UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

TESIS DOCTORAL

OBERIU and Theatre of the Absurd:
the Parisian and the Petersburgian Absurd

OBERIU y el teatro del absurdo:
el absurdo parisino y el petersburgués

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR

PRESENTADA POR

Guillermo Hernández Muñoz

DIRIGIDA POR

Francisco Javier Juez Gálvez

UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

Programa de Estudios Literarios

TESIS DOCTORAL

OBERIU and Theatre of the Absurd: the Parisian and the Petersburgian Absurd

OBERIU y el Teatro del Absurdo: el absurdo parisino y el petersburgués

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR
PRESENTADA POR

Guillermo Hernández Muñoz

DIRECTOR

Francisco Javier Juez Gálvez

Madrid

2025

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am obliged to the director of this thesis, Francisco Javier Juez Gálvez, for his support and stewardship throughout, as well as for his help with organising of the less grateful administrative elements of a doctorate. In connection to this, I will also thank the governance members of the doctoral program of Literary Studies at Complutense University of Madrid for their guidance and understanding of what turned out to be a difficult personal situation through the preparation of this study. I also express my gratitude to Professor Galin Tihanov, at Queen Mary University London, who welcomed me into his temporary supervision at short notice, for his invaluable insights and commentary on parts of this thesis, as well as for his championed yielding concept of *regimes of relevance*. I am also indebted, as so many of us scholars or aspiring academics in this field of studies, to Jean-Philippe Jaccard, at the University of Geneva, for his *vade mecum* 1991 book on Kharms, the OBERIU and the Russian futurists. Additionally, I thank academics Kristina Pranjić and Cristian Cámara for their insightful recommendations in polishing off the thesis draft and their encouragement. Lastly, I want to thank my friends and family for their support, and I will especially highlight the precious vitalising role my daughter Luna has played, as her steadfast joy, wit, energy, humour and mischievousness have been a source of light and oomph in what can at times be the secluded existence of a PhD candidate.

Contents

ABSTRACT

OBERIU and Theatre of the Absurd: the Parisian and the Petersburgian Absurd

Academics have so far struggled to explain the parallels in output between the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd exponents, and this, not only in their theatre, but similarly in their prose. What would have otherwise been justified as the expected influence of one current on a subsequent group, especially taking into account their relative geographical and cultural proximity, was precluded by the impenetrable barrier appeared between them due to the Stalinist Terror. The initiated reader is witness to the fact that the mention of the oberiuts is often times accompanied by the coda that they are the Russian precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd, either within or without academic circles.

The starting point of this study has been to certify the lack of any direct or indirect communication between the two groups by an extensive study of all the sources available. The next step, the analysis of the authors' literary and philosophical traditions, has proved yielding, but inconclusive, with the confirmation of the presence of certain shared roots – be it Bergson and Dostoevsky, or less directly, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche –, as well as diverging genealogies of the Petersburg Text and *left* art, and Jarry via Dada, Surrealism and Artaud. The socio-political context of both regions has also been explored to ascertain whether their similarities could have prompted the same artistic response, with the aftermath of the First World War and the Revolution on one side and the end of the Second World War on the other. This analysis has been qualified early by the fact that the avant-garde traces its ethos back to the turn of the century. In what pertains the analysis of the authors' oeuvres, the core works selected for comparative analysis have been Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs',* Kharms' *Elizaveta Bam*, *Incidents* and 'The Old Woman', Vaginov's *The Goat Song* and *The Works and Days of Svistonov*, Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Similarly, some of their theoretical-philosophical writings have been explored.

This investigation has also expanded upon the previous limited probes into the OBERIU's connection with Orthodoxy and the figure of the *yurodivy* or *holy fool in Christ*; as well as having brought to light the profound ties with Bergson's thought of both the groupings, as well as of Orthodoxy, Russian Formalism, and Futurism; in addition, it has delved into existentialist thought and what aspects of it the different authors incorporated into their works. A last important exploration was pursued with the intent to demarcate the different conceptions of the avant-garde and to which of these the writers, poets and dramaturges could be said to belong. The previous has yielded the submittal that the OBERIU, especially in its earlier stages, could be said to belong to a more self-sufficient conception of the avant-garde than the Parisian postwar interpretation.

The omnipresence of the absurd in the Petersburgian and the Parisian constellation of authors has prompted an analysis of the nature of the respective understandings of the absurd. This disquisition was coloured by the unique case presented by the OBERIU in reaction to the increasing repression, which resulted, in general terms, in a shift from a futurist inclination to the preponderance of a more concrete absurd. Consequently, the contrasting required has not been solely that of one current against the other, but also with one face of the OBERIU with a later one. Following this line of inquiry, it has been established that the reading of the absurd was diverging in essence if the early OBERIU is matched against the Theatre of the Absurd, with the former being based in the futurists' tint of metaphysical nonsense, *bessmyslitsa*, and use of *zaum* or *transreason* devices, and the latter in existential absurd. As the 1930s advanced, the OBERIU's output started to morph into an increasingly situational absurd, which saw a concurrent abandonment of poetry in favour of prose. As such, the perceived proximity of the Petersburgian and the Parisian absurd, in the oberiuts' later rendition, has its source in the loss of faith in progress experienced by both, with the caveat that the Theatre of the Absurd endured a more multifaceted loss of faith, which included language and God. If both groups concurred in their distrust of reason as the only means to beget meaning, the notion of language, as reason's offshoot, was more markedly nihilating in the Parisian case. For the latter, its reception of Sartre and Camus' philosophy is also an essential

consideration, and the closeness of thought with them has been corroborated, with the caveat of not sharing their moralising and more idealistic underlining.

On the whole, the reader is offered a heteroglot contrasting of ideas, which this author intends to yield a demarcating through line that will help better sharpen the similarities, but also the differences between the two currents, as well as exposing previously backgrounded shared springs, with the added significant permeating of the Orthodox, Bergsonian and Bakhtinian elements. I thus propose the results of this study to whet the profile of these two groups by shedding light on previously dimmed elements, while the impulse of these contentions is less definitive in nature, but rather aims to be a source of renewed interest and dialogue with further scholarship, as well as a beacon towards additional potentially fruit-bearing research paths, as the absurd's interplay with the view of the artist as an exile, or culture's reaction to socio-historical trauma.

RESUMEN

OBERIU y el Teatro del Absurdo: el absurdo parisino y el petersburgués

Hasta ahora, la esfera académica se ha esforzado por explicar los paralelismos en las obras de la OBERIU y los exponentes del Teatro del Absurdo, no sólo en teatro, sino también en prosa. Lo que de otro modo se habría justificado como la esperada influencia de una corriente en un grupo posterior, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta su relativa proximidad geográfica y cultural, se vio imposibilitado por la impenetrable barrera aparecida entre ambas debido al Terror estalinista. Quien esté leyendo con conocimientos previos sobre el grupo podrá testificar que la mención de los oberiuts suele ir acompañada de la coda de ser los precursores rusos del Teatro del Absurdo, tanto dentro como fuera de los círculos académicos.

El punto de partida de este estudio ha sido certificar la inexistencia de cualquier comunicación directa o indirecta entre ambos grupos mediante un estudio exhaustivo de todas las fuentes disponibles. El siguiente paso, el análisis de las tradiciones literarias y filosóficas de los autores, si bien ha resultado fructífero, no ha sido concluyente, con la confirmación de la presencia de ciertas raíces compartidas -ya sea Bergson y Dostoievski, o de forma menos directa, Kierkegaard y Nietzsche-, así como las genealogías divergentes del Texto de Petersburgo y el arte *izquierdo*, y Jarry a través del dadaísmo, el surrealismo y Artaud. También se ha explorado el contexto sociopolítico de ambas regiones para averiguar si sus similitudes pudieran haber suscitado la misma respuesta artística, con las secuelas de la Primera Guerra Mundial y la Revolución por un lado y el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial por el otro. Este análisis se ha visto matizado desde un primer momento por el hecho de que el sino de las vanguardias comprendidas se remonta al cambio de siglo. En lo que respecta al análisis de las obras de los autores, las obras centrales seleccionadas para el análisis comparativo han sido *Navidad en casa de los Ivanov*, de Vvedenski; *Elizaveta Bam*, *Incidentes* y *La vieja*, de Jarms; *La canción de la cabra* y *Los trabajos y días de Svistonov*, de Váginov; *La cantante calva*, de Ionesco; y *Esperando a Godot*; *Molloy*, *Malone muere* y *El innombrable*, de Beckett. Del mismo modo, se han explorado algunos de sus escritos teórico-filosóficos.

Esta investigación también ha ampliado las limitadas indagaciones previas sobre la conexión de la OBERIU con la ortodoxia y la figura del *yurodivy* o *santo demente en Cristo*; asimismo ha sacado a la luz los profundos vínculos con el pensamiento de Bergson de ambas agrupaciones, así como con la ortodoxia, el formalismo ruso y el futurismo; además, ha profundizado en el pensamiento existencialista y qué aspectos del mismo fueron incorporados por los distintos autores en sus obras. Una última exploración importante se ha llevado a cabo con la intención de delimitar las diferentes vertientes de la vanguardia y a cuál de ellas se podría decir que pertenecen los escritores, poetas y dramaturgos. Esto ha dado como resultado que la OBERIU, especialmente en sus primeras etapas, podría decirse que pertenece a una visión más autosuficiente de la vanguardia que la interpretación parisina de posguerra.

La omnipresencia del absurdo en la constelación de autores petersburgueses y parisinos ha suscitado un análisis de la naturaleza de las variantes respectivas del absurdo. Esta disquisición se ha visto teñida por el caso singular que presenta la OBERIU como reacción a la creciente represión, que se tradujo, en términos generales, en el paso de una inclinación futurista a la preponderancia de un absurdo más concreto. En consecuencia, el contraste requerido no ha sido únicamente el de una corriente contra la otra, sino también el de una faceta de la OBERIU con otra posterior. Siguiendo esta línea de indagación, se ha establecido que la interpretación del absurdo es esencialmente divergente si se equipara la OBERIU temprana con el Teatro del Absurdo, estando la primera basada en el tinte futurista del *sinsentido* metafísico o *bessmislitsa* y el uso de *zaum* o *transrazón*, y la segunda con el absurdo existencial. A medida que avanzaba la década de 1930, la obra de la OBERIU comenzó a contener un absurdo cada vez más situacional, lo que conllevó un abandono simultáneo de la poesía en favor de la prosa. Así pues, la proximidad percibida entre el absurdo petersburgués y el parisino, en la encarnación posterior de los oberiuts, tiene su origen en la pérdida de fe en el progreso experimentada por ambos, con la salvedad de que el Teatro del Absurdo padeció una pérdida de fe más polifacética, que incluía el lenguaje y Dios. Si bien ambos grupos coincidían en su desconfianza de la razón como único medio de engendrar sentido, la noción de lenguaje, como vástago de la razón, es más marcadamente negadora en el caso parisino. Para este último, su recepción de la filosofía de Sartre y Camus es también una consideración esencial, y

se ha corroborado la cercanía de pensamiento con los mismos, con la salvedad de no compartir su trasfondo moralizante y más idealista.

En conjunto, se ofrece al lector un contraste de ideas heteroglósico, el cual este autor pretende que aporte un eje ubicuo que ayude a agudizar las semejanzas, pero también las diferencias entre ambas corrientes, así como a exponer manantiales comunes que se encontraban previamente en segundo plano, con la significativa adición de la impregnación de los elementos ortodoxos, bergsonianos y bajtinianos. Así pues, propongo que los resultados de este estudio sirvan para resaltar el perfil de estos dos grupos al arrojar luz sobre elementos hasta ahora oscurecidos, teniendo presente que el impulso de estos argumentos no es de naturaleza definitiva, sino que más bien pretende ser una fuente de interés renovado y de diálogo de investigación, así como una señal hacia otras vías de investigación potencialmente fructíferas, como la interacción del absurdo con la visión del artista como exiliado o la reacción de la cultura al trauma sociohistórico.

Index of main authors and works' original edition

For conciseness within the main text and for reference, an index of the main authors in this thesis, together with their date of birth and death, is included. These authors' first names may, thus, not appear in the main text. In addition, also included, is an index of the works that have been cited in an edition posterior to their first appearance, with their original publication date – or date of completion where the work was not published.

Artaud, Antonin (1896–1948)

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1895–1975)

Bergson, Henri (1859–1941)

Camus, Albert (1913–60)

Druskin, Yakov (1902–80)

Fondane, Benjamin (1898–1944)

Ionesco, Eugene (1909–94)

Jarry, Alfred (1873–1907)

Kharms, Daniil (1905–42)

Khlebnikov, Velimir (1885–1922)

Kierkegaard, Søren (1813–55)

Kruchenykh, Aleksei (1886–1968)

Lipavsky, Leonid (1904–41)

Malevich, Kasimir (1879–1935)

Mayakovsky, Vladimir (1893–1930)

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900)

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–1980)

Shklovsky, Victor (1893–1984)

Shestov, Lev (1966–1938)

Tufanov, Aleksandr (1877–1943)

Tzara, Tristan (1896–1963)

Vaginov, Konstantin (1899–1934)

Vvedensky, Aleksandr (1904–41)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1889–1951)

Bambocciada (1931)

Being and Nothingness (1943)

Christmas at the Ivanovs' (1938)

Elizaveta Bam (1927)

Harpagoniana (1933)

Incidents (1933–9)

Laughter (1900)

Malone Dies (1951)

Molloy (1951)

Nausea (1938)

Rhinoceros (1959)

The Adolescent (1875)

The Bald Soprano (1950)

The Birth of Tragedy (1872)

The Goat Song (1929)

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)

The Old Woman' (1939)

The Overcoat (1842)

The Theatre of the Absurd (1961)

The Unnamable (1953)

The Works and Days of Svistonov (1929)

Theatre and Its Double (1938)

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921)

Waiting for Godot (1952)

List of abbreviations

BS Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*

'DN' Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel'

MS Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

'PND' Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse'

RHW Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

WG Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

WL Likhachev and Panchenko, *The 'World of Laughter' of Ancient Rus'* [1]

[1] The yet-to-be-translated «*Смеховой мир*» *Древней Руси*

Note on terminology

As a study written in English, with a big component of Russian language and culture, which often refers to a city with changing names, and that has to deal with blurred edges and often slippery terminology, the following is an attempt to establish firm ground and a bridge-building bearing from the start:

OBERIU – Acronym for The Association for Real Art in Russian (ОБЭРИУ – Объединение Реального Искусства). It is in fact quite a free acronym, as it is formed by the two first letters of the first word *ОБ*, then an *Э* – which does not appear in any of its forming words – is added, then comes the first letter of the second word *Р*, then the first letter of the third word *И*, and finally *У* is added.

oberiut(s) – There is a marked lack of cohesion in the literature about OBERIU in English in the use of this term, which is mainly used as a substitute for 'OBERIU member(s)'. The following variations can be found, depending on the academic's preference: 'oberiuty, *oberiuty*, Oberiuty, OBERIUTY, oberiuts, Oberiuts.' Since, in Russian, the term used by the authors themselves and by the vast majority of literature to designate anything related to OBERIU (authors, works) is the non-capitalised root 'обэриут-' plus the appropriate declination, I will follow this principle and use the non-capitalised root 'oberiut', plus the 's' when the noun is plural.

Saint Petersburg/Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad – The name used for this quintessentially name-changing city will be Petersburg throughout, unless a name synchronous with the period being discussed is imperative for clarity. This is to follow the OBERIU members in how they referred to their city and to align this study with the tradition of the Petersburg Text.

Theatre of the Absurd – This term will refer throughout to the loose grouping of authors, mainly to those residents of Paris in the 1950s, that were joined by their perceived commonalities, rather than by any formal association or nationality, initially by Martin Esslin. As such, for conciseness, on top of referring to the authors, it will also refer not necessarily to the plays of this group, but to any creative output of these dramaturges and writers.

Parisian and Petersburgian absurd – Looking for common ground instead of dividing lines has been an especially pertinent consideration for non-native academics of Russian studies from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With this in mind, this author has struggled to find the right terminology to refer to the two different types of absurd analysed in this thesis. The obvious choice would have been to term them *European absurd* and *Russian absurd*, but this dichotomy presents with many issues. What is to be considered *European*? Is it geographical Europe? Moscow and Petersburg are *in* Europe geographically. Is it Western Europe? But, again, what is Western Europe? Is it west of Central Europe or west of the Iron Curtain[2]? The term *Russian absurd* is also problematic. For example, one of its main exponents, Gogol, was born in Ukraine, originally had a Polish surname, started his literary career writing prose set in Ukraine, and wrote part of his most famous Petersburg prose while living in Italy for twelve years. In addition to this, one of the main characters in this thesis, Petersburg, resists this division between European and Russian cultures. There was, since its foundation, a clash of two distinct forces in Petersburg, Russia's capital for centuries and the most European of Russian cities, as its moniker of the *Window to Europe* attests to; one pulling it towards the rest of Europe, one pulling it eastwards, away from Europe. It would seem unfair then to completely cut out Petersburg from Europe by making an absolute division at the Russian border. What to do then? The author found the solution in focusing on two specific metropolises, those great attractors of culture and diversity, rather than on national borders. While it is true that Existentialism, which is a key element for the absurd, had its roots in Germanic philosophers (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), what this study focuses on is the absurd, rather than on Existentialism. The main Francophone exponents of the absurd and avant-garde theatre were either Parisians or were pulled into Paris by some common force; Sartre, Genet, and Bergson were Parisians, while

[2] This later division is chosen, for example, by Neil Cornwell. In his enriching book, *The absurd in literature* (2006), he classifies the OBERIU within the *East European* absurd, alongside representatives from countries east of the Iron Curtain. While the aim to efface the division at the Russian border is to be welcomed, I am not sure that completely ignoring the fact that Russia straddles two continents and is immersed in what can be considered sometimes mutually antagonistic cultures, is the most satisfactory choice either.

Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and Camus all came to Paris from different countries, and Jarry and Artaud from other French cities. On its part, Petersburg exerted a similarly strong pull for absurd and avant-garde artists, be it pulling Gogol and Malevich from Ukraine, Mayakovsky from Georgia via Moscow, or Dostoevsky from Moscow. On top of this, Petersburg culture was heavily influenced by Germanic culture – even its original name, *Sankt Peterburg*, as duly noted by Tsar Nicholas II when he changed the name to Petrograd in 1914, was of German origin. In light of this, the fact that Existentialism and Dada had Germanic roots – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Zurich as the springboard for Dada – should not create a division between the two strands of the absurd. Finally, the author is conscious of some exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd, even those initially proposed by Esslin, having no connection to Paris – Havel, Mrozek, Pinter –, but they are not covered within the scope of the present study and can be said to be ancillary rather than core to the Theatre of the Absurd, their plays being published mainly after the principal output of the Parisian exponents during the 1950s.

The West – Whenever this term is used, it is to denote the cultural and political division created by the Iron Curtain, which only started to disappear with the emergence in the mid-1980s of the *glasnost* or aim towards greater openness in the Soviet Union – especially in its accompanying rapprochement with the West.

Influence – As the reader will be aware, the inadequacy of this term in comparative literature is by now a truism. For conciseness, however, this term will be used throughout with the understanding that it is a placeholder for whichever term or phrase the reader finds more suitable, be it *inspiration*, *formative contact*, *role in the crystallisation of the author's thought*, *dialogue*, *proximity of thought* or even *negative contrast* or *yielding polemicising*. For the initiated reader, the term *transfer*, as clearly expounded upon by Tomas Glanc (2023), could substitute the term *influence* throughout.

Introduction

There are seemingly hard-to-explain parallels between the Theatre of the Absurd exponents and the OBERIU members, not only in their dramatic output, but in their prose as well. The crux of this mystification lies in the fact that, what would have been a natural influence of one group on an ensuing one, especially due to their relative geographical and cultural proximity, was prevented by the unsurmountable gap that opened between the two due to the Stalinist Terror, from whose wrath neither the Russian works nor the authors themselves were able to escape. Therefore, a particular case is presented in which a society of authors had such parallels in thought and output with another as to imply the former influencing the latter, while this perceived influence was made impossible by impregnably hermetic borders.

It would seem that almost every time the oberiuts are mentioned outside of academic literature an appendage is necessarily attached to label them 'precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd[3].' Even in academic literature, this trope is often added. See, for example, Anemone and Scotto (in Kharms 2013), Roberts (1997), Cornwell (1991), Meilakh (1990), Stone Nakhimovsky (1982), Brailer (1976). Even the oberiuts' friend and the guardian of their work, Yakov Druskin, made the bold assertion that the Theatre of the Absurd 'was created in Russia 15 to 20 years earlier by poets and playwrights A. I. Vvedensky and D. I. Kharms[4]' (Druskin 1998: 46). There are numerous instances of these surprising parallels being mentioned in academic literature, chiefly as pertains their shared distrust of and play with language – and their aim to renovate, rather than destroy it –, a prevailing absurd atmosphere antithetical to humanity, a rejection of plot and causality, a demoting of the status of the dramatic text, as well as resorting to low cultural genres as elements of commedia dell'arte, clowning, and music hall practices in their theatre. While some authors also venture into an even shorter enumeration of their main differing points, their overall

[3] See, as examples, Matvei Yankelevich's introduction in Kharms (2009), Eugene Ostashevsky's introduction in Vvedensky, A. (2013a), Wikipedia's entry on OBERIU, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberiu, (accessed 1 Jul 2024), or The New Yorker's article on Daniil Kharms, (2007), So It Is in Life. Online. Available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/06/so-it-is-in-life, (accessed 1 Jul 2024).

[4] My translation. Similarly, hereafter, any quote from a text referenced in a language other than English in this study, rather than a published translation, will be my translation.

shared approach is to content themselves – not from lack of interest or intellectual curiosity, but assuredly for the challenge presented by this seemingly inexplicable affinity – with highlighting the striking nature of their proximity, and enumerating the foremost commonalities; see Brailer (1976), Stelleman (1992), Jaccard (1991), Epstein (1994), Stone Nakhimovsky (1982), Listengarten (1996), Cornwell (2006), Bennett (2015). It is worth pointing out that, while there have been some publications that have made a more exhaustive comparative study of two authors, such as Jaccard's (1991) short comparison of Kharms' and Ionesco's plays, or even Tokarev's (2002) study dedicated to a comparative analysis of Kharms and Beckett, there has been neither a comprehensive comparative study of both groups, nor a methodological, exhaustive examination as to why these parallels formed apparently independently from each other. To quote Druskin again, academic literature has not gone much further than pointing out that the type of theatre pioneered by the oberiuts 'remained unknown, and then, independently of them, it arose in the forties and fifties' (Druskin 1989: 107).

The starting point of this investigation was to corroborate that there was, indeed, no direct link between the two groups, making sure the OBERIU works did not escape the Stalinist censorship and travel outside Russia either orally or in written form, be it by direct contact between the authors or through indirect contact via one of the many émigrés from the intelligentsia. An exhaustive study of all the sources available – diaries, interviews, literature – has confirmed, indeed, a complete absence of any knowledge of the works or even the existence of the oberiuts outside Russia until their works finally saw the light in the West, initially via Druskin's briefcase, mainly through the 1970s and 1980s. One needs to go no further than Ionesco's own words to realise his lack of awareness of the oberiuts. In 1959, he included Mayakovsky as one of the members of the avant-garde (1966: 88), while simultaneously declaring that the literary and theatrical avant-garde had stopped in 1925 (1966: 156). It follows that, while Mayakovsky was able to escape the Bolshevik censorship, both physically and through his works at least for a period of time, making Parisian intellectuals aware of his brand of Futurism, the later exponents of the avant-garde did not share this fate. In fact, Ionesco may have been more knowledgeable of Russian futurist thought than a simple awareness of Mayakovsky;

there are indications that he may have also been familiar with Khlebnikov's works[5] and thought. While awareness of the Russian futurists presents as a possible common influence between the Petersburgian and the Parisian absurd, the corroboration that the Theatre of the Absurd was not aware at all of the oberiuts' work is truly remarkable, since at times, reading some works of the Theatre of the Absurd, one has the impression of similarities that border on plagiarism; of course, not being aware of the existence of such similar efforts can be surmised as precisely the reason why they were repeated almost verbatim by authors of Ionesco's[6] stature.

With that incognita cleared, the scope of this thesis, in addition to the comparative study of the two groups, was thus self-extended to also be an investigation of the reasons for the parallels between them given the lack of direct contact. The logical next step emerged as the analysis of their respective literary and philosophical traditions to see if they aligned with each other, thus helping to explain the similarities in their oeuvre. However – while not wanting to advance any conclusions at this stage – a preliminary examination of these traditions proves at best inconclusive, since, as much as there are shared roots – chiefly Bergson and Dostoevsky, and more widely Kierkegaard and Nietzsche –, there are key demarcations between the traditions they could be inscribed within. The next step

---

[5] Khlebnikov's 1909 poem 'Zverinec' – Russian for *menagerie* – makes the same identification of a rhinoceros as the opposite of humanity as Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*:

> Oh, Garden, Garden!
> Where iron is like a father, reminding brothers that they are brothers, and stopping a bloody fight. … Where the rhinoceros bears in its white-red eyes the unquenchable fury of the overthrown king and alone of all the animals does not hide its contempt for people. … And Ivan the Terrible lurks in it. (1933: 41-46)

[6] Using Ionesco's play as an example, it is possible to witness the exceptional similarities between Kharms' ministory 'Sonnet' and a scene from Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*.

In Kharms' story the narrator forgets how to count properly, asks the neighbours for help, they do not know either and decide to ask a worker in a nearby food shop, who also does not know and gives a nonsensical answer 'seven comes after eight, but only when eight comes after seven' (2009: 48). In the end everyone loses interest and the group disperses when a grotesque incident happens –a boy breaks both his jaws.

In Ionesco's play, at some point, Berenger and his friend Jean start arguing about the number of horns of two types of rhinoceros and cannot agree. Their argument extends to the people in their vicinity, who also cannot agree. It is then decided that the worker of – precisely – the food shop ought to know, so they ask him, but he also does not know. Afterwards the food shop worker also gives a nonsensical opinion: 'The Asian rhinoceros has one horn, the African rhinoceros, two. And vice versa.' (2006: 52). The group eventually disperses when their attention turns to the grotesque reality of a cat having been crushed.

was, then, to widen the scope of the investigation to include the socio-political context of both currents to ascertain whether they were similar enough as to promote the same response to it. While the OBERIU materialised after the First World War and the Revolution, and fully developed along with the Stalinist Terror, the Theatre of the Absurd came shortly after the end of the worst war the world had ever seen, and that after witnessing the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. As before, not wanting to suggest any conclusions at this point, this will also not prove to be a definitive circumstance that made these similarities inevitable, since both the Russian and the French avant-gardes trace their prewar roots back to the turn of the century.

As a result, to get a complete picture, after the preliminary framing of the above, this thesis delves deep into the literary-dramaturgical works of the authors themselves, and their theoretical-philosophical writings. It is worth pointing out at the outset that, while, taken as a whole, the OBERIU output was principally in poetry, the Theatre of the Absurd was extremely poetry-shy in their published works. Consequently, as central as the oberiuts' lyric output is to wholly understand their oeuvre, their verse works have been mostly passed over in this study[7]. In addition to this, the prose and drama works selected had ineluctably to be restricted to a very few samples to allow for a deeper analysis of each work instead of a general overview. This has inevitably meant that mainly the most salient works, and authors of each current have been included at length – and those who present as the exemplars with most reciprocal kinship at that-, and that important authors like Arthur Adamov or Jean Genet have been left out or explored in passing. As a result, for the sake of conciseness, the works of Ionesco and Beckett are often taken as a token for the wider Theatre of the Absurd, while Kharms and Vvedensky's oeuvre is taken at times to signify the whole of the OBERIU. The reader is asked to keep this in mind and be benevolent in this extreme extrapolation to an overarching grouping with authors as diverse in their output as Beckett and Genet. It is hoped that what would be conveyed is the shared spirit and aura of the groupings by giving limited, but exhaustive examples. As an advance, the central plays included in the exploration are Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs',* Kharms' *Elizaveta Bam*, Ionesco's *The Bald*

[7] The reader is directed to Levin (1986), Epstein (1994), and Kobrinsky (2013) for a sweeping commentary on the OBERIU poetics.

Soprano and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. These dramatical works will be comparatively analysed using the categories of time and space, plot and characters, and language and dramatical devices to provide structure. The prose works, in turn are Beckett's *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, Kharms' *Incidents* and 'The Old Woman', and Vaginov's *The Goat Song* and *The Works and Days of Svistonov*. The through line in the comparative analysis of the authors' prose presents as the role of the author, the tension between modernist and postmodernist sensibilities, as well as the concept of *nothing* as the primordial source and *conditio sine qua non* for writing, and, lastly, the perceived violence of the author as an allegory of the writing process.

As a statement of purpose, this author will make use of the analogy that readily presents itself at this point. If both the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd shared a fundamental strife to express the inexpressible, this introduction may have already given an idea to the reader that he who types these lines is, perhaps, attempting just that in his aim to envisage the reasons for these commonalities in the face of no discernible point of contact between the two groups. The exploration of the diverse elements that could help answer these questions will, hopefully, if it were not to give a definitive, monologic answer, at least be a fruitful confrontation and dialogue of apparently disparate approaches that will yield unexpected connections, fertile insights, and be galvanising towards new areas of research.

Chapter I. Literary theory and philosophical frameworks

When approaching the framing of the seemingly disparate traditions of the Petersburg's and Paris' absurd, the problematic surfaces of how to approach this without requiring a whole study of this onto itself. It would be well beyond the scope of this thesis to try to investigate all the philosophical or literary-philosophical meaningful precedents of the two conglomerations. This chapter thus focuses on the weightiest proponents of the preceding philosophical thought for each group of authors. They have also been selected, apart from their merit of having a stronger influence in the groups, for being the most fruit-bearing paths to follow in their parallels or the most highly yielding contrasts with the other tradition. This author will avoid the pitfall of following a *West*-centric approach to these sources – which would confine the Petersburgian authors to a *satellital*, subordinate place –, and will in fact deliberately err on the side of a more marked focus on the *East* traditions, as this has in turn the attached benefit of integrating the two groups much better within an overarching framework and will, in my opinion, result in a more worthwhile exploration.

As such, this chapter opens with the Petersburg-centred[8] phenomenon of literary theory, in which Shklovsky's central position in Russian Formalism and avant-garde with his concept of *defamiliarisation*, and the special case of Bakhtin with his far-reaching conceptions of carnival and *heteroglossia* occupy a place of privilege. After this, the figure of Bergson is introduced as the strongest point of connection between the two currents, for his unanticipated role in shaping Russian philosophical thought at the start of the twentieth century, and his surprising kinship with Orthodoxy. This same heightened mystic vein of the Russian avant-garde is then explored, along with the illuminating figure of the Orthodox *yurodivy*. To close this chapter, a succinct exploration of Existentialism is called for at this stage of the investigation, in which the most prominent representatives of the movement will be

[8] It could be argued that Moscow also has an important place in Formalism, as the Moscow Linguistic Circle, of which Roman Jakobson was a member. However, this study deals mainly with the thought of the Petersburgian OPOYAZ group, and, of course, Bakhtin when delving into literary theory.

called upon, along with the two *godless existentialists* par excellence, Sartre and Camus.

1. Foregrounding of language and its circumstance: Shklovsky, Wittgenstein, and Bakhtin

When dealing with the theoretical framework of a study that encompasses a period of roughly fifty years, which started almost a hundred years from its writing, the concept of *regimes of relevance*, a term coined by Galin Tihanov seems to be most relevant. These refer to 'the prevalent mode of appropriating (both interpreting and using) literature in society at a particular time.' Said 'modes' are 'in competition with others, and at any one point a constellation of different regimes is available' (Tihanov 2019: 22). This study is not an attempt to recontextualise the OBERIU or the Theatre of the Absurd from a contemporary, twenty-first-century context, but an attempt to better understand both currents' perceived proximity within their separate frameworks and traditions. As such, the best approach seems self-evidently be to frame these constellations of authors within the framework of their contemporary *regimes of relevance*. As it will be shown, this unquestionably necessitates this analysis to be based on literary theory, which was the predominant approach to the study of literature in Russia from about the start of the First World War, and then extended into and influenced European thought – structuralism and post-structuralism – until its *demise* or substitution as the main regime of relevance in the early 1990s, with Yury Lotman's turn to semiotics as an overarching cultural theory before his death, which was preceded by Barthes' own concept of semiotics (2019: 28). Following this approach, literary theory started its *regime of relevance* hegemony in the 1910s, when it broke with the previous holder of that position, which considered literature as a means to put ideas or emotions forward, to add knowledge to the world or to promote social and political change. This perception of literature as a transmission of ideas and values put language itself on the background, rarely making it the object of study. The new understanding of literature also *broke the mould* by displacing the author to a secondary place. What makes literature *literary*

is its autonomous discourse, which rests upon the intricacies of language within it, rather than the prowess of a specific author.

Within the broader field of literary theory, one name stands out as the most befitting for this enterprise, that of Viktor Shklovsky. Amongst the Russian formalists, he is the one to be singled out if the OBERIU work is to be fully grasped. Not only this, but his concept of *defamiliarisation*, and his aim to *lay bare the device* could not be more relevant for an appreciation of the Theatre of the Absurd's devices, while continuing to exert its influence all the way to Postmodernism. Being an integral part of formalist thought, which promoted, in literature, the divorce of language from any other human concern, be it social, cultural or historical, and proclaiming its primacy and uniqueness to create the specific *literariness* of a literary work, for Shklovsky, art's raison d'être is to facilitate human *seeing* of reality, rather than its *perceiving* it. Without art's intervention, economy of language and thought dictates that, after its first *pure*, or virginal, seeing of an object, the viewer will replace the next encounter with that object with abstractions and generalisations drawn from experience, so that this experience would turn into automatic, unconscious perception, rather than a true *seeing* or experiencing of the object. This concept is also the basis of the oberiuts view of language, and their – and its predecessor founding grouping, the Chinari's – poetic concepts of the *collision of meanings* and the *fifth signification of the object*, which will be explored further below. Needless to say, this automatisation of thought, and communication was also decried by Ionesco and was the basis for his earlier, most renowned works, while Beckett concurred with this wariness towards language and communication, and continually deconstructed automatic turns of phrase and idioms in his works.

To achieve this sharpening of perception, Shklovsky points at the necessity of 'resurrecting the word' in literature, specifically poetry, as 'today, words are dead, and language resembles a graveyard' (2017a: 63). This resurrection of the word was the driving force behind the Russian futurists' different attempts at poetry, which was shared by the OBERIU. Indeed, even if Shklovsky used Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's sound and morphological *zaum* as examples of authors aiming to resurrect the word, the oberiuts, in the poetry section of their manifesto, purported themselves to be more *Shklovskian* than the futurists,

> No school is more hostile to us than *zaum.* We, people who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones, are the first enemies of those who castrate the word and make it into a powerless and senseless mongrel. In our work we broaden the meaning of the object and of the word, but we do not destroy it in any way. The concrete object, once its literary and everyday skin is peeled away, becomes a property of art. (Kharms and Vvedensky 1974: 245–54)

Ionesco, in turn, seemed to share Shklovsky's concerns, when he repeated the Russian literary theorist's eschatological analogy almost verbatim in *Notes and Counter-Notes*, when he argues that 'as soon as a form of expression becomes recognised, it is already out of date', and that 'a thing once spoken is already dead' (1964: 41). However, the Theatre of the Absurd, while agreeing with Shklovsky's assertion, did not share – or rather were not able to materialise – his renovating impulse, limiting their efforts to denounce this crisis of language, be it by Ionesco satirising communication or Beckett's constant deconstruction of language. By returning to Ionesco's own essays – as we shall see in further chapters –, in spite of his attempts to purport otherwise, his is a conservative and nihilating view of the avant-garde, rather than a generating one. Ionesco declares that an avant-gardist is a person whose raison d'être is to be 'the opponent of an existing system', and who is 'a critic of … what exists now' (1964: 41), but only in as much as they advocate for a return to old, forgotten forms, in a view of the avant-garde as a way to lay the foundations' stones of the next yet-to-be consolidated artistic building.

In his essays, Ionesco goes on to try to give his view of the avant-garde – and by extension of his own work – a deeper underlining, by speaking of the 'renovation' of theatre and language. However, it is unclear how the renovation in language is to happen, as Ionesco alludes once and again to the aim of the avant-gardist to show language's inadequacy, its automatization and removal from life, be it voluntary or not, but states very little in what pertains where to go from there. That apparently is left for ensuing thinkers, as his impetus seems to stop at denouncing the *crisis of language* and making society aware of the possible tyrannical perversion of language by power, but it remains a feeble attempt at a generative solution. What is offered as a way forward, to rely solely upon the artists' imagination roaming free once

unshackled from the fixed forms of expression, cannot help but appear ultimately as trite an empty statement of purpose with no practical application. While he tried to fend off the potential parallels and accusations of haphazardness that would connect his statements with Surrealism by stating 'my own intention was not to recognise any [laws] except those of my imagination, and since the imagination has laws this is further proof that finally it is not arbitrary' (1964: 47), his remains on the whole a diffuse attempt at a solution to the *crisis of language*. The author's imagination as the main artistic force is a tenet as old as time, and the unshackling from old forms, such a bromide, that Ionesco is erring, at least conceptually, on exactly that which he is denouncing. He went on to try to inscribe his avant-garde in the Russian futurist tradition, in an attempt to share in their radical experiments with language by mentioning that critics saw elements in his theatre of the music hall or circus, much as the futurists had used Balagan, puppet show, and clowning elements in their performances. However, these similarities do not pertain to language *per se*, and do not constitute in themselves a way forward.

For the formalists and futurists, the critique of solidified language or artistic forms was necessary as an instrument to arrive at a new perception of the object – or reality. Shklovsky offered his concept of *defamiliarisation* – or *ostranenie* – as the means for the artist to peel off the layers of solidified *perception* that encumbered the object, making it possible for 'the masses' to access the object as if for the first time. It is worth quoting the formalist at some length for its perspicuity and the fecundity of the quote in the subsequent stages of this study:

> What we call art exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the "*ostranenie*" of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art. (2017b: 80)

This *defamiliarisation* is achieved in literature through the foregrounding of language and a new perspective of the object referenced. This new vision of the object,

sharpened by the concepts of later futurists like Mikhail Matyushin's *widened* or *360-degree vision*, will in turn be central to the OBERIU's work and artistic philosophy. This Shklovskian philosophy of the object is made even clearer when Kharms rebukes one of his *mentors* and close collaborator, Malevich, for his abandonment of the object and for considering it nothing but a collection of empty utilitarian clichés. In direct opposition to Malevich, and in line with Shklovsky, Kharms considers the object as having four, everyday, working meanings – geometric, utilitarian, emotional, and aesthetic –, all of them subjective to their interaction with a person; additionally, the object has a fifth, immanent signification to the object itself, independent from its interaction with the person (Kharms 2015: 748). While this defamiliarisation of the object and the purposeful 'complication of the form' – so that form is also experienced by the reader –, or in other words, the poetic device *laid bare*, which are both ideas shared by the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd, are Shklovsky's most inspired and fertile concepts, what is also worth focusing on in the above quote is the temporariness of art and the refusal of any already experienced or *consolidated* art. In a preview of the analysis of the two cohabiting conceptions of avant-garde that will be explored further below, Shklovsky positions himself squarely into *left* art's conception of the avant-garde as an ever-changing impulse whose aim is not to lay the foundations for a more consolidated current, but as a form of experiencing and creating art that perishes once it is created or experienced.

A last aspect of Shklovskian terminology that needs to be mentioned is his curious attack on *prose* as a creative force, that comes about due to his deliberate *defamiliarisation* of this oft-used term. In *The Resurrection of the Word*, the literary theorist contrasts several times poetry and prose, making *prose* a synonym of consolidated, experienced – old – forms of art, while *poetry* is equated to *left* art's continuously renovating and creative impulse. He states that 'old works of verbal art experience the same fate as the word itself', that they 'journey from poetry to prose', and 'stop being seen and begin being recognized' (Shklovsky 2017a: 67). Shklovsky is not referring here to poetry or prose as literary forms, and to complicate things further, in his subsequent 'Art as a Device' essay, he gives this opposition yet a different definition; he defines *poetry* as 'decelerated', 'contorted', and 'constructed' *speech*, while *prose* is 'ordinary', 'economical', 'easy', and 'correct' *speech*.

Shklovsky's terminology will later shed the term *prose speech* in favour of *practical speech*. Be that as it may, it could be fruitful to take this polarity literally, as if it were in fact referencing the literary forms, since it then acquires a new dialogical life when one reflects on Kharms and Vaginov's turn from verse to prose in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which has been seen by many scholars – and even by fellow oberiut Vvedensky – as a form of abandonment of *left* art.

At this point, we should turn our attention to Wittgenstein's parallels in his all-encompassing focus on language, not limited in his case to art, and to the Austrian's relevance in the posterior analysis of the works in this thesis, if only for polemicising his tenets. In his seminal *Tractatus*, posterior to the formalists' paradigm-changing focus on language, Wittgenstein drew a line between the language-covered world and the world outside language, with the latter being completely devalued as a valid field of exploration.

> What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense. (1922: 23)

As such, a parallel was drawn between language and reality, and language was upheld as the ultimate and only way to create the world and reality – in Wittgenstein's words, 'the world is the totality of facts, not of things' (1922: 25). This is especially relevant to the formalist focus on language as the only relevant area of study in literature, and its separation from any social or cultural competing concerns. It is also relevant to Kharms' philosophical proposition of *world creation* through words; if, as Wittgenstein proclaims, the world consists of *facts*, and only that which can be expressed through words can be said to exist for human experience, then it follows that if something can be put into words, it will concurrently begin to exist. The limitation of reality to that which can be expressed is also fruitful while contrasting it to OBERIU's refusal to stop at language's limits to experience reality with their

attempt at showing a deeper reality just below the surface – or beyond language – using their *transrational* thinking. The last word from the above long quote, 'nonsense', which is used in a fully negative way in the manner in which it escapes reason's grasp, is in turn split in two by the Chinari – and by extension the oberiuts –, with one variant, *bessmyslitsa*, being celebrated by the oberiuts for its creative and metaphysical possibilities, and the other variant, *bessmyslennost*, having the same meaning as Wittgenstein's term, shall we say, *meaninglessness*. In fact, Vvedensky signed his poems for a period as 'the authority of nonsense' – or '*avto-ritet bessmyslitsy.*' In addition, Wittgenstein's proposal is also relevant to the aspect of the Petersburgian and the Parisian absurd that dealt with the dyad of the difficulty or impossibility of using language to talk about God, what lurks beneath the surface[9], or reality as a whole, and the fact that the latter element in this dyad turns human existence absurd or leaves no other solution than God or reality being absurd[10].

Wittgenstein's division of the world into communicable parts – or facts – offered no consolation for the oberiuts, as Kharms' philosophical ministory 'The Werld' shows, which can be considered an indirect criticism of this approach. After having endeavoured to divide the world into recognisable parts, the narrator is suddenly offered a glimpse of reality as a totality, not as a sum of parts, with which comes the awareness of the inadequacy of the attempted division, then gets frightened by this lack of divisions and the simultaneous impossibility of not making a division between the self and the world due to the person's consciousness, and ends in existential angst, hopelessly repeating 'And I'm the world. But the world's not me' (2009: 148–9).

Notwithstanding all the previous, it must be said that Wittgenstein does not, by any measure, reject the idea that there is a deeper reality below – or sense to – human existence. What Wittgenstein does is, finally, to acknowledge the limitations of reason and language, and make these human limitations unsurmountable. Thus, he concedes that humans cannot reach this deeper sense and should accept contingency when he states that 'The sense of the world must lie outside the world.

[9] One needs to go no further than looking at the title of one of Beckett's works analysed in this study: *The Unnamable*.

[10] See Carrick (1998: 81).

In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen.' (1922: 87), and, as a consequence, humanity must give up on finding life's sense: 'We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem' (1922: 89). Adding to this, in what could be seen as a final contradiction of his language-reason covered world, he concedes that 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical.' (1922: 90); however, this is not a contradiction at all, but a further expounding upon reason-language limitations. This concession consequently entails a point of communion with more intuitivist approaches to the inexpressible – as *zaum* – or even with negative theology exponents, which postulate that God can only be intuited through demarcating all which God is not. In turn, if Wittgenstein's inclusion in this study appeared to be at first glance justified only for the sake of offering contrast, it turns out to be much more complementary to the other authors analysed, in the way that the Austrian philosopher reaches the same outer edge of reason-language, with the difference that he then chooses to retreat into solid ground rather than risking a blind leap, in what can be said to be a connection with Camus, as will be further explored.

Apart from the parallels and contrasts between Wittgenstein's and other approaches, another aspect that is relevant for this study is the fact that both Shklovsky's and Wittgenstein's conceptions were influenced by the First World War, having started their output either during or immediately after the war. When Tihanov contextualises Shklovsky's ideas as a response to the war, he may as well be talking about Wittgenstein, 'the war was the propitious ground on which a materialist, substance-orientated view of the world grew strong and flourished, amid and out of – ultimately as a protest against – the cacophony and chaos of annihilation' (Tihanov 2019: 52). This connection will be useful for latter discussion in this study of the context that engendered the Petersburgian and the Parisian absurd. Suffice it to say that the fact that in Russia there was also the uprooting experience of the Revolution and new Soviet reality, at least in the case of Shklovsky, while having an impact on his main output, was not as inextricable as his experience of the war.

After this survey of two thinkers whose most influential works shortly preceded the formation of the OBERIU, it is time now to pass on to one of their contemporaries in output, Mikhail Bakhtin, with whom some oberiuts worked side by side. Vaginov joined the Bakhtin Circle when Bakhtin moved from Vitebsk to Petersburg in 1924, and Bakhtin's ideas are transparently present in Vaginov's novels. After reading Vaginov's *The Goat Song*, Bakhtin stated that Vaginov was 'a true carnival writer' and then 'with obvious reverence' Bakhtin 'went through the details of *The Goat Song*' (Vulis in Nikolskaya 1999: 9). Kharms and Vvedensky, on their part, attended several of Bakhtin's lectures, and some scholars, including Holquist (1982), have stated that Bakhtin praised, or at least acknowledged Kharms as a carnival writer[11]. This presents a case of a literary theorist who was working alongside contemporary authors, creating an ecosystem of mutual interconnections and influences. Unlike Shklovsky, who either dismissed or attacked any previous literary oeuvre when formulating his formalist ideas as a breakthrough – as his perennial attack on the Symbolists – and focused just on the present and the future[12], Bakhtin went way back in time into the Renaissance as a prime example of his conceptions of the novel, presenting, it could be argued, a more markedly conservative approach. Bakhtin's exchange of ideas with the oberiuts, and his focus on the novel as an intrinsically carnivalesque medium where his concepts of dialogism and *heteroglossia* could be explored, is of much interest for analysing Kharms and Vaginov's turn from poetry, which occupied most of the space in the formalists' – and by extension futurists' minds –, into Bakhtin's predilected genre, the novel.

Having started his theoretical writings in the decade following the seminal works by the formalists – and Saussure –, Bakhtin was called first a formalist and a Structuralist when *rediscovered* in the West in the 1960s, and then there were efforts to incorporate him into Postmodernism and Post-Structuralism. However, while having a kernel of truth, these denominations miss the mark, not helped in turn by Bakhtin's oeuvre's refusal to be categorised. Turning our attention back to the

[11] Specifically due to Kharms' Menippean satire treatment of Pushkin.

[12] As made implicit in *The Resurrection of the Word*: 'The paths of new art have only been lightly traced. Not theorists but artists will be the first to travel these paths. Whether the new forms will be created by the futurists, or by others—in any case, the futurists are on the right track: they judged the old forms correctly.' (Shklovsky 2017a: 71–2)

formalists, the Russian intellectual shared with them the lack of interest in the individual author, and the avoidance of a moralising aim in literature, as well as an interest and focus on language, commonalities succinctly exposed by Tihanov (2019: 96–133). However, that is the extent of their commonalities, and Bakhtin could not have been clearer in his repudiation of formalist ideas. His interest in language was not confined to the intricacies of language within a literary text, but extended well beyond into socio-ideological, and humanistic concerns. In Bakhtin's words, 'form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon', and it is so 'from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning' ('DN': 259). As Holquist (2002: 15) puts it when considering Bakhtin's totality of thought, his was an example of an epistemology that 'seeks to grasp human behaviour through the use humans make of language'. This theory of culture, which centred around language, 'restores in a much subtler and mediated way, the bond between language and culture that the literary theory of the formalists had attempted to sever' (Tihanov 2019: 105). In connection with this holistic view of Bakhtin, another of his concepts opposed to the formalist thought, *unfinishability*, acquires a marked humanistic colour. This impossibility for the novel to be completed as an exercise on always becoming – which runs counter to the formalists necessarily closed view of the text as determined by the language system –, then becomes 'the source of the frustration, pain, and danger we must confront in a world so dominated by the unknowable', and 'the necessary precondition for any freedom we may know' (Clark and Holquist 1984: 347). A last important polemic between them, a polemicising that was explicitly addressed to the formalists in Bakhtin's reaction to their thought, *The Formal Method* (Medvedev[13]: 1985), is the absolute separation that the formalists make between literary language and everyday or *practical* language. Taking their ideas to their logical extreme, Bakhtin makes the point that this distinction impoverishes literary language and in fact makes it subservient to *practical* language. Since the function of literary language is to defamiliarise everyday language, any innovation in literature would then have to wait for this language to evolve in order to be able to come up with a new defamiliarisation of the newly solidified language, thus being relegated to a secondary, parasitic relationship (Clark

[13] The book was written by Bakhtin but published under the name of fellow member of the Bakhtin Circle, Pavel Medvedev.

et al. 1984). For Bakhtin, this harmful separation of life and art should be substituted by literary and non-literary utterances, neither of them separated from life, and both entailing an internal organisation through language in an attempt to reduce the chaos of the world (Holquist 2002: 85). In a thinly veiled attack on the formalists, Bakhtin writes that even the 'linguistic profile and style of the utterance' is determined by its heteroglot aspects 'to no less a degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language' ('DN': 252).

After this spotlight on the formalists and Bakhtin's polemics, it is time to focus on Bakhtin's own thought, specifically those of his concepts that are more relevant to this study. Before moving on to that, however, these polemics ought to be qualified. Even if on the surface these controversies seem purely antagonistic, this author agrees with Clark and Holquist (1984: 196) when they point to the exceptional way these two approaches complement each other, and how these are, maybe, not mutually exclusive views, but fruitfully dialogical for the scholar that incorporates both.

> The exchange that was initiated in the 1920s, when the two sides appeared to be talking past each other, has since become a mutually interacting set of still living possibilities. … Subsequent history has shaped a relation between the two sides in which it is increasingly apparent that Bakhtin and the formalist provide a particularly grateful "other" for each other.

While Bakhtin's theoretical output is lengthy and complex, what is most relevant for the present study are his concepts of carnival and dialogism in the novel. The dialogic essence of the novel finds in Bakhtin its most salient aspect in the concept of *heteroglossia*. Before arriving at *heteroglossia*, Bakhtin spoke of *polyphony* as the dialogism inherent to the novel. This *polyphony* encompassed just two separate voices, that of the author and the character -author and *hero* in Bakhtinian terms. This dialogue was, of course, figurative, and was achieved through the *dual directedness* of the hero's speech, which added to the traditional speech of the character that targeted their life and aims a second target, the author, represented in the novel through its form, structure and atmosphere -*scheme of discourse* in his terms. Using Hirschkop's (2021: 83) clarity of expression, 'a hero's speech is

dialogically provoked by the narrative as a whole' and 'the hero, as a consequence, seems to address the reader directly.'

Right after the publication of these ideas in 1929 in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, Bakhtin's life collided head-on with the Stalinist regime. He was arrested and given a sentence of five years' exile in Kostanay, Kazakhstan in 1930, where he also witnessed the horrors of famine brought about by collectivisation. During his exile, probably in part as a reaction to this clash with the Soviet state and awareness of the new Soviet reality, his concept of a polyphonic dialogism evolved into his concept of *heteroglossia* in the novel – much broader, socio-culturally and politically charged, and against centripetal and authoritative *monologic* social forces[14]. It will be worth dwelling further down on how this change parallels Kharms and Vaginov's turn from *left* art poetry into prose exactly at this same time.

In the heteroglot multitude of discourses, the author is still the overarching stylistic unifier, but the characters transform into cohabiting or competing socio-ideological speeches. This dialogic nature of language is recognised not only within the novel, but as an integral characteristic of 'any living discourse' ('DN': 279). This decentring of a monologic discourse of the author, by necessity carries a shedding off of any unilateral moral dimension. In connection to Shklovsky, but in stark opposition, it is interesting to dwell on the fact that Bakhtin identifies this antiquated, monological approach with poetry – as well as myth and authoritative discourse – in 'DN'. Bakhtin levels the accusation that poetry 'often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative' ('DN': 287). This seemingly extreme view of poetry seems derived more from Bakhtin's rejection of Formalism and Symbolism than an entrenched view of poetry as incapable of any dialogism. By reading the formalist treaties, it is clear that their focus is overwhelmingly on poetry, even when they purport to talk about literary endeavours in general – Shklovsky's use of the term *poetry* to describe creative forces and *prose* for solidified, antiquated ones readily comes to mind. On top of this, the Symbolists, who had reigned over the transition into the twentieth century in Russia, did make some claims that could support Bakhtin's accusation, making an

[14] It was, however, not a direct consequence of this shock, as the seeds for his concepts were already planted and can be traced back to previous works.

unbridgeable distinction between poetic language and any other form of language. In a further reaction to the Symbolists, Bakhtin goes on to say that

> In the poetic image narrowly conceived (in the image-as-trope), all activity—the dynamics of the image-as-word—is completely exhausted by the play between the word (with all its aspects) and the object (in all its aspects). The word plunges into the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object itself, with its "virginal," still "unuttered" nature; therefore it presumes nothing beyond the borders of its own context (except, of course, what can be found in the treasure-house of language itself). … For the writer of artistic prose, on the contrary, the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments. ('DN': 278)

However, Bakhtin's general issue with poetry seems to be most of all the missed opportunities of this one-track focus on poetic language in detriment of other literary genres. As pointed out by Hirschkop (2021: 99-100), Pushkin's 'Evgeny Onegin' was included in 'DN' as a prime example of dialogism, and Bakhtin praised Mayakovsky for bridging the gap between poetic and prose language in his poems. Regardless of whether Bakhtin did consider poetry as an enemy of dialogism, or he was just polemicising with the formalists and Symbolists, it is undeniable that the added cultural and social dimension of Bakhtin's dialogism, this multiplicity of voices, as well as the unambiguous criticism of authoritative discourse, ensure Bakhtin is protected against accusations of any complicity in the creation of the Soviet discourse and reality, much unlike the formalists, whose role was markedly more ambiguous, having been considered by some scholars in a range that goes from unintended, minor, and tangential facilitating elements, up to the point of an almost *sine qua non* requisite for its existence[15].

Returning to Bakhtin's thought, and to make a distinction from what may sound at first glance like Post-Structuralism or Postmodernism, this *heteroglossia* is still orchestrated by the author, who is able to insert irony or parody into any of the voices they choose to make part of the novel, although this is not done directly by the author inserting their own voice into the novel, but by inserting other voices that

[15] See Anemone (1991).

relativise the initial voice's speech, and by the 'double-voiced discourse' of characters, which expresses 'the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author' ('DN': 324). This proliferation of, at points, contradictory speeches, does not debilitate the overall effect of language in the novel, but it allows it to be 'submerged in social heteroglossia' and 'reconceptualized through it' (DN: 326). Here, heteroglossia is starting to sound increasingly similar to the oberiuts' own concept of the *collision of meanings* – or the use of incongruous or unexpected collocations or displacements to achieve new meanings –, which will be expounded upon in a following chapter. However, using the words of Hirschkop (2021: 95), even if *heteroglossia* may equivocally appear to be the 'collision of different languages within a single work', the more basic dialogism in the novel is 'between the novel as a whole and any single constituent style', or as Bakhtin puts it, between the 'subordinate stylistic … unities' and the 'higher unity of the whole work' ('DN': 262). This overarching unity of the work is 'orchestrated' by the author, who 'cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the centre of organization where all levels intersect' ('PND': 48-9). The discourses represented are not meant to be closed utterances, used as pieces in a collage, they are supposed to be extended by the novelist beyond their initial point of departure to test their validity and feasibility against other discourses. The novel, thus, becomes a testing ground for the dominance-aspiring voices.

Another essential element of this multitude of voices, already advanced in his polyphonic analysis of Dostoevsky's novels, is the impossibility of completion, as this dialogicity 'cannot be completely encompassed within the bounds of direct dialogue' and this *double-voicedness* implies a constant *historical becoming* that is never closed ('DN': 325-6). This orientation towards the future that Bakhtin saw in Dostoevsky's dialogism between author and hero, was sharpened and expanded into societal preoccupations with *heteroglossia*. This element, even when not directly linked to *historically becoming*, is the one that can be said to be shared by all of the authors in this study. Beckett's preoccupation with the impossibility of finishing is well known and present throughout his drama and prose, as are Ionesco's circular plots, Vaginov's obsession with completion in *Harpagoniana*, Vvedensky's

simultaneous existence and dialogue between authors distant in time or Kharms' abrupt ends that do not give any closure or moral to the story.

The tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces in *heteroglossia* was then given further social and political edges by Bakhtin's introduction of his understanding of carnival, with which the *multi-voicedness* of the novel was literarily taken out into the streets, or more precisely into the town squares, and given a universal dimension. This concept was introduced at length in his most carnivalesque of works, *Rabelais and His World*. The choice of the main author subject to his study, apart from being apt for elaborating upon his conception of carnival in the novel, is telling for another reason. Returning to the impact of the Revolution and new Soviet reality in Bakhtin's thought, the Renaissance writer paralleled Bakhtin's historical situation: 'Such ages, whatever the consequences for those who live through them, create particularly favorable conditions for study of the relativity of cultural systems, of the holes in the discursive walls erected by cultures to order their religions, laws, and genres' (Clark et al. 1984: 296–7). Bakhtin was decidedly aware of this fact, which he made implicit in his description of Rabelais:

> Let us note, first of all, Rabelais' clear awareness of the historical revolution that has taken place, of the changing times, and the advent of a new era. The author expresses this awareness in the other parts of his novel with the help of a system of folk images, celebrating the New Year, spring, or carnival; in Gargantua's letter he creates a theoretical basis. (*RHW*: 406)

Clark and Holquist go on to point out the fact that, because of their revolutionary essence, in both epochs, the distance of the everyday person as a mere observer of history was erased, making people by necessity active participants, or actors, instead of spectators of the *play*. They see a parallel between this and both authors' preoccupation with the erasing of 'borders of any kind.' However, this last phrase may be a bit too broad for Bakhtin and leaves outside an important aspect of *borders* for Bakhtin in this subsummation. While it is true that Bakhtin admired carnival's capacity to erase the liminality between art and life – making carnival 'a theatre without footlights' –, high and low culture, life and death, and to turn a vertically stratified (hierarchical) social order into a horizontal continuum, for his concept of

heteroglossia he needed to segment different socio-cultural speeches and genres so that they could enter into dialogue with others. If 'the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types', then the 'internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel' ('DN': 262-3). Were there to be no differentiation between the socio-cultural voices, dialogism would be impossible in the heterogenous, but hopelessly mixed broth of voices.

Apart from the different speeches, Bakhtin also differentiates between *genres*. He attacks the notion of literary *styles* or *schools* as too narrow, at times individualistic, and author-centred, and proposes instead to speak of *genres*, an overarching term that is always a coalescence of voices, with socio-ideological implications. The novel presents as the best medium to make these differentiated genres come into contact and contrast each other, and seen through multiple eras, the best way to see the history of literature as a 'historical struggle of genres' (Bakhtin 1981a: 5). This last historical view takes us back to Tihanov's efficacious concept of *regimes of relevance*. It could be argued here that the historical view that Tihanov takes for the study of literature is directly applicable to Bakhtin's view of the struggle between genres, not only historically, but also concurrently within any specific novel. In fact, the very terminology used by Bakhtin in his 'Epic and the Novel' essay, his repeated mention of the *dominance* of a genre in different eras, constitutes a true resonance. This is not surprising given that Kant's notion in *Critique of Pure Reason* of philosophical anthropology – the historization of epistemologies – was the basis for Bakhtin's own historising stimulus.

The last aspect of carnival where it is necessary to dwell on due to its importance further on in this study is its attached concept of laughter. Laughter in carnival is liberating, there are no tears or fear behind it. Much to the contrary, 'festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts' (*RHW*: 92). This festive laughter 'keeps alive a sense of variety and change' and is used against more ominous rubrics like 'eternal', 'immovable', 'absolute', or 'unchangeable' (Clark et al. 1984: 301). However, this also represents the main criticism of Bakhtin's view of carnival, as this

view of laughter has consistently come under attack due to its abandoned idealisation. Many critics have argued that this seemingly regenerative power of laughter in the festive town square was restricted to the act of the carnival itself and did in no way transcend it; at best, it was a *letting off air* by the lower strata of society. It is further argued that, in fact, it did not shake the pillars of the established order at all, but that, on the contrary, it served to reinforce the status quo, by making the social structure explicit through its foregrounding by inversion, and reverting to it after the festivities, as in the coronation of the old king when the temporary carnival king reign expired. While this criticism is historically valid, it is worth reconceptualising Bakhtin's thought as wanting to reflect his immediate reality, rather to repeat a historical anachronism. For this, Khlebnikov's – and by extension the futurists' – view of carnival will be illuminating.

The main thrust of Khlebnikov's view of carnival is its potential for upheaval. This upheaval is capable of affecting real change as, in a view similar to that of Bakhtin, it represents a process of transition to an opposite reality, rather than a temporary sterile inversion. Laughter is a pillar of this view of carnival, in that it is capable of instigating a revolt that reveals and unmasks an artificial reality. In connection with *zaum*, and the generalised avant-garde rejection of rationalism, laughter represents an opposite of reason, it is 'an apostle of irrationality' (Lönnqvist[16] 1979: 28). This laughter is accompanied by the introduction of elements of play as a 'generating principle', something that is reflected in the futurist concept of creation as play. Taking their cue from carnival, as it is well known, the futurists took to the streets and squares 'provoking argument and entering into banter with, or even insulting, the crowd, the futurists "actors" became self-stylised carnival clowns who burst into the "burgeois everyday" exhibiting their distaste for and lack of deference to accepted values of decorum"' (Brandist 1996: 55). Their anti-bourgeois performances were linked to the shortly preceding phenomenon of *hooliganism* in Russia, where small groups went about terrorising the bourgeoisie at a small scale with their rejection and inversion of established civilised values, and the threat of violence. They can be said to have subverted the power balance – albeit to a very limited extent – by *taking control* of the streets. Even though they shared with

[16] I have Barbara Lönnqvist (1979) to thank also for the main direction of this initial view.

these *hooligans* an aversion towards the bourgeoisie and an aim to subvert the balance of power by taking over the public space, the futurists rebellion was primarily artistic, rather than purely social. The label of *hooliganism* stuck with the futurists, in a remarkable transmission from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. If the *hooligans* inspired 'moral panics' that were 'propagated by the burgeois press' (ibid), the Bolshevik proletariat pasted the same label on the futurists, and kept doing so even after the OBERIU started their output, as they also had this label attached to them in reviews of their performances[17].

Be that as it may, it is precisely this *taking control* of the public space that provides the best link between Bakhtin's reading of carnival and his contemporary reality. I propose that, against the historically accurate but limited criticism of Bakhtin's carnival concept, the variety of carnival in Russia at the turn of the century and the years that followed was not a mirror doubling of the bygone carnivals, but a unique reinterpretation of the idea. While the medieval carnival was limited to a specific date in the year, the futurists aimed to turn into this carnivalesque reality *every day*, that is to say, they sought a permanent state of carnival. By the nature of this aim towards an unending carnivalisation of life, that refused to fade back into obscurity once the performance was over, carnival managed to transcend the reality it was inverting. In all, in contrast with medieval carnival's complete destruction of social hierarchy, this futurist carnival had a more subdued but attainable aim to rejuvenate art along with social consciousness through it. This is the key to understanding the oberiuts' early demeanour and output, not as a repeat of medieval carnival, but as an implementation of this futurist carnivalisation of art.

Returning to the specificity of laughter, while this carnivalesque laughter may have been put into practice by futurists like Mayakovsky with their use of *balagan* and other popular *low* forms of culture in the mid-1910s, and the OBERIU may have had a kinship in behaviour and output at its formation, as we shall see, their use of the comic in the oberiuts' work later representations progressively differs from this

[17] In 1927, after some minutes of the poetry of proto-OBERIU members being drowned by shouts and whistling, Kharms stood up and declared 'Comrades, please bear in mind I do not perform in either stables or whorehouses.' This prompted the publication of an article that read 'The students categorically objected to hooliganish attacks of this sort on the persons appearing in the capacity of official representatives of a literary organization' (Kharms 2013: 133-4).

carnival laughter, be it in its understanding of Bakhtin's historically inaccurate view or in the above proposed distinct futurist carnival; it becomes more medieval-Orthodox in nature. Notwithstanding this analysis of carnival laughter, the influence of Bergson's conception of laughter is also felt in the oberiuts' works. Bakhtin, for one, realised that Bergson's views of laughter were antipathetic to his own:

> For the Renaissance … the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning. This clearly distinguishes it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter, including Bergson's conception, which bring out mostly its negative functions. (*RHW*: 71)

Following Bakhtin's pointer, then, we shall next pass on to the analysis of Bergson's philosophy.

2. Foregrounding of time and laughter: Henri Bergson

Was, as Bakhtin claimed, Bergson's conception of laughter mainly negative? While it can be argued that this is an extreme position, since for Bergson laughter has a dual function – to bring attention to the automatisation of life, brought about by intellectual lassitude, so that life can be truly experienced on the one hand, and the fully restrictive correction of deviations from the social norm on the other –, what is irrefutable in Bakhtin's above quote is that Bergson's laughter is lacking in elements that would denote a creating impetus. This, in fact, would bring Bergson's promulgated social correction of laughter closer to the historical carnival laughter – not Bakhtin's take of it –, as both would ultimately serve to ensure the status quo.

What becomes clear, even after this short contraposition of both philosophies of laughter, is that none of the authors analysed in this study – with the exception of the OBERIU's early output – can be said to be essentially Bakhtinian in their laughter. In none of them is laughter of a 'regenerating' or 'creative' nature, and neither can it be said it allays any fears, but at best to be a form of putting a brave face in the face of adversity or an inevitable consequence of the realisation of the absurd. Conversely, at least some if not all of the authors in this thesis have well-defined and even central elements of laughter of Bergsonian import in their works, be it the laughter caused

by the automatisation of language and by the deviation from the social mores in Ionesco's plays, in Beckett's exposing of the mechanisation of language, Kharms' character's antisocial behaviour and lack of ethical considerations, or the social inadequacy of the characters in Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs*. Let us then delve deeper into Bergson's philosophy of laughter, to which he dedicated his 1900 work, *Laughter*.

Bergson's first work of the twentieth century cannot be considered an intrinsically theoretical work. It is rather a philosophical reflection on laughter and, more generally, on art. Therefore, in terms of his philosophy of laughter, it is not possible to say that it influenced this or that author, but only whether said authors' use of laughter aligns or not with the Frenchman's analysis. It is, surprisingly, his elaboration on art in *Laughter*, that connects to his views of time – his *durée*[18] – and life's creative impulse – his *élan vital* – in other works of this era, as his 1907 *Creative Evolution*, that prove more fruitful in terms of Bergson's resonance with the authors that read them, which will be dealt with further in this study.

Bringing our attention back to laughter, after pointing out its purely human ontology, Bergson starts his work by pointing to two main characteristics of the comic, which will be fertile ground for this study and that can be summarised as follows:

1. Emotion and laughter are incompatible. For laughter, an – at least temporary – moral insensibility is necessary, since it is addressed at 'pure intelligence'.
2. Laughter has a social signification and necessitates a group of people to exist.

With these tenets set, Bergson delves into the positive side of this social laughter, that of the 'general perfecting' of society by foregrounding any 'mechanic rigidity' in life – someone's actions – that runs contrary to the natural and flexible flow of life. When we perceive this automatisation, which is not life but a mere imitation, we perceive it as funny, and the laughter it provokes serves to correct it. Even though, by necessity, laughter is not a purely aesthetic endeavour due to its social function, Bergson still sees in it an aesthetic element in that, by creating a distance between

[18] The *durée* or *duration* is Bergson's view of time as an indivisible whole. As an absolute, reason alone cannot access it, or as a consequence, reality, so that only through intuition the true nature of time and reality can be grasped.

the individual and their actions, humans become their own works of art. After this, Bergson says that, in theatre, the more a character becomes individualistic, the less their comic potential; by contrast, the more a character is thought as a *stock character* or to represent a general set of attitudes, the more comic possibilities they gain. Then, in an acute transposition of this idea to life outside theatre, Bergson points out that the comic in life comes from the realisation of its absurdity, or more precisely from the realisation of humans' lack of individual freedom in spite of the perceived freedom they believe to have when they get entangled with personal emotions and intricacies; in fact humans are mere puppets in the hands of everyday, practical demands.

After this, Bergson goes on to list certain ways in which laughter is attained in writing, which will be listed here as they are readily applicable to many of the works of the authors studied:

1. Inserting an incongruous word into an idiom, axiom or turn of phrase
2. Taking a figurative expression literally
3. Using an inappropriate tone for an idea

The first point effortlessly reminds us of *The Bald Soprano* – e.g. 'He who sells ox today, will have an egg tomorrow', 'Benjamin Franklin was right; you are more nervous than me', 'rather a steak in a chalet than gristle in a castle' (Ionesco 1958: 38) – and *Elizaveta Bam* –e.g. 'When you're buying a bird, make sure it hasn't got teeth. If it's got teeth, it isn't a bird' (Kharms 1991: 227). The second point fits neatly into Beckett's constant deconstruction of well-established idioms and turns of phrase – e.g. 'An aeroplane passes by, flying low, with a sound like thunder. It is a noise quite unlike thunder, one says thunder but one does not think of it, it is just a loud, fleeting noise, nothing more, unlike any other.' (Beckett 2012: 98). Lastly, the third point is apparent in Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs'* (2001: 401):

CLERK	And what happened to that drunk? Is he still swinging?
CONSTABLE	He is swinging like this pendulum,
	And the Milky Way is swinging above him.
	How many there are of these toilers of the sea,
	Outcast folk and peasant serfs.

It is also observable in Kharms' use of inconsistently incongruous style, as in the '14th bit' in *Elizaveta Bam*, entitled in its draft version the bit of 'classical inspiration':

PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH	Empty, stupid words! There is an infinite movement, The breathing of the lighter elements, planetary motion, the earth's rotation, the crazed alternation of day and night, the combination of remote nature, the anger and strength of untamed beast and the subjugation by man of the laws of light and wave.
IVAN IVANOVICH	(lighting a match) Now I realise, realise, realise. I give my thanks and squat and as always take an interest – What time is it? Tell me.
PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH	Four. Oh, it's time for dinner! Ivan Ivanovich, let's go, but remember that tomorrow night Yelizaveta Bam will die. (*EB*: 233–4)

While being conspicuous in Ionesco's presentation of the most mundane inanities as unbelievable facts of prowess:

Mrs MARTIN	Well, today, when I went shopping … I saw a man, properly dressed, about fifty years old, or not even that, who…
Mr SMITH	Who, what?
…	
Mrs MARTIN	Well, I'm sure you'll say that I'm making it up–he was down on one knee and he was bent over.
THE OTHER THREE	Oh!
Mrs MARTIN	Yes, bent over.
Mr SMITH	Not possible.
…	
Mrs MARTIN	He was tying his shoe lace which had come undone.

THE OTHER THREE Fantastic!

Mr SMITH If someone else had told me this, I'd not believe it. (*BS*:21-2)

There is a further element of the comic in language for Bergson that is interesting as it connects to the subsequent formalist thought; it is his idea that there is laughter that comes from within language as a system, from its deficiencies or interplay, which is not translatable to other languages or systems. This would serve to bridge the gap between Bergson and the formalist, as it welcomes into the closed language system as an inherent possibility in language itself rather than the situation described, and it represents a first attempt to explicitly name metafiction and its comic potentiality.

Before moving into the negative side of laughter, it is necessary to dwell in Bergson's view of the comic writer as a moralist. He divides this moralising impetus into two types of approaches, what he calls *humour* and irony. Irony is straightforwardly the statement of an ideal situation – and its exaggerated prolongation –, against a lacking reality, while *humour* is said to be the quasi-scientific analysis of reality to show its absurdity. These definitions are not applicable to any of the authors studied as these artists lack any moralising element. However, Bergson's description of irony is useful when thinking about Kharms' comic, as some critics have advanced, rightly or wrongly, a moralising undercurrent in his works. This, in Kharms' case, would not be done by irony in the Bergsonian sense, but by its inversion. By focusing and stretching reality while not explicitly mentioning how things should be, it is claimed that Kharms is aiming to precisely that which other authors attempted through irony.

To finish with Bergson's views of the comic, we shall move on now to his fully negative view of laughter, that which Bakhtin had in mind when making his above-quoted remarks. This is a laughter of social correction, designed to humiliate and intimidate; this laughter, even when its supposed aim is to ensure adjustment, does not need to be fair or even *good*. As such, a comic character does not derive their comic elements from being immoral, but solely because of their social maladaptation. To the impertinence thrown by a person who does not follow the social norms, laughter represents an even stronger personal affront. This socially corrective laughter can be transposed directly to Ionesco's and Beckett's characters, as with the

laughter caused by the Martins being too shy to ring the bell of their hosts' house or the exacerbated criticism of the Smiths for the Martins' delay, or Vladimir and Estragon's casual talk about hanging themselves. It can also be said to be the type of laughter provoked by the characters' mismatched actions in *Christmas at the Ivanovs*', as when the parents give into passion's throes while mourning the death of their daughter. However, this social corrective, again, is turned on its head by Kharms by inverting the role of society into a positive humanistic one, in opposition to their contemporary situation in which Soviet reality and society were being turned into something despicable, and by implying social adaptation to the new regime was something detestable, managing to bring back the positive energy of laughter. As such, when Kharms' narrator in the ministory 'Falling Old Women' dispassionately watches six old women fall to their death, and then gets bored about the spectacle altogether and leaves for something more entertaining, the comic situation that this engenders is a corrective of Kharms' contemporary inversion of morals and general indifference to the Stalinist deaths. Maybe Beckett can be said to get close to this laughter with his Pozzo and Lucky characters, as by taking social hierarchy to an extreme, a positive corrective laughter is provoked.

After this analysis of Bergson's comic, a second important discussion in his work is that of reality and art, which, together with other works preceding Formalism can be seen to have been at least a source of inspiration for the formalists. Indeed, some critics have argued that some of Shklovsky's tenets are nothing but unacknowledged translations of Bergson. Taking a look at the following 'Art as a Device' (2017b: 93) passage,

> When studying poetic language … we always encounter the same characteristic of art: it is created with the explicit purpose of de-automatizing perception. Vision is the artist's goal; the artistic [object] is "artificially" created in such a way that perception lingers and reaches its greatest strength and length, so that the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually.

Curtis (1976: 114), argues that it is essentially Bergsonian, and that, without a previous familiarity with Bergson's terminology – 'duration', 'spatiality', 'continuity' – and his division between everyday and poetic language, this passage would not be

fully intelligible. Having previously analysed Shklovsky's conception of art in this study, going over the tenets of Bergson's conception of art may feel like déjà vu. Some of Shklovsky's tenets so closely resemble Bergson's words that his influence in the Russian is undeniable. Bergson says in general that 'we do not see the actual things themselves … we confine ourselves to reading the labels affixed to them' (1935: 153), before passing on to analysing language directly, 'the word … only takes note of the most ordinary function and commonplace aspect of the thing, intervenes between it and ourselves, and would conceal its form from our eyes, were that form not already masked beneath the necessities that brought the word into existence.' Also 'even in our own individual, individuality escapes our ken. We move amidst generalities and symbols' (154). Bergson then goes on to further delve into the reasons for this. He states that the senses and consciousness simplify reality for practical reasons, and that in this process things that are not useful for humans are removed. He indicates that humanity previously has classified the object for us, so that we see this classification and not the true nature – or, in his formalist-sounding terminology, the colour and shape – of things. Therefore, the artist's function is to 'remove the utilitarian symbols, the socially accepted generalities', and that art is 'nothing but a more direct view of reality' (ibid). Subsequently, Bergson, using Nietzschean terminology, speaks of a thick veil that stops the masses from accessing reality, which in the case of the artist is innately thinner, almost transparent, so that the artist has a higher facility to pierce this veil. This veil is not maliciously imposed, but a necessity to live and act in the everyday world. By refusing the utilitarian view of life, the artist is then able to access this impractical realm. Bergson goes then on to expound on how the artist helps the masses access reality in a quote that, were it to be attributed to Shklovsky, no one would raise an eyebrow:

> This one applies himself to colours and forms, and since he loves colour for colour and form for form, since he perceives them for their sake and not for his own, it is the inner life of things that he sees appearing through their forms and colours. Little by little he insinuates it into our own perception, baffled though we may be at the outset. For a few moments at least, he diverts us from the prejudices of form and colour that come between ourselves and reality. And thus he realises the loftiest ambition of art, which here consists in revealing to us nature. (1935: 155-6)

In fact, in Curtis' words (1976: 115), 'since estrangement as a device embodies Bergson's concept of the effect of art, we may consider Shklovsky the foremost, and certainly the most energetic, proponent of the Bergsonian paradigm in Russia.' Indeed, in his article, Curtis, as in the previous quote, prefers to speak of a paradigm for the formalists, rather than of influence, due to the constitutive importance of Bergsonian thought for them, to the point where the formalists did not feel the need to even reference Bergson by name, so clear was the medium they were working within.

Something that takes Bergson closer to the formalists and, for that matter the Symbolists, and constitutes a clear distinction with Bakhtin, is his view of the object. Even though Bergson rejected *symbols*, as fixed labels running contrary to the continuously flowing reality, his view of the object is akin to that of the Symbolists and formalists. It would almost seem that Bakhtin had the following quote in mind when writing his repudiation of the Symbolists and formalists' view of the 'virginal' and 'unuttered' nature of the object: 'a natural detachment, one innate in the structure of sense or consciousness, which at once reveals itself by a virginal manner, so to speak, of seeing, hearing or thinking' (Bergson 1935: 153-7). However, in connection with Bakhtin, Bergson's concept of *durée* or ever-becoming in life and art represents a strong parallel with the Russian's concept of *unfinishability*, with the universal, instead of historical, view of carnival time, and with the view of carnival as a union between art and life, a 'theatre without footlights':

> Hence the equivocal nature of the comic. It belongs neither altogether to art nor altogether to life. On the one hand, characters in real life would never make us laugh were we not capable of watching their vagaries in the same way as we look down at a play from our seat in a box; they are only comic in our eyes because they perform a kind of comedy before us. But, on the other hand, the pleasure caused by laughter, even on the stage, is not an unadulterated enjoyment; it is not a pleasure that is exclusively esthetic or altogether disinterested. It always implies a secret or unconscious intent, if not of each one of us, at all events of society as a whole. (Bergson 1935: 135-6)

As all the previous has shown, Bergson's thought was extremely important for the formalists, but it did not stop there. Bergson's thought was highly popular in Russia, especially since the publication in Russian of his *Creative Evolution* in 1909. His ideas were important for Modernism in general, as pointed out by Richard Lehan, when he states that 'if the moderns did not have Bergson, they would have had to invent him' (1992: 311), since he 'created a systematic, rigorous philosophy that gave foundation to basic modernist trends' and he 'cleared the modernist landscape of a materialistic underbrush that would have choked modernism off at the outset' (307–8). In fact, Bergson's main contribution to Modernism was to create a propitious atmosphere for its existence, since 'The modernists were not yet willing to write off mythic and symbolic reality, could not reconcile theories of cyclical time and history with a belief in linear evolution and mechanical progress' and 'could not accept the notion of man based upon a purely rational theory of cognition and motives' (307).

However, Bergson found an even wider and more welcoming reception in Russia, the reason being the importance placed on intuitivism by the Frenchman. Bergson was not only welcomed in Russia by intellectuals, but also by Orthodox theologians. Both sides were attracted to his bridging of the Kantian gap, which had sought to divide intellect from intuition. Bergson's emphasis on intuition, in fact, also ran contrary to Wittgensteinian thought, and serves to illuminate why the Austrian's ideas never took hold in Russia. It is not by dividing the world into parts – or facts – through reason that we will arrive at reality, but through intuition and the realisation that reality is ever flowing and cannot be solidified. As we shall see, his concepts of *élan vital* and *durée* fit perfectly with the Orthodox ever-becoming.

It is worth spending some time on the Orthodox reception of and parallels with Bergson's thought, in order to better illustrate his welcoming in Russia. When one thinks of Orthodoxy, one is inevitably reminded of the figure of the icon. Orthodoxy fought to be able to keep the icon against the charge of iconoclasm at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, and won. In the words of Hilary Fink (1999: 11):

> According to the iconophiles, the icon is a *revelation of* divine truth, not a representation; thus, by contemplating the icon, the worshipper is able to enter into spiritual "sympathy" with it and thereby gain immediate, noncognitive understanding of reality in its essence. The iconophile victory at Nicaea engrained in Russian thought

> the notion that the human being is able to participate in divine reality by the intuitive apprehension of things as they really are (given by grace).

She goes on to point out that this view is 'opposed to the traditionally rational emphasis in Western philosophy on an epistemology, which is informed by the dichotomy between knower and object of knowledge' (1999: 11). As Bergson states in *Creative Evolution*, while intuition transcends intelligence, it needs intelligence to reach the point where the person acknowledges intellect's limits. Without it, there would not be *intuition* to speak of, but rather *instinct*, which in no way transcends reality, but is subjugated to practical needs. Fink brings to our attention the illuminating distinction made in Russian thought between two types of reason. On the one hand, there is pure reason – or *rassudok*–, that completely dispenses with intuition, and on the other there is understanding – or *razum*–, which incorporates it. While rejecting the former, Orthodoxy, and the Russian intelligentsia including the avant-garde, predilected the latter, which makes use both of intellect as well as 'all the human faculties of perception' in order to 'grasp the noumenal world' (1999: 12), or in the case of non-theologians, the transcendental world. Of course, this inevitably brings us to the futurists' concept of *transreason* – or *zaum* –. This neologism had the same root as *razum*, *um,* which signifies intellect or thought. It is interesting to observe the parallels and variations between Orthodox theology's terms and those of the futurists. In their rejection of reason as the only means to arrive at a transcendental source, the futurists created the word *zaum*, or *za-um*, *za* meaning *on the other side of*, and *um* in this case signifying *reason*. Even if at first glance this seems like a complete rejection of the intellect, it actually represents a very similar approach to the Orthodox *integral knowledge*, which combined intellect and intuition, and of Bergson's tenets that even if intuition takes the final leap into reality, intellect is a precondition for this ultimate leap. *Zaum* then can be said to be a tool to bypass reason, but intellect was necessary to arrive at the *zaum* solution in the first place. In fact, as Geoffrey Cebula (2014: 94) puts it, Tufanov's *zaum* 'required intensive phonological and philological training that would cover both universal laws of phonology and the history of the Russian language at every developmental stage.' Charlotte Douglas (1980: 54), in her study of Malevich – and other futurists like

Khlebnikov – concurs with the view that *zaum* represented in art what the *integral knowledge* constituted for Orthodox theology and Bergsonian thought.

> Malevich did not advocate intuition as a kind of passive, anti-intellectual approach to art. It is definitely not instinct. He advanced intuition as an active creative principle which is lawful; in this it was quite similar to the original principle of *zaum.* For while it rejects analytical logic alone as too limiting, it certainly includes analytical logic and demands of the intellect the greatest effort. Indeed, Malevich often called this intuition 'intuitive reason' or 'intuitive will.'

Douglas makes a strong argument in favour of Bergson's influence on Malevich and Khlebnikov. While of the latter, she said that *zaum* had a strong basis on intellect, of the former, she points out that Malevich's artistic theories of the tension between intuition and intellect can be equated to Bergson's, and that both have similar views of form being a concept rather than a reality due to life's ever-becoming nature. While Malevich expounds that 'form is a condition and … does not exist' (1971: 190), Bergson says that 'there is no form, since form is immobile and the reality is movement' (1911: 319). However, Malevich's statement has to be qualified, as evidently he used form in his paintings. As he goes on to say after the above quote, 'form … as soon as it is revealed, dies away, for it has achieved in itself a certain perfection.' To try to overcome Bergson's solution, in essence antithetical to pictorial tenets, Malevich's was to try to make use of form just as a process and focus on the 'movement' of reality. He advocated for the artist to alter their consciousness before painting, instead of leaving this alteration to the future viewer. This rejection of form led Malevich to ultimately reject the object, and start his paintings from *zero*, so that the world was created anew in each painting and that the unavoidable pictorial form became a living form. Even if Malevich's total rejection of the object was problematic for his OBERIU interlocutors, this concept of *zero* as an ever-renovating point of departure in the time continuum could be seen as a strong parallel of Kharms' concept of *zero*, which will be analysed further below.

Another aspect of Orthodoxy that paralleled and made Bergson's ideas welcomed in Russia was the concept of instant, nonempirical understanding to arrive at the absolute. In his 'An Introduction to Metaphysics' (1913) essay, Bergson uses

languages and images that remind us of Orthodoxy. Having differentiated between *relative* and *absolute* knowledge, Bergson qualifies relative knowledge as *analytic*, *static*, and *external*, and indicates that absolute knowledge is reached by the means of intuition and 'through the active sympathy with the object of knowledge' (Fink 1999: 37). In fact, the three different types of knowledge included in the all-unity – or *vseedinstvo* – of Orthodox theology – experience, reason, and intuition – as made explicit by Vladimir Solovev, 'heavily influenced Russian artists of the early twentieth century and had much in common with the Bergsonian mix of intellect and intuition, the union of science and metaphysics' (39).

It is pertinent to momentarily return to Bergson's views for the contrasting offered with Kharms. Laughter is an essential element in Kharms' oeuvre – who has often been wrongly called a satirist – and there have been copious amounts of scholarly discussion on precisely what type of laughter Kharms can be said to embody. Is it Bakhtinian? Bergsonian? Moralising? An attack on Stalinism? A denunciation of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat? Is it absurd laughter or is it medieval laughter? In what pertains to Bergsonian laughter, the answer is, at best: in a small and oblique way. As will be expounded upon in ensuing chapters, Kharms' comic was of a distinctly darker hue than Bakhtin's carnival laughter, but it was also, on the whole, bleaker than Bergson's corrective laughter, even in the Frenchman's most negative view of its functions. Kharms' laughter had more in common with medieval, Orthodox laughter, which does not abolish fear, but on the contrary, implies it. It is at best a resigned laughter in the face of adversity and at worse the other side of the coin of terror. If Bergson's laughter pointed to the automatisation of life and the deviation from the social norm, Kharms' laughter pointed at the loss of humanity and moral considerations of the new Soviet society. It may be argued that the foregrounding of automatisation in life can be found in Kharms' comic, as the new society is shown to live with the new proletariat maxims that are immovable and increasingly distant from true life – as in the story's moral in one of Kharms' ministories, 'What They Sell In the Stores Nowadays' (Kharms 2009: 73), the narrator of which concludes that the conclusion that can be drawn from the senseless killing of a person with a cucumber is that the contemporary vegetable produce is remarkable, with its implication that this is due to Stalin's agrarian policies. But more

relevantly, as put forward above, when talking about Bergson's more negative function of laughter, if anything, Kharms' comic could be a reversal of a social corrective, which instead of humiliating people so that they *go back to the fold*, incites people to see the moral corruption of society and therefore invites people to not conform to the contemporary social norm.

It is irrefutable that Kharms was deeply interested in Bergson's work. Indeed, in one of his diary entries, Kharms writes that he had taken all of Bergson's works he could find in the library (Kharms 2013: 62-3). It is possible that this interest was generated or piqued by one of Kharms' mentors, Aleksandr Tufanov, who in turn was heavily influenced by the French philosopher. In his most discussed work, *Towards Zaum* (1924: 25), Tufanov references Bergson by name when expounding on his own ideas of consciousness and time, which closely mirror Bergson's concept of *durée*:

> The condition of consciousness is marked not by quantity but by quality; it is immeasurable and can only be apprehended; it consists of a multitude of alternating elements, interpenetrating one another, inseparable, indistinguishable, incalculable ... time, in our conception, is a successive and qualitative multitude (Bergson).

Tufanov, in fact wrote an article in 1919, 'On Life and Poetry' (Tufanov 1991: 113-127) – as well as others – which was deeply permeated by Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. This article, according to Jaccard (1991: 41), was a point of inflexion for Tufanov as it set forth clearly the lines of work he had been developing so far and is fundamental for his posterior works and thought. For Jaccard (2013), the reading of Bergson meant in Tufanov the passage from a Symbolist and Ego-futuristic approach into pure *zaum*, which remained his main impetus from that moment on. Tufanov's splitting of lyricism between *direct* lyricism – or *zaum* –, and *applied* lyricism, in his 1923 article 'Stanovlyan poetry[19]', is clarifying. As Jaccard (2010: 234-5) puts it, direct or *zaum* lyricism 'opens access to life in the integrity of its *formation,* while the second is merely a craft capable of stopping reality in frozen forms, onto which

[19] *Stanovlyan* is a neologism signifying poetry's focus on the present, as opposed to *budetlyan*, which has a marked focus on the future. Excerpts from this article can be found in Dvinyatina, T. (2008). The article can be found in the manuscript department of Saint Petersburg's Pushkin House.

it is no longer difficult to stick "label words".' Or, per Tufanov's succinct synthesis of the Bergsonian and Shklovskian tenets, 'there is another kind of lyricism, sometimes stormy, sometimes calm, always spontaneous, always emanating from the impulse of life; it is not applied, but a kind of lyricism for lyricism's sake' (1924: 7).

However, Tufanov's Bergsonian concept that was to have a stronger repercussion in the *zaum* of Kharms' works throughout his oeuvre is that of the *fluidity* of the world – or *tekuchest*. For Tufanov, this was a direct application of Bergson's *durée*, which viewed time and reality as an indivisible continuum, so that reason was not able to comprehend it by its usual resource of dividing reality into recognisable parts. His 'Liberation of Life and Art from Literature' article is notable in the way it represents an almost verbatim reinstating of Bergson's words: 'For us, the "past" always flows into the present, and the "future" is also present and also with the past immersed in it … There is only one beautiful instantaneity, dying and resurrecting endlessly.', or in more Kharmsian terms, he endorsed the view of authors as 'not Pushkins and not *budetlyans*' (1991: 152).

Language's effort to turn all facts into labels – or words –, meant it could not access reality, so *zaum* offered a possibility to think in a fluid way. It is only after his analysis of Bergson that Tufanov starts to use *fluidity* as a poetic concept, which applies to all of the arts. The term *tekuchest* is not Tufanov's own, as it had a previous history in Russian literature. It is relevant to point out that the Russian term has a double signification achieved through its etymology. While the first half of the word sends the Russian linguist's attention directly to the concept of *flowing*, the second half is the shared root for *river* and *speech*. Water, liquidity and the concept of time as a river feature heavily in Kharms oeuvre, and his concept of *zaum* can be said to be based on this fluid thinking rather than on any pure, phonological *zaum*. Jaccard argues that it would be difficult to understand the OBERIU's reflections on time without Tufanov's use of *fluidity*, as exemplified by Kharms' statement of purpose in 1930, when he affirms that he thinks 'fluidly' (Kharms and Vvedensky 1997: 117). In fact, Jaccard's predilected example of the concept of time – and fluidity – for Kharms, as well as for the parallels with Herman Hesse's use of the image of the river in *Siddhartha*, is Kharms' poem 'Hnyu and the Water' (Kharms 2009: 156–9). In it, the river tells Hnyu what happens further down the river, using the metaphor that, as

much as it is the case with time, the river is a continuum from its source to its mouth, not a chronological succession of events.

Tufanov's idea of fluidity, through Bergson, is also palpable in Kharms' fellow Chinar, Leonid Lipavsky, for whose thought the conception of the fluidity of reality is paramount, and who followed a similar evolution than Kharms from an idealistic view of fluidity to the ambivalence or even danger represented by it by the end of his works. While for Kharms the impossibility of thinking fluidly due to the horrors of the Stalinist regime was extremely frustrating and created existential angst in him – and even while making reference to the stalling of this water as with the image of the swamp at the end of 'The Old Woman' –, for Lipavsky, in turn, more extremely, water and its stagnation became representations of the horrors entailed for humanity when faced with the absolute. In his 1930 'Study of Horror', he speaks of 'water, hard as stone', or

> stagnant water … solid water … where there is no division, no change, no series … a fused world without gaps, without pores, there is no heterogeneity in it and, therefore, no time, individuality cannot exist … if everything is the same, immeasurable, then there are no differences, nothing exists. (Lipavsky 2005: 22)

Turning our attention back to Bergson, his relevance for Kharms is evident in the oft-quoted annotation that Kharms attached to his most famous ministory concerning the non-existent red-haired man. These two words, 'against Kant', cannot fail to point towards Bergson's rejection of Kant's unbridgeable distinction between intellect and intuition. In fact, Fink (1980: 534) posits that 'Kharms rejects both the limitation of literature to a strictly intellectual, logical progression of events, as well as … excluding the spiritual or noumenal element of reality.' Following Bergson's mention of the *nothing* which in a work of art represents its fundamental raison d'être, Kharms' story about a man who comes from nothing, who is then shown to be nothing and reverts into nothingness, Kharms' is shown to be a rebellion against cause and effect and the imperative for there to be something instead of nothing. This *nothing* as the essence of and *sine qua non* requisite for fiction finds an earlier parallel in Nietzsche's perspectivism, or his understanding of human reality as a fictionalised existence, swimming amongst a 'movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and

anthropomorphisms' (Nietzsche1992: 84). Following Meghan Vicks (2011) reasoning, for this fictionalised existence, Nietzsche points to the concept of *zero* as a requisite – as much as it is a prerequisite for any work of art or of literary fiction as per our previous exploration of the Bergsonian *nothing*. Since 'truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions' an erasure of all previous knowledge of the actuality of any truth being an illusion is necessary in order to arrive at the person's 'sense of truth' (Nietzsche 1992: 84). Indeed, this understanding of *nothing* seems to be a staple in the thought of many a thinker or writer in this study, from the 1830s onwards. As a compendium of the commonalities of the concept of *nothing* as a precondition for creativity in diverse authors like Nietzsche, Bergson, Malevich, Gogol, Kharms or Beckett, it is worth quoting Vicks' clean encapsulation of this generating *nothing*:

> … nothing functions as the catalyzing element that produces both narrative and existence, but itself remains outside those systems of language and being. That is, nothing generates narrative and being, but is itself difficult, if not impossible, to capture in words or to experience in existence. It operates, in other words, as an imaginary and impossible abstraction whose paradoxical function is precisely to allow for existing and possible narratives and being. (2011: 21)

Gogol's *The Overcoat* presents as the most pertinent example of this generative nothing and its metaphor for fiction[20]. In bare terms, the mirrored narrative is about a *nothing* who is constantly writing – that is to say copying – but not living, and then stops writing altogether but starts living. The first half of the story represents the physical act of writing from *nothing*; first, Akaky Akakievech is given a nebulous and negative characterisation that focuses rather on what he is not than what he is, then his physicality is equated to the letters being printed into the paper by the physical act of writing, as he 'moved his lips, so that it seemed as though every letter his pen was forming could be read in his face' (1985: 307). To reinforce this image, Akaky Akakievich never seems to acknowledge the meaning of what he is writing, just the

[20] I am indebted to Meghan Vicks for her lucid analysis of Gogol's work for the ensuing analysis. For a detailed and enjoyable examination of Akaky Akakievich's character, the reader is directed to Vicks (2011: 55–64) or to the book that followed her thesis: Vicks, M. (2017) 'Akaky Akakievich', in *Narratives of nothing in 20th-century literature*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 62–69.

individual letters that form the words. After this, he is identified with his threadbare overcoat when his tailor tells him of it that 'there's nothing to put a patch on. There is nothing for it to hold on to' (313). However, when he buys a new overcoat – having got rid, or more metaphorically, filled this *nothing* –, he also completely stops writing and his life begins to be filled with experiences, which can be said to be akin to those described in novels. If in the first half of the story, his emptiness prompted his fellow clerks – or writers – to tell 'all sorts of stories of their own invention about him' (306) to fill this void, now that this void has been filled, others presumably have become spectators – or readers – of his experiences. So the act of writing has come full circle; if it started from this *nothing* that compels a writer to create something, and then focused on the physical act of writing as nothing but the imprinting of signs on a blank paper, once filled, this paper becomes impregnated with a new existence created solely by the narrative instead of any external experience, even when the narrative rests upon the protagonist writing *nothing*. To quote Vicks (2011: 63), the layers of *nothing* at the end of the story are:

> (1) "The Overcoat" itself as a narrative embodiment of nothing; (2) the narrator writes about Akaky, and therefore writes about nothing; and (3) Gogol writes "The Overcoat," and thereby writes nothing into narrative … from this perspective, to write nothing becomes a method for producing narrative and, indeed, meaning.

The influence of Gogol's story will be felt for a long time after, and there are parallels to be found in Kharms, and in Beckett. The central position of *nothing* – which was also picked up by Bergson – for both authors' creations will be further analysed in later chapters. Suffice it to say for now, that while, as alluded above, the theme of contingency and refusal to write about *something* is fundamental for Kharms, Beckett, in turn, with his narrative's progressive shedding of the traditional narrative elements, seeks an 'immanent nothingness that paradoxically encompasses infinite being', since for him, *nothing* is 'at the heart of being and at the core of language: it generates both' (20).

It is only natural to interrogate at the close of this section the influence of Bergson's thought in the Theatre of the Absurd. In this area, it must be said that, while a lot in the Parisian group's comic can be seen through Bergson's philosophy

of laughter – like the automatism of language and life, and social maladaptation –, and the conception of words as perishable labels is conspicuous, this analysis does not seem particularly fruitful, and the parallels stop there, as the Theatre of the Absurd exponents lack Bergson's more pronounced metaphysical generative impetus, which, apart from his conceptions of laughter, constitute the main body of his oeuvre. It should be remembered that Bergson's popularity sharply waned after the First World War, and so that it may be that any perceived influence in the Theatre of the Absurd could be explained rather by Bergson's influence on authors that were inspiring for the Parisian group, as was the case with Jarry. If Bergson's view of time as something other than a historical progression from the past into the future could be said to fit conceptually with the disavowing of linear time and progress of the Paris authors, this connection seems lacking, since the works of Beckett and Ionesco seem to exist high and dry outside of time, rather than to be immersed in its continuously flowing current.

3. Foregrounding of intuition: Orthodoxy, mysticism and *yurodstvo*

As it was previously alluded to, the influence and interconnection between Orthodoxy and the period of Russian literature encompassed in this study cannot be overlooked. From Gogol to the OBERIU, it is an inseparable part of the Petersburgian literary tradition with its marked mysticism and as the ultimate overarching order over the chaotic and evil-inhabited existence. The Petersburgian avant-garde was not exempt from it either. Malevich's proclamation that even in Bolshevik reality, God – or a substitute ideal – is still the ultimate end the proletariat aims towards in his 1922 essay 'God Is Not Cast Down' (1971: 188-223), will be illuminating to show the striking parallels between his conceptions of art and those of Orthodoxy, as well as the perfect justification, concurrent with the rise of the Bolsheviks and Stalin, of the concept of God for the avant-garde as non-religious.

After starting his exposition in an intuitivist-Bergsonian line by stating that thought is just a tool amongst others to try to cognise the incognizable, and describing life as 'without number, precision, time, space' (188), Malevich then goes on to equate the absolute and infinite in life with nature. While describing nature, he

doubles down in his attack on rationalism, as 'reason cannot understand anything and intelligence cannot judge any thing for there is nothing in nature that can be judged, understood or examined; it has no consonance which could be taken as a whole.' (191) Following this introduction, Malevich passes onto directly identifying nature with God, and advances the Orthodox-sounding concept that to comprehend or get closer to God, humanity's main impulse has been one of constant progression to ever-perfect itself, which every person should aim for as well in their life. He indicates that 'each man hastens towards his perfection, strives to be nearer to God … each of man's steps should be directed towards God' (202). This, in the midst of the Bolshevik industrial-utilitarian overarching ethos, leads Malevich inexorably to separate God from its religious connotations, putting religion on par with other – meant to fail – human attempts to understand the absolute. It is in this way that Malevich is able to openly state 'God is not cast down' in 1920s' Russia. Malevich divides humanity's attempts to understand the absolute, or God, into three – the religious path, the utilitarian path, and the artistic path. Even though he tries his best to be magnanimous about it, it is clear which path he predilects. He criticises the religious division between *body* and *soul*, stating that both belong to God and that describing the *body* as sinful would be to imply sinfulness in God. He criticises as well religion's division that turns humans into *non-existence* and God into *existence*, as, he argues, recognising a *soul* in humans implies recognising *existence*. Of the materialistic view of the world, he says that it tries to completely dismiss God, but that in seeking a path of ever-perfecting, it unintendedly establishes itself in the image of God. He then equates the religious prayer and making of bliss with the work in the factory to satisfy human aspirations. When it is art's turn, however, Malevich limits himself to proclaiming – in quotes, in an attempt to appear an impartial observer – arts' credo. Amongst other things, 'art' proclaims that

> He who possesses me possesses and lives by beauty; unlike other truths I contain no sin, for were there no beauty in me truths would not use me to hide their other teachings; on contact with me everything becomes filled to the brim with beauty, as perfection. The harmony of God is within me and therefore my world is perfect. (217)

After doing so, what is of note for its absence is any refutation or qualification of these proclamations. A last concept of God for Malevich that is worth dwelling on is his view of God as senselessness, which perfectly fits with the OBERIU's nonsense *zaum*, and also represents a further criticism of religion, in favour of non-objective art. Were one to substitute Malevich's term *senselessness* – in the original *nesmysl* – with the OBERIU's, via the Chinari's nonsense or *bessmyslitsa*[21], most of Malevich's following passage could be incorporated into the Chinari-OBERIU thought without much alteration,

> From the church's point of view … the absolute is … established as the perfection of impeccability … [which] must be contained in the most terrible thing of all – in sense; and it is against this rock that the two paths of the factory and the church break up. God must be sense and, therefore, his perfection must have sense … [however] God cannot be sense … all the human senses leading to sense – God – are crowned by senselessness. Hence God is not sense, but senselessness. His senselessness should be seen in the absolute final limit as non-objective. The achievement of the finite is the achievement of the non-objective. (204)

In spite of his criticism of the 'religious path', Malevich's initial statements of reason being just a human tool to try to cognise the incognisable and his repudiation of reason alone to comprehend the absolute have a lot in common with the Orthodox *integral knowledge*. As shown previously, Malevich also shared with Bergson the rejection of form in ever-becoming reality, to the point where it could be argued that Malevich saw it as nothing but a necessary evil in pictorial art. While Bergson denounced the non-artistic view of reality as imposed by previously established 'shapes and colours' and Malevich admitted the inexistence of form in life and advocated for non-objective art, we shall now see how strikingly similar was this view with their contemporary Orthodox thought about reality. In 1913, hieromonk Aleksei Kuznetsov wrote a short book, half of it dedicated to the figure of the 'holy fool in Christ.' When analysing their intentional renunciation of reason, Kuznetsov makes statements that are astoundingly similar to Bergson and Malevich's views, and for that matter to *zaum*. He expounds that, even if it may seem that renouncing the *mind*

[21] Note they both share the same root, *smysl*, or *sense*.

may be perceived as running contrary to human nature, 'the basis for "foolishness" can be found in the best and highest part of [the mind].' This makes his remarks fully Bergsonian in nature, which is further reinforced when he states that this submission of the mind to the sensory world should be fought, and, advancing the Orthodox doctrine of the ever-perfection of humans, that

> In proportion as the powers of the spirit develop and become perfected, a person cannot help but detach himself from the visible and temporary and, consequently, cannot help but detach himself from that side of his soul which adapts itself in him to his present state, in which are found the knots that firmly bind him to the visible and temporary – the duties of his life here on earth. (1913: 91-2)

Note how the repeated use of 'visible' and 'temporary', and the references to the 'present state' parallel Bergson's conception of the *durée*, and how the phrase 'the duties of his life' corresponds to Bergson's view of the 'thick veil' of perception imposed onto the non artist by the practical needs of everyday life. If we return our attention to Bergson and Malevich's rejection of form – in Bergson's case, explicitly of 'shapes and colours' – we will find the following remarks by Kuznetsov to approach a mere paraphrasing of these thoughts. He posits that in order to transcend reason, one must resist it as much as possible to get rid of 'all kinds, colors and outlines' since 'all such things are a stain and obscuration of the purity and brightness of the mind', and that it is a must 'to keep one's mind colorless, ugly, formless and pure.' A last point of convergence, which does not include Malevich for his complete rejection of the object, but that concerns Bergson, the formalists, and the OBERIU, is the *peeling off* the old skin to arrive at a better perception of reality. What follows are seven quotes, the first one from Kuznetsov, and the following ones by the OBERIU, Bergson, Shklovsky and, looking further into this study, quotes by Artaud, Ionesco and Beckett[22]. They have been chosen for the remarkable proximity of their vision.

[22] Needless to say, Artaud, Ionesco and Beckett cannot be fully inserted into the tradition of Orthodox thought. In the case of Ionesco, notwithstanding the fact that he was baptised in the Orthodox faith and lived intermittently in Romania, his oeuvre cannot be said to be overtly influenced by Orthodoxy or even to have any mystical elements. If anything, as is the case with Beckett, what features in his literary works and his essays is the reality of a society where God has been removed, especially on the heels of WWII. With that said, their remarks have been included to further show – as is one of the main pillars of this study – the Theatre of the Absurd's closeness to the Petersburgian avant-garde, and to show the

Just as a snake, when it needs to cast off its old skin, goes and with effort squeezes itself through some narrow passage … so the mind … is stripped of the garments of the imagination of sensory things and unkind sensory impressions, becomes pure. (Kuznetsov 1913: 100)

The concrete object, once its literary and everyday skin is peeled away, becomes a property of art. (Kharms et al. 1974: 245–54)

we do not see the actual things themselves … we confine ourselves to reading the labels affixed to them … the word … only takes note of the most ordinary function and commonplace aspect of the thing … a natural detachment … a virginal manner … of seeing, hearing or thinking … diverts us from the prejudices of form and colour that come between ourselves and reality … art … has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols … to bring us face to face with reality itself. (Bergson 1935: 153–7)

Today, words are dead … when they are used in everyday speech … they become familiar, and neither their internal forms (images), nor the external one (sounds) are experienced anymore … there is a need for the creation of new, "tight" language (Kruchenykh's expression). (Shklovsky 2017a: 64–71)

I demand the right to make a break with its usual verbal meaning, to break the bonds once and for all, to break asunder the yoke, finally to return to the etymological origins of language, which always evoke a tangible idea through abstract concepts. (Artaud 1970a: 79)

We need … detachment from our daily lives, our habits and mental laziness, which conceal from us the strangeness of the world … a fresh virginity of mind … a new and healthy awareness of existential reality … modern painting … has done nothing but try to shake off all that is not painting … painters are trying to rediscover … pure form, color for its own sake … fundamentally it was the ascetic pursuit of purity. (Ionesco 1964: 26–33)

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it … To bore one hole after

complicated interconnections between Bergson–Orthodoxy–formalist–futurists–OBERIU and amongst Bergson–modernists–avant-garde–Theatre of the Absurd.

> another in it, until what lurks behind it … begins to seep through; (Beckett 2009:518-9)

Reprising the above-mentioned Orthodox specificity, the figure of the *yurodivy*, which can be translated as the 'holy fool for Christ[23]', and its overarching philosophy of *yurodstvo*, is, unlike its *trickster*, *fool* or *jester*[24] counterparts in medieval, non-Orthodox Europe, intrinsically attached to the Orthodox church. They were, as it were, free agents of the church, with marked mystic tendencies. They were *allowed* to act in the name of God, rather than being officially sanctioned by the Orthodox Church, and indeed they acted contrary to the standards of behaviour of the Church in many cases, although several of them were posthumously canonised. Indeed, 'The Church affirms "measuredness," orderliness, pious solemnity. All of this is contraindicated to *yurodstvo*, and *yurodstvo* demonstratively opposes all of this.' (*WL*: 84), and 'the "actor's paradox" is that the *yurodivy* himself puts people into temptation and into rebellion, while, according to the terms of the agreement, he is obliged to lead them on the path of virtue' (*WL*: 91). At this point, it is worth quoting Likhachev and Panchenko's description of the *yurodivy*, as it shall prove illuminating:

> By his behavior … the *yurodivy* shows that it is the world of culture that is not real, a world of anti-culture, hypocritical, unfair, and not in line with Christian norms. Therefore, he … behaves in this world as one should behave only in the world of anti-culture. Like any fool, he acts and speaks "inappropriately", but … he speaks and behaves exactly as he should according to the norms of Christian behavior … The actions, gestures and words of the *yurodivy* are both funny and scary … [he] sees and hears something true, real beyond the limits of ordinary visibility and audibility. (*WL*: 5)

[23] This author prefers this longer rendering over the commonly used *holy fool*, as their behaviour was markedly intentional and had a didactic or perfecting role. Leaving out 'for Christ' may invite connotations of unintentional foolishness or candour which result in pure or *saintly* behaviour. Hereafter, the Russian term *yurodivy* will be used to refer to the figure of the *holy fool for Christ* – *yurodivie* for plural –, while *yurodstvo* will be used to refer to *holy-foolishness for Christ*.

[24] *Jester* will be used in the remainder of this text to refer to the carnivalesque figure, as opposed to the *yurodivy*.

This description seems to draw a lot from Kuznetsov's analysis of the *yurodivy*'s feigned untethered behaviour. With an unsurprisingly more religious stimulus, he divides the functions of the mind into *internal* and *external* and posits that by rejecting this distinction, the *yurodivy* refuses to act in an *external*, reasoned manner – that of society with all its pitfalls –, as this does not relate to God, but to humans' practical needs, and insists on acting in a way that is in absolute accordance with religious thought, but that lacks the order and logic of everyday life. Therefore, the *yurodivy* always acts according to the mind's *internal* function of the 'morally rational being', even when this seems incongruous in society. This was so in order for the *yurodivy* to perform actions solely with the aim of salvation in mind. *External* life, which did not pertain to salvation, is 'most closely under the orders of the mind, is established on its laws, is ordered by its rules and prescriptions, then with the renunciation of the mind for this life, disorder must naturally occur in the external life of the *yurodivie*' (1913: 92).

The *yurodivie* share some commonalities with jesters, like the fact that their foolishness is invented, and their acts, deliberate. They also share the aim of exposing the naked truth through hardship; in the case of the *yurodivie*, this is a destitution and ugliness through which they are allowed to speak truth to anyone, including to power, while for the jesters, their antics were attached to the 'gift of foresight and innocence' (*WL*: 81). However, there is much that pulls the *yurodivy* away from the tradition of the jester. Apart from the already mentioned marked religious essence of the *yurodivy*, there is an abysmal difference in the two approaches to laughter. If both the jester and the *yurodivy* provoke laughter from their audience, the former uses it to remedy transgressions, where the *yurodivy* 's performance, while having the appearance of being funny, in actuality has the aim to ultimately provoke crying in the spectator; 'only sinners (laughter itself is sinful) can laugh at it, not those who understand the hidden, "soul-saving" meaning of *yurodstvo*' (*WL*: 81). In fact, the *yurodivy* has a didactic impetus in his actions, while the jester's laughter is of a much more entertaining nature. Thanks to this acceptance of the non-aesthetic function from society and power, the *yurodivy* becomes a mediating authority between official culture on one side and popular culture on the other. He joins the piously serious with the comic – much as medieval theatre blurred

the lines between the tragic and the comic. Indeed, their instructive impetus makes them, at the same time, opposed to an existence removed from the Orthodox dogma and to 'buffoons and mummers ... the folk culture of laughter with which he is so closely associated' (*WL*: 105).

The figure of the *yurodivy* is a grotesque one, be it by their physical appearance – nakedness, emaciation – or by their behaviour – obscenities, crude language. This grotesqueness comes from a deliberate rejection of beauty, or turning the ideal of beauty upside down, thus 'raising the ugly to the level of aesthetically positive' (*WL*: 80). Apart from being allowed to exist concurrently with the church, they were also allowed to live at the same time outside society and its mores, and amongst people, this being a precondition for their existence. This double existence *amongst* people, while *outside* society placed them in a privileged position which is necessary for *yurodstvo*. In all, their 'voluntary asceticism, a life full of hardships and reproaches' meant the *yurodivie* had the right in turn to '"swear at the proud and vain world"' (*WL*: 79).

Another relevant aspect of *yurodstvo* is its intrinsic theatricality. This phenomenon was attracted to any crowded space, which is then seen as a stage – inexorably linking *yurodstvo* with the urban space. The multitude was all that mattered, not the space, since the *yurodivy* 'is equally "naughty" in a tavern or in a monastery' (*WL*: 82). This improvised scene had no divisions, but on the contrary was a shared performance. Even if the *yurodivy* was the main actor, it required the participation of the crowd, be it by throwing insults at or mocking the protagonist or simply by giving their attention to the unfolding action, which then became a spectacle. In addition, due to the *yurodivie*'s commitment to act only according to *internal* mores, this theatre was alien to *stage time*, since rather than the spectacle starting, developing, and ending, it existed perpetually in a continuum, with only the crowd's participation delimiting its scope. Even though this theatricality was never accepted into the art canon, it shares much with the theatre considered *art*, and indeed had many elements that artists like those in the OBERIU or Artaud pursued. The OBERIU 'sought to return to that original, not yet mediated by "techniques" type of human creativity, when pleasure was not yet divided into "aesthetic" and "non-aesthetic"', much like *yurodstvo* managed to unite life and art and abolish the

'distance between the creator, the creation and the percipient' (Gerasimova 1988a: 54).

Two of their main roles being denunciation and protest, *yurodstvo* then approaches the tradition of carnival, but in this case, it would be an Orthodox, religious, carnival, rather than the humanistic medieval carnival. Their denunciation is aimed not at 'people, but circumstances' (*WL*: 134), and it is carried out in the name of humanity. Due to its religious essence, it does not denounce the faults of the social order, but the lack of adherence to Orthodox morality, which in turn means the social position of the denounced is irrelevant. This carnivalesque democratisation, in which the social order is abolished, is certainly what Bakhtin had in mind when he expounded upon the virtues of carnival in the novel. However, in parallel with much of the criticism of his idealised concept of carnival as progressive, the *yurodivie*'s actions were deeply conservative. It is true that their lack of regard for social status could be unintendedly socially progressive, but what they were promoting was a higher order and reality, that of Christianity. However, by looking into the form of their protest, it becomes undeniable that any progressive attributes attached to this denunciation would have been misplaced, as the *yurodivy* 'does not call upon the devil; his protest has nothing in common with rebellion, radicalism or reform. … He is, in essence, a reasoner, a conservative moralist' (*WL*: 132). Their number started to decline at the same time as their protest reached its apogee, as theirs was a fellowship of protest. As this protest became increasingly exacerbated, it reached its summit in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. This was paralleled by the Church's schism, and the subsequent creation of the Old Believer Party. This party's ethos was that of denunciation, so that it made *yurodivie* accessory, rather than instrumental for the purposes of protest against deviation from Orthodox dogma.

After this immersion into the role of the *yurodivy*, delving into medieval Rus'[25] laughter constitutes the next step. This was the laughter within which the *yurodstvo* came to be and is deeply reliant upon, and at the same time it will serve to differentiate it simultaneously from Bakhtin's view of carnival laughter and from Bergson's definitions of laughter. As it will be shown, this analysis will be essential if

[25] *Rus'* were the peoples of proto-Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, who first settled in Ukraine and had Kiev as their central locus.

one is to fully grasp the dimensions of laughter in Kharms' oeuvre[26]. For the purposes of this study, this author will limit the scope of this inspection of medieval laughter to a synthesising enumeration of Rus' medieval laughter's most relevant aspects, as pointed out at length by Likhachev in *WL*, who dates its dominance as a *regime of relevance* from the first written example in the twelfth century, by Daniil Zatochnik, until the seventeenth century. This is not an invitation to approach culture with a nationalistic impetus; it is an attempt to follow the different routes that laughter followed in a time when cultures were immensely more isolated from one another than in more contemporary times. Indeed, even if Likhachev occasionally errs by pitting a Russian tradition of laughter against other Rus' traditions, he overwhelmingly – even if just by historical chronology's necessity – speaks of *Rus'* laughter. This enumeration could be summarised as follows:

1. It is distinctive by its attack on the most sensitive aspects of human existence, like the personality of the laugher, while also attacking everything that is considered holy, pious, and honourable.
2. The authors present themselves as fools, naked or scantily dressed, poor, hungry, when in fact they are confident in their intellect and only pretend to be free in laughter.
3. Individual style is not a sought-after concept. Style is understood only as the author's adaptation to a certain literary genre or form of business writing.
4. Its aim is to destroy the meaning and order of signs, to create a world without a system, an absurd world. It creates a world of *anti-culture* turning the *cultured*, seeming world upside down – not the genre used –, thus creating an *anti-world*.
5. It has a doubling function, as it reveals in the appropriate, the inappropriate, in the high, the low, etc. It creates a laughing likeness of reality.
6. The function of laughter is to expose, to reveal the truth, to strip reality of the veils of etiquette and artificial inequality, it equalizes all people.
7. It destroys the meaning of words and distorts their external form, thus revealing the absurdity in the structure of words.

[26] For a more detailed analysis of elements shared by Russian medieval laughter, the *yurodivy* and Kharms, the reader is directed to Anemone's perspicacious article about the *anti-world* in Kharms' comic (1991).

All these elements of Rus' laughter, together with the *yurodivy*'s disregard of societal or political concerns, their outsideness, theatricality, and grotesqueness, will be illuminating in this study's later analysis of the OBERIU, and will serve to individualise its oeuvre from that of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, it is the moment now to pass on to analyse the view, shared by many scholars, of Kharms oeuvre being permeated by elements of *yurodstvo*. This view, to which this author subscribes, leaves no room for interpretation when analysing Kharms' later comic, so that it would be of great use in elucidating the above-asked question of exactly what type of laughter Kharms' oeuvre can be said to embody. As an epigraph to this analysis, this author shall use the words of Kharms' fellow Chinari, Druskin, in reference to *Incidents*: 'They were … anti-political and anti-social … they were religious' (1991: 26).

Taking the torch from Likhachev, Anemone (1991) conceives of Kharms' comic world as an *anti-world* of *anti-culture*, delving into its correlations with *yurodstvo*, which many scholars have pointed out; this is a trend that, since the *rediscovery* of the oberiuts in the West, was started by Gerasimova (1988b) – although this connection was already made as early as 1927 by a committed Bolshevik-aligned critic's review of the *proto-oberiuts* reading of their poetry entitled 'Dadaists in Leningrad'[27]. This scholarly view posits that Kharms' comic, especially his prose, turns reality upside-down to make the reader want to restore the moral order that is conspicuously missing in his stories, and by analogy in contemporary Soviet reality. Therefore, Kharms' absurd is married to a social and political function and goes beyond a mere veiled denunciation of the Soviet regime, into a more active role that compels the reader to seek moral restitution in reality. This view always goes hand-in-hand with the view of Kharms' laughter as something other than Bakhtinian, especially as his prose acquired a gloomier tenor as the Stalinist terror progressed. Anemone quotes Likhachev's explanation that the person who understood the *yurodstvo*'s comic would not laugh, but rather cry and be compelled to act in connection with Kharms' prose and, while not denying a formalist understanding of Kharms' absurd, he indicates that the social function of Rus' laughter serves to

[27] 'This *zaum* is not Khlebnikov's laughing and thundering linguistic creativity of a savage who lacks words, but an enervated and *yurodstvo*-like baby talk.' (Tolmachev 1927: 14)

contextualise this formalist reading of Kharms within the socio-political situation of the new Soviet reality. When a connection with Bakhtin's carnival is attempted, this is still qualified not as the idealised concept of Renaissance carnival of the Russian literary theorist, but as a view of medieval carnival as a temporary permission for evil to rule the world.

Going back to Gerasimova, it must be said that in fact her equating of *yurodstvo* with the OBERIU's comic fits much better with Orthodox thought in general than the specific figure of the *yurodstvo*. When she makes a parallel between the Chinari-OBERIU's concept of a literary *hieroglyph* and the *yurodivy*, she is actually making a parallel with Orthodoxy. Getting slightly ahead of this section's scope, Gerasimova quotes Lipavsky[28] (1988a: 53) to describe the *hieroglyph* as having a dual function, a *proper*, material meaning and an *improper*, immaterial meaning that cannot be defined with precision. As such, 'the hieroglyph can be understood as an indirect speech or circumlocution addressed to me by the immaterial, i.e. the spiritual, or suprasensible, through the material or sensual.' As incisive as this simile is, it is difficult to establish a clean equation of *yurodivy* and the immaterial 'addressing me' through the material or sensual. However, this equating fits perfectly with the Orthodox figure of the icon, as a material revelation through which to arrive at the divine, and also falls in line with the Orthodox *integral knowledge* that incorporates intuition into cognition. Gerasimova then goes on to further develop the equation of the *yurodivy* with the OBERIU in terms of their fusion of life and art, including their individual public behaviour. She sees a parallel between their aim for an early creativity that does not make a division between 'aesthetic' and 'non-aesthetic', and to unite life and art by removing the distance between artist-work of art-recipient. The buttressing of this parallel is also resting on feeble ground, in as much as it includes the individual public behaviour of the OBERIU members, and should thus be qualified. While the above equation could be applied to Kharms' fusion of life and art, as we will see later, and it may also be applicable to Nikolay Oleynikov[29] as she indicates – although in a more distanced or ironising way – it surely is not applicable to any other member of the OBERIU. Gerasimova makes a compelling

[28] Without giving reference

[29] A writer associated with OBERIU, and included in some lists of the group's members, but who remained outside the group for reasons of political association.

exposition of how the OBERIU erased this distance in their works and performances, but remains adamant that they applied the principle of the *artistic gesture* both to their performances and also 'their behavior in everyday life' (1988a: 51). In fact, none of the other members of OBERIU took art outside of the sphere of their works, and indeed, as we shall see, Vaginov, who has been described as the complete opposite of Kharms in terms of his public behaviour, made what can be read as a criticism of Kharms' fusion of life and art in the figure of the character of the clown Felinflein in his novel *Bambocciada*. This reading of Kharms as a *yurodstvo* figure because of his *eccentric* behaviour has subsequently been taken up by some scholars like Brandist (1996), but this author remains unconvinced by these parallels, as, while Kharms' short story characters exhibited the *anti-behaviour* of *anti-culture* of the *yurodivie*, Kharms' public activities did not constitute this *anti-behaviour* at all, but just a conscious choice to live *in art*. His actions were aimed against no one, did not have any didactic pretensions, and did not seek to restore an ideal order that existed previously. Perhaps, in an effort on intellectual gymnastics, the point could be made that Kharms was an *art-yurodivy*, making the streets the stage for his public performance, being open to attacks and derision with his eccentric appearance and behaviour, all to live according to art and indirectly preach it, while discouraging philistinism and standard social behaviour. In this view, Kharms' *art-yurodstvo* would be aimed at inciting all people to live according to art, something that by its extreme idealism and pomposity, was clearly not Kharms' intention, with all pointing towards a personal choice to live life according to art. It may be that this individualism was reinforced by the standardising regime of the proletariat, which included personal aesthetics, in a refusal to conform to the state-mandated model, and whose reach extended into art by making it nothing but another instrument in the Soviet state's toolkit for the implementation of its ideology. If Kharms had a spectator in mind for his public behaviour, it was decidedly not the proletariat, but the intelligentsia.

Returning to Kharms' comic, its practicable inscription within medieval Rus' laughter in relation to Likhachev's previously listed tenets proves illuminating. Going down the list from the top, his laughter attacks everything and everyone that is honourable, be it Pushkin, Ivan Susanin or human life. Kharms repeatedly presents himself as poor and hungry in his prose – although this was in his case forced upon

him as a reality –, while also *playing the fool*. His prose is distinctly generic, as his *Incidents* can be read as a series of genres laid bare – be it the official, the newspaper, or the standard street speech – instead of any individual authorial style. As we have seen, Kharms creates an *anti-world* within the content of the story, but he does not attack the genres; even though there is an element of play with and *defamiliarisation* of the genre at hand, and what could be called *generic sdvig*, Kharms' impetus is not a negative, satirising one. Taking the ministory 'Sonnet' (2009: 48) as an example, an *anti-world* is created in which people have forgotten how to count and a boy breaking both his jaws is seen as something positive, all while respecting the structure of a sonnet, as it contains fourteen sentences – as the number of lines in a sonnet. Similarly, Kharms' ministory 'The Beginning of a Very Fine Summer's Day: a Symphony' (2009: 84) contains a grotesque, inhuman *anti-world* as a *laughing double* of beautiful moral concepts, while being inspired by and trying to respect in prose form the attributes of a symphony, even at the expense of the closing sentence – the *moral* – reflecting in no way whatsoever the preceding narrative, in order for it to be in harmony with the title and subtitle of the story. Kharms' ministories also have a markedly equalising character. As we have seen, he uses widely respected figures such as Pushkin or Susanin, but they are dethroned and returned to the level of the *people* in a carnivalesque way. Apart from these eminent figures, Kharms' prose is populated by the masses or the *simple person*, with no characters in between these two extremes. Lastly, as it pertains to the destruction of meaning and distortion of their form to reveal the absurdity in the structure of words, while the OBERIU's aim was not to destroy, but to renovate and expand the meaning of words, it did rely on distortions like deliberate calembours to form new meaning, and Kharms specifically is known for intentionally misspelling words. In fact, in its full exposition on the last point, Likhachev includes an analysis of the comic effects of rhyme and its use in tale verse in medieval Rus':

> Rhyme unites different meanings by external similarity, dumbs down phenomena, makes dissimilar things similar, deprives phenomena of individuality, removes the seriousness of what is being narrated, makes even hunger, nakedness, and barefootness funny. Rhyme emphasizes that we have before us a tall tale, a joke. (*WL*: 27)

As we shall see in the next chapter, this definition represents an unforeseen connection with the futurists and oberiuts alike in their use of *sdvig*. For now, it suffices to advance that this medieval device was often employed by Kharms through the use of deliberate calembours, amongst others, and that he was deeply aware of the importance of rhythm and sound to deform and extend the sense behind words.

All the previous already starts to favour an answer to the question of the nature of Kharms' laughter, making it nigh to medieval laughter. Uspensky and Lotman (1984), in turn, while praising the overall body of Likhachev's argument, add to his connection of Rus' medieval laughter with the more positive 'European medieval', Bakhtinian view of laughter of the Orthodox kind, which does protest against hierarchy and whose laughter does not abolish fear. Laughter is considered satanic in Orthodoxy, and sharing in with this laughter instead of being horrified by would imply satanism on the part of the laugher. This side of the medieval comic only allows for a 'pious smile' (40) at best, and the blasphemous laughter of the devil does not challenge the existence of God or the social hierarchy, it just takes opposite sides. The *anti-world* created by the devil is not a world without rules, but on the contrary has stringent, inverted rules. The Orthodox treatment of laughter, they argue, has its roots in the Slavonic pagan tradition. This serves to further differentiate the proto-Orthodox carnival laughter from the rest of Europe, as the Slavonic pagan laughter did not abolish fear, it incorporated the comic to what was to be feared in the *anti-world* of life beyond the grave. Lotman and Uspensky see yet another distinction between the figure of the *yurodivy* and Bakhtinian laughter. They see a clear dividing line between the theatrical spectacle in *yurodstvo* and the spectators, who are absolutely passive, and they conclude that this takes the laughter provoked as non-carnivalesque, as it is not equally shared between all. However, it would seem that, in their focus on repudiating Bakhtin's aim to incorporate the European carnival elements to the Russian tradition, they fail to see that the spectacle of the *yurodivie* was indeed a *theatre without floodlights* and that the spectators were an integral part of the play, either physically or verbally attacking the protagonist, or feigning outrage, which was an indispensable part for the play to take place. This indeed takes the figure of the *yurodivy* closer to the European carnival, as in the mock dethroning

of the king or focus on aggravating utterances and semi-violent acts, with the caveat that in the case of the *yurodivy* no one was heartily laughing – or at least no one who understood the nature of its comic would.

This darker view of laughter proposed by the Tartu semioticians is, in turn, clearly present in Kharms' comic, which would position it squarely as a laughter through tears, conscious of the emphatic presence of evil in the world, rather than a liberating laughter. The eventual effect of Kharms' stories, in which the comic is always attached to violence and death, cannot be other than alarm and moral outrage in the reader, since heartily laughing along with the evil that is imbued in them would indicate the moral corruption of the laugher. In all, rather than a refusal of Likhachev's references to European medieval laughter, Uspensky and Lotman sharpen this view as it pertains to Rus' medieval laughter, which in turn represents the closest definition of Kharms' laughter, as it also accommodates the Bergsonian denunciation of the automatisation of life and an – inverted -social corrective. In response to Anemone, who shares many elements of this interpretation, Brandist (1996: 194), while agreeing with the elements of Orthodox medieval laughter and *yurodstvo*, refuses a singular interpretation of Kharms' ministories through the prism of Orthodox laughter, and allows for a 'West medieval and carnival' colouration to them, seeing in them a fusion of the 'carnivalesque with the medieval grotesque by means of the generic and philosophical universalism of the Menippea.'

What remains unquestionable amongst this multiplicity of approximations is that Kharms' prose through the 1930s was not of a monolithic character, but rather a concatenation that evolved together with the deterioration of the life of the intelligentsia under the Stalinist terror. As such, there can be found examples of an early comic that is purely Bakhtinian and liberating in nature, such as the Menippean treatment of revered figures, as in his 1934 ministory 'Pushkin and Gogol' (2009: 51-2), and examples of later stories that have lost any Bakhtinian traces in them, have a prominent evil presence in them, and withal have almost completely lost any comic character altogether, as is the case with his 1941 ministory 'Rehabilitation' (2009: 251). This oft-mentioned increase in the violent and grotesque and the reduction in the comic finds a parallel in Likhachev's explication of the decline of Rus' laughter towards the seventeenth century. In what could be an analogy to Kharms' context, he

posits that the medieval satirical device was not 'a direct ridicule of reality, but a rapprochement of reality with the comic underworld' (1976: 68). However, as the evil-inhabited underworld progressively surfaced and became the reality, satire lost this distance and became 'scary.'

After this in-depth examination of Orthodoxy, medieval Rus' laughter and *yurodstvo*, and their reverberations in Kharms' oeuvre, the inevitable question is whether there any analogies to be drawn with the Theatre of the Absurd? There are, of course, no direct influences at play, notwithstanding Ionesco being baptised into the Orthodox Church. It is clear as well that the Theatre of the Absurd's works are severely lacking in mysticism. If there can be talk of a metaphysical dimension to them, it is objectively a secular metaphysics. If the OBERIU follows the Orthodox tradition of intuition to get access to an omnipresent God who is hidden beyond immediate reality and represents its incomprehensible order, in what pertains to God in the Theatre of the Absurd, it is rather, in Nietzsche's tradition, his absence or impassibility which is foregrounded. With the aim to find convergences instead of segregations, to end this section it is worth exploring – in a possible hyperbole – the parallels of *Waiting for Godot*'s Vladimir and Estragon with the figure of the *yurodivy*. Although at first glance they may seem to have little in common with medieval religious zealots, there are surprising similarities to be found, especially with Estragon as the more physical embodiment of humanity as opposed to Vladimir's more spiritual vein. As much as the *yurodivie*, these tramps are scantily dressed, hungry and destitute, while the image of the tramp is also one of someone that lives among people but outside society. This is reinforced in Estragon by his constant removal of ill-fitting shoes or the lack thereof. As much as the *yurodivie*, they can be considered eccentric and similarly to them, Estragon is regularly beaten, both by other characters in the play – Lucky –, as well as groups outside the scene:

VLADIMIR	And did they beat you?
ESTRAGON	Beat me? Certainly they beat me.
VLADIMIR	The same lot as usual?
ESTRAGON	The same? I don't know. (2011: 5)

As much as the *yurodivie*, God is central to their reality – although in their case it is because of God's absence. In all, they may be seen to represent *yurodstvo*'s intent turned on its head; while the *yurodivie*'s raison d'être was to be a moral rudder and denounce society's forsaking of God in their lives, Beckett's tramps' role in his play is to denounce the abandonment by God of humans' lives, which renders them rudderless.

4. A Balancing act at the edge: Existentialism

The word *Existentialism* is used in such a broad sense today as to have had its contours almost irreparably blurred. Anything that has a hint of a questioning of the human condition is considered existentialist at this point. The aim of this part of the study is to limit the term to the philosophers and authors that questioned the place of humanity in relation to God – or the lack thereof –, that expressed metaphysical angst as a consequence, but importantly, that never abandoned reason as a means to overcome this anxiety, but rather questioned reason within the bounds of reason. For them, this in turn gave humanity a fighting chance by means of choice, which determined whether one escaped or was entombed within the void of uncertainty. A last characteristic that could be attached to existentialist thought is the fact that in the last instance, it is a means of *coming to terms* with reality as opposed to *transcending* it.

In light of all the previous, it is pertinent to establish this early the ambiguous place of the Theatre of the Absurd in respect to Existentialism. Even though it shares many facets of existentialist thought, it cannot be considered to be a fully deserving member of it due to the extreme devaluing of the role of reason in the search for an escape, the critique of human choice as completely futile, and, more consequentially, the rejection to come to terms with reality – in what can be considered a *negative transcendence*, that is, the refusal to make peace with reality as a cry for transcendence –, while simultaneously not offering any means to reach this transcendence. This is an essential aspect that serves to differentiate the Theatre of the Absurd from Existentialism, as well as from the OBERIU theatre. If, unlike the latter, it completely rejected the role of reason while at the same time avoiding any active search for a positive transcendence, in contrast with the former, it both refused

to come to terms with humanity's absurd reality and offered no clear path to transcend it. While it has been argued in academic literature that Camus came close to this refusal to come to terms with the absurd, imbuing his thought and works with the impetus of rebellion, I will argue that his was not so much an open rebellion, but rather a remonstration against it with the individual's back turned to the absurd reality. As such, no cry for transcendence can be adhered to Camus, while the previous exponents of Existentialism sought transcendence in the divine or to come to terms with the absurd rather than transcend it. The previous tenets place Nietzsche in a perilous place on the ledge of the Existential building and what lies beyond, the key being whether he relegated reason to such a secondary role as to constitute a rejection of it as a means of escape from metaphysical *anxiety*, and whether his thought ultimately sought transcendence or a coming to terms with reality. If he advocates for the irrational Dionysian flux of life and criticises the predominant Socratic use of reason and dialogic discourse, which extends to art, he still accepts the role of the Apolline, with its beautification and division of reality into parts, in making reality and the purely Dionysian bearable for humanity. At the same time, his adhering to the image of life as an illusion, as a veil obscuring the deeper reality that lies behind, would point to an aim to transcend it, but on the other hand he attempts a description of what lies behind – an indivisible *all* and primordial forces that can be seen as antithetical or impassive at best towards humanity –, thus inserting reason into the supposedly unknowable and inexpressible by advancing a quasi-description – rationalising – of the indescribable. He sees the consequence of humanity being confronted with this deeper reality – a tragic understanding of life – as bearable so long as it is modulated by Apolline intervention, thus creating a closed circle from which there is no escape, and becoming open to accusations of nihilism for pointing toward humans' inability to affect this deeper reality and their resigned tragic acceptance thereof. On the other hand, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus all perfectly fit the mould of a metaphysical angst caused by the void of uncertainty against which humanity can fight by means of reason and choice, without transcending reality in the process.

Needless to say, Kierkegaard started the current of Existentialism in the first half of the nineteenth century, and this first foray already had most of the aspects of

existential thought. In contrast with his French followers, his thought ultimately accepted and foregrounded the presence of God behind reality, so that, when he questioned reason, he opposed it to the eternal and divine. Kierkegaard saw as intrinsic in every person a mode of existing not as *being*, but as *becoming*. This becoming entailed an active participation in the person's destiny through choice, rather than a passive acceptance of reality. Kierkegaard saw in every person the feature of 'an anxiety about some possibility in existence' (1980a: 22). The person is aware of the alternatives available to them and their reality is thus their responsibility and dependent on their will. However, this 'freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility' (1980b: 42–3), brings with it a 'dizziness of freedom', when 'freedom looks down into its own possibility' (1980b: 61). This in turn creates the dichotomy of the 'possibility of *being able*' (1980b: 42) becoming both a source of angst and a welcomed potentiality. Humanity's constant metaphysical striving is pointed for Kierkegaard towards something that lies beyond the person's immediate or practical reality, and thus seemingly advocates for a transcendence beyond reason. However, this faith in humanity's choices and potential to transcend immediate reality is modulated by Kierkegaard's religious faith, as this transcendence is laid squarely on humans' *submission* to God's eternal and divine domain. Thus, the seeming human transcendence is annulled by Kierkegaard, as his solution is to consign the problematic of transcendence to someone else – God –, and to reduce the person's choice to their acceptance or refusal of God. This arriving at transcendence through the eternal and the divine, and his concept of *becoming*, could seem to equate Kierkegaard's thought with the Bergsonian-Orthodox streak analysed in the present study. In reality, however, it is removed from it by the lack in the Danish's of the concept of *intuition*. This Bergsonian-Orthodox undercurrent, which was an essential component of the Petersburgian avant-garde, insisted on the combined use of reason and intuition to arrive at the absolute, rather than delegating transcendence to a passive acceptance of God, albeit with the caveat of an active choice in doing so. This is connected to the fundamental belief in the Russian avant-garde, and other authors that form part of this study, like Artaud, that an artist had the potential to affect a change in reality after contact with the absolute, rather than the concept of transcendence being limited to a more passive alternative perception of reality.

When Kierkegaard thought re-entered the French sphere, it was through Lev Shestov's reading, who reintroduced the Danish philosopher from 1935. However, his introduction was modulated by Shestov's previous shaping of the reception of the Nietzsche-Dostoevsky dyad from the 1920s, adding the Petersburgian absurd to the equation. Through them, he expounded on the refusal of rationalism and a reestablishment of the severed connection with the transcendent and the divine. As such, he interpreted Dostoevsky's metaphysical angst, not as a desperate cry, but as a battle cry to repair humanity's connection to the divine by abandoning rationalism's reign. Together with his student, Benjamin Fondane, he championed irrationality as a means to escape the impasse created by reason, to which only the achievement of arriving at the absurd when it reaches the limits of its powers is recognised. This absurd, however, does not have a purely negative connotation, but has a marked potentiality as a point of departure once reason – and language – have exhausted their impetus. In Fotiade's words (2001: 57), the 'absurd possibility' reached by reason has 'a corresponding "absurd evidence" that the individual will find a way to awaken the lost sources of life and to express the "inexpressible"'. Shestov's thought had a transparent influence on Camus, in spite of his seeming polemicising with the émigré's writings. In fact, according to Fotiade (4), *The Myth of Sisyphus* has consistently been seen as a thinly veiled response to Shestov, touching on his predilected rejection of rationalism, existential fight, affirmation of freedom and subjective experience. As much as Shestov's influence on Camus is clear, there remained differences in their so-called *existential* thought, a fact which led Fondane to adopt from 1938 the term *existential philosophy* for Shestov and his approach in an attempt to distinguish it from Sartre and Camus' variant. Already in his 1936 *La conscience malheureuse*, he made the crux of this difference the ultimate reliance on reason of the opposed current:

> A German critic recently wrote that Lev Shestov's philosophy begins precisely where Heidegger's ends … [Heidegger] also, an 'existential' philosopher … following in Kierkegaard's footsteps … deals with angst, the void … but … he, as a true speculative philosopher, ultimately looks in Kant for the means to obtain a "light upon the being". (1979: 254)

The polemic between Camus and Fondane, which continued in subsequent years, was instructive and serves to differentiate better than any analysis the points of divergence between Existentialism and the more irrational existential philosophy and, by extension, between the existential rational absurd and the irrational absurd of the Theatre of the Absurd and the OBERIU. If Camus denounced Shestov in 1942, for renouncing the 'commandments of the absurd' (*MS*: 26) by trying to annul the immanent absurd in reality by placing it upon the shoulders of an incomprehensible God, Fondane responded in 1945 by accusing Camus of 'renouncing the absurd' and not being a 'misologist', as he sees in Camus an 'admission' of the absurd and a 'resignation', both of which 'remove the absurd from reality, or impregnate it with intelligibility' (Fondane 1945: 38). We could add the quote from Camus, which preceded Fondane's reply – even though it was included in support of his claim for primacy over the absurd – as a diplomatic *agreement to disagree* between the two: 'To [S]hestov, reason is useless, but there is something beyond reason. For an absurd mind, reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason' (*MS* 27).

Shestov's isolated role of reason to arrive at the absurd can be said to have been taken directly from Nietzsche's 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy*, where the German exalts Socratic thought only for its role in making its followers ultimately aware of the impossibility to understand reality through its means, prompting a regeneration in art – understood as metaphysical art – due to the newly arisen tragic awareness. Needless to say, for the nineteenth-century philosopher, the way out of this impasse is through the creation of myth. In a clean departure from Kierkegaard's thought, and in contrast with Sartre and Camus, Nietzsche lauds tragedy understood as a perception of reality that runs contrary to the individual and subjective, in favour of the erasure of limits and distinctions between the self and others and the self and nature, and a foreboding of the universal unity beyond reality. In fact, his concept of tragedy would be easily equated to the Bergsonian intuitivist approach were it not for the fact that Nietzsche accepts form as a prerequisite for humanity to presage this deeper unity of reality, and for the aforementioned *closed circle* approach to this understanding of reality, that does not seek a true transcendence, but rather a coming to terms with reality. Be that as it may, there are still strong points of connection between the German philosopher and his French counterpart, as the

stress on 'the actuality of the individual, the uniqueness of human creativity, and the richness of experience' and their criticism of 'the weakness of scientific reason in particular, and rationalism more generally' (Gunter 1992: 231). Some of these aspects of Nietzsche's thought begin to explain his recurrent inclusion in the existentialist current, something that constitutes a bridge towards later exponents like Sartre and Camus. In a similar vein, he speaks of a 'ghastly absurdity of existence', and in the words of Lehan (1992: 324), 'he suggests that man must define himself in relation to a universe without God – to confront the universe as universe', and that in this way 'man becomes the agency of his own being.'

This exploration calls for an analysis of Sartre and Camus' Existentialism and rational absurd. There is little to add to the almost limitless collection of scholarship about the French authors, and the points of departure from both *existential philosophy* and irrational absurd have already been touched upon. It is a widely known fact amongst the scholars[30] of Sartre that, after his initial focus on literary output, after reading Bergson's 'Time and Free Will' (1910), he became absorbed with philosophy. As such, Sartre shares much with his fellow Frenchman, like the conception of the world has an indivisible homogeneity and their refusal of pure scientific thought, that leaves space for intuition. They also share their conception of the person's life as other than a linear time progression and qualify the past as non-existent, which gives the person the freedom to continually create their reality from *zero*. However, while this freedom was of a fully positive and artistically yielding nature for Bergson, it was of a much more negative, angst-inducing character for Sartre. For him, this freedom is innate in the person, rather than gained or fought for; if it shows itself in the capacity to create distance between themselves and the world through the questioning of reality, the flipside is the malaise caused by always being 'separated by a nothingness from his essence' (1956: 35). In a further demarcation from Bergson, Sartre presents a second acceptation of *nothing*, in this case to reflect the indivisible absolute. This void is key for Sartre, as it induces that vertigo or *nausea* when a person is confronted with it. Bergson separates the power of the *zero* for continuous creation from *nothing-absolute*. For him, 'not even matter, or space,

[30] As Pete A. Y. Gunter, whom I must thank for his analysis of Bergson's thought influence in Sartre (1992).

become … metaphysically negative principles', but conversely, 'something concrete, something actual, which can be known and studied' (Gunter 1992: 240). Sartre, in turn, as was the case with Lipavsky's horror of the indivisible, points towards humanity's malaise when reason and language show their inadequacy in their attempts to construe a heterogeneous reality out of homogeneity. If, when confronted with this *nothing* the narrator in *Nausea* says of reason that 'neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence.' (1964: 129), of language, he states that 'things are divorced from their names … I am in the midst of things, nameless things.' (125). It is indeed in this fact that Sartre locates the reason for the absurd. Unlike Camus, for Sartre the *human absurd* does not exist, as it only appears through reason in relation to the 'accompanying circumstances' (129) of the person. For Sartre, the absurd is an absolute ontological category independent from humanity and reason, and it escapes the powers of language, as this absolute is 'Absurd, irreducible; nothing… could explain it' (ibid). In the following passage, with his refusal of language and reason to comprehend the absolute, but attempting, nonetheless to understand it beyond the intellect, Sartre comes extremely close to Bergsonian intuitivism:

> The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice … without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life … Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words (ibid)

Indeed, it could be taken as a direct application of Bergson's criticism of Kant, as Bergson 'holds that in addition to [the] Kantian intellectual way there is another way, the intuitional, which Kant admitted to be necessary (though impossible) for metaphysical knowledge' (Landes 1924: 459). As such, Kant named this impossible metaphysical comprehension *faith*, thus removing it from the hands of humanity.

Returning to the specific human experience, the contingency of human existence has clear nihilistic implications in Sartre. As much as this contingency implies freedom from determinism, it also carries with it the full responsibility of a

person's actions into their own hands, thus making the person accountable for their involuntary contingency. In a move away from the previous exponents of Existentialism, Satre, as an atheist, takes God completely out of the equation, something that at times has drawn comparisons with Nietzsche. However, it must be remembered that Nietzsche was decrying the *death of God* in society, rather than trumpeting it. As a result, Sartre's Existentialism is of a sober and nihilating nature. Any positive statement or certitude is mercilessly mocked, as does the narrator in *Nausea*: 'I have re-read what I wrote in the Cafe Mably and I am ashamed; I want no secrets or soul-states, nothing ineffable; I am neither virgin nor priest enough to play with the inner life. There is nothing much to say' (9). This is reflected also at the formal level of the text, which reflects a *flairless* narrative while indirectly attacking more fanciful literary works: 'This is odd: I have just filled up ten pages and I haven't told the truth' (ibid). This distrust and deconstruction of any positive statement just uttered, will find a clear analogue in Beckett's prose. Be that as it may in a seeming contradiction with his philosophy, in other works and in his life Sartre does moralise by condemning the bourgeoisie, prejudice and bad faith amongst others. This leaves us with the paradox of someone who 'perpetually affirms positive values and positive social possibilities which his philosophy can only negate' (Gunter 1992: 241). In this light, the following passage from *Nausea* – which I have taken the liberty to render in the form of a theatre dialogue for clarity –, reads as a conversation between these two paradoxical positions, one embodied by the narrator [N], and the other by the Self-Taught Man [STM]:

[N] … there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.

[STM] … you undoubtedly mean, Monsieur, that life is without a goal? Isn't that what one might call pessimism?

[N] [to himself] Certainly not …

[STM] … in favour of voluntary optimism. Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one … I don't know what you think about that, Monsieur?

[N] Nothing … [to himself] the sort of lie that … people … tell themselves.

…

[STM] There is a goal, Monsieur, there is a goal… there is humanity.

[N] [to himself] That's right: I forgot he was a humanist. (112)

A humanist, Camus, he was. The absurd, for him, came from the confrontation of a person with their circumstances – with the world –, rather than with an absolute, ontological absurd. The way to live with the conscience of the absurd was found precisely in a humanistic revolt, through individualism and hedonism in life. For Camus, as opposed to Sartre, it is human reason that creates the absurd; even the work of art, so often seen as a way to pierce reality, is robbed of its possibilities to transcend it: 'It would be wrong to see a symbol in it and to think that the work of art can be considered at last as a refuge for the absurd. It is itself an absurd phenomenon, and we are concerned merely with its description. It does not offer an escape for the intellectual ailment' (*MS*: 70–1). As much as all existentialists preceding him, he does not fully reject reason, but relegates it into a secondary position. In his case reason is useful for the *human experience*, but humanity must acknowledge its limits for anything other than the human domain. The crux of Camus' philosophical thought is to come to terms with the absurd, instead of trying to transcend it or to negate it. In a sweeping attack on thinkers that refused to compromise with the absurd, be it Kierkegaard, Jaspers, or Shestov – and by implication Dostoevsky –, he calls their election of God to transcend the absurd *philosophical suicide*, as it means a delegation of the understanding of this absurd.

And it is his literary-philosophical debate with Dostoevsky that could be argued to be the central, starting point for Camus' brand of Existentialism, all while serving as the link with Kharms, with whom Camus shared the intertextuality with Dostoevsky's works – in the case of Camus, maybe unconsciously. The inextricable Camus-Dostoevsky connection is such a truism as to make a detailed analysis here unnecessary. The reader is directed to Davison (1997) for an extensive and unsurpassed contrasting between the two authors. What is clear and of note after such an analysis is how Dostoevsky was on one hand a source of admiration and a living example of Camus' tribulations, while on the other, representing the opposite end of Camus' reaction to the absurd. Camus being a humanistic-secular thinker, God and the divine are then the crux of contention between the two. In the chapter of *MS* dedicated to the character of Kirilov from Dostoevsky's *Demons*, Camus makes the above-mentioned duality transparent. Against his remonstrations that Dostoevsky was not 'an absurd novelist … but an existential novelist' (*MS*: 82), and

that any of his works 'is not an absurd work … but a work that propounds the absurd problem' (*MS*: 83), because of his ultimate leap into 'eternity's springboard' (*MS*: 26), there is an acknowledgment that Dostoevsky's solutions come, not out of a rock-solid, unassailable faith, but out of the Russian's life-long struggle with the absurd and his faith. In fact, George Strem argues that his admiration towards the Russian made it difficult for Camus to take Dostoevsky at his *literary* word, since he found it arduous to believe that anyone who has the ability to dissect the reasoning of the rebels … with such consummate skill … could be sincere when he turned against that rebellion' (1966: 249). Indeed, Camus posits that the early Dostoevsky was extremely close to his own views and identifies, in this early stage, the Russian with his atheist rebels. The suicide of the hero is equated to a rebellion against the existence of God, as an expression of the person's ultimate freedom and the absurd conviction that, in the absence of God, he then becomes a god of unrestrained freedom and should kill himself to implement this freedom. Camus then posits that this initial impulse was then changed – or qualified – by Dostoevsky due to the criticism he received concerning his concept of *logical suicide* and its exemplification in his novels. Thus, in later articles in *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevsky explains this suicide as the only honest solution for someone who does not believe in *immortality*, therefore advocating the acceptance of the divine against a faithless existence which is ultimately destined for the absurd and suicide. This, in turn, gave the absurd for Dostoevsky the attributes of 'a corrosive anguish, alienating humanity from pleasures and love and condemning us to a sense of futility and even to suicide unless we yield to the logical necessity of faith' (Davison 1997: 29).

The question of *immortality* is an essential motif for Kharms as well, but the Petersburgian, in turn, sides squarely with Dostoevsky in the choice presented against the absurd and which option is preferable, while accepting, as much as was an integral part of Dostoevsky's life an oeuvre, doubt. This passage from 'The Old Woman' – as before, rendered in the form of a play's dialogue –, between the protagonist [P] and Sakerdon Mikhailovich [SM] shall prove illuminating of this position and of the presence of Dostoevsky's imprint:

[P] … Do you believe in God?

[SM] … to ask a person 'Do you believe in God' is … an impolite and tactless act.

…

[P] … forgive me for asking you such [a] … question.

[SM] … I simply declined to answer you.

[P] I, too, would not have answered … but for a different reason … in my opinion, there are no believers or non-believers. There are only those who want to believe and those who do not want to believe.

…

[SM] And what is it that they believe or do not believe in? In God? …

[P] No, in immortality.

[SM] Then why did you ask me whether I believed in God?

[P] … to ask 'Do you believe in immortality?' sounds stupid somehow … (2009: 100-1)

In contrast, Dostoevsky's choice to believe in immortality is for Camus a betrayal towards his characters' atheist response to the absurd. In a final encapsulation of this choice, Camus argues that to the question posed by Dostoevsky's rebels when they wonder about life's sense, about whether 'existence is illusory *or* it is eternal' (*MS*: 77), Dostoevsky answers 'existence is illusory *and* it is eternal' (*MS*: 83). For Camus, the *absurd person* – who is the enlightened person – should reach the precipice of reason over the absurd, and remain in a permanent balance there, neither negating the absurd, nor trying to comprehend or transcend it. The person should make their peace with the fact that the absurd is part and parcel of the human experience, acknowledge irrationality, and be able to live with its accompanying incertitude. With this in mind, he attempts to take himself – and by extension Sartre – out of the existentialist movement by stating that the existentialists negate the absurd with their blind leaps towards God:

> existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them. (*MS*: 24)

In the final instant, however, Camus does not follow his own precepts of living in a constant balance with the absurd, as he also, inversely, *escapes* into this side of the absurd. His hedonistic *rebellion* could be conceived, and indeed was conceived a milliard of times before him as the *carpe diem* provoked by the *memento mori*. Against his heralding of a humanistic revolt against – and within – the absurd, he is seen with his back well and truly turned to the absurd, living life as if it was not there, drawing no radically original lessons from it. Rather than *coming to terms* with it, his solution is rather to *ignore* it or drown it with earthly pleasures. Of course, I am aware this condensation is simplistic and leaves very little room for nuance. Novels like *The Stranger* or *The Fall* are masterful attempts to expound on Camus' attempts to come to terms with the absurd and put a brave – and even smiling – face when confronted with the extreme manifestation of it. However, as the scope of this study does not include a deep immersion into Camus' thought and oeuvre, his ideas have been sharpened and simplified for contrast and debate – which was something that, according to Brée (1964: 197), Camus was fond of doing himself:

> Other people's thinking interested him less for its intrinsic values than for those particular moments when it either coincided or entered into conflict with his own. He then took what seemed to him essential, indifferent to its origin and often to its exact connotations within its own system of reference.

Chapter II. Petersburgian and Parisian avant-garde

While the previous exploration has shown many points of convergence between the groups' traditions, it has also highlighted several prominent differences. Therefore, the initially mentioned unexplained nature of the parallels in output remains mostly so. What follows is an immersion into each avant-garde context and the groups themselves, which will in turn further offer either a definitive link between their oeuvres or deepen the incognita presented by their similarities, an incognita which has already been brought to the fore with the above investigation – which has evinced the more markedly intuitive-divine streak of the Petersburgian tradition, in contrast with the more nihilistic and unholy undertones of the Parisian current.

A key aspect of this thesis is the dichotomy between avant-garde and established currents. It is important to make the distinction between novelty in content or form and avant-garde. The term avant-garde does not help with this distinction. Coming from a military background, in French, it designates the small, independent contingent making a foray into unexplored territory. This group may pioneer an infertile and death-bound path, or it may find a new, viable and productive path. As such, from its provenance alone, the term avant-garde, while implying exploration of unknown routes, strongly implies that this is just a way of laying the ground for the main contingent, or, in this case, a future established artistic current. With this in mind, any paradigm-changing, but also just strongly innovative artist, in any epoch, would be at the vanguard of art, and thus should be called an avant-gardist. On the other hand, there is a more limited and self-sufficient concept of avant-garde, one closely related to what was called *left* art in Russia in the years after the Revolution. Counterintuitively, *left* art did not mean *Bolshevik*, or even *Soviet* art; it in fact referred to the conception of art pioneered by the futurists as a field of continuous experimentation and change, of the constant pursuit of new devices and language. As such, avant-garde or *left* art should always defy classification and never lead to a well-established current[31]. Its aims were not to pave the way for yet another

[31] There is an alluring terminological particularity concerning the word *avant-garde*, which is central to this exploration. The distinction between the pre-eminently experimental or *left* avant-garde and its previous interpretations could have been easily and naturally made *in English* with the use of *avant-*

literary current, but to always elude becoming one. Calcification of any of its ideas was to be avoided at any cost, and it could not be seen to be based on previous currents. As such, *left* art could never be consigned into literary history as the evolution from Symbolism, into a different *-ism*. True, *left* artists ended up being stamped with the generic Futurism designation for posterity, something that the artists themselves deeply resented at the time and that, according to them was due to the urge to classify from the critics. Indeed, by the combination of unwelcomed associations with the Italian futurists and the rejection of the artists of any new *-ism*, this denomination was not the happiest one. Mayakovsky made this explicit, as well as his aim to remain outside any new *-ism* by referring to his circle with the broad term 'Literary Company' in his 1914 article 'We, Too, Want Meat!' (Mayakovsky 1988):

> People say that I am a futurist?
> What's a futurist? I don't know. I never heard of such a thing. There have never been any.
> You heard this tale from Mademoiselle Criticism. I'll show "her"!
> You know, there are good galoshes, the brand's "Triangle."
> And yet, not a single critic would wear them. The name scares them.

The term is indeed fragile, since there are essential differences between the Russian and preceding Italian futurists. The main merit of this term resides in the fact that the artists indeed sought a complete break with the past and had their sights well and truly on the future that they would pioneer. In any case, the denomination stuck, and as can be seen in Osip Briks' 1927 manifesto, *We Are the futurists* (1988), the Russian futurists made their peace with the label and indeed tried to reclaim it by asserting they preceded Italian Futurism – or at least they preceded the Italians being

---

garde and *vanguard* respectively, thanks to the fact – worth entertaining notwithstanding it is not strictly within the scope of this investigation – that English borrowed, in the fifteenth century, the French term slightly altered, *vaunt garde*, which then was further refashioned into *vanguard*, only for it to re-enter the language in its original, *avant-garde*, form centuries later to specifically designate the art movements that this thesis deals with. However, this distinction would have been specific to the English language, and does not find an analogy in either French or Russian – nor Spanish or Italian amongst many others –, where the same term is used for both concepts. Due to the internationalising ethos of this thesis, and the fact that, when the French authors quoted in this study refer to the avant-garde, they are not making this distinction, this author has chosen to use periphrases or analogies – as the Russian *left* art – to make this distinction.

'well known in Russia.' Be that as it may, Brik did acknowledge a kinship with some of the Italians' ideals, those that could be said to fit neatly into *left* art. In his manifesto, he looks kindly upon some of Marinetti's movement's slogans, such as,

> "The main elements of our poetry will be: bravery, boldness, and rebellion."
>
> "Up to this time literature has celebrated pensive immobility, ecstasy, and dream; we want to praise aggressive motion, feverish insomnia, the gymnast's stride, the dangerous leap, the slap in the face, and the fist's punch."
>
> "We are on the farthest promontory of the ages . . . What is the point of looking back if we must smash the secret doors of the impossible. "
>
> "… we do not want that past; we are young, strong, alive futurists!"

Here, *left* art's pillars of a rejection of the past, an orientation towards the future, as well as the unrestrained frantic energy of the era, is palpable.

Another specific characteristic of this definition of the avant-garde is its ethos of experimentation for experimentation's sake. If artistic vanguards or innovators in the past had come up with new concepts, the aim *per se* was never to experiment, but to arrive at a truer vision of the artist in line with its time. For the 1910s avant-garde, however, experimentation was foregrounded for its own sake, even when the result of these experiments was unpredictable. The concept of *left* art of *avant-gardeness* was given explicit verbal form when Vvedensky, after having listened to the reading of his fellow oberiut Kharms' short story 'The Old Woman', – in Vvedensky's eyes drawing too much from previous currents and with enough accessibility as to have to potential to become part of an 'established current' – said to fellow Chinari, Druskin, 'Myself, I haven't abandoned left art' (Druskina, L. in Kharms 1988: 132). I argue that avant-garde understood as *left* art was only possible during the highly ionised atmosphere of the first quarter of the twentieth century in Europe, as only this time of unsurpassed energy and scientific-political-artistic upheaval could sustain this ever-changing artistic flux and could act as a solvent to prevent any calcification. A society cannot sustain this level of energy and frantic change for long, so the two decades that span this view of the avant-garde present as a remarkable feat in history, which may have a difficult time finding a parallel.

As has been alluded to in the paragraph above, another aspect of this conception of the avant-garde is the refusal of easy accessibility in favour of abstruseness. Indeed, in his 1918 'Dada Manifesto' (2001: 300), Tzara proclaims that the avant-gardist should create 'forever unintelligible' works of art. They were to be difficult to fully access at first glance, *defamiliarised*, and would require all the powers of intellect in their perception. In a similar fashion to the Dadaists' apparently simple, but impenetrable artworks, Kharms states in his diary that 'works should be both easy and hard to read' (2013: 232). This would ensure that the piece of art was not passively experienced, and that other methods of understanding other than reason – intuition or *zaum* – were engaged. Needless to say, this inability to access the works oftentimes extended to art critics, especially those predisposed against avant-garde experimentation. This was the case with the already mentioned 1927 review of the proto-oberiuts poetry reading, in which they are linked with the school of Malevich:

> it is fundamentally impossible to understand the meaningless lines, intonationally rhythmic, ornamental spots of Suprematist sound due to their being a *zaum* endeavour. After a short period of claiming to pictorial hegemony, Suprematist art has taken its true place: applied arabesque. (Tolmachev 1927: 24)

The question of whether the Theatre of the Absurd belongs to this *left* avant-garde then resolves itself by analysing both the works and their socio-political and cultural context. After two world wars, Europe was exhausted, so no matter how reinvigorating the years of recovery after the Second World War may have seemed in comparison, there was still not the same electricity and semidemented hunger for change that characterised the first years of upheaval. As opposed to *left* art, the Theatre of the Absurd was also markedly individualistic, with almost every dramaturge included within this classification by Esslin having rejected their belonging to any kind of coordinated movement. Esslin, for one, made an approximation of a definition of the Theatre of the Absurd in line with the more self-sustaining view of the avant-garde: 'The Theatre of the Absurd is not, and never can be, a literary movement or school, for its essence lies in the free and unfettered exploration, by each of the writers concerned, of his own individual vision' (2014: 219). While the perceived impossibility of becoming a *movement* is attributed to the

individualistic nature of the authors, he still describes their works as 'free and unfettered exploration', which seems to point to similarities with the experimentation for its sake of the previous avant-gardists. However, with the benefit of time passed, today it is clear that the Theatre of the Absurd's works have calcified into some of the most established works in the canon. In fact, one of the main tenets of *left* art was to malleate form so that it was not readily consumed passively by reason, but other means of perceiving art would be engaged. Therefore, there must be elements present in these plays that make them more accessible and less *avant-gardist* than initially thought when these works first entered the theatre scene, as the way most renowned works from the Theatre of the Absurd are consumed nowadays by the mass audience is difficult to be qualified as anything other than passively, and solely through reason. The blunting of these works' edges has been blamed on their identification with existentialist thought, as Lara Cox (2018: 26) propounds, 'it is certainly true that the Theatre of the Absurd has been made palatable for a large proportion of Anglophone and Francophone audiences via the academy', while she advocates for 'a new lease of critical life for the Theatre of the Absurd', and its liberation from 'critical overdetermination.' Finally, she proposes removing the existentialist label from these plays in order to arrive at the previous; a goal shared by Bennet (2011), which will be dissected later in this chapter.

Ionesco himself had what can be called a conservative view of the avant-gardist, something translucently reflected in his 1957 article 'There Is No Avant-garde Theater' (1957: 101-5). After denouncing the confusion surrounding this term, he joins the view of the concept of avant-garde theatre as 'a theatre preparing the way for another, definitive one.' In a traditional view of the avant-garde as nothing more than part of the usual recycling of culture, he says that 'the avant-garde appears of necessity, so to speak; it is self-generated when certain systems of expression are exhausted, corrupt, too remote from a forgotten model.' Further, in a view of the revolutionary nature of avant-garde which would have raffled the futurists' feathers, but would have been welcomed by most oberiuts, Ionesco says that 'being, of course, revolutionary, the avant-garde constitutes … like most revolutionary events a restoration, a return.' The change purported by the artists is only an appearance and 'this "appearance" however is tremendously important, for it permits (by means of

what is "new") the revival and re-establishment of what is timeless and permanent.' Whenever Ionesco refers to the more experimental elements of the avant-garde, in what turns out to be an opposition to the full commitment of *left* art, he does so with detachment, associating it with scientific research and calling it 'laboratory' theatre. He might have had in mind his immediate predecessor Tardieu's experiments with miniplays from 1947, many of which appear in his untranslated *Théâtre de chambre* – or Chamber Theatre –, published in 1966. In these, Tardieu takes an idea and turns the miniplay into experimentation by making the play a putting into practice of that idea. As such, while in 'Un mot pour un autre' (207-18), Tardieu attempted to 'make the "sense" understood through gestures and intonation alone, while the random in language was pushed into the absurd, into unintelligibility' (10), in 'Ce que parler veut dire' (159-175), he wanted to explore through the contrasting of private language with the public sort the loosened nature of the reference and referenced relationship, thus showing the artifice behind words and the semantic system. Tardieu serves as the immediate precursor that reinforces Ionesco's view of the avant-garde as the stone-layers of future established schools, as some of Tardieu's experiments are reflected in the Romanian's plays, in a clear trend of consolidation of the emerging current, in detriment of the more self-sufficient conception of the avant-garde and its impetus to reject any precedent or existing artistic effort, no matter its merits.

In contrast to Ionesco's detached, rational and conservative view of the avant-garde, the words of *left* artists themselves will serve as the best remonstration. As a case in point, Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, and Burliuk's 1912 manifesto, 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' (Mayakovsky, V., *et al*. 1988), gives a good idea of the contrast in vision and energy:

> To the readers of our New First Unexpected.
> *We* alone are the *face* of *our* Time. Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the world.
> The past is too tight. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.
> He who does not forget his *first* love will not recognize his last.
> …

From the heights of skyscrapers we gaze at their insignificance!...

We *order* that the poets' *rights* be revered:

1. To enlarge the *scope* of the poet's vocabulary with arbitrary and derivative words (Word-novelty).
2. To feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before their time.
3. To push with horror off their proud brow the Wreath of cheap fame that You have made from bathhouse switches.
4. To stand on the rock of the word "we" amidst the sea of boos and outrage.

Apart from the conspicuous dizzying movement and energy of the time, with its horns blaring and skyscraper's heights, a general sense of defiance towards anything that is established – as Pushkin or Dostoevsky – or that may become established – the bathhouse 'Wreath of cheap fame' – is palpable, as is the aim to reject anything that is not being created in the present – with that broad and seemingly unmotivated 'hatred for the language existing before their time.' In contrast with the Theatre of the Absurd individuality, the fact that this is a shared endeavour is put to the foreground with that 'we' upon which the *left* artists stood.

As was the case with the authors of the Theatre of the Absurd, this 'we' was rejected by the Dadaists, in their turn with greater vigour. In his famous manifesto (2001: 297-304), Tzara claims that 'DADA was born of a desire for independence, of a distrust of the community.* Those who belong to us keep their freedom. We don't recognise any theory.' This brand of avant-garde, which was influenced by the First World War, even though Dada started before the war, can thus be seen as prophetic, since in opposition to the Italian avant-garde's complicity, and the Russian avant-garde unintended facilitation of fascist and totalitarian regimes, this desire for individuality, aim for freedom and rejection of any overarching theory protected them against any accusation of abetting the subsequent rise in fascism in Europe. In fact, their rejection of any appearance of unity led Tzara to lash-out at the previous avant-garde exponents, notwithstanding the fact that by rejecting *what came before* he was in fact conforming to one of the essential components of an avant-garde ensemble. Of them, he said that 'we have had enough of cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas … all the groupings of artists have ended up at this bank even while they rode high along on diverse comets.' In his manifesto, Tzara declares

the individuality of the artist and states that true art is for oneself and should not be lauded or understood by the masses, in fact he comes very close to sounding like preceding avant-garde exhortations when he indicates that 'we must have strong, upright works, precise, and forever unintelligible.' Of all the avant-garde groups, Dada was, without a doubt, the most *left* avant-garde of all. With their aversion to labels and their refusal of any kind of unifying theory, and in fact their negation of any surety, they achieve better than any the ideal of an utterly free and constantly shape-shifting art, which refused to be inserted into the canon. History has concurred in this decision, as it is not possible to speak about any true follower of Dada after its demise and most of their dramaturgical work has not entered the canon. This, it must be said, was achieved at the expense of having a more full-bodied and convincing ethos behind, something that prevented Dada from becoming an established current, but that also pasted into this group of artists the everlasting label of gratuitous nihilism, with its accompanying charge of immaturity, which has prevented their works oftentimes from being taken as seriously or having been flatly dismissed by many critics[32].

The question arises of what to make then of the often-pasted label of the oberiuts as Dadaists - an equating that started, as has been mentioned, already in 1927. The answer is that the term is not apt since, while there are some similarities concerning the theatricality, playfulness and irreverence of their behaviour, there cannot be any accusation of nihilism for the scholar of OBERIU, and the place awarded to the work of art and metaphysics was deeply dissonant between the two groups. This deeper undercurrent, in spite of the Dadaists' best efforts, means that 'the poetic experiments of Kharms and Vvedenskii are far more radical, and less accessible, than those of Tzara' (Stone Nakhimovsky 1982: 169).

After this examination, we can attest to how problematic to achieve was the ultimate ideal of an art that was constantly evolving and rejected classification, an art that acquired its whole value in the *process* of its creation rather than the final result, and that died and became irrelevant as soon as it was finished. This was the view of art espoused by Bergson, Shklovsky and Malevich amongst others, and which was still

[32] As an example, Pronko (1962: 2) is thinking of Dada when he says that the previous avant-garde was an 'exuberant, adolescent (but most often ineffective) personal revolt'.

reverberating in the post-war era – as per the previously mentioned quote from Ionesco about a form of language expiring as soon as it becomes recognised. As previously proposed, this ideal was, in practice, difficult to achieve, due to the relentless and almost schizophrenic energy necessary for this permanent state of change. There were, at best, different degrees in which the different avant-garde groups came close to this; while Dada came the nearest to the full realisation of this ideal, it was at the expense of a strong metaphysical undercurrent and in favour of nihilism; while the Russian avant-garde also came close to this ideal, and achieved to do so with a strong metaphysical mindset, some of their branches did become schools, whose works in turn became canon, and the maddening energy required to remain malleable seemed to fizzle out as the 1920s progressed and the 1930s started, although needless to say this analysis may be wholly unfair due to rise of Stalinism, which truncated Futurism by force. Be that as it may, erring on the side of cynicism, it is difficult to conceive of a Russian avant-garde that would have had the unlimited source of energy to keep constantly evolving and changing for decades afterwards without the frenzied atmosphere of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Lastly, other examples often included in this avant-garde, like the Surrealists, have not been included in this exploration due to their clear aim towards becoming an established current. As much as Surrealism could be said to have sprung as a Dada outshoot, the length in time of the movement, its clear artistic tenets and the fact that so many of their works have become enshrined in the canon, all speak against Surrealism being a believable exponent of *left* art, in spite of sharing in the relegation or rejection – complete in their case – or reason in art.

Before closing this preliminary exploration of the avant-garde, it is worth exploring what role, if any, the divine had in the Russian – or even the Franco-Germanic – avant-garde. At first glance, with the Russian movement happening in the midst of the Bolshevik Revolution and the most famous exponents westwards being committed atheists or being accused of anarchism, it would be difficult to discern any role for the divine role whatsoever. However, we have already seen Malevich's intellectual acrobatics to try to preserve the concept of God in Bolshevik Russia, and the overwhelming presence of the concept of God in the oberiuts' output. While the role of the divine in the widest concept of the avant-garde is at best

secondary, it is worth shortly exploring this aspect for its possible implications in the view of the different avant-gardes. In Russia, was it a subdued continuation of Orthodoxy in line with the Russian tradition or a gap that had Futurism as it starting point and was not taken up again until the oberiuts did, only to then be well and truly given a Stalinist coup de grace? In France, was it a continuation of the progressively entrenched view of reality as godless, a complete refutation or a demarcation from this trend? To resolve this, it would be fruitful to delve into Mikhail Epstein's (1989: 222-235) exploration of the possible religious marker of the avant-garde, specifically as it relates to the figure of the *yurodivy* – if only to test its validity. His contention encompasses not only the Russian, but also the Franco-Germanic avant-garde. According to this analysis, it is possible to see a religious side to the avant-garde, even if this was completely unintended. It assuredly does not have the characteristics of preaching from an elevated position, but rather it has those of the *yurodivy* 'wallowing in the dirt.' The act of self-destruction of the work of art, in what is called *anti-art*, implies a removal of all aesthetic concerns, and it is in this removal that 'its supra-aesthetic nature is revealed.' This divine superstructure is what allows the work of art to remain one, even with all aesthetic concerns rejected. This removal of the aesthetic and seeming facets of art connects the avant-garde with *yurodstvo* and implies numerous parallels with the Orthodox ascetics. The shame and ridicule that the *yurodivie* experienced are shared by the hardships endured by the avant-gardists when their unseeming works of art were revealed – this was both in the form of extremely negative and deriding reviews, but also the cries, shouts and insults during their performances. The *pure* – or holy – ideals of the artists are then mocked and, in its most extreme manifestations, the artist 'showers the audience with spit and abuse in order to provoke their reciprocal indignation and ridicule', which in turn is reminiscent of Likhachev's description of the *yurodivy*'s antics: "He constantly provokes the spectators, downright forces them to beat him, throwing stones, dirt and filth at them, slapping them, insulting their sense of decency" (Likhachev et al. 1974: 116). A final parallel can be drawn between *yurodstvo* and the avant-garde in the way they both strive to express the inexpressible, to express through language that which is beyond it or through form that which has not got it. As such, we

recognise the characteristic tongue-tied *babblings* [33] of the *yurodivy* or the *incomprehensible* works of the avant-gardists.

While Epstein's effort is thought-provoking and clear-eyed, it is a given that most avant-gardists did not have any of the above in mind when creating their works of art. It is, finally, a suit that the scholar has tailored a posteriori and which fits relatively well into the avant-gardist's anatomy, but that never was to be found in their wardrobe. In all, the possibility could be conceded of the avant-gardists being *art-yurodivie*, much as was said of Kharms before, in a more nuanced definition that does not include solely the public behaviour of the artist, but their works as well. As such, the mockery endured by the artists would be in the name of true art, and the superstructure to their *anti-art* or *incomprehensible* works would be given by an ideal and absolute understanding of art.

1. The Russian avant-garde in the midst of war, revolution, and terror

1.1 The Russian avant-garde

Russian Futurism, unlike its Italian predecessor, did not have their militaristic undertones and did not share the latter welcoming of industrial capitalism. As the Italians, their formation predated the First World War, but as much as the First World War helped shake the pillars of the Russian bourgeoisie, and as much as the Revolution later gave this bourgeoisie the coup de grace, even if the Russian futurists had an entrenched aversion towards bourgeois art, the mainly purely artistic aims of Futurism clashed with Bolshevik politics and promoted art, and put it into an unavoidable collision course with the Party, which later on would make sure to extricate Futurism from the state-sanctioned art. Their perceived kinship with the Fascism-enabling Italians did not make them any more agreeable in the eyes of the Soviet regime. The Russian futurists made every effort to rid themselves of these connections already on the eve of the First World War. When Marinetti visited Russia in early 1914, the vast majority of them gave him a cold welcome, with some being openly antagonistic. In this 1914 article in the *Iskry* periodical, published after the

[33] Returning once more to the much-quoted frenzied critic of the proto-oberiuts poetry reading, it is worth remembering his description of the Petersburgians' *zaum* as 'but an enervated and *yurodstvo*-like baby talk' (Tolmachev 1927: 24).

visit of the Italian futurist, the thrust of the feeling is transparent: 'The king of the futurists, the Italian Marinetti, arrived … the Moscow futurists met Marinetti with hostility and refused all contact with him. They do not agree with his views about the future of Futurism' (Brik 1988). On his part, Khlebnikov distributed his own leaflet at the same time as Marinetti was gracing Petersburg with his presence, admonishing the Italian and attacking anyone who did not give him a cold shoulder:

> Today some natives and the Italian settlement on the Neva, for personal reasons, have thrown themselves at the feet of Marinetti, thus betraying the first step of Russian art on the path of freedom and honor, and placing Asia's noble neck under the yoke of Europe … stranger, remember, you have come to another country. (Mayakovsky, Brik, *et al*. 1988)

The language in this leaflet is shocking by its nationalist hue. In the months preceding the First World War, this national fervour and aim to separate Russia from Europe can, perhaps, be partially explained in turn by the conflation of *Europe* with an exacerbated, bellicose nationalism. Be that as it may, the Italian futurists still influenced the Russians with their propensity towards violence, although this was done in the latter case within the form of the artwork to attack old forms of art, rather than it being attached to a pro-militaristic ideology. Indeed, a decade after its formation, the recently formed Left Front of the Arts (Lef), which included Mayakovsky and Brik, insisted in their anti-bellicose nature – even in their most violent-sounding works – to ingratiate themselves with the Bolshevik powers that be, together with an overall softer and regime-appeasing tone: 'The futurists were the first and the only ones in Russian literature to curse the war drowning out the saber rattling of the war-singers (Gorodetsky, Gurnilev, etc.), and to fight against it with all the weapons of art ("War and the World," by Mayakovsky)' (Mayakovsky, Brik, *et al*. 1988).

When the oberiuts started their public life, Futurism was already strongly out of favour with the Bolsheviks, and their *antics* got them immediately painted, or tarnished, with the futurist brush. In an early attempt to not collide head on with Stalinism, the OBERIU's stated ethos was not presented purely as a reaction against bourgeois art, but as a proposal of *concrete* art and an impulse towards the renovation of language and of the perception of reality, all this paired with a rejection

of the label of futurists–*transreasonists*. With already a decade between them and the end of the First World War, their concerns were not so much anti-war, but rather against the increasing philistinism of the proletariat and a subdued remonstration against totalitarianism and the standardisation and smothering of art. While they shared with Futurism its renovating energy and reaction against the previously calcified bourgeois art – similarly to the futurists' vociferous aversion to Balmont, Kharms included the author in a blacklist on his diary –, from the start, the members of the OBERIU differed in their more pronounced fixation with time, death and God. As the horrors of Stalin's repression increased in intensity, the OBERIU output increasingly strayed away from futurist concepts, which were progressively replaced with absurd and grotesque devices, ever more self-referential and self-absorbed, to an almost postmodern extent.

An interesting example presents itself in Tufanov's declaration (1924: 8), in which he unwillingly conflates the aftermath of the First World War with the pre-existing ideas in Russian soil before the war, in this case, Bergson's philosophy; thus, it supports the idea that these notions were already circulating before the war, and that the war in turn helped to shape them into futurist, post-war trends:

> In recent decades, many artists have … freed themselves from objectivity and imagery … these trends were born of the 'hygiene of the world'; of the war, which awakened in man the ideal of a wandering life and the desire to escape to an unthinking nature … the word is a frozen label on the relationships between things, and not a single artistic technique will return to it the power of movement.

Consequently, if Tufanov places the emergence of these ideas in the First World War, he is using, in line with his thought as a whole, purely Bergsonian tenets and terminology to describe these new ideas – be it the need for *movement,* or in other words *durée*, the view of words as empty labels or the rejection of rationalism. Needless to say, as pointed out above, Bergson's ideas were amongst the currencies of the Russian intelligentsia already in 1909.

In an oblique reverberation of Bergsonian thought – as it pertains to his criticism of the division of reality into parts –, we happen upon Kruchenykh and his concept of *sdvig* or *shift*, especially as applied to poetry, which was in turn of

foundational importance to the OBERIU. This *sdvig* had always happened – involuntarily or not – in poetry, and the futurist determined to apply himself to its study for the generative and *zaum* doors it opened. By shifting the pronunciation and spaces between words through rhyme and rhythm, poetry created unexpected connections, new words and unintended calembours. In fact, it was precisely by mining these fields that *zaum* could be achieved, as it removed the artificial borders of meaning created by words, and allowed, by the deformation and segmentation of words, to delve into the field of sense, instead of being limited to the field of meanings. *Sdvig*, then, constituted the best example of *left* avant-garde, which combined radical experimentation and a rejection of the past forms, in order to achieve a new, deeper understanding of reality through generative devices. Kruchenykh's concept would be reworked by the OBERIU into their concept of the *collision of meanings*, in clear adhesion to *zaum* principles and devices, in contrast to their stated rejection of *zaum* practitioners as *gelders* of the word.

As a fellow futurist and *zaum* proponent, Khlebnikov shared a similar conception of language as a system of sounds, rather than a cumulation of meanings represented by words. In Khlebnikov's case there was always present a concept of a primordial *pre-Babelian* universal language, which was in turn expressed through a focus on nature in his poetry. This metaphysical connection with the absolute will be in turn present in Kharms' conception of a unifying order behind the seeming disparity of the parts that conformed the world. In connection to the Orthodox *integral knowledge* and Bergson's philosophy, Khlebnikov states that '*Zaum* … has a special power over consciousness, special rights to life along with the rational one' (1933: 235). In fact, their admission of reason into the metaphysical equation is more heightened than that of its predecessors, since there is a definitive impetus to rationalise *zaum*. For him, 'there is a way to make *zaum* a rational language' (ibid) by perceiving the possibilities of each sound, thus making *zaum* a 'language [that] ceases to be beyond reason. It becomes a game with the alphabet we have recognised; a new art, at the threshold of which we stand' (ibid)[34].

All the previous takes us back to the medieval comic, and to Bakhtin, as well as to Khlebnikov's already explored conception of carnival. To quote once more

[34] I am ingratiated to Jaccard (1991: 33) for the identification of these quotes.

Likhachev's definition of medieval Rus' comic as it pertains to the use of rhyme to create comic effect, 'Rhyme unites different meanings by external similarity … makes dissimilar things similar, deprives phenomena of individuality … emphasizes that we have before us a tall tale, a joke' (*WL*: 27). In connection with this definition, it is worth in turn quoting Lönnqvist's (1979: 132) analysis of Khlebnikov's equation of *zaum* with poetry – in striking proximity to Bakhtin's application of carnival, and its inherent *heteroglossia*, to the novel:

> Just as the carnival erases conventional boundaries and unites heterogeneous and even opposite elements in grotesque, ambivalent combinations, the poet interconnects and blends different semantic spheres or frames of reference in his poetry. By finding or creating points of contact between previously unconnected areas of existence, he gives the reader the power to "see double", the ability to perceive and experience a variety of different realities simultaneously.

Khlebnikov can thus be said to be the conciliatory link between the formalists and Bakhtin by implementing – before Bakhtin published his ideas – the heteroglot conception of carnival of the latter within the predilected medium of poetry of the former current. In all, it represents a comely reflection of the single focus on language of the formalists together with the importance of the circumstance in which the word is uttered that Bakhtin championed.

1.2 The OBERIU

Since the academic literature on the OBERIU is extensive and exhaustive, the uninitiated reader is directed to the *vade mecum* studies on the group[35]. The following analysis, thus, will limit its scope to the details relevant to the thrust of this thesis.

The OBERIU has been called the last Russian avant-garde grouping for good reason. The members of this Petersburgian ensemble, most salient amongst them Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky, started their public output almost two decades from the start of Russian Futurism, and at the same time as Stalin's first five-

[35] Jaccard (1991), Roberts (1997)

year plan. Their work, together with most of its member's lives, was put to an abrupt end during Stalin's Great Terror, from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s. The OBERIU was a dynamic and evolving association, and as such even their membership varies depending on the source consulted. According to its 1927 manifesto, the OBERIU was composed by Igor Bakhterev, Kharms, Boris Levin, Vaginov, Vvedensky, and Nikolay Zabolotsky. However, in his private list of OBERIU members, Kharms (2013: 208), who considered himself the main force behind the creation of the group (195), does not include either Vaginov or Zabolotsky as active members already by the autumn of 1928 (Kharms 2013: 195). Gerasimova (1988b), on her part, makes a spirited argument for including Nikolay Oleynikov as an OBERIU member for his closeness in behaviour and output and for his collaboration with the group, while the OBERIU member Bakhterev (1984) includes Aleksandr Razumovsky, who joined the group between the writing of the manifesto and the performance of 'Three Left Hours' and Yuri Vladimirov, who joined in 1929, as members. Zabolotsky left the group shortly after its foundation, in 1929, and he is considered by many scholars to be an OBERIU member in nothing but name, as his more Romantic view of the author clashed with the oberiuts philosophy (Roberts 1997: 12). On his part, Vaginov is considered by most scholars to be a satellite to the OBERIU, rather than an official member, as he did not participate in the OBERIU meetings, but became fully involved in the writing of his novels instead. In fact, he was considered an individualist who prided himself on having passed through all of the Petersburgian literary circles of the time, most famously the Bakhtin Circle. All this takes us back to Kharms' own description of the OBERIU as being composed mainly by Bakhterev, Levin, Vvedensky and himself, with Vaginov remaining closely linked to the group and Oleynikov's belonging by closeness of output in question due to the absence of self-consciousness in his verse (Roberts 1997: 32).

There were, however, two groupings previous to the formation of the OBERIU that can be said to be its philosophical and theatrical foundations, the Chinari and Radiks respectively. Kharms and Vvedensky were the only OBERIU members who were part of the three groupings, while Oleynikov and Zabolotsky also participated in the Chinari.

The Chinari, which was conceived mainly by Vvedensky and Leonid Lipavsky, can be said to have been officially active between 1925 and 1927, during which period Kharms and Vvedensky signed their poems '*chinar' vziralnik*', and '*avto-ritet bessmyslitsy*' respectively –, although its members continued weekly meetings up to 1937, the year of Oleynikov's death and of Vvedensky's forcibly being sent to Kharkiv. The word Chinari is the plural of Vvedensky's neologism *chinar*, which is derived from the word *chin*, meaning rank, which Druskin (1985: 394) is quick to point out referred to a priestly or official rank, not an official rank. It was composed by Druskin, Kharms, Lipavsky, Oleynikov, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky, with Zabolotsky being considered, as much as in the case of the OBERIU to be a member only by name, as he was not a regular participant in the meetings and from 1930 he was not on speaking terms with Vvedensky. Having a markedly philosophical focus, the two members extraneous to the OBERIU, Druskin and Lipavsky, were philosophers. It was imbued with a markedly sacred quality, with Druskin having written theological treaties. According to scholars like Jacquard (1991) and Epstein (1994), rather than the seed of the OBERIU, the Chinari should be considered a parallel grouping of friends, which was of vital importance in the creation of new works by oberiuts Kharms and Vvedensky, well into the 1930s. The most salient elements of the philosophy of the Chinari, which could be inscribed within a Bergsonian view of time and an Orthodox sensibility, and which were to later be part of the OBERIU philosophy, were the concepts of senselessness – *bessmyslitsa* –, the *vestniki* or messengers from neighbouring worlds, as well as the interrelated concepts of *this* and *that*, the interval, a small error, and the hieroglyph, all of which will be mentioned further below.

The Chinari's conception of senselessness is much in line with Orthodox thought and with its corresponding negative theology, which posits that it is impossible for reason to comprehend the absoluteness of God, and therefore other means are necessary to get closer to the absolute. Much in connection with *zaum*, Druskin distinguishes this senselessness from an aleatory assemblage of words, by noting in his diary that it does not refer to *irrationality*, which is demonic, but to *arrationality*, in the same way that *zaum* is not *illogic*, but *alogic*. This Orthodox colouring of the Chinari's senselessness leads Epstein (1994: 84–6), in his otherwise acute dissertation, to the mistake of making an absolute division between Kharms

and Vvedensky on the one side, and the rest of the avant-gardists on either side of the Russian border on the other. As much as this division would be valid between the Petersburgian and Parisian avant-gardes, Epstein, while accurately recognising the Orthodox tendencies of the Chinari, errs by failing to see how Orthodoxy also runs through the veins of some – if not all – Russian futurists, starting from the connection of Formalism to the Orthodox reception of Bergson's thought. It is hoped that by means of the above analysis of Orthodox theology's influence in the Russian avant-garde, Epstein's position that the OBERIU *bessmyslitsa* was 'the opposite' of the futurists and formalists' search for meaning can be shown as lacking[36].

Another of their Orthodox-inspired concepts is that of the *vestniki* or messengers from neighbouring worlds. These messengers cannot be grasped by reason or the senses, and are associated with creative, *arrational*, inspiration. As such, the artist cannot control when these messengers will come, but all they can do is have an appropriate disposition and acuity of perception for when they do. This is clear for example from just the title of Kharms' 1937 letter to Druskin, entitled 'How I was visited by *vestniki*' (Kharms 2013: 489-90). These messengers, sharing a Bergsonian view of time, do not divide time into past and future by means of the present, and are a way to get closer to the divine. In connection with this view of time, the Chinari saw time as a *juxtapositive* succession of *nows*, which are always eternal, instead of a succession of events (Jaccard 1991: 151). Another characteristic of the *vestniki* which is paramount, especially for Kharms, and which represents an oblique connection with Bakhtin, is their awareness of the beginning of an event, but not its end, something that for humans implies disquiet. This start of events manifests reality always from a point zero, which unavoidably evokes Kharms' stories which are created from nothing and do not end or have an unsatisfactory end.

The last aspect of the Chinari's philosophy that will be dwelt on is their division of the world into parts, or more precisely into points. As humans cannot know the absolute, it is necessary to divide the world in individual *points*, so that *this* can be said to not be *that*, and so that *this* can interact with *that*. For the Chinari, reality only

[36] As per the rest of this study, this contrast is sought for the dialogic possibilities it offers, not with a historicising aim. In fact, Epstein had previously written a perceptive article (1989) analysing divine parallels from *all* of the avant-garde, including its Franco-Germanic manifestations, which is cited in this study.

came out of the interaction between these individual points, so that in an absolute reality, there would be no possibility of interaction due to its homogeneity; they are juxtaposed, not aggregated. Between *this* and *that* there is an *interval*, which is the point of contact of transition between the two, and will be integral to the OBERIU's own concept of the collision of meanings. Another related way of seeing this is the Chinari's concept of the *small error*, which is necessary for reality to exist. A perfectly balanced universe would be homogeneous and absolute, so a small error, which does not destroy the equilibrium but slightly upsets it, is necessary for the present to be intelligible. This is compared to how Christ was necessary for the understanding of God, Christ being the small error and God the absolute equilibrium. This break of the equilibrium connects directly with the futurist *sdvig*, as a displacement from the centre (Jaccard 1991: 162), something that will be shared in turn by the OBERIU. This *small error* or lack of equilibrium, when applied to language becomes polysemy, which can also be interpreted as a *hieroglyph*, which connotes 'more than it denotes' and that incorporates 'within its very fabric differing, even contradictory meanings' (Epstein 1994: 100).

Before moving on to the Radiks theatrical ensemble, it is worth dwelling on Tufanov's group of students of *zaum* that preceded it and was concurrent with the Chinari's period of public activity. This group, created in March 1925 by Tufanov, was called the *Орден заумиков DSO*[37], or Order of the Transreasonists DSO, which Tufanov said was composed of eight students and himself, amongst them Kharms and Vvedensky, as well as Evgeny Vigilyansky, who would have also peripheral roles in Radiks and the OBERIU. As we have seen previously, Tufanov was a proponent of phonetic *zaum* and was heavily influenced by Bergson's thought. Later that same year, at the request of Kharms and Vvedensky, the group changed its name to Left Flank, or *Levy flang*, before disbanding the following year. A mixture of the official rejection of *zaum* representatives, as well as artistic differences with Tufanov's non-objective art, saw Kharms and Vvedensky distance themselves from his group, call themselves Chinari publicly, and then abandon the group and join the theatrical grouping Radiks. This distancing became more noted in the already quoted OBERIU

[37] The *D* stood for the weakening of material barriers, the *S* stood for the radian aspiration, and the *O* for an expanded perception of space and time (Tufanov 1991: 176).

manifesto, where it is stated that 'no school is more hostile to us than *zaum*.' However, the importance of Tufanov in the shaping of the OBERIU's thought should not be underestimated, and leads to an understanding this distancing as a necessity to be able to have a public dimension, rather than a complete rejection of all of Tufanov's teachings.

In 1926, Kharms and Vvedensky were invited to join the theatrical group Radiks, which had recently been created by Bakhterev, Levin, theatre director Georgy Katsman, and theatre theorist Sergei Tsimbal, and to which Malevich would give a *home* to stage its productions after Kharms' request to the GINHUK, or State Institute of Creative Art. Since the group aimed to go back to a pure theatre, the name was chosen for its connotations, Radiks being the Russian transliteration of the Latin word for *root*, *radix*, and at the same time the fact that it is a word that shares the root of the word 'radical', '*radik*alny*'* in transliterated Russian. Their first production, *My Mother All in Watches*, was never performed due to Malevich's growing political predicaments[38]. With the Radiks denomination no longer viable, most of the members of the group renamed it in 1926 'The Left Flankists' (*Flang Levykh*), then in early 1927, it was renamed back to 'Left Flank' (*Levyi Flang*), and then to 'The Academy of the Classical Left' (*Akademiya Levykh Klassikov*) in March of that year. In April 1927, Katsman would be arrested and sentenced to 10 years of forced labour, which represented a fatal blow for the group, although it could be argued that it was kept alive in the theatre section of the OBERIU – the section dedicated to theatre in its manifesto, written by Radiks members Levin and Bakhterev, can be said to be an enumeration of Radiks' tenets. Its overall theatrical pursuit was to be '"pure theatre", a theatre of experiment, focused not so much on the final result affects both the viewer and the experience of pure theatrical action by the actors themselves' (Katsman in Meilakh 1987: 164). It presupposed a live '"montage" … in conjunction with the actors who introduce an element of improvisation', the succession of 'bits', a bit being 'a scene in itself and yet subject to the total scenic action' (Meilakh 1991: 200), and also a rejection of the literary text in theatre, along with the equal value of all elements on the scene (Kharms in Jaccard 1991: 77). A further analysis of Radiks'

[38] Malevich, in fact, was dispossessed of his tenure at the GINHUK, which was closed and merged with the GIII, or State Institute of the History of Art, on 1 January 1927.

tenets would not be possible without the introduction of the OBERIU manifesto and *Elizaveta Bam* and as such, this additional study will be developed in the section of OBERIU theatre below. Before moving on to the OBERIU, it is important to point out for the following analysis that, as much as Radiks had a clear dramatical aim, much like OBERIU, it was also a 'conglomerate of various arts – theatrical performance, music, dance, literature and painting' (Katsman in Meilakh 1987: 165).

The members of the group, dispossessed of any common denomination and in low spirits, were given a lifeline by the director of Petersburg's House of the Press, Nikolay Baskakov[39], who gave them the opportunity to stage a soirée to showcase their art. It was only because of this fact that the OBERIU was created, not as a decision between a circle of artists to start a new grouping, but to fulfil the necessity of having some kind of identity and denomination for the upcoming evening. This determination to not create a new circle, a new *–ism*, was in the members' minds when Bakhterev came up with the name, which was chosen 'unenthusiastically' (Bakhterev 1984: 87), and after Kharms changed the direct acronym ОБЕРИ[40] to the less straightforward ОБЭРИУ. With the preparation of the evening's performance in mind, the remnants of Radiks, Kharms, Vvedensky, Bakhterev, and Levin started to frantically work on the preparations, together with Zabolotsky. The group also welcomed Vaginov, although he did not participate much in the preparations as he was focusing on the writing of *The Goat Song* (Bakhterev 1984: 90). To present a richer programme[41], the OBERIU also accepted for the evening the addition of cinematographers Alexander Razumovsky and Klementy Mints, who would show their 'Film No. 1.'

After this survey of the OBERIU's history up to the eve of their famous 'Three Left Hours', it is hoped that a clearer picture of its preceding groupings as well as its purpose and place in the careers of its members appears. The seeds for OBERIU were

[39] Baskakov was detained shortly afterwards and sentenced to exile.

[40] However, in Bakhterev's recollection of the events, 40 years afterwards, he states that Kharms only suggested that the *E* be changed to an *Э*, which would mean Bakhterev suggested the also modified acronym *ОБЕРИУ*.

[41] Fireman of the merchant fleet, Nikolay Kropachev, was also enlisted but his 'weak poems did not pass censorship" (Bakhterev 1984: 90), so he was only allowed to perform his poetry in a street corner while a substitute announced on the scene what Kropachev was doing outside. His name appears in the famous 'Three Left Hours' poster, but upside down.

planted with the creation of the Chinari, which continued their regular meetings until the late 1930s. It was the first group that Kharms and Vvedensky attended together. They then started attending Tufanov's Order of the Transreasonists, and afterwards joined Radiks together with fellow member of the Chinari, Bakhterev. When Radiks was dissolved, its members, together with Zabolotsky and Vaginov formed the core of the OBERIU instigated by the pressure of the upcoming evening at the House of the Press. It is hoped that this synthesising survey clarifies why Kharms and Vvedensky are thought to be the real core of OBERIU – being the only members that joined together the different groupings since 1925, taking into account Zabolotsky's general antagonism, Vaginov's aloofness, and, it could be argued, the lesser impact of Bakhterev's works. Lastly, it is hoped that it serves to put in relief the paramount importance of the Chinari's philosophy and the Radiks theatre tenets for the OBERIU, as well as the influence of Bergson's ideas and *zaum* via Tufanov, and how accidental it was that the OBERIU has been the label that has resisted the passing of time, when in fact it was a short-lived, last-minute patch in the midst of increasingly desperate prospects for its members. Perhaps, as the first centenary of the formation of the group approaches, a label that better reflects these complicated groupings and regroupings could be conceived. However, in the meantime – or for posterity –, the OBERIU badge has proven resilient and it does have the benefits of loosely connecting Kharms, Vvedensky, Vaginov and Oleynikov, as well as their ancillaries, manifesto included.

The OBERIU's main aim was to be a multifaceted circle of artists with the shared universal purpose of going back to the pure essence of *Real Art*, be it poetry, drama or painting, in order to sharpen and broaden the object and the word. Along with the rest of the avant-garde, it rejected emotions[42], in favour of a more concrete and formalist approach. In the increasingly oppressive climate of the late 1920s Russia, and on the heels of the arrest of close associate Katsman, the OBERIU manifesto also contains an extremely bold defence of *left* art – albeit modulated by their stated rejection of *zaum*. While this distancing from *zaum* was due to artistic differences around the word and the object, and maybe also because *zaum* was at the centre of

[42] With the exception of some of the most extreme facets of *zaum*, like the manifestations of poetry conceived as a succession of phonemes, rather than words.

the attack of any Bolshevik-attuned critic – it makes a strong defence of *left* art – which included the futurists – and publicly denounces the persecution of Malevich, Filonov and Terentev. This unavoidably set the scene for a confrontation with the Stalinist regime, which prematurely cut the group's output, and ultimately the lives of many of its members. This confrontation started with the first public event of the group, 'Three Left Hours', which by all accounts was a success in terms of attendance and the spectators' engagement. However, the Bolshevik acolyte critics immediately and viciously attacked the oberiuts and the performance as a whole[43]. Even if these *vigilantes*' attacks were wholly misguided as art criticism was concerned, their ideological attacks were accurate, as the OBERIU was firm in its rejection of the increasingly state-sponsored art and its aim towards a monoculture, and additionally their sense that the OBERIU smelled of Futurism was equally correct. With the caveat that the OBERIU rejected the branch of Futurism that sought to make art fully non-referential, such as phonetic *zaum* or Malevich's rejection of the object, the OBERIU was inseparably linked to the formalist-futurist movement. Apart from having incorporated many artistic concepts of *left* art, the OBERIU also followed in the tradition of theatricalisation of their public events, with absurd slogans, eccentric outfits, and a generalised carnivalesque and clownish atmosphere characteristic of Mayakovsky, as well as other futurist qualities as a manifesto, the sharp stated rejection of any previous group and its aim towards new forms. Apart from a general *left* art sensibility in all of the arts, coupled with a Bergsonian view of time, and an Orthodox-futurist rejection of reason to arrive at the absolute, as well as the incorporation of concepts such as Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, a Khlebnikovian-futurist carnival, Kruchenykh's *zaum* and *sdvig*, Tufanov's fluidity and a Mayakovskian public theatricality, this *left* art offshoot came up with its own founding concepts.

Apart from incorporating their Radiks theatre ideas, most notable amongst their concepts - mainly with poetry in mind -, was the *collision of meanings*. This central concept can be described as the intentional upsetting of the expectation of the reader by logical, grammatical or lexical-semantic means. Ilya Levin (1986: 48-

[43] See critic Lydia Lesnaya's review included in the Красная газета No. 24 issue of January 25, 1928, copied by Kharms into one of his notebooks (Kharms 2013: 175-6).

9) gives an inspired description of the anti-mimetic qualities of the *collision of meanings*:

> the distance between the normative and literary functions of an element is increased so greatly as to result in deliberate effects of verbal nonsense … the distance between the norm and the literary context does not destroy the connections between the two; on the contrary, the greater this distance, the tauter the connection, for the violation of a norm underscores the very norm being violated … [it] lays the norm bare, forces the reader to actualize it and sparks his own hermeneutic pursuit for new connections in the semantic universe of the text.

In his analysis, which focuses on poetic discourse, Levin points out several deep-seated qualities of the *collision of meanings*, that should prove illuminating and useful for this study. Following the formalists' prescription of separating everyday language from poetic language, it gives words a function different from their common use, changing their meaning or their possible collocations. He calls these deviations *catachrestic*[44] *shifts*, which foregrounds the semantic links that the norm had hidden. He mentions the importance of randomness in this system, as 'a random element in a structure serves both to undermine normative semantic connections and to posit new connections lying beyond logic' (1986: 118), and adds that, while questioning the unity implied by the common semantic sequence, randomness points to a unity that the use of logic would lack. A requirement for the *collision of meanings* to be something other than a random accumulation of incongruous words, is the creation of a semantic system where every one of its components is enthused with the same weight, be they the normative components, those that shift from the common usage, and those who completely reject the norm. Lastly, he makes a connection between the *collision of meanings* and Bakhtin's thought, by buttressing the idea that Bakhtin posited that the word gets its unique and temporary meaning in a specific context, while the *collision of meanings* derives its semantic prowess through context. Bakhtin[45] said that 'the task of understanding does not basically amount to

[44] Meaning the wrong use of a word with respect to a context

[45] The later-to-be-translated book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was published under the name of his friend Valentin Voloshinov in 1930. Following Holquist's (1982) analysis, this book inverts the Saussurian tenets of *langue*, or language as an abstract system, and synchronicity, in favour of the

recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e. it amounts to understanding its novelty and not recognizing its identity' (Voloshinov 1973: 68). The dialogic creation of meaning happens amidst several existing contextual understandings, which are implicitly agreed by the interlocutors. Clark and Holquist (1984: 13), in their study of Bakhtin, give a clear picture of this tension between normative and non-normative elements:

> On the one side are ranged those forces that serve to unify and centralize meaning, which conduce to a structuredness that is indispensable if a text is to manifest system. On the opposing side stand those tendencies that foster the diversity and randomness needed to keep paths open to the constantly fluctuating contextual world surrounding any utterance.

This takes us back to Khlebnikov, who also allowed a place for randomness in *zaum*. The influence of the early futurist is clear, but, apart from some early experiments with the more sound-based preceding *zaum*, Kharms – and Vvedensky – were mainly involved with 'syntax and phraseology' (Stone Nakhimovsky 1982: 168). In a synthesis of his own belief in the power of words to affect reality and Khlebnikov's tenets, Kharms (1992: 196) writes:

> The power inherent in words must be released. There are some combinations of words that make the effect of force more noticeable. It is not good to think that this power will make objects move. I am sure that the power of words can do this too. But the most valuable action of power is almost indefinable. We get a rough idea of this power from the rhythms of metrical verses. Those complex ways, such as the help of metrical verses in moving some member of the body, should not be considered fiction either.

Finally, returning to the last line from Likhachev's twice-quoted description of the use of rhyme for comic effect in medieval Rus' culture to show the unreality of the story, it could be argued that Kharms uses elements of the earlier *zaum* and the *collision of meanings*, not to show the dissonance of reality and the text, but as a

---

actual utterance and its diachronicity. Holquist also states that there is no doubt that Bakhtin was the author. Bakhtin also published under Voloshinov's name *A Critical Sketch* in 1927, and the 1926 article 'Discourse in Art'.

way to show the lie of thinking that his contemporary language was apt in expressing reality. As such, he agrees with the emphasis on sound and rhythm to remove the 'old corpse of meanings' in order to 'delve into the field of sense / acting on the surface structures o language, it is possible to act on the deep structures, so on the sense' (Jaccard 1991: 23).

All the previous constitutes the subsuming genius of the *collision of meanings*. It managed to encapsulate all of the mentioned formalist, futurist, Left Art, and Orthodoxy interrelated concepts with the apparently discordant Bakhtin in one elegant solution. It was based on the ideas of *transreason*, *ostranenie*, *sdvig*, on the rejection of logic, and the acceptance of randomness to arrive at the absolute and it took into account that each utterance is said dialogically against others and not in a vacuum. Out of the seeming complete randomness and gibberish contained within these texts, came out a higher unifying order that subsumed the logic of language and the higher unifying order.

The OBERIU's conception of space, time and God, which drew heavily from the Chinari's conversations, was based on the concept of zero. A zero that is both nothing and everything, and represents the infinite in an infinitely small *now*. The zero also has this meaning geometrically, as its shape is a circle, a shape without end that is the most perfect of shapes. As it is impossible to represent an infinitesimally small point, the zero, or circle is also the best means to represent the infinite or absolute for humans. Humans, afraid of a line not starting or ending, gave it a start, and came up with negative numbers, with zero as the most important and central point, which does not have a value. In the human cartesian division, zero is in the centre and all comes towards it. Zero cannot be perfect, as were perfection to be represented, it would end, so it is just an imperfect human representation. God is also equated with the zero. This zero connects to the concepts of time, and to the theme of water in Kharms, which he himself explicitly did in this quatrain:

> Zero is a divine thing.
> Zero – a numbers' wheel.
> Zero –body and soul,
> water and paddle and boat. (2001: 135)

This point zero, which is the present in which all the *nows* juxtapose in succession, is also the point zero from which art should emanate, reverting to the essence of the object and widening it with the present *now*. This also implies a Bergsonian view of time as a continuum, not a progression of moments, which is reflected in the dialogue in Vvedensky's poetry between authors from chronologically distant eras, and in Kharms' motive of water in his poetry and prose, as well as in his drama, especially in his *Comedy of the City of Petersburg*[46]. The rest of the concepts associated at times with OBERIU, in turn, can be said to be individual to each member, rather than a shared philosophy.

2. Parisian avant-garde before, between and after the world wars

As much as the title to this section conveys the idea that its central axiom are the world wars, this idea would not fully state the case. If we consider, as will be further analysed below, that the inception of this avant-garde and absurd is to be found in Jarry's 1896 *Ubu Roi*, and that, as mentioned earlier, Dada began before the First World War did, what we are left with is rather a spirit of the turn-of-the-century period, which was then deepened and shaped by the subsequent wars and rise in totalitarianism. The latter elements, in turn, inserted the element of mistrust of *progress* that created the contradictory reality of an avant-garde that did not believe in progress. As such, while the role of the surrounding atrocities is not in doubt as concerns their role in sharpening Dada's anti-materialism and perceived nihilism, Sartre's general apprehension or the Theatre of the Absurd's foregrounding of an impassive or absent God and their distrust of reason, language and even human nature, it cannot be said to be the sole force behind the Parisian development up until the 1950s.

2.1 Parisian avant-garde before and after the First World War

Whenever the European avant-garde is mentioned, the mind of the listener is most probably directed to Dada and the aftermath of the First World War. However, as pointed out by a multitude of scholars, there was a predecessor to it, who can neatly

[46] Due to its generalised carnivalesque atmosphere and the synchronous presence of well-known personalities from distant eras. See Rymar (2006) for more on this piece.

be said to be its point zero, as he was as radically innovative and fully formed at that. We are talking about Alfred Jarry (1867–1907), the – primarily – dramaturge responsible for *Ubu Roi*, whose opening performance in Paris in 1896 – which was only one of two representations – caused a proper scandal and is said to have marked an inflexion point in European artistic currents. In fact, W. B. Yeats, present at this performance, intuitively felt it to be a coup de grace, not only to classical forms of theatre, but to Symbolism as well:

> The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes … the chief personage, who is some kind of King, carries for a sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet. … that night at the Hotel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say: 'After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, … after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm … what more is possible? After us, the Savage God.' (1955: 348–9)

The performance itself was also a precursor, in its character, of later scandalous performances of the Petersburgian and Parisian avant-garde, since it happened 'amongst a concert of bird screams, whistling, protestations and laughter' (Ghéon 1944:149). Notwithstanding the – welcomed – scandal of the performance of *Ubu Roi*, the notoriety of Jarry quickly faded after his death at the start of the twentieth century and he was regarded as little more than a quirk of history until the middle of the century, when, along with his incontestable importance for the Theatre of the Absurd, his oeuvre was revived. The connection to the Theatre of the Absurd was performed by Antonin Artaud, who was heavily influenced by and a faithful defender and proponent of Jarry through the late 20s and the 30s. The contemporary relevance of Artaud, as we shall see, remained muffled, so it was not until the creation of the College of Pataphyisics informal group in 1948 that his comeback started. This comeback was not subtle either and was felt strongly by the theatre critics of the era, as can be seen in Esslin's approving words about Jarry in his seminal book, 'Jarry … must be regarded as one of the originators of the concepts on which a good deal of contemporary art, and not only in literature and theatre, is based' (302). These laudatory words came from Esslin in relation to Jarry's objectification of psychological states.

As much as he has been considered a fully formed, completely original figure, one can still feel influences in Jarry. Not dwelling on his clear references to Rabelais – looking no further than Ubu himself, with his bloated, grotesque, unrestrained and base nature, reminiscent of Rabelais' giants, or the title of Jarry's play *Pantagruel* –, the most important and fruitful influence is that of Bergson. Jarry directly studied under Bergson, and the philosopher's tenets colour Jarry's thought throughout. As we shall see, the Bergson connection not only – predictably – offers a clear path for other Parisian currents, be it Dada, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty or the Theatre of the Absurd, but – surprisingly – it presents a connection with the Russian avant-garde. However, it must be noted that Jarry's thought was less idealistic than that of Bergson and that it was modulated by a Nietzschean undercurrent that serves to take it closer to the Parisian, rather than the Petersburgian absurd, as shown by his conception of God, of which Jarry is said to 'not flatly reject Christian dogma', but to be aware that humanity 'must replace an expiring divinity' (Shattuck 1959: 183).

The shared elements with Bergson begin with the refusal of reason to arrive at a deeper reality. This refusal of reason is more in line with the existential-absurd European current than the Orthodox Russian one, since Jarry shows the mind as incapable of understanding the big mysteries, completely rejected reason, and was less inclined towards intuitivist tendencies. However, in a bridge between Paris and Petersburg, critics have pointed out the fact that Jarry's theatre, at the least, left the door open, if not implicitly pointed towards something behind reality, as it shows that 'there is meaning beyond the easy reach of comedy, as there is life beyond death' (Shattuck 1959: 239), even if what is behind turns out to be 'the cosmic malignity that hovers invisibly over the characters' (Wellwarth 1971: 5). The connection between the Theatre of the Absurd and Jarry can further elucidate in turn the metaphysical differences between the Theatre of the Absurd and the oberiuts. As much as the oberiuts' theatre has an essential metaphysical-divine dimension, and notwithstanding the fact that the Theatre of the Absurd lacks this pillar, it is still arguable that there is something that makes the spectator uneasy in the Parisian plays. This 'presence' is clearly not benevolent and it does not point towards a deeper harmony, but, on the contrary, it is fully negative. This malignant presence was

probably felt more strongly when the pieces were first performed and had not become a tired popular cliché to ensure theatres had an acceptable attendance. Critics at the time felt this presence, as was the case with Leonard Pronko, who in 1962 published his book almost in unison with Esslin – and therefore had still not adopted the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' and called it 'today's new French theatre' –, who pointed out that 'the apprehensive laughter which Ubu elicits is the same laughter which explodes today in the theaters where *Waiting for Godot* and *The Lesson* are performed' (Pronko 1962: 7).

Another point of commonality is the nature of language in Jarry's works, that stem from its experimentalism and lack of logic. As pointed out by Michael Bennett (2015: 26), 'the willingness to jettison theatrical realistic language in favor of a combination of awkward speech patterns and (at the time) too-real-for-the-stage banal and crude dialogue, is what gives Jarry's play the feeling of absurdity.' However, it has to be pointed out that Jarry did not go so far as to indicate that language had lost its communicative power, as was the case especially with the crisis in communication propounded by the Theatre of the Absurd. In fact, as pointed out by Pronko (1962: 7), 'the characters in Ubu roi understand each other almost too well, and beat each other as unmercifully with words as they do with sticks and feet', which, as we shall see, bring him closer to plays like *Elizaveta Bam* with their all too real and life-altering language games. As much as Jarry scorned traditional language, he also did this with theatrical conventions, something that also brings him close to both currents. Be it his scorning of plot or coherent dramatic text, his bare and 'childish' decors, the objectification of moods and non-objective elements – as Ionesco's clock in *The Bald Soprano* or Beckett's rubble and bare tree in *Waiting for Godot* –, the concept of characters as empty puppets, which merge the form of the play with its content, this was a return to a 'pure theatre' that both the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd strived for. Indeed, dramaturges operating in Paris saw this return to pure theatre clearly; as Henri Ghéon (1944: 149-50), who was also present at the first performance, expressed half a decade later, '*Ubu Roi* … is theatre "a hundred percent", what we would call nowadays pure, synthetic theatre, foregrounding the use of convention into scandal; creating, on the margins of the real, a reality of *signs.*' The extreme nature of Jarry's propounded unrealistic theatre was, however, closer to

the OBERIU theatre than that of Beckett and Ionesco, as despite their theatre not being realistic in the classical way, the Irishman's sombre scenery and at times clownish antics, or the Romanian's stereotypical and slightly out of kelter atmosphere, these plays do not reach the extremes of Jarry's scenic action. A last element that brings both currents closer through Bergson's ideas is the unfinishability of the work of art. The lack of plot and the *traitlessness* of the characters make it impossible to arrive at a definitive ending and leave the work open to infinite interpretations. In the words of Jarry himself, prefacing the play on that momentous evening:

> The Swedenborgian philosopher, Mésés, has excellently compared rudimentary creations with the most perfect, and embryonic beings with the most complete, in that the former lack all irregularities, protuberances and qualities, which leaves them in more or less spherical form, like the ovum and M. Ubu, while the latter have added so many personal details that they remain equally spherical, following the axiom that the most polished object is that which presents the greatest number of sharp corners. That is why you are free to see in M. Ubu however as many allusions you care to, or else a simple puppet. (Jarry in Bennett 2015: 26)

This leads us directly to an astonishing correlation with Kharms in the concept of infinity. In a remarkable parallel, Jarry said that 'God is the point tangent to zero and infinity' (Jarry in Shattuck 1959: 185), exactly matching Kharms' words about zero and infinity. For Jarry, this meant that 'no state of being excludes its opposite' (ibid), and that 'contraries combine to produce not zero but infinity' (187). This was also paralleled in Jarry's concept of time, as he aimed to make his works both timeless and synchronic – for example, by presenting anachronous elements in the decor of *Ubu Roi,* and as stated in his 'Time in Art' (1901), something that further connects him to Bergson and the OBERIU, since their conception of time was, not only outside of time as in the Theatre of the Absurd, but also more of a synchronic continuum – as Vvedensky's dialogue between chronologically distant writers or the whole of Kharms' play *Comedy of the City of Petersburg*. For Jarry, 'infinity of time and infinity of meaning determine the same visionary universe' (Jarry in Shattuck 1959: 187). Another element of approaching between Jarry and the avant-garde is his fusion of life and art, which will be later replicated by many an avant-gardist, both in Paris and

in Petersburg, a group with, famously, included Kharms. In the words of Shattuck (186), Jarry attempted to 'achieve a new level of existence through literary mimesis, fusing his life and his art', to the point of identifying himself with his characters, as per Esslin 'Jarry himself more and more assumed the manner of speaking of Ubu' (301).

Taking the baton from Jarry, Antonin Artaud kept his legacy alive both in life and his works. Leaving to one side the fact that he created in 1927, together with Roger Vitrac, the Théâtre Alfred Jarry with the stated aim of producing avant-garde plays, he was also a prime example of the avant-garde philosophy of merging life and art in the figure of the artist. As Cornwell pointed out 'more than with almost any other figure one can think of, Artaud's work and his life seem indistinguishable, as do his periods of apparent sanity and alleged insanity' (Cornwell 2006: 108). Also in common with other examples, his was a deliberate aim to merge both, rather than a purely innate view of life; as Artaud himself said some years before the 1938 publication of *Theatre and its Double*, 'the tragedy on the scene is no longer enough for me, I am going to carry it into my life' (Barrault 1972: 104). This was not so much a personal preference, but rather it had a sociocultural aim, 'the duty of the poet and the writer is not to shut himself up like a coward in a text, … but on the contrary to go into the world to jolt, to attack the mind of the public' (Artaud 1988: 582-3). This is so in order to bring about an experience and understanding of culture as the 'true culture', as 'a distilled medium to understand and *practise* life' (Artaud 1938: 15). The influence of Jarry is clear for anyone to see, going no further than by examining Artaud's *Theatre and its Double*. When reading the following passage about what the new theatre requires, it is difficult not to conclude that Artaud had Jarry in mind while writing these lines:

> the apparently chaotic evolution of dream images in the mind … provides the audience with truthful distillations of dreams where its taste for crime, its erotic obsessions, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even its cannibalism, do not gush out on an illusory, make-believe, but on an inner level. (1970a: 70-1)

While there is much in common between the two Frenchmen, there are also important differences, which could be summarised with Brustein's opportune parallel, whether

intended or otherwise, when he assessed Artaud's theatre as 'a kind of a mirror held up to the unconscious' (1991: 370), which directly reminds us of the much-used description of Jarry's theatre being a mirror held up to the bourgeoisie. Even if Brustein generalises by considering Artaud's work 'the logical culmination of the avant-garde movement in France' by endowing it 'with seriousness, depth and commitment.' this seems more applicable to the Surrealists than the Dadaists. Indeed, Artaud's thought could be said to have a starting point in the synthesis of Jarry's theatre, Bergson's ideas[47], and Surrealist characteristics like cryptic simplicity or dream-like reality. In this regard, it shares Jarry and the avant-garde's characteristics of a theatre that '*appear[s]* to be simplicity disguised as profundity and [is] actually profundity disguised as simplicity' (Wellwarth 1971: 9). However, when Brustein compares Artaud's rejection of traditional art and the bourgeoisie with the avant-garde's, he seems to be thinking mainly about Dada, 'he turns these negative attitudes into positive acts, transforming the nihilism, sterility, and buffoonery of his predecessors into profoundly revolutionary theory' (1991: 364).

Burnstein then passes on to contrasting Artaud with his successors in the Theatre of the Absurd, indicating that they did not follow in his footsteps in the areas of the ritual and the enactment of fantasies, and that Artaud would have considered their theatre too nihilistic, making the connection with the Dadaists and Surrealists rather than with Artaud. However, the Theatre of the Absurd can be said to be imbued with some element of Artaud's theatre, especially those tenets that align simultaneously with Jarry, as is the case with the 'malignant presence' that can be felt hovering, but is never materialised, in the plays of the later Parisian theatre and the lowering of the status of the dramatic text. When Artaud propounded his Theatre of Cruelty, he was quick to qualify this cruelty, not as human-to-human violence, but as a 'theatre that is difficult and cruel for myself first of all … [it is] the far more terrible, essential cruelty objects can practise on us. We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads' (1970a: 60). Or, using Wellwarth's words about Artaud's

[47] To quote Jacques Derrida (1978), 'The continuous transition of his metaphysics of life into his theory of Language, and his critique of the word, dictated a great number of theoretical formulations and metaphors of energy that are rigorously Bergsonian.'

philosophy 'the condition of man was such because of the unrelenting malignancy of the incomprehensible cosmic powers that govern him' (1971: 20).

Artaud's more philosophical writings steer clear of Dada and the Surrealists, and into both the existentialist absurd of Sartre and Camus, and the Theatre of the Absurd's impetus. Artaud's impulse was to rebel against humanity's inability to comprehend reality, and a universe that was nothing but hostile to it. This is the view of the human condition as resourceless in front of the void. In fact, Artaud seemed to anticipate Camus and Sartre's writings already in 1936, when he intuitively felt the current flowing below French theatre and beyond, which implied 'the human revolt that does not accept the law of destiny, a theatre full of cries, not of fear, but of rage; even more than rage, the feeling of life's value' (1970b: 19). However, he qualified this idea immediately on the following line leaving space for the role of laughter, which was something that the existential absurd philosophers never allowed space for. The metaphysical nature of this laughter takes his conception of theatre closer to the Theatre of the Absurd – and even closer to the oberiuts. For Artaud, this new theatre 'is supremely aware of laughter and … knows that within it there is a pure, nurturing idea of life's eternal forces' (1970b: 19). However wholesome this view of laughter may seem, the laughter that Artaud sought was of another kind, as he already promulgated in 1932 in connection to the Marx Brothers. For him, the more positive laughter of 'integral liberation', of 'ripping all reality from the spirit', which was lost in contemporary times, should be accompanied by a 'notion of something disturbing and tragic, an inevitability (neither blissful nor wretched, but difficult to formulate) which creeps behind as the revelation of a terrible illness with a silhouette of absolute beauty' (1938: 214). In the words of Epstein (1994: 135), the laughter that Artaud sought was 'not the merely comical but an act of metaphysical revolt: a revolt that violates conventions and sows chaos in its rejection of the rationally real.'

An additional element that brings Artaud closer to the Theatre of the Absurd – and OBERIU theatre – is Artaud's almost complete rejection of the word on the scene. The fact that Artaud seems to be something of an incongruence in the development of French theatre, and conceptually close to some Russian tenets, may be explained by his complicated relationship with the surrealists and his arguable interest in the theatre of Meyerhold and Evreinov, with both of whom his theatre finds parallels – be

it by the importance that Meyerhold placed on the actor's physicality and his aim towards the removal of the separation between the play and the public[48], or by Evreinov's[49] conception of theatre as a forum for transgression and repentance through catharsis in which the spectators participate (Golub 1984: 63). Notwithstanding this, returning to the word, even if his main preoccupation is with dramatic language, for him, the problem runs deeper. He believed that, at the bottom of his epoch's confusion was 'a schism between things on the one side and the words, the ideas, and the signs which are their representation' (1938: 12). In theatre, much like the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd proposed, there was a need to dethrone the dramatic text from its position of dominance, to not make theatre merely a 'branch of literature.' At points, in his search for a pure theatre, in which only elements specific to drama would be included, Artaud's writings seem to reflect a complete rejection of the word on the scene, but he himself qualified his views, so as to not completely efface the word from theatre. Rather he aimed to make use of language 'changing its intended purpose, especially to lessen its status, to view it as something other than a way of guiding human nature to external ends' (1970a: 53). Its function was no longer to transmit ideas, but to create emotional effect. This dethroning was still to be quite radical, as his concept of the word on stage reminds us of the Chinari's *bessmyslitsa/bessmyslennost*, and in its most extreme stipulations approaches the most radical proposals of *zaum* – as language limited to intonations or sounds. In a parallel to the OBERIU's focus on the objectification of the word, and its collision with other words, Artaud seeks to use the word as an object for metaphysical effect, 'to use it in an actual spatial sense, uniting it with everything in theatre that is spatial and significant in the tangible field. This means handling it as something concrete, disturbing things, first spatially, then in an infinitely more secret and mysterious field permitting more scope' (1970a: 53).

Using this conception of language as a point of departure, we can link Artaud's thought with that of Bergson, but also with the Orthodox intuitivist tradition, something that creates a divergence with the posterior Theatre of the Absurd and the

[48] 'A fourth *creator in the theatre,* after the author, director and actor; this is *the spectator.* The theatre of convention creates a staging in which the spectator is forced to *creatively complete* the stage hints *with his imagination*' (Meyerhold 1968: 106).

[49] Evreinov also lived and staged productions in Paris from 1925.

preceding avant-garde. For Artaud, in the Western world, 'the word has solidified, … all words are frozen, bundled up in their meaning … the word is made to stop thought; it delimits thought, but ends it. In all, it is nothing but a completion' (1938: 183). This concept of the word and reason as useless labels or label makers in the search for a deeper reality behind everyday existence is exactly that of Bergson and Orthodoxy. When criticising the 'religions of the West', Artaud looks eastwards into the Far East, not realising that his statements have a distinct Orthodox flavour. He rejects Judaeo-Christianism and the Western world's philosophical systems because they have annihilated all magic from human reality and separated instinct from reason. In fact, these philosophical writings extended also firmly into his theory of theatre. As Ramona Fotiade (2001: 49) puts it, 'within Artaud's conception of theatre, the return to primitive mentality and magical practices makes possible the reconstruction of a primitive, non-rational understanding of the divine.' However, much as with both Bergson and Orthodoxy, Artaud does not advocate for a complete rejection of reason, but to recognise reason's limitations, and to use it in coordination with intuition. Indeed, his 1925 'Manifesto in Clear Language' (Artaud 1976: 108-9) reads like an unintended but intuitive synthesis of Bergson's thought and the Orthodox intuitivist tradition and its focus on pictorial representations in the form of the icon, as well as the Russian avant-garde *zaum*, up to OBERIU's own *zaum* and *alogicality*:

> I destroy because for me everything that proceeds from reason is untrustworthy. I believe only in the evidence of what stirs my marrow … my mind, exhausted by discursive reason, wants to be caught up in the wheels of a new, an absolute gravitation … like a supreme reorganization in which only the laws of Illogic participate, and in which there triumphs the discovery of a new Meaning … It is order, it is intelligence, it is the signification of chaos … I renounce nothing of that which is the Mind … that which belongs to the realm of the image is irreducible by reason and must remain within the image or be annihilated.

This rejection of reason as the best way to comprehend reality did not limit itself to the word, but had an overarching nature in Artaud's theatre. As Wellwarth (1971: 18) points out,

> The paradox forming the basis of Artaud's system of theatrical practice is that instead of clarifying the meaning of drama, instead of using the various elements of the theater (scenery, lighting, costumes, stage movement, etc.) to make the plays easier to understand, it is necessary to make the plays less easy to understand in order to make them the more accessible to instinctive human emotion.

This dramatic language, this *spatial poetry*, which had as purpose to address the senses, was thus not limited to this, since it would have the consequence of expanding the effect on the intellect on a variety of levels and along different paths.

Violence was another way in which the spectator's intuition, rather than reason, was engaged in Artaud's plays. It was 'the violence of rational thought against the individual subject', which in Artaud's case becomes 'an "obscene" violence of the concept against the body, against his body' (Fotiade 2001: 50). On the scene, Artaud's use of violence had a metaphysical aim; as he put it, 'metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body' (1970a: 77). This scenic violence brings Artaud's theatre closer to Kharms' grotesque ministories, a connection deftly made by Lipovetsky in his analysis of Kharms' violence as a substitute for writing, 'violence appears as some kind of a transverbal language, or rather, a language of power … operating by a supreme language of violent acts and thus making verbal expression superfluous' (Lipovetsky 2007: 207) [50] . Similarly, this use of violence as transcendental communication is connected for both to their belief in art's capability to affect change in reality; as Esslin (1976: 83) puts it, for Artaud theatre thus becomes 'an assembly of human beings striving to establish contact with the profound mainsprings of their own being', which in turn could 'change their basic attitude to life and institutions, their ways of thinking, their entire consciousness and thus transform society and the world.'

Additionally, there are also striking similarities in the conceptual and terminological domain with the OBERIU, the Chinari, and the Russian avant-garde. Much as Kruchenykh's concept of *sdvig*, Artaud speaks of a 'shifting of meaning' (1938: 64) with inversions of form on the scene. Therefore, both *sdvig* and the

[50] A connection that had already been made by Epstein (1994: 135)

collision of meanings are also reflected in Artaud's thought, almost verbatim, 'we thus understand that poetry is anarchic in the way it questions all object-to-object relationships and those of form with its meaning' (1938: 64). Lastly, something that pervades the Chinari's philosophy and by extension the oberiuts' is the nonsense – *bessmyslitsa* – nature of their works. In a transparent parallel, in his 'Manifesto in Clear Language' (Artaud 1976: 108-9), Artaud speaks of the logic and laws of the *illogic* and asserts that his 'lucid *unreason*[51] is not afraid of chaos.'

To close this exploration of Artaud's theatre, it is worthwhile to dwell on Artaud's connections with Bakhtin, as expertly expounded by Robert Cunliffe (1993). Parallels with carnival can be found in the physicality of the mass festivities and the lack of distance between the *stage* and the *spectator* in the public square spectacle. For Bakhtin, a theatre which makes a clear separation between a passive audience and the dramatic action reaffirms the official hierarchy in its mirrored hierarchy between the elevated drama unfolding on stage and the external, powerless spectator. In contrast, the removal of this distance in carnival presents as an inherently subversive phenomenon due to the erasure of the artificial distance in traditional theatre. Compounding this, the nature of carnival meant that, in its throngs, 'no incident was ever fully cognised by the revellers … it resisted abstract thought' (51). If all this already points towards a kinship with Artaud's theatre tenets, there is a last aspect of carnival – the transgression by the body of individual physical liminalities – that brings them even closer. The importance and specificity of the body in carnival was analysed by Bakhtin in Rabelais' novels. Of the Frenchman, he says that 'he wants to return both a language and a meaning to the body' (*RW*: 171), and he posits that in carnival 'the individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed' (*RW, 255*). This use of the body as meaning bearing and the dissolution of borders brought about by its transcending individuality represents in turn a blurring of the boundaries imposed by the 'Neo-Platonic dualisms [of] mind/body, spirit/flesh, abstract thought/material form' (Cunliffe 1993: 54).

[51] My emphasis

Not leaving the theme of carnival, Richard Sheppard (2000) paints a persuasive picture of Dada as essentially carnivalesque, in his buttressing of the idea that, against received wisdom, the main impetus of the avant-gardists was social-existential, rather than it being primarily a reaction against bourgeois art. As pertains their carnival tendencies, Dadaists themselves, in their rejection of *Art* with a capital *A*, proposed that Dada was a state of mind, rather than an artistic school. They also flatly rejected any aesthetic principles that made a division between art and life, turning the artwork 'into an autotelic object of disinterested contemplation' (199-200). Conversely to this aversion to divisions, they welcomed life's binarisms at large, and fought the bourgeois aim to reject this or try to integrate them into an ordered whole. Of their art *artifacts*, they asserted them to be *concretions*, *constellations* or *analogues*, and opposed them to traditional symbols, as the latter find their genesis and essence in a fixed central point, where a *constellation* is a Bakhtinian '"heteromorphic," "heteroglossic," asymmetrical amalgam of moving forces in balanced opposition to which there is no clear center' (201-2). Connected to the acceptance of existence's binarisms, they fought the anthropocentric understanding of the world, with its harmonious and centred ideal. Needless to say, Dada's whole public behaviour was theatrical to its core and modelled itself in *low* and essentially democratic representations, such as street theatre, variety theatre, inscriptions in toilet cubicles, etc. They wanted their art to steer clear of elitism and made emphasis on the response of the public to their *artefacts* or performances rather than the authoritative take of the artist. As much as was the case with Khlebnikov and the OBERIU, chance is accepted into the artistic creation domain, as well as the decay of the *artefact*. In an increasingly Bergsonian tint, this represented a better reflection of the vital flux, while simultaneously making the artworks resist reverential institutionalisation and commodification. In a Bakhtinian reading of the elements of play in the town square, the Dadaists saw it as having the therapeutic aim of appeasing the most harmful aspects of evil, and in its collective nature, as an elixir for the collective inner health. It also exposed the tyranny of the established social order while deriding the tools it used for self-legitimation. Thus, the chaotic and contradictory nature of their art should not be regarded as a denunciation of *emptiness*, but as a celebration of the nature of reality and a denunciation of artificial hierarchies. This collage-like view of reality was also present in their poetry, which

apart from foregrounding language's conventions, also shared Bergson's championing of intuition as the best tool amongst the incoherence of existence. In keeping with the French philosopher tenets, as much as they denounced rationalism, they did not reject the role of reason. By making people aware of language's shortcomings, they aimed at stopping its deformation into ideological slogans or synthetic expressions, as in their juxtaposition of newspaper headlines with contradictory accompaniments. Thus, as per the previously proposed *permanent carnival*, Dada can be understood in a Bergsonian-Bakhtinian light in their rejection of rationalism and the espousing of the disordered vital flux of existence, their theatricality, derision of artificial hierarchies and the temporary and heteroglot nature of the work of art.

They can be said to be a link between Jarry and the Theatre of the Absurd in that, like the former, they expounded on human nature's lower instincts and focused on the cruelty of nature over any cosmic evil; if the latter integrated this cosmic evil and de-emphasised the role of nature, they shared with Dada and Jarry their rejection of the idea of civilisation's linear progress. In fact, the place the Dadaists found themselves in was hardly enviable. Where the Italian futurists' adherence to violence was in part a reaction against the fact that they were conceived by the culture they opposed, they welcomed the contemporary rise in industrial capitalism as an antidote to conservatism in culture. However, while Dada rejected the previously dominant bourgeois culture, they simultaneously disallowed industrial capitalism because of its identification with the inevitable result of war as a 'monstrous version of the productive process itself' (Sheppard 2000: 229). This left them in an enervating impasse, that often approached their output to nihilism and is in turn reflected in the unfinished nature of their *artefacts*.

True to its word, Dada did not advance any theory, other than promoting the absence of a theory, and steered clear from any statement that would have smelled of an artistic directive, contenting themselves with negation as their rationale – e.g., 'there is no final Truth', 'life is a bad farce, with neither goal not initial labor pains', 'art … has not the importance we … have attributed to it for centuries', 'logic is always false', 'I am neither for nor against and I don't explain because I hate common sense' (Tzara 2001: 88) – something that, deservedly gave them the coda of nihilism.

However, this nihilism was not as facile as it may seem, as it had a facet of metaphysical persuasion. When Tzara proclaims that 'all action is vain', this is so not speculatively, but 'measured by the scale of Eternity.' On top of this, there are, in spite of Tzara's best efforts, messages and directives that could be said to form something of a philosophy or theory. As with other groupings, his rejection of reason and logic is patent. That said, he does go a step further and in stark contrast with previous avant-gardists also rejects the future, but whether this is done with the sole aim of polemically purporting nihilism in spite of the beliefs contained in the manifesto or a true extreme nihilistic impetus is debatable. Finally, as much as he relied on negation to avoid any accusation of laying a theory, the final cacophony of negations in his manifesto could be read as a negative theory – in the sense of an inversion that states its aims by the negation of what they are not. Apart from the rejection of bourgeois art and materialism, this is said of this variant of the avant-garde: 'DADA: abolition of logic … of all hierarchy and social equation … of memory … of archeology … of the prophets.' Even though with his manifesto, the Dadaist makes much clearer what he rejects than what he proposes, it still contains the ideas reflected in the preceding avant-gardists' manifestos, such as the rejection of rationalism, the past, and hierarchy. The Dadaists share with the Russian futurists their rejection of bourgeois life and the commodification of art, finding a parallel between Dada's dethroning of the museum-bound work of art in the Russian futurists use of everyday valueless materials like sackcloth for their writings to denounce the bourgeois consumption of literature as a commodity. As such, Dada's perceived devaluing of the work of art was not such, but it was rather an attempt to return to a primordial, unmediated art.

2.2 Theatre of the Absurd and the end of Modernism

The representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd, most notably, differentiated themselves from the philosophical absurd of Camus and Sartre by integrating the absurd into the form and not just the content of their works. Additionally, Ionesco and Beckett's absurd includes elements pertaining to the crisis of language, the impossibility of communication or the automatization of life on top of existential concerns. In contrast with the philosophers – which, it should be remembered, also wrote a few plays –, it also draws from the avant-gardists, be it Dadaism, or Antonin

Artaud, and the chronological precocious Alfred Jarry. A preliminary argument for this contrasting return to the avant-garde could be argued to be the effect of the Second World War, since the authors of the philosophical absurd started publishing just before the Second World War, while being already removed by two decades from the First World War, whilst the Theatre of the Absurd works came a few short years after the end of the wars. Therefore, it could be argued that the reaction to the traumatic events of the Second World War and its despotism and perversion of language instinctively awakened an impulse more akin to 1910s and 1920s sensibilities that took place in reaction to the First World War, as much as the Revolution and subsequent repression had awakened a more concrete absurdist streak in the OBERIU members, that started to increasingly drink from the waters of Dostoevsky and Gogol's absurd and a grotesque current, in detriment of their more formalist contemporary futurists. In fact, the OBERIU's prose progressively gravitated towards self-referentiality, self-consciousness and self-destruction, which sets a strong parallel with Beckett's novels. As much as both found their roots in Modernism and used modernist devices, Kharms and Beckett increasingly turned them into their negation, be it the constantly enervating contradiction of Beckett's *stream of consciousness*, or Kharms' stories foregrounding language only to self-annihilate as a response. These and other characteristics of their prose have led many an academic to point to the postmodern tendencies of their prose, something that will be further delved into in ensuing chapters.

This brings us back to Tardieu's theatrical experiments, which were firmly modernist in their exploratory nature, in their rejection of the traditional view of theatre and in the supremacy of the author as the guiding hand of this experiments. However, at the same time, these probes are so extreme in their rejection of traditional theatre as to approach a purely deconstructive impulse, which in turn take these miniplays closer to Postmodernism. As such, in all, the Theatre of the Absurd can be said to represent the end of Modernism due to their mid position between a dying Modernism and the start of Postmodernism. The fact that the Theatre of the Absurd abandoned any pretension of progress, positive knowledge or definitive solution to human existence's absurdity has had a huge impact on philosophy and literature that is felt even nowadays. To this attests the labelling of a vast number of

currents arising after the 1950s having the prefix *post* – be it Postmodernism, Poststructuralism or even Post-postmodernism –, all of which seems to point backwards to the time when any definitive way out of the impasse was abandoned and to culture's scrambling in the face of this stalling.

Going back to the basic conceptions of the Theatre of the Absurd in Esslin's *vade mecum*, a pillar of its specificity may be argued to be its striving 'to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought' (2014: 5). As previously mentioned, Esslin adheres to this group the characteristics of avant-garde by considering their efforts a 'free and unfettered exploration' (219). This last, more *generating* reading, however, should be qualified by their loss of any faith or certainty, which imparts this theatre with a more nihilating hue and ultimately offers no clear way out through Esslin's addressed exploration. Any generating ethos that could be ascribed to Ionesco's plays is undermined by the dramaturge himself by means of his foregrounding of laughter as the main absurd device in his theatre. His Bergsonian liberating conception of laughter is modulated through Sartre and Camus to arrive at his idea of the absurd. If, like the former, Ionesco speaks of the opening of a gap between the self and reality – in Ionesco's case through humour rather than consciousness as 'humour is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves … from our tragicomic human condition, the malaise of being' (Ionesco in Esslin 2014: 153) –, as much as the latter he sees in this coming to terms with reality the main merit of an absurd vision: 'to become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying' (ibid). This inscribes Ionesco's works firmly into the previous Sartrean and Camusian existentialist absurd, and by extension entails an understanding of the absurd of a more passive and contempt nature. Similarly, in a further demarcation from the OBERIU theatre, Ionesco rejects any intention of showing the absurd through language – as the OBERIU attempted to do through *bessmyslitsa* – when, of his plays' reception, he denounces that 'what is sometimes labelled the absurd is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans' (1964: 46). As we have seen, Ionesco himself is antipathetic to the more self-sufficient idea of the avant-garde and was conceptually closer to the idea of this

exploration being a return to old forms. To end this Esslinian understanding of the authors, the theatre critic enumerates some characteristics of this theatre, such as it being a '*pure* theatre' of 'abstract scenic effects', the presence of *low* genres like clowning, 'verbal nonsense', 'a strong allegorical element' and a rejection of language (272).

This lead towards the 'allegorical element' could be used to address Michael Bennett's (2011) reassessment of the Theatre of the Absurd, which takes it away from Esslin's existentialist reading. Bennett's contribution is included mainly for contrasting purposes, as it is its pitfalls, rather than its merits which will be expounded upon. The thrust of his book is to draw an absolute line between Existentialism and the dyad Camus–Sartre, and to argue that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are not absurd after all. All this is done, in a parallel to the concept of allegory, through the idea of the plays as *parables*. His proposal rests upon two basic stilts; one is Esslin's supposed mistranslation of the French word *but*, and the other is the wrong identification of Camus with existentialist thought. The first one presents as a being embedded in unstable ground, as it approaches a factual inaccuracy[52]. This distinction does not take us very far – both words being acceptably interchangeable –, as exemplified by none other than Esslin himself later in his argumentation, in a passage that analyses Beckett's plays: 'in a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives' (2014: 61).

Passing to the less circumstantial fact of Camus – and by extension Sartre – not being an existentialist, Bennett buttresses the idea that the main reason for this is that the previous existentialists rejected reason, *wherein* lies his *faux pas*. As it has been explored above, the existentialists – and for that matter the intuitivist understandings of reality – did *not* reject reason; Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky very

[52] Bennett argues that the translation of Ionesco's quote regarding the work of Kafka 'absurd is that which is devoid of purpose' (Esslin 2014: 5) is incorrect, as it should have been rendered as '… devoid of goal.' While, admittedly, context is essential in translation, and Bennett rightly points out that Ionesco is discussing Kafka in historical terms and in relation to a project, he goes as far as suggest that the translating the French word *but* in isolation as 'purpose' would not be a correct choice: 'The word "but," however, which Esslin translated as "purpose," really has more of a sense of "goal"' (2011: 9). I propose to have a look in the dictionary to leave this impasse: 'goal *noun* [C]: an aim or purpose' (Cambridge University Press (2020). Goal. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ (Accessed: 28 August 2024).

much relied on reason to arrive at the chasm of the absurd, as did Camus, the difference residing in their reaction to this confrontation. Where Camus chose to rationalise the absurd and translate it into a renewed individualistic and hedonistic impulse, the previous existentialists acknowledged – that much is true – the limitations of reason when faced with the absurd and chose to rely on intuition from there. Thus, it was not a fanatical abandonment of reason, but a choice informed by reason and experience. What further undermines this view of Existentialism being confined to previous exponents is the fact that Nietzsche, while not an atheist, centred much of his tenets around the need to live in a world as if without God, something that would take his philosophy very close to the French philosophers if the dividing line were to be this reliance on God. Bennett goes on to accurately assess Camus and Ionesco's absurd as emanating 'from the contradiction between our desires and what the world offers us' (2011: 10), which removes any absolute nature to the absurd, and consequently takes any metaphysical tint away from them, something which may be qualifiable in Ionesco's case. Adding to this, Bennett places the ethos of the 1950s plays in a Camusian finding of meaning 'through our defiance, revolt, and contemplation' (ibid). Bennett goes on, in further pages, to conflate the Theatre of the Absurd propositions with a structuralist, quasi postmodern *heterotopia*, in which it is up to the spectator to select their own way forward when faced with the absurdity of the human condition. In a seeming contradiction, after positing this, he goes on to expound on his own interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*, unless this is meant as an example of an interpretation amongst many competing and equally valid ones. His reading, however, remains unconvincing, amongst other reasons for reducing such a consequential work as is *Waiting for Godot* to the following, admirably warming, but rather innocuous subsumption: 'Beckett, I argue, shows us how to fill up time, how to fill up our time: with the theatre, with idle talk and diversions, and with friends' (50)[53].

[53] I must thank Michael Bennett for his polemic-promoting proposal, and recognise the intellectual heights his book reaches. His publication has been chosen with a contrasting aim, and it serves to signify in turn similar reinterpretations of Esslin's concept, which the author of this study does not adhere to and which therefore will not colour his exposition. Another of Bennett's publications (2015) will be used in this study in an altogether non-polemicising approach due to its incisive scholarship.

In fact, the above-named concepts of *heterotopia* and freedom as a consequence of the rationalisation of the absurd could be argued to have been pre-empted by Esslin, as can be seen in this passage from *The Theatre of the Absurd* (2014: 62), which deals with language in Beckett's plays:

> The recognition of the illusoriness and absurdity of ready-made solutions and prefabricated meanings, far from ending in despair, is the starting point of a new kind of consciousness, which faces the mystery and terror of the human condition in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom.

Were one to substitute 'ready-made solutions and prefabricated meanings' with *reality* or *existence*, this quote would fit neatly into Camus' thought, and consequently into Bennett's argumentation. However, herein lies the crux of the contention; the concern is whether this freedom, arrived at through the distancing of the individual from reality – which for Sartre creates the *nothing* which constitutes the person's freedom, and represents a 'dizziness of freedom' for Kierkegaard –, is so idealistic in its actuality. It could be argued that this freedom from purpose or *goal* is as enervating as the impossibility of comprehending the nature of reality that this freedom was supposed to be an escape from. For the author of this thesis, as already elucidated with the analogue of the prevalent use of the backwards-looking *post* for any new current, the answer is unambiguous.

At this point, a deep inquiry into Ionesco's and Beckett's theatre and prose appears to be doubly unnecessary; on the one hand, the sheer amount of academic and non-academic analysis of their oeuvre would render such an exploration redundant, while on the other hand, the aspects of the authors considered relevant for the present argumentation have been presented and will be included in the latter comparative analysis of their works. Suffice it to preliminarily foreground at this stage their focus on and approach to language. For the Romanian-born author, language itself is a source of the comic, but as we have seen, for him it is the comic itself rather than language that is the best manner of facing the absurd. With this in mind, academics such as Wellwarth directly contradict Ionesco's stated intentions with this line of surmising:

> Since everyday life, whether absurd or not, depends for its coherence entirely on the coherence of speech patterns, it follows that if our speech patterns are absurd … (it is possible that to an individual the world does not appear absurd, but since he has no means of communication with other people except through intrinsically senseless speech patterns, it follows that his view is actually nonexistent in practice). (1971: 61)

This would be awarding too primary a role to language in his plays, since his use of language was primarily for comic effect and to show its automatisation, impoverishment, and separation from real life. Ionesco's impetus was ultimately to show the absurd existence of the person, not the fact that the inadequacy of contemporary language rendered human reality absurd. In fact, taking Ionesco at his word, what he aimed for, as much as the OBERIU, was to renovate and rejuvenate language; whether his plays achieve this at all or his denunciation of the crisis of language remained a nihilating one is a separate question whose answer this study has already pointed towards. In the case of Beckett, in turn, as much as he attacked and devalued language in drama and prose, 'his continued use of language must, paradoxically, be regarded as an attempt to communicate on his own part, to communicate the incommunicable' (Esslin 2014: 62). The realisation of the inadequacy of language meant that, in a vicious circle, when afterwards the use of words was required, he aimed to 'destroy language, making it inexpressible, to adequately express the inexpressible' (Bennet 2015: 52). In what concerns his plays, it is well known how they progressively abandoned language altogether, as a better reflection of 'the complexity of relationships (between bodies, within a body, between bodies and objects, and between objects)' (54), in what would seem a reaffirmation of the absurd reality of the person, rather than its rationalisation.

Conclusion: the Parisian and the Petersburgian absurd

Ionesco, describing the general impetus behind the different incarnations of the avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century while reminiscing about Artaud, wrote what can be regarded as an admirably embracing description of the avant-garde:

> If it is difficult to say what it is, it is without a doubt less so to realise what it is not … break everything to go towards that which we do not exactly know what it is and which only its absence is painfully felt by the sensitive or conscious spirits. The Dadaists and Surrealists of yesteryear, the Italian futurists, and those from Blok and Mayakovsky's … [did] not suffer from hunger, it [was] something else that is lacking. (1969: 24)

While serving as an illuminating encapsulation, we have seen the gamut of manifestations the avant-garde took to try to satiate this hunger. In what concerns the absurd, this most abstract of concepts has been alluded to through its interaction with Existentialism, the absolute and the comic, rather than it being directly addressed in a separate chapter. This presents, however, as an adequate point in the argumentation to delve specifically into the absurd, once its manifestations have been examined. As has been propounded, the unifying characteristic of the specific quality of the absurd shared by the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd is the loss of faith in progress. If the preceding absurd, from Kierkegaard up to and including Dostoevsky, had been a more abstract absurd centred around God and the human condition in its relation to God, the more concrete, situational absurd that both currents professed came about after the unstoppable reign of Stalinism and after the Second World War. If the OBERIU's first incarnations of the absurd were based on the metaphysically charged concept of *bessmyslitsa*, their latter, post-disillusionment output was of a different nature. Where Camus and Sartre dealt with a philosophical absurd either before or during the war, the Theatre of the Absurd's take, arising after the war, had much more concrete traits. In both cases language was intimately connected to the absurd, be it by the separation of words and their usual meanings and from sense, by the self-destructive attack on itself or by absurd formal devices. This last point is addressed by Ionesco, unintentionally making a strong parallel between his theatre and Kharms *Incidents*; of his theatre he asserts it to be 'simply a sequence of events without sequence, a series of fortuitous incidents unlinked by cause and effect' (1964: 159).

This link to *Incidents* takes us directly to the shared utilisation of violence in the theatre and prose of both groups. This violence is absurd in that it is ungranted or incongruous in its expression in the play or the story, but it is in reality against the absurd or an antidote to it. On the face of it, as we will see in detail in further

chapters, the killing of Sonya by the nanny in *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, the murder of Koshkin in 'Mashkin killed Koshkin' or the decapitation of the man of medium height in 'Lynch Law', the murder of the student in '*The Lesson*', or Estragon's periodic beatings all are completely senseless or undeserved. However, in the formal domain, the violence that permeates the works of these authors represents an attempt at transcending reality and achieving meaningful communication where language has been shown to be powerless. If Kharms' violence and disregard for moral considerations can be read as an attempt to instigate the reader to restore morality in the Stalinist reality, the only real communicative acts in *Waiting for Godot* – either in the sense of transmission of meaning or in the sense of affecting a change in others – are violent acts like Lucky's kick of Estragon's shin, the cracking of Pozzo's whip or the trampling of Lucky's hat to stop his ramblings. There is also a third incarnation of violence as a superstructure, which suggests itself in the form of an invisible, dimly felt malevolent presence in Beckett's novels, in some of Ionesco's plays and in the drama and prose of Kharms and Vvedensky, which can be taken to signify the absurd incomprehensible and its antipathy towards the individual.

A conception of the absurd that is present in the OBERIU's early works is, as mentioned, the *bessmyslitsa* or their brand of nonsense. This connection with the historical absurd is expressly made by Druskin (1998: 48): 'the spiritual cannot be understood, at least completely. It is always illogical and rational. If we are not afraid of words, then in Greek one calls this paradox (Kierkegaard); in Latin, absurd (Tertullian); in Russian, *bessmyslitsa* (Vvedensky).'

Bessmyslitsa can be understood as metaphysical nonsense. The OBERIU were deeply interested in the works of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Therefore, an exploration of this brand of nonsense is pertinent for its contrast with the Chinari-OBERIU *bessmyslitsa*. Elizabeth Sewell's (1973) treatment of nonsense approaches a formalist reading of its tenets. Nonsense is described as an 'attempt to render language a closed and consistent system on its own' (21). With the clear sympathy of this view with Carroll's logician and mathematician background or Lear's musical interests, this view parallels the formalists' conception of language as a closed, autonomous system from which meaning and innovation should emerge, rather than from the surrounding socio-cultural background.

An analogue to Shklovsky's *defamiliarisation* can also be found in Carroll's substitution of the expected word for another alien to that idea in order to draw attention to the limiting fixed bonds between words and meanings. With a stimulus reminiscent of that of Kharms' *collision of meanings* and Kruchenykh's *sdvig*, words are turned into objects to play with in order to shift language's rules. This *objectification* of words, in turn means that 'The Nonsense universe must be the sum of its parts and nothing more. There must be no fusion and synthesis' (98). The set of rules that compose this view of nonsense, in turn, differentiate it from other manifestations usually attached to it, as is the case with Surrealism. Its main diverging from the concept of *bessmyslitsa* resides in its confinement to a closed system that precludes any exterior reality or metaphysical preoccupation. In the oberiuts' case *jabberwocky* was used for its *zaum* possibilities and in parallel with the *yurodivy*'s quasi divine *tongue-tiedness* as the best expression of the absolute. In further contrast, British nonsense was overwhelmingly concerned with words, rather than the objects they represented. Even if Sewell posits that the fact that it is based on rules makes it 'concrete, clear and comprehensible' (23), this is a different *concreteness* from the one proclaimed by the OBERIU in its manifesto, where they refer to themselves as 'people who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones.' This *concreteness* rested upon precisely the focus on the object and its actualisation, as opposed to Malevich's complete abandonment of it. However, there is an aspect of nonsense that firmly unities the British authors with the OBERIU, via the formalists, which is its implied removal of the author. Its essence as a closed, autonomous system gives it the features of a self-generating entity. As such, 'the causality of "authorship" becomes erased' because 'the fiction comes to write the word' (Stewart 1979: 142). With a further Kharmsian colouring – which also finds harmony in Beckett's oeuvre –, Susan Stewart goes on to say that 'in nonsense, closure can only be imposed upon infinity by an arbitrary stop rule, a rule that says "Enough" in a metaficitive voice' (143). This 'enough' is used by Kharms explicitly in his ministories, as many of them end with the interjection 'vse' – *всё* –, which signifies precisely 'enough' or 'that's all'[54] – although in isolation it means 'all' or 'everything' –, and reminds us of their perceived arbitrariness and their abrupt, non-causal ends. This

[54] In isolation, it means 'all' or 'everything', and it can also signify 'the end', especially in oral stories.

'vse' is also used as an ending by Vvedensky, for example in one of his most famous poems, 'Where. When.' (Kharms et al 2006: 55–59), and in fact is the title of one of the main anthologies of the author in Russian (2013b). Using this anthology, we can also attest of how deliberate this use of 'vse' as an ending is, since there are examples in this anthology of Vvedensky using the more literary phrase 'the end' – *konets* – at the end of other works, as in 'A Certain Quantity of Conversations' (2013b: 22–240).

This exploration of nonsense has been performed in the framework of the absurd, and consequently, the question arises of whether nonsense is absurd. For this, Wim Tigges' reading is elucidating: 'in nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality' (1988: 128). As has been already alluded to, in its latter manifestations, Kharms' prose passed on from the language that '*creates* reality' to the language that '*represents* a senseless reality.' This merits its own dissection for the way it exemplifies this difference between nonsense and the absurd within one author's oeuvre. This adjustment had its source in Kharms' loss of faith in the futurist-espoused progress and the avant-garde devices to arrive there, when confronted with the increasingly antipathetic and absurd reality of 1930s Petersburg. Even though Kharms did not abandon his concept of the *collision of meanings*, its application to his increasingly predominant prose manifested itself in a turn from formal *bessmyslitsa* to a situational absurd of *byt*[55]. Even Vvedensky, who is said to have repudiated Kharms' perceived abandonment of *left* art in 'The Old Woman', and who never abandoned poetry as his predilected form of expression, did approach a more concrete and situational absurd as a way to better reflect his contemporary situation by the end of the 1930s in *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*; even if in Vvedensky's play his preoccupations of time, God, and death are ever present, a more concrete and situationally absurd representation of reality is inserted into the play with the confrontation of official language against private language and the refusal of figures of authority to fulfil their roles, and, in a parallel with Kharms and Vaginov's increasing focus on the grotesque, his play is also plagued by uncharacteristic grotesque scenes. In fact, even when their content is absurd, Kharms' ministories have the characteristics of 'concision, efficacy, clarity' (Jaccard 1995: 661) in their narrative.

[55] Everyday life or *ennui*

This transition in Kharms' stories also implied a delegation of the organising principle – or lack thereof – from the hands of the author into reality, in a markedly less Romantic view of the author, and one with postmodern resonances. Consequently, Jaccard (663) exposes a double connection with nonsense and the Parisian absurd: 'The loss of the organising principle, which necessarily implies … "automatisation", impelled Kharms' whole output not only towards other forms, but towards a different literature, that which will see the birth of Existentialism and the absurd a bit later.' This connection takes us necessarily to the already-quoted Kharms' anguished repetition of 'And I'm the world. But the World's not me.', when confronted with the incomprehensible absolute, which Jaccard (1991: 128-9) equates to Camus' 'unreasonable silence of the world' (Camus 1955: 21).

Something else that connects these two authors is their condition of exiles, and it is this view of the author as an exile which will be a last exploration in the conclusion. Not only Kharms and Vaginov, but also every single one of the main authors included in this thesis can be said to be cultural exiles – when not geographical exiles. This presents, in turn, as an innate characteristic of the *left* avant-garde as a whole, due to the distance and alienation from the existing cultural milieu necessary for such an uncompromising conception of art. They could thus be said to be strangers in their own culture, and conversely, that their culture was a stranger to them. In what pertains the specific OBERIU and Theatre of the Absurd authors, this is especially true, and not only in the cultural domain. Beckett and Ionesco were, admittedly, voluntary exiles from their countries of birth, and remarkably, they also became temporary unwilling exiles when they had to abandon Paris during the Second World War. Kharms and Vvedensky were sent into exile to Kursk for a short period, and they can be said to have been exiled by ideological force from their cultural milieu, not being allowed to publish much of their oeuvre. They were, as well, exiled from the previous reality of the intelligentsia into the new Soviet world. Additionally, exile was in turn present in the milieu of all of these authors, be it Adamov's migration from Russia after his family's move from Armenia or Bakhtin's five-year exile in Vitebsk. The preceding exponents of the avant-garde also shared this commonality, as the well-known self-exile of many a Dadaist. The role of geographical and cultural exile in shaping the *left* avant-gardist tendencies emerges

as an area worthy of exploration, which, regrettably, this thesis does not have the scope to cover.

Chapter III. Comparative study of drama pieces: *Elizaveta Bam*, *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Waiting for Godot*

In parallel with all of the above pieces' rejection of dramatic plot, the *synopsis* of the plays will be mostly omitted from the following comparative analysis, as will be a potential thorough analysis of the theoretical theatrical frameworks of each current, these having already been examined in previous chapters. Suffice it to use, for the Petersburgian side – which is the internationally lesser-known one –, their own already-quoted manifesto to give a rough view of their main theatrical tenets. The theatre section of the manifesto, it should be remembered, was little more than a replica of the Radiks' theatre tenets, a grouping that, apart from Kharms and Vvedensky, included Tsimbal and Katsman, a theatre theorist and a theatre director respectively. Of the plot, the manifesto says:

> Until now, all these elements have been subordinated to the dramatic plot—to the play. A play has been a story, told through characters, about some kind of event. On the stage, all have worked to explain the meaning and course of that event more clearly, more intelligibly, and to relate it more closely to life. That is not at all what the theatre is. (Kharms and Vvedensky 1974: 245-54)

They add that 'such an action will be a separate item; a series of such items organized by the director will make up a theatrical performance, which will have its plot line and its scenic meaning. This will be a plot which only the theatre can give.' Finally, they posit: 'The dramatic plot is replaced by a scenic plot which arises spontaneously from all the elements of our spectacle. The center of our attention is on it. But at the same time, separate elements of the spectacle are equally valuable and important to us.' About language, in a parallel with Shklovsky's thought, we read: 'As people of a concrete world, object, and word—that is how we see our social significance. To cleanse the world by the movements of a hand, to cleanse the object of the rubbish of ancient putrefied cultures.'

Turning our focus on to the perceived similarities between the OBERIU theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd, it will be pertinent to rely on Jaccard's (1991: 247-

259) use of Revzina and Revzin's (1975) analysis of Ionesco's laying bare of the 'postulates of normal communication' to support his contention of a striking proximity between Kharms and Ionesco. Jaccard's analysis, however, should be qualified for its erring on the side of having too strong a francophone view of Kharms, in which, for example, Kharms is wrongly accused of being close to Ionesco's disintegration of language to show communication is impossible. As it has been argued and will be further exposed, Kharms' intention was never so much to show the impossibility of communication, but to show that behind language lay the absolute; importantly, however, through the use of language – even when admittedly in a negative way – it was possible to approach the inexpressible. Jaccard sees a commonality in both dramaturges' representation of characters that believe that their existence depends on what they say, and so speak even when there is nothing to say in Ionesco's play – this would apply also to Beckett –, or in the case of Kharms, they are thoroughly aware of this fact – in *Elizaveta Bam*, Ivan Ivanovich says 'I speak, therefore I am' – and who, additionally, want to change reality with their utterances. The above qualification of Jaccard's proposal should already be patent even in this proposed *commonality*. There is an essential difference between saying something when there is nothing to say to confirm one's own reality and believing in the power of words to affect reality, which attests to the notably more generative status awarded to the word by the OBERIU. Other similarities in language mentioned are the rejection of cause-and-effect relationships, the lack of a common memory, the lacking informativeness of the utterances, the loss or fluctuation in the characters' identities, the lack of correspondence between statements and actions, between emotions and messages, as well as absurd semantic connections. While, as Jaccard posits, all these serve to close the gap between the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd, this author propounds that this is so rather superficially.

By focusing on the last aspect mentioned, the establishment of absurd semantic connections, a transparent deviation in intent already starts to emerge. As we have seen, and especially this early in the OBERIU's output – 1927 –, these absurd connections were not intended to show the inadequacy of language and to create comic effect as in Ionesco's case, but rather the intention was intimately connected to *zaum* and the Chinari's *bessmyslitsa.*

This initial contrasting of Kharms and Ionesco can be extended to Vvedensky and Becket to set the general principle which the following comparative study will follow. Vvedensky, as an inveterate follower of the *star of bessmyslitsa*, used nonsense in *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, needless to say, in an even more *zaum*-oriented manner than that of Kharms. With his three consuming preoccupations of time, death and God, the concern with the everyday human element – and person-to-person communication by extension – was almost negligible in Vvedensky's case. As Stone Nakhimovsky indicates, in contrast with Kharms, Vvedensky remains concerned with these themes 'in a universal sense' (1982:167). Thus, life is seen as a more futile endeavour than in Kharms' case, which necessarily leads to Vvedensky's lack of interest in everyday communication, making the subversion of semantic and logical links purely metaphysical in nature. Conversely, Beckett's preoccupation with language and its constant deconstruction and destruction is squarely based on interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, or the impossibility of language conveying any positive knowledge, and has little metaphysical implications apart from its pointing towards the *nothing* from which literature and human existence spring from.

This introduction is followed by a comparative study of the four most well-known pieces of both currents. In order to give some structure and limit the scope of the comparative study, this analysis will be limited to the dramatical aspects of time and space, plot and characters, and language and dramatical devices.

1. *Elizaveta Bam*

Time and space

In *Elizaveta Bam* (Kharms 1991), the circularity, repetition and lack of a substantial plot make this piece exist outside of time. There are no temporal references in the play – there is no reference to day, night, before, later, two o'clock, date, etc. When the temporal reference *par excellence* is mentioned – a clock –, this is not done to give time at all:

ELISAVETA BAM	Why am I a criminal?
PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH	Because you have lost all right of reply.

…

ELISAVETA BAM I haven't lost any such thing. You can check by the clock.[56]

When the temporal reference of 'eight minutes' is mentioned, this is done to show how irrelevant this is for the action of the play, and that time is just seen as another theatrical element, not the absolute, fixed element that exists outside the theatrical piece. This is further reinforced by the line being uttered by one of the characters instead of appearing as a stage direction – this in turn being preceded and followed by a violin acting as another character and *speaking* its music:

VIOLIN pa pa pée pa
pa pa pée pa
PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH Eight minutes fly past unnoticed.
VIOLIN pa pa pée papa
pa pa pée

There is a key moment in the play when absolute time is temporarily used and when the dramatic time is aligned with *outside* time. This happens immediately after Pyotr Nikolaevich gives a speech about the laws of the universe and nature and mentions 'the subjugation by man of the laws of light and wave.' This subjugation, or rationalisation, of *absolute* elements and their division into artificial *bits* is, in a Bergsonian manner, strongly rejected by the OBERIU. As so, it is at this point in the play that Pyotr Nikolaevich announces the incoming killing of Elisaveta Bam, which appears as something completely human made, arrived at by means of flawed human rationalisation; it is the second time Elisaveta's killing is mentioned, as Pyotr Nikolaevich has already said in *bit* five that he wants to kill her:

PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH …
and the subjugation by man
of the laws of light and wave.
IVAN IVANOVICH Now I realise, realise, realise.
(lighting a match) …

[56] Due to the conciseness of Kharms' and Vvedensky's plays, the quoted passages are not referenced to the pages they appear on.

	What time is it? Tell me.
PYOTR NIKOLAEVICH	Four. Oh, it's time for dinner!
	Ivan Ivanovich, let's go,
	But remember that tomorrow night
	Elisaveta Bam will die.

The circularity of the play, with the eighteenth, and penultimate *bit* being almost a carbon copy of the first one, places the play even more decidedly outside of time, as there was apparently no time for everything that has happened in the interim. The constant jumps of the characters from one scenery to the next, from the apartment to the street, to the countryside, their seeming ubiquity, further foregrounds the refusal of linear time. Additionally, according to Jaccard (1991: 249), the rejection of determinism in the play also makes linear time an impossibility.

Plot and characters

In the piece, following the tenets of Radiks theatre, Kharms juxtaposes dramatical actions and scenes in order for them to form their own internal logic on the scene. Jaccard (1991: 257) sees the main diverging point with the Theatre of the Absurd pieces in the fact that *Elizaveta Bam* has a very loose, but nonetheless existing plot – two enforcers come to Elizaveta Bam's apartment to arrest her for a crime she has not committed, she tries to avoid her fate, but is ultimately led to her execution. While Jaccard's incisive point is true considering the absolute absence of plot in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Soprano* due to their circularity and unfinished nature, the fact that there is a resemblance of a plot is part of the OBERIU's theatrical tenets, as it is not the case that plot is completely rejected, but rather that it is treated as another element of the play with no overall control over the others. As such, even if structurally there is a hint of a plot, this plot is constantly subverted by having the same scene happen more than once, but in a diametrically different manner. The raison d'être of the play, as much as it is the case in *Incidents*, is the *happening* of Elisaveta Bam's arrest, but this is a glimpse of an instant in the continually flowing nature of time, rather than a linearly developed plot. The perceived plot is in reality inexistent, as the actions described don't follow the laws of logic, Elizaveta Bam being arrested for having killed one of the enforcers that has come to arrest her.

There is no description of any of the three main characters in the action apart from male or female and a very approximate age range, their names are markedly theatrical and would be out of place in the world outside the scene, and their power dynamics change constantly based on the utterances they speak, rather than any pre-established societal hierarchy. The appearance of the characters changes even when the same scene is reprised. For example, the two characters that come to arrest Elisaveta Bam appear as two men with crutches and bandages the first time this scene is presented; when this scene is shown again at the end of the play, the characters come dressed as firefighters. To reinforce the lack of personal traits and changeability of the characters, their names are incorrectly stated by other characters in the play, even in the same utterance: 'If you allow me, Elisaveta Cockroach … Elisaveta Edwardovna, I'm an honest man … I'm going home, Elisaveta Mikhaylovna.'

Language and dramatical devices

Language plays the main role in the play. Academics have been split in the interpretation of the use of language, nonsense and alogism in the play. One proposal, as exemplified by Roberts, postulates that language has absolute power and is capable of creating its own world and piercing reality, much as Kharms himself felt when he wrote on his diary that 'poetry should be written so that if you throw a poem at the window, the glass will shatter' (2013: 247), and much in line with the Chinari's philosophy. The other reading, as already mentioned headed by Jaccard (1991), posits a much more negative view of language, closer to the negative use of language in the Theatre of the Absurd, where language is just used to expose its inadequacy to communicate and its impotence to affect change. This would be more in line with Kharms' later abandonment of poetry and preference for an ever-minimalistic, violent and grotesque, self-destructive prose, the solidity of which argument will be further delved into in further chapters. In this author's surmising, even though the arrests had started and Katsman, a friend and fellow member of Radiks, had suffered this upheaval himself in 1927, the year when the play was written, it was still too early for Kharms to renege from the aim to expand the power of language and, through it, to get closer to the absolute, too early to be content with just decrying the impotence of language to achieve communication or affect change,

even when aided by *zaum* devices. It is worth remembering that the play's opening night was just a few weeks after it was written, at the now famous 'Three Left Hours', where the OBERIU's position on language was made transparent in their manifesto and left no room for doubt:

> We are the first enemies of those who would castrate the word and turn it into a powerless mongrel. In our work we expand and deepen the meaning of the object and the word, but in no way do we destroy it. … Perhaps you will assert that our subjects are "unreal" and "not logical"? But who said that "mundane" and "everyday" logic is necessary for *art*. (Kharms and Vvedensky 1974: 245–54)

Roberts' analysis of the play is, in my view, the most complete and accurate. He will be left to explain at length this reading in a footnote, in order to avoid an unnecessary exercise in paraphrasing what is already clearly stated. He, insightfully, uses Wittgenstein to assert Kharms' intentions when using seemingly nonsensical language. Roberts makes use of the Wittgensteinian concept of language as the main creator and framework of reality as an overarching theme. Thus, language becomes not impotent and inadequate, but all powerful and all encompassing. Therefore, he posits that in the play, language is used to define the characters' reality and its frame, as in *Elizaveta Bam* the language which the characters use articulates their reality and marks out the limits of the world, which is paralleled with Wittgenstein's proposition that language 'articulates the space of all that we know as world' (Thiher 1984: 23). Words can affect change, as much as language can change the direction of the action in the play.

Stelleman (1985: 343) concurs with this view by observing that 'the characters create a new situation, a different reality, by their speech.' The omnipotence of language in the play is dextrously shown by Roberts (1994) using the example of Elizaveta Bam's opening lines[57]. When Elizaveta expresses her fear by asserting that

[57] 'Elizaveta declares: "Now, I'm afraid, the door will open, and they'll come in ... They'll definitely come in to catch me and wipe me from the face of the earth". Such a scenario is, to be sure … unwelcome … for Elizaveta. It cannot be claimed, therefore, that she says this in order for it to come true. Neither are the events which she recounts here inevitable; she does not say that they will break down the door, but rather, merely, that it "will open". But once she has said the words … the events which she has articulated are as ineluctable as she said they were. As if to underline this fact, … she will eventually (in scene 2)

'the door will open and they will come in', she seals her own fate. This primacy of language is also made explicit when Pyotr Nikolaevich utters 'I speak, therefore I am', and it is also exemplified, as described by Roberts[58], by the verbal 'killing' of Pyotr Nikolaevich by Ivan Ivanovich. When Pyotr Nikolaevich starts to recount a story of his youth, Ivan Ivanovich takes over the tale, thus depriving Pyotr Nikolaevich of his voice and reality. This is further reinforced by the stage direction that at that same instant the characters merge into one, and the fact that Pyotr Nikolaevich does not appear back or is *resuscitated* until several *bits* further, when Ivan Ivanovich splits back this merging by addressing Pyotr Nikolaevich by 'you.' Roberts expertly draws the reader's attention back to the fact that since it was Ivan Ivanovich who usurped Pyotr Nikolaevich's identity and life, it is only he who can bring them back, and Elizaveta is not able to do so in the subsequent *bits*. He makes the point that, after all, the initial accusation of Elizaveta being responsible for the death of Pyotr Nikolaevich because she could not speak does not sound so farfetched.

Any perceived nonsensical statement should be viewed under the lenses of a language game. These language games are almost always initiated by Elizaveta, in an effort to change the feared outcome of the visit. While everyone else in the play readily joins the language games proposed, Elizaveta is unable, or refuses, to join in these games when proposed by the enforcers in their *official* language. The reference to the crashing of Elizaveta's private language and reality by the language of the state, and her losing of her voice – or vote, as in Russian, *golos* has this double meaning – is clear (59), but the end becomes two-pronged. It could be that Elizaveta has been unable to fend off her incoming death, or that her private reality has been destroyed by the state, avoiding death, but assimilating into the new reality. Both options would have seemed, in any case, two sides of the same coin for Kharms.

---

go and open the door herself. As if further to underline the necessity of her words being realized independently not only of her volition but of the men's also, the men do not move into Elizaveta's room, but, rather, the room moves out to encompass them; the stage backcloth is moved backwards … what we have is indeed language talking, language articulating itself, and thereby the world' (Roberts 1994: 53–4).

[58] 'In section 7 Petr Nikolaevich begins to tell the story of how he lived, as a young man, all alone in a little house on a hill. Suddenly, however, Ivan takes over the narrative, assuming not only Petr's story, but his 'I' also, usurping both his language and his space … Ivan then goes on to accuse Elizaveta, for the first time in the play, of Petr's murder' (55–6).

On the opposite side is the point of view embraced, amongst others, by Jaccard, for whom the use of *zaum* in the play is seen as an open mocking of this futurist tenet and to express the 'total disintegration of reality.' Jaccard goes as far as to see traces of existential angst in the play, much in line with Camus and his influence in the Theatre of the Absurd (1991: 257). As mentioned above, I find this analysis to be too influenced by a francophone, existentialist point of view and retroactively infected by Kharms later turn into self-destructive prose. It directly contradicts the manifesto that went along with the play, which had a marked non-nihilistic approach. In fact, as it has already been stated above, the French philosophical existentialism is one of the main diverging points between the authors of the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd, and while both exposed the old calcifications of language, where the Theatre of the Absurd stopped at that and offered no solution, the OBERIU strived to renew language and widen its capabilities.

There is, however, one point in common between Roberts and Jaccard, and that is the use, both in *Elizaveta Bam* and in *The Bald Soprano*, of language to establish or confirm the reality in which the characters live in such turbulent times. While Roberts states that 'facts either well-known or self-apparent must be given expression in language, even if not immediately relevant to the context' and that when characters 'are confronted with a new reality, they feel the need to express that reality in language, as if somehow to explain and thereby "domesticate" it' (1994: 51), Jaccard makes a similar contribution when he states that '[Mrs Smith] betrays the desire to restore the whole of reality with each sentence. The mission is of course impossible, but the characters of the Theatre of the Absurd feel the need to attempt it regardless, maybe because in their view the world is divided into an infinity of parts which they try to join coherently by naming them' (1991: 255).

Since *Elizaveta Bam* was released at the same time as the OBERIU manifesto, it served as model of the OBERIU's tenets into put into practice, which were in essence those of Radiks. As such, there is a long list of dramatical devices for such a short piece, which serves as an example of how to create a theatrical reality removed from life outside the scene and, even if it includes elements from other art forms, is a separate entity. Laying bare the device permeates the play. There is a multitude of ways in which this is achieved. To start with, each of the nineteen *bits*, even those

that are just a handful of lines long, has a title based on a different dramaturgical framework (as in 'Solemn melodrama, with undertones of Radiks' or 'Realistic. Everyday comic genre'), making evident the artifice of how different a theatre piece is depending on its *type* or *tone*. It is unclear whether these titles were meant to appear in the final version of the written play or on stage. While Nikolay Khardzhiev, who received from Kharms the only authorised copy of the play indicated that Kharms told him to remove these directions from the basic text (Khardzhiev in Meilakh 1991: 212), scholars like Jenny Stelleman (1985) have proposed not only their belonging to the basic text, but that they were to be proclaimed in the theatre in cabaret or street theatre fashion before the start of each *bit*. Another device that is used throughout the play, much in line with the OBERIU's philosophy, is the use of an incongruous element that serves to defamiliarise the spectator with the conventions of theatre, thus shifting the focus into the convention itself, rather than the action. For example, the play starts with the rather conventional early stages of an arrest. The enforcers knock at the door, a young woman refuses to open out of fear, and the enforcers keep trying to enter the apartment. At some point, this conventional scene is defamiliarised for the spectator when Elizaveta Bam stamps her foot in anger. The seriousness and pathos of the situation is instantly lifted, and the conventional scene exposed by the introduction of this unexpected element, firmly placing the action into a theatrical setting.

The décor is as basic and bare as possible to reinforce the importance of the dramatical action over any other element, and is used in a way that only belongs in theatre, as the moment when the backcloth is moved so that the enforcers are suddenly placed inside Elizabeta Bam's apartment without having to walk or the moment when the backcloth and all other elements start vibrating as the play nears its end. The play is filled with balagan and music hall elements to reinforce the primacy of dramatical devices over literary or pictorial elements. In the third *bit*, the enforcers start acting in a purely clownish manner that completely diverts from the expected behaviour and plot, hiccupping, lifting a leg, going on their hands and knees, until an audience starts to form when Elizaveta Bam's parents are invited to witness the spectacle. The introduction of movement elements completely foreign to the plot is yet another way to emphasise the fact that what the spectator is witnessing

is purely theatrical and could only happen on the scene. In *bit* five, the stage directions indicate that a log should be brought to the front of the stage and sawn while the enforcers run on the spot. This is a way to separate the dramatic action from life, while simultaneously splitting movement in two; it both shows the limitations of the scene, as it is not possible to run a long distance in a confined space, while doubling the action of running on the scene using a device to show movement in a purely dramatical form. In this way thus movement itself becomes a dramatic element with as much importance as the characters.

Music is also lifted in the hierarchy and placed on the same level as any other dramatical device. When music sounds, no one else talks, as if music were another character. In the following extract, a pipe and piano play three notes between the characters' exchanges:

VOICE OFF	Nothing!
Mummy:	Nothing!
(Pipe sounds offstage: three notes:)	sss
Ivan Iv.:	Nothing!
(Piano is played: three notes:)	sss
Pyotr. Nik.:	Nothing more!

In the Radiks *bit*, the merging of instruments with characters is taken to its extreme, when notes are replaced with phonemes:

Ivan Iv:	Now you are broken
	your chair is broken.
Violin:	Pa pa pée pa
	pa pa pée pa
…	
Pyotr Nik.:	The tatters, they flew week after week.
Siren & drum:	Vee-a-a-boom, boom
	Vee-a-a-boom.

Even for the *reader* of the play, Kharms makes sure that the conventions are exposed in order for the reader to be defamiliarised from their expectations and for them to

have a *virginal* glimpse of the text, while exposing the theatrical text as another dramatical device, separated from literature. This is something that, as it will later be shown, Vvedensky took to an extreme in *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*. Kharms limited this defamiliarisation to changing the names or references to the characters throughout the play. Thus, the father is first called by the author 'father', then this changes to 'daddy'; Pyotr Nikolaevich and Ivan Ivanovich are first referred to as 'first' and 'second', then their names are used, and then, further on, Kharms reverts to calling them 'first' and 'second'.

2. *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*

Time and space

In *Christmas at the Ivanovs'* [59] (Vvedensky 2001: 394–413), the scene directions make sure that it is clear that time is a scenic time separated from *real* life time. To this end, for example, while the short first scene – where children are having a bath and then one of them is killed while in the bath, the police come and take the murderous nanny away – takes a couple of minutes, the clock has moved forward three hours in that time. The scene directions at the start of the scene state: 'A clock hangs on the wall to the left of the door. Its face shows nine in the evening.', while the scene ends with these directions: 'A clock hangs on the wall to the left of the door. Its face shows twelve midnight.' Therefore, a tableau that would have taken hours in real life, an evening bath for the seven children with the nanny, a murder, all the chaos and lamentations, police being called, arriving at the scene, inspecting it, and taking the murderer away, is reduced to a scene of mere minutes. This is achieved by treating every single element, like the bathing, the murder, the arrest, as an object that is already defined and is just placed on the scene, rather than a

[59] The original title of the play is *Ёлка у Ивановых*, whose literal translation is ambiguously either *Christmas Tree at the Ivanovs'*, *New Year's Tree at the Ivanovs'* or *New Year's Celebration at the Ivanovs*.' This ambiguity is important, as by the time Vvedensky wrote it, Christmas had been banned in Soviet Russia in 1929, then reinstated in 1935 in secular form. The most recognisable symbol of this new secular 'Christmas' was the *ёлка*, the old Christmas tree, that now was called New Year's tree. By naming it *ёлка*, which just refers to the tree itself, without adding the 'Christmas' or 'New Year' qualifier, Vvedensky would avoid the ire from the state, while preserving the ambiguity as to which type of celebration the title referred to.

prolonged, detailed development of each *happening*. For example, instead of having seven separate bathing times, the seven children bathe at the same time, with six in one bath, and little Petya in a pot. The murder is simplified to the extreme extent which sees Sonya saying something untoward to the nanny, who immediately chops her head off with an axe that has appeared out of nowhere. The police's inspection of the scene and arrest takes place in seconds, and instead of a detailed description, there is a dialogue in verse to further reinforce this element being an object of the scene, and not a detailed literary description. To further concentrate the scenic time, there are no pauses in the scene to signify the passing of time outside the scene, but conversely, everything is juxtaposed and follows immediately from the previous action. For example, the police enter immediately after the murder: 'Having moved away from the body two paces, the bloody, reckless head lies on the floor. The dog Vera howls behind the doors. The police enter' (2001: 396). Similarly, the parents enter just as soon as the police and the nanny have left: 'POLICE Hey, cooks, quiet. Hurry up, hurry up, let's go. Good-bye, children. (A knocking on the door is heard. Puzyrov-father and Puzyrova-mother rush in)' (397).

To further highlight that what is taking place is a succession of scenic objects, with the action segmented into *bits* and inserted where necessary, and that it is not a linear-time action, the stage directions indicate that the ending time shown by the clock at the end of one scene is the same as the starting time of the following scene, even if this would be physically impossible outside the play. For example, after arresting the nanny and leaving at precisely midnight in the first scene of act one, the opening scene of act two, which takes place as the nanny is already at the police precinct, starts at the same time, midnight exactly. The moving of the nanny from the precinct to the asylum in the following scene is equally instantaneous. Following the Chinari's concept of time, all moments of time coexist at the same time, and usual chronological aspects are broken. Thus, the youngest child, aged one, apart from being the wisest of all the characters, already knows what will happen and when he will die, and he is seemingly commenting from an omniscient position after death on his current scenic age, as in these separate utterances:

ONE-YEAR-OLD BOY PETYA PEROV Will there be Christmas? There will be. Yet suddenly there will not be. Suddenly I will die.

PETYA PEROV (one-year-old boy) Don't worry. During my short life I will see even worse things.

PETYA PEROV (one-year-old boy) Only I will sit in the arms of the guests in turn, with a serious and stupid look, as if I understood nothing. I and invisible God.

PETYA PEROV (one-year-old boy) Daddy, Mummy, Uncle, Aunty, Nanny.
THE DOG VERA What are you saying? Come to your senses.
PETYA PEROV (one-year-old boy) I am now one year old. Don't forget. Daddy. Mummy. Uncle. Aunty. Fire. Cloud. Apple. Stone. Don't forget.
(He leaves the room in his nanny's arms, while pooping in his pants.)

It is also of note that the age range of the children encompasses eighty-one years. However, for the purposes of the dramatic piece, they are the seven girls and boys, with the oldest one being referred to as 'DUNYA SHUSTROVA—eighty-two-year-old girl.' This not only reinforces both that their role in the piece is more important than any external logic, and that the dramatical piece could not exist outside the theatre, but additionally, it serves as a practical application of Vvedensky's concept of time as the sum of all actions that has ever happened or will ever happen and the possibility of dialogue between temporarily distant eras, even after death, as when the family members announce their recent deaths:

MISHA PESTROV (seventy-six-year-old boy) I longed for longevity. There is no longevity. I have died.

…

PETYA PEROV (one-year-old boy) I want to die so much. Passionately. I am dying. I am dying. So, I have died.

Plot and characters

While it could be argued that there is indeed a plot in the play, murder-arrest-judgement-death of the whole family, this is used almost as an excuse for the

succession of scenes as objects of art, and bears no leading role. As was the case with time in the play, it is used as another element of the dramatic work, with no hierarchy whatsoever over other elements. The fact that the play ends with the death of everyone in the family for no logic-based reason further serves to lessen the relevance of the plot.

The family members are reduced to their age, gender and position, and their stated age does not correspond to their statements in the play. As it has already been mentioned, one-year-old Petya is extremely articulate and wise, while thirty-two-year-old Sonya apparently has not finished puberty yet, as these two instances show:

SONYA OSTROVA (thirty-two-year-old girl)	You, Misha, are always wrong. Better look at what has happened to my breasts.
DUNYA SHUSTROVA (eighty-two-year-old girl)	Bragging again. You bragged about the buttocks, now the breasts. Fear God.

SONYA OSTROVA (thirty-two-year-old girl)	And when I enter the hall, when they light the Christmas tree, I will hold up my skirt and show everything to everybody.
NANNY (becoming ferocious)	No, you won't. You have nothing to show—you are still little.

To reinforce this separation, each *child* has a different surname, which is in turn different from that of the parents. To further disconnect things, even the title does not seem to refer to any of the family members, but rather to the concept of a family, as not a single character has the surname Ivanov. This makes it impossible to have the associations that would have been made in the world outside theatre, making their characters and their role fully dependent on their function in the play, while turning the title into yet another independent element of the play in true Radiks fashion. For the *children*, it is more important that they are in the category of children rather than the connection to their parents. Even within the *children*, it is primary that they are *children* over being siblings. Any other characters that appear are mere stock characters reduced to their societal role, as in the characters list preceding the play: 'Nannies, policemen, woodcutters, a clerk, a medical attendant, a doctor, patients,

judges.' Additionally, these characters seem sometimes to be playing their roles against themselves. For example, the asylum doctor is terrified by the patients and is himself mad. Two judges die at the start of the trial, preferring death to fulfilling their role, and then the third judge refers to a different or imaginary case rather than focusing on the case at hand.

Language and dramatical devices

In *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, written a decade after *Elizaveta Bam*, there is a clash between private language and official language, which exposes the inadequacy and lack of agency of personal language in those situations, much in line with the oberiuts' surrounding reality. When the nanny is taken to an asylum for examination, firstly, the doctor declares her sane after one look and two sentences from the nanny. Then, he completely ignores any psychological ailments that the nanny expresses, until the nurse takes over speaking for the nanny to declare her healthy. There is also a fundamental incongruity in the whole dialogue in terms of the role of a doctor in a mental health institution, as he constantly equates physical health with mental health. This shows the weakness of the individual's language against official language and actions, as the doctor is completely uninterested in exactly that which he should be focusing on in order to evaluate a patient, their statements:

NANNY	I am mentally deranged. I killed a child.
DOCTOR	It is not good to kill children. You are healthy.
NANNY	I did not do it on purpose. I am mentally deranged. I can be executed[60].
DOCTOR	You are healthy. You have color in your face. Count to three.
NANNY	I can't.
ATTENDANT	One. Two. Three.
DOCTOR	You see, and yet you say you can't. You have a constitution of iron.
NANNY	I am talking desperately. I didn't count, your attendant did.
DOCTOR	At this point it is difficult to prove. Do you hear me?
ATTENDANT	I hear you. I am the nanny, I must hear everything.
NANNY	God, my life is ending. Soon I'll be executed.

[60] The original, 'Меня могут казнить', can be translated as 'I could be executed', which would express just the fear of being executed, instead of the more ambiguous 'can' which incorporates an element of the nanny understanding her crime and *allowing* the execution.

The inadequacy of language alone to communicate meaning is also shown by the fact that baby Petya, who has not been completely corrupted by language yet, is the most eloquent character, and the fact that Vera the dog's whims when seeing Sonya dead are equated with the most pertinent verses and lamentations about her death, even when there are lines in her declamation that lower the human-elevated tone of the rest of the verses – as is her mention of ham:

THE DOG VERA Around this coffin walk I
Looking carefully with my eye.
What could this death signify?
…
The corpse lies here freezing.
The taste of ham is pleasing.
Dulcinea is dead—no appeasing.

The fact that Petya and Vera the dog are able to communicate also shows that language is not a precondition for communication, since none of them can talk, but they understand each other, and the situation, better than any other character. Once adult characters enter the scene, the conversation becomes nonsensical:

PETYA PEROV I am the youngest—I wake up earlier than everybody else. I remember now that two years ago I didn't remember anything. I hear the dog reciting a speech in verse. She is crying ever so quietly.
…
THE DOG VERA I howl, I howl, I howl, I strive, Wishing Sonya were alive.
PETYA PEROV She was unusually indecent. And now it is frightening to look
(one-year-old boy) at her.
THE DOG VERA Are you not surprised that I speak and do not bark?
PETYA PEROV What can surprise me at my age? Relax.
(one-year-old boy)
…
(Misha Pestrov and Dunya Shustrova enter, mumbling and holding hands.)

MISHA PESTROV (seventy-six-year-old boy)	Happy day! Today is Christmas. Soon there will be glee.
DUNYA SHUSTROVA (eighty-two-year-old girl)	Not glee but a bee. Not a bee but a tree. Happy day. Happy day. Is Sonya sleeping?
THE DOG VERA	No, she is peeing.

Stone Nakhimovsky sees in the characters' language as an attempt by Vvedesnky to distance the spectator from any emotional aspects of the play, to reinforce psychology is to be rejected from theatre. He does this even more markedly for the reader of the staging note – for instance in the metadirections quoted below, which urge the reader to not be affected by what is happening –, a device which also finds a parallel in his poetry cycle 'A Certain Quantity of Conversations' (Vvedensky 2006).

There can be discerned in the play a use of gestures that become increasingly incongruous with what is happening. As an example, after the death of Sonya Ostrova, the actions of the parents become incongruous with such a reality, until finally the dialogue becomes aware of what is happening when the mother complains about the creaking of the sofa. Once the dialogue catches up with the gestures and actions, the incongruity disappears and all elements go back to being consequent with what is happening:

PUZYROV-FATHER	(cries) My little girl, Sonya, how can this be? How can this co be? In the morning you were still playing with the ball and running around as if alive.
PUZYROVA-MOTHER	Sonyechka. Sonyechka. Sonyechka. Sonyechka. Son-yechka. Sonyechka. Sonyechka.
…	
PUZYROVA-MOTHER	(powders herself) We wanted to celebrate Christmas for our children.
PUZYROV-FATHER	(kisses her) And we will celebrate, we will. No matter what.
PUZYROVA-MOTHER	(undresses herself) Oh, we will have a Christmas tree. The Christmas tree of all Christmas trees.
PUZYROV-FATHER	(his imagination on fire) You are my beauty, and the children are such sweethearts.

PUZYROVA-MOTHER (gives in to him) God, why does the sofa creak so? How awful this is.

PUZYROV-FATHER (having finished his business, he cries) God, our daughter has died, and we are here like beasts.

PUZYROVA-MOTHER (cries) Didn't die, didn't die, that's the thing. She was killed.

To mock and denounce anything that is not part of the scene itself, Vvedensky inserts plenty of authorial asides directed at anyone reading, instead of watching the play. These asides change nothing for the spectator, but they do tease the readers and alter their perception:

> (Scene 9, like all the previous ones, depicts events that took place six years before my birth or forty years before us. At least. So there is no need for us to get upset and grieve that somebody was killed. We didn't know any of them, and they all died, in any case. A couple of hours passed between Act 3 and Act 4. In front of the tightly closed doors stand the children, freshly washed, wreathed with flowers. The face on the clock to the left of the door shows six in the evening.)

The first part of the *directions* is clearly irrelevant to the performance of the play. Even more so since no new information is being given; at the start of the play, the directions state that the action takes place in the 1890s, which was indeed about forty years from the play, written in 1938. The author is also telling the reader what to feel, instead of letting the dramatic action alter the spectator's feelings. Then, as if to tease the reader, the author *spoils* the play for the readers by informing them, mid-play, that everyone in the play is dead, with the strong implication that this would be part of the play. After this, the *direction* 'a couple of hours passed between Act 3 and Act 4', is not only unnecessary – as two lines later, it is indicated what the clock should show –, but also serves only to confuse the reader, as Act 3 ends at 9 am, and Act 4 starts at 6 pm. This teasing and confusing of the reader could be thought of as double-sided. On the one hand, the dramaturge is *punishing* the reader for not experiencing this play in the theatre, and on the other hand, Vvedensky is introducing something specific for the reading experience, to differentiate the experienced play from the read play, and in order to make the reading of the play a more literary experience.

3. *The Bald Soprano*

Time and space

In *The Bald Soprano* (Ionesco 1958: 7–42), there is a patent lack of a timeframe or of any progression, which is reinforced by the absence of a plot. The circularity of the play, here, also helps achieve the destruction of linear time. This existence outside of time is made explicit by the Smiths:

> Mrs SMITH We don't have the time, here.
> FIRE CHIEF But the clock?
> Mr SMITH It runs badly. It is contradictory, and always indicates the opposite of what the hour really is. (34)

This is said after the spectator has been made aware of this implicitly throughout the play; when, in the play's opening scene, the clock chimes seventeen times, Mrs Smith says 'Look, it's nine o'clock.' Shortly after, the clock starts chiming randomly: '(Another moment of silence. The clock strikes seven times. Silence. The clock strikes three times. Silence. The clock doesn't strike)' (11). There is a kinship with the OBERIU's treatment of any element as having the same hierarchy as the characters in the treatment of time. The clock is imbued with volition and personality, and is reactive to what is happening on the scene, as is the case when it suddenly chimes in an extremely loud manner as Mrs and Mr Martin kiss after having realised they are a married couple, or as in these stage directions: '(We sense that there is a certain nervous irritation. The strokes of the clock are more nervous too)' (39). However, unlike the OBERIU, throughout the play, time is used in a parodying way – and always with the language-learning textbook style present –, as can be seen in these lines about the death of a Bobby Watson:

> Mr SMITH Why do you pretend to be astonished? You know very well that he's been dead these past two years. Surely you remember that we attended his funeral a year and a half ago. … It's been three years since his death was announced. … Poor Bobby, he'd been dead for four years and he was still warm. A veritable living corpse. (11–12)

Here, or in the following exchange, it is difficult to see any other intention than to achieve a comedic result through the use of language-learning textbooks' pitfalls:

> Mrs SMITH And when is there no competition?
> Mr SMITH On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Tuesdays.
> Mrs SMITH Ah! Three days a week? And what does Bobby Watson do on those days? (13)

Here, if anything is achieved at all apart from laughter, it could be argued to be to help increase the sense of chaos and instability in the play, but it would be difficult to affirm that it points towards the nature of time being non-linear in the Bergsonian sense.

Plot and characters

In the play, with its circular nature and lack of action, there is, as much as is the case with the other plays from Beckett or in Ionesco's early plays, no plot to speak of. However, this lack of plot, apart from being a deliberate mechanism to show that the play is specific to the scene and not a literary effort, unlike OBERIU theatre, also has the subdued existentialist vocation of showing the absurdity of man after the loss of faith in any positive knowledge, to decry the inadequacy of the reason-language tandem, and to ensure no assertion is made or authoritative intention discerned.

Even if, at first glance, it could be argued that the characters are placeholders for societal stereotypes, they are constantly subverting the characteristics of the stereotypes they are assigned to portray. The maid chastises the guests for being late, Mr Smith has no qualms in angrily complaining to his guests for being late, right after Mrs Smith has excused herself for making the guests wait. Mrs Smith inadequately kisses the firefighter in front of everyone and calls him charming, the firefighter is shy about asking whether there is a fire in the house. This parody brings to the front social conventions and formalities and forces the spectator to query them. The passage where all the Bobby Watsons appear would seem especially relevant here. It is reminiscent of the passage in *Elizaveta Bam* where she is called by three different patronymics in the same utterance. However, while in *Elizaveta Bam* this was used as a device to rob the character of her identity, in *The Bald Soprano*, this passage

should be viewed through the more negative lenses of the inadequacy of language, and therefore, it will be analysed below.

A further element that is worth noting in what pertains the plot is the final scene, where the Martins repeat exactly what happened at the start of the play in place of the Smiths, thus further depriving any of the Smiths or Martins of any personal traits – who are shown to be completely interchangeable – while additionally providing the play with its circular, absurd structure. Lastly, it is relevant to point out the evolution of this ending. In its initial form – the early, 1934, Romanian version of the play –, the ending was altogether different. The public was indiscriminately shot at by armed state representatives after remonstrating against the author. This more markedly nihilating and politically-charged ending was in turn changed into the Smiths reprising their initial roles, in a clear change of direction towards the absurd after the war – which then was changed again to see the Martins take the role of the Smiths after several initial performances. This points towards the evolution of the play from its pre-Second World War, totalitarian context, to the postwar Paris scenario, and how the absurd inanity of life and even the inconsequential and interchangeable nature of personal lives after the many-sided loss of faith of society was increasingly brought to the forefront.

Language and dramatical devices

If Beckett's characters are isolated from society by their status as tramps or social oputcasts, it can be argued that Ionesco's characters, while being the opposite of a tramp in their social status, share with them the same isolation from the world and from others. Ionesco's play can be said to be a performative show of the crisis of language, so central to his thought at the time. Ionesco himself, while analysing his own play in *Notes and Counter-Notes*, makes this explicitly clear. Therefore, even more than existential angst or a critique of the bourgeois way of life, *The Bald Soprano*'s main theme is language. As is the case with the rest of the Theatre of the Absurd works, language is used derisively to show its inadequacy and the impossibility of communication. In the Bergsonian sense, the characters have become automatised machines contempt with speaking in clichés and expressions completely devoid of meaning. It is by now a widely known fact that the characters in Ionesco's

play do not listen to each other and are incapable of communicating amongst each other. The play starts with Mrs Smith talking to Mr Smith about something mundane, but this is in fact a soliloquy, as Mr Smith's replies are unfailingly in the form of a clack of the tongue, his attention focused on the newspaper he is reading. The play is filled with examples of this lack of communication, as in the exchange where Mr Martin agrees with a word that has not been pronounced yet by Mr Smith:

Mr SMITH Hm… hm… you two are very touching, but at the same tie, a little … a little…

Mr MARTIN Yes, that's exactly the word.

Mr SMITH …A little too exhibitionistic… (35-6).

This lack of communication rears its head here and there until the climatic end, where all communication breaks down in pieces, and the utterances of the characters devolve first into pseudo idiomatic nonsensical phrases, then into plainly nonsensical clichés and idioms, and language-learning book phrases, until it completely dissolves into cacophonic sounds, numbers and letters, angrily shouted at each other:

Mr SMITH One walks on his feet, but one heats with electricity or coal.

…

Mrs MARTIN One can sit down on a chair, when the chair doesn't have any.

…

Mrs SMITH Benjamin Franklin was right; you are more nervous than me.

…

Mr SMITH Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. [In English in the original French version].

Mr MARTIN Edward is a clerk; his sister Nancy is a typist, and his brother William a shop assistant. [In English in the original French version].

…

Mr SMITH Cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos.

…

Mrs MARTIN B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z! (38-41)

After this, however, the four characters start to think and speak as one, until they are in complete synchrony:

Mr SMITH	It's!
Mrs MARTIN	Not!
Mr MARTIN	That!
Mrs SMITH	Way!
Mr SMITH	It's!
Mrs MARTIN	O!
Mr MARTIN	Ver!
Mrs SMITH	Here!
…	
ALL TOGETHER	It's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here! (41–2)

This could be seen as the complete annihilation of communication, since the characters have now abandoned the idea of talking to each other and are just shouting as one voice into the void. Another passage that is worth focusing on is the Bobby Watson exchanges. The first mention of there being more than one Bobby Watson could be seen as an attempt to show how irrelevant and inadequate language can be in the world by completely tipping over the convention. It is said that Bobby Watson and her husband Bobby Watson were indistinguishable from people when they were seen together because they had the same name. By turning it around, it is thus shown how empty the name is and how incapable of saying anything about the person it is, something that can be extrapolated to any word, as a denunciation of the distance and asymmetry between reference and the referenced. However this is then, again, taken into a parodic situation, reminiscent of a music hall or clownish performance at the moment the Smiths start talking about the Watsons and get utterly confused:

Mrs SMITH	Who? Bobby Watson?
Mr SMITH	Which Bobby Watson do you mean?
Mrs SMITH	Why, Bobby Watson, the son of old Bobby Watson, the late Bobby Watson's other uncle.

Mr SMITH No, it's not that one, it's someone else. (13)

The following example could be interpreted in a similar vein, but it is also a more mundane use of language-learning textbook exercises for comic effect, as Mr Smith is focused on using the words necessary for the exercise in detriment of the sentences being coherent:

Mrs SMITH I've never seen her. Is she pretty?

Mr SMITH She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin. She's a voice teacher. (12)

A final point to be made, much in line with Beckett's oeuvre, is the constant contradiction of any statement made in the play, which brings to the forefront both the fact that there is no inherent truth in language, and that language can be used to transmit misinformation, rather knowledge, as well as the fact that language is devoid of any power and impotent to affect change, as can be seen in these instances:

Mr SMITH Fortunately, they had no children.

…

Mrs SMITH But who would take care of the children? You know very well that they have a boy and a girl. What are their names? (12-3)

Mr MARTIN You are my own wife … Elizabeth, I have found you again!

…

Mrs MARTIN Donald, it's you, darling!

…

MARY I can … let you in on a secret. Elizabeth is not Elizabeth, Donald is not Donald. (18-19)

FIRE CHIEF I should like to remove my helmet, but I haven't the time to sit down. (He sits down, without removing his helmet.) (27)

Mr SMITH It's a useless precaution, but absolutely necessary. (34)

In competition with the word on stage, while cacophony and rhythm are used in the scene for a climatic effect at the end of the play, there are incongruous gestures and moods that sabotage the text throughout:

> Mr SMITH We didn't do it on purpose.
> MARY (bursts into laughter, then she bursts into tears. Then she smiles): I bought me a chamber pot. (14-5)
>
> Mr MARTIN (Mrs Martin … surprised by his solemn air, has also gotten up very quietly. Mr Martin, in the same, flat, monotonous voice, slightly sing-sog); Then, dear lady, … you are my own wife … Elizabeth, I have found you again!
> (Mrs Martin approaches Mr Martin without haste. They embrace without expression). (18-9)

As previously mentioned, the clock with its constant chiming is given a place equal to any of the characters, even something of a personality. From the start, the clock chimes are central to the piece. With its seventeen chimes, it already sets the scene askew, displacing the action from reality to an *unreal*, theatrical setting. It is worth noting that the clock is not mentioned in the stage directions, only the sound. This absence of a visible source of the sound helps remove the action from a physical place and transport it into a liminal, undefined area outside of time and space. At some point, Ionesco makes the passage of time explicit, rather than implicit, to further reinforce that it is in fact dramatical time, and not real life time, when a long pause in the dialogue between Mrs and Mr Martin is filled with twenty-nine chimes of the clock.

Apart from verbal language being shown to be of no use as a means of communication, there is no physical communication either, as one of the work's main aims is to show the total crisis of language and communication. Whenever the characters kiss, for example, it is in a completely dispassionate manner – as do Mrs and Mr Martin – or the kiss is socially inadequate – Mrs Smith to the firefighter. Physical violence, a way to transcend failed attempts at communicating for the

oberiuts – and even Beckett at times –, although hovering over Ionesco's play as a faint malignant force, never materialises.

4. *Waiting for Godot*

Time and space

Waiting for Godot (Beckett 2011), needless to say, is the quintessential play without a timeframe and that simultaneously happens in a liminal, undetermined space. This existence firmly outside of time and space has been extensively explored in academic literature, and so a comprehensive re-exploration of these features presents as unnecessary. Any reference to time is used to show the lack of *earthly* time in the play, and to lay bare the device of theatre. For example, the tree in the play goes from completely bare to having some leaves in one night, night comes suddenly and the moon rushes to its place at the end of acts one and two: '(The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night. The moon rises at back, mounts in the sky, stands still, shedding a pale light on the scene)' (49). Pozzo and Lucky have supposedly been in their master-slave relationship for 60 years, and Vladimir and Estragon have supposedly 'been together all the time' for 50 years, Estragon is unable to remember almost anything that happened the day before, and when he does, he is not sure of when it happened:

ESTRAGON	I remember a lunatic who kicked the shins off me. Then he played the fool.
VLADIMIR	That was Lucky.
ESTRAGON	I remember that. But when was it?
VLADIMIR	And his keeper, do you not remember him?
ESTRAGON	He gave me a bone.
VLADIMIR	That was Pozzo.
ESTRAGON	And all that was yesterday, you say? (56)

The lack of a plot, its repetitiveness, its circularity, the bareness of the scenes and any meaningful action in the play further reinforce this existence outside of time. The primacy of dramatic time is thus protected. What happens in the scene has its own

time reference, outside real-world time to separate the dramatic world from the mundane world.

Plot and characters

The lack of a plot is essential for the play, as it is a piece about nothing happening, all the time. Any plot elements would destroy the aim of showing humanity's limbo-like situation in the postapocalyptic reality of postwar Europe. The absence of a plot is further reinforced by the marked repetitiveness of the actions in the play, the lack of effective communication between the characters, as well as the circularity of the play, with both acts being variations of the same day, and the opening Englishman joke also serving to end the play. In true Beckettian fashion, there is an enveloping nothingness throughout the play and an incomplete quality to the action which introduces unexplained elements, as the unjustified beatings of Estragon. Lastly, Vladimir and Estragon lack any physical traits that could differentiate them, and adiditionaly, any definitive markers are deconstructed, as can be seen in the fact that names are changed to the more clownish and cacophonic Didi and Gogo, which further makes their initially dissimilar names more abutting. Even Godot has his name put into doubt:

VLADIMIR	To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment.
ESTRAGON	His name is Godot?
VLADIMIR	I think so. (17)

Additionally, whenever any physical trait is mentioned, it is subsequently erased or doubt is cast about it, as can be seen in these exchanges:

VLADIMIR	You're lighter than I am.
ESTRAGON	Just so!
…	
ESTRAGON	Gogo light—bough not break—Gogo dead. Didi heavy—bough break
(with effort)	Didi alone. Whereas—
VLADIMIR	I hadn't thought of that.
ESTRAGON	If it hangs you it'll hang anything.

VLADIMIR But am I heavier than you?

ESTRAGON So you tell me. I don't know. There's an even chance. Or nearly. (14)

POZZO You are severe. (To Vladimir.) What age are you, if it's not a rude question? (Silence.) Sixty? Seventy? (To Estragon.) What age would you say he was?

ESTRAGON Eleven. (24)

This lack of certainty and the complete lack of traits has an added reverberation in their connection to the wider socio-philosophical context. While for the OBERIU authors this could be a way to reflect the lack of individuality and agency in proletarian Russia, for the Theatre of the Absurd authors this could be said to be more connected to the philosophical absurd of existentialism, where humans are lost in their aim to achieve any meaning in their lives. This lack of agency can be seen in other representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd, as in Adamov's *The Parody*, in which the two main characters' actions or lack thereof make no difference at all towards their shared aim, while some placeholder societal characters achieve this same aim almost against their will and seem to navigate life and society with an ease that is out of reach for the individual.

Language and dramatical devices

Communication between Vladimir and Estragon is completely ineffective and repetitive, serving more to fill the void or pass time than to communicate anything meaningful. Especially in their interactions with Pozzo, who is the placeholder for societal structure and power, the characters speak past each other and no communication is achieved. As can be seen in the following excerpt, only when Estragon abandons the use of the expected language and resorts to gibberish, does Pozzo stop his soliloquy and pays attention to what Vladimir and Estragon have been asking:

POZZO Perhaps I haven't got it quite right. He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him. No, that's not exactly it either.

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?

POZZO He wants to con me, but he won't.

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?

POZZO He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him on in that capacity.

ESTRAGON You've had enough of him?

POZZO In reality he carries like a pig. It's not his job.

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?

POZZO … Well, that's that, I think. Anything else? (Vaporizer.)

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?

POZZO Remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due.

VLADIMIR You waagerrim?

POZZO I beg your pardon?

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?

POZZO I do. … (28)

When asked what to tell Godot, instead of a message, Estragon tells the boy to tell Godot that he actually saw them. This *message* is not such; as the boy would have said so or it would have been implied upon his return, it is in fact an expression of Vladimir's wish to be seen by God, to be able to break that indifference that makes him doubt his own existence.

Further dramatical devices that undermine language throughout the play are the innumerable misunderstandings,

VLADIMIR Godot?

ESTRAGON Yes.

POZZO I present myself: Pozzo.

VLADIMIR (to Estragon). Not at all!

ESTRAGON He said Godot.

VLADIMIR Not at all!

ESTRAGON (timidly, to Pozzo). You're not Mr Godot, Sir?

POZZO (terrifying voice). I am Pozzo! (Silence.) Pozzo!

…

ESTRAGON (pretending to search). Bozzo… Bozzo… (19)

the numerous repetitions,

VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?
POZZO He wants to con me, but he won't.
VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?
…
POZZO In reality he carries like a pig. It's not his job.
VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him?
POZZO … (Vaporizer.)
VLADIMIR You want to get rid of him? (28)

and the general lack of understanding

VLADIMIR … One of the thieves was saved. (Pause.) It's a reasonable percentage. (Pause.) Gogo.
ESTRAGON What?
VLADIMIR Suppose we repented.
ESTRAGON Repented what? (7)

VLADIMIR Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?
ESTRAGON No.
VLADIMIR Shall I tell it to you?
ESTRAGON No.
VLADIMIR It'll pass the time. (Pause.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One—
ESTRAGON Our what?
VLADIMIR Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (he searches for the contrary of saved) . . . damned.
ESTRAGON Saved from what?
VLADIMIR Hell.
…
ESTRAGON Who?
VLADIMIR What?
ESTRAGON What's all this about? Abused who?
VLADIMIR The Saviour.
ESTRAGON Why?

VLADIMIR Because he wouldn't save them.

ESTRAGON From hell?

VLADIMIR Imbecile! From death.

ESTRAGON I thought you said hell.

…

VLADIMIR: … Why believe him rather than the others?

ESTRAGON Who believes him?

VLADIMIR Everybody. It's the only version they know.

ESTRAGON People are bloody ignorant apes. (8-9)

Apart from these devices which permeate the play, much like the rest of his oeuvre, Beckett seems to have the compulsion or the perverse pleasure of having his characters contradict or reject any positive statement that is made, which, in an existentialist vein, serves to reinforce both the impotence of language to arrive at any truth and the angst of living with no certainties after the overarching loss of faith. The play is filled with these types of mental leaps and backtracking:

ESTRAGON You're sure it was this evening?

VLADIMIR What?

ESTRAGON That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think.

…

ESTRAGON (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

ESTRAGON We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR Ah no, there you're mistaken.

…

ESTRAGON If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today.

VLADIMIR But you say we were here yesterday.

ESTRAGON I may be mistaken. (11)

VLADIMIR You're lighter than I am.

…

ESTRAGON If it hangs you it'll hang anything.

VLADIMIR But am I heavier than you?
ESTRAGON So you tell me. I don't know. There's an even chance. Or nearly. (14)

VLADIMIR Let's wait and see what he says.
…
ESTRAGON Good idea.
VLADIMIR Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.
ESTRAGON On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes. (14)

Turning our attention to the dramatical devices, the use of the hats in the play has widely been discussed in the academic sphere. For the present purposes, suffice it to say that there is a transparent implication that the characters cannot think without their hats, or more accurately, that the hats do their thinking for them, as it is explicitly mentioned in the play:

VLADIMIR (to Pozzo) Tell him to think.
POZZO Give him his hat.
VLADIMIR His hat?
POZZO He can't think without his hat.
VLADIMIR (to Estragon) Give him his hat.
(38-9)

POZZO His hat!
(Vladimir seizes Lucky's hat. Silence of Lucky. He falls. Silence. Panting of the victors.)
ESTRAGON Avenged!
(Vladimir examines the hat, peers inside it.)
POZZO Give me that! (He snatches the hat from Vladimir, throws it on the ground, tramples on it.) There's an end to his thinking! (42)

This is also implicitly stated in the piece, as the characters almost never take their hats off. That is, apart from the one time when they do. Even if confused and stumbling at first, they manage to understand each other using logic and reason better than at any other point in the play. As soon as they put their hats back on, reason-created concepts like existential angst come back to their speech:

POZZO He refused once. (Silence.) Dance, misery!

(Lucky puts down bag and basket, advances towards front, turns to Pozzo. Lucky dances. He stops.)

…

(All three take off their hats simultaneously, press their hands to their foreheads, concentrate.)

ESTRAGON (triumphantly) Ah!

VLADIMIR He has it.

POZZO (impatient) Well?

ESTRAGON Why doesn't he put down his bags?

VLADIMIR Rubbish!

POZZO Are you sure?

VLADIMIR Damn it haven't you already told us?

POZZO I've already told you?

ESTRAGON He's already told us?

VLADIMIR Anyway he has put them down.

ESTRAGON (glance at Lucky) So he has. And what of it?

VLADIMIR Since he has put down his bags it is impossible we should have asked why he does not do so.

POZZO Stoutly reasoned!

ESTRAGON And why has he put them down?

POZZO Answer us that.

VLADIMIR In order to dance.

ESTRAGON True!

POZZO True!

(Silence. They put on their hats.)

ESTRAGON Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful! (37-8)

The hats thus, as an artificial element foreign to the body, represent the language and ideas that have been placed inside peoples' heads by society and science, which did not belong to the virginal mind. It is thus shown how language and knowledge make people unable to think for themselves, so that any effort to escape the tyranny of language and received knowledge is futile with the sabres of learnt truisms.

The use of physicality in the play serves to further devalue the role of language. Estragon seems to only understand physical pain. When Lucky starts his monologue, he is also able to yank the rope towards him, instead of constantly being pulled by it, while before being told to speak, his only communication is his kicking of Estragon's shin. When the boy speaks with Vladimir, Vladimir gets tired of and angry with the child, who represents a message, and tries to physically grab him to ensure he exists.

The distance between the dramatic action and the external world is reinforced by actions like the inability of Lucky, Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon to get up from the ground by the mere fact of having fallen. After having requested help to get up for a long time, Pozzo is suddenly able to get up when violence, instead of language, is employed:

ESTRAGON	Make him stop it. Kick him in the crotch.
VLADIMIR	(striking Pozzo). Will you stop it! Crablouse! (Pozzo extricates himself with cries of pain and crawls away. He stops, saws the air blindly, calling for help. Vladimir, propped on his elbow, observes his retreat.) He's off! (Pozzo collapses.) He's down! (79)

Afterwards, Vladimir and Estragon are able to get up when they choose to do so:

ESTRAGON	Suppose we got up to begin with?
VLADIMIR	No harm trying.
(They get up.)	
ESTRAGON	Child's play.
VLADIMIR	Simple question of will-power. (80)

Conclusion: non-literary theatre

Characters, plot, space, time, and dramatical devices

Even though the theatre of these four authors was influenced by what were considered low forms of theatre, be it balagan, commedia dell'arte, or the music hall -where instead of multifaceted characters, there can be found placeholders or stock characters -, these authors took this lack of traits a step further, by either making the characters' personalities - and even their names - changeable or by completely

removing any traits in them. This, again, was a conceited effort to remove any association between the dramatic scene and the outside or literary world, and to make characters mere vehicles for the dramatic action, with as few details as possible to distract from this. There is no plot to speak of in any of these works. All of the authors rejected a literature-based dramatic plot and aimed towards the dramatic work having its own specificity, which exists outside the realm of prose and verse. It was in the accumulation and clashes between different scenes or actions that the dramatic piece achieved its internal logic, something that could only be witnessed and intuited in the theatre, but that would not work in prose or verse form. While three of the plays have some minimal geographical-spatial reference – the action of *Elizaveta Bam* takes place in a Russian city apartment, *Christmas at the Ivanovs'* takes place in a Russian house and a Russian hospital, *The Bald Soprano* takes place in UK suburbia –, neither of the four plays makes reference to any concrete markers, like a specific place, street, etc., nor do they give any description of the house or apartment where the action takes place. Beckett, of course, in line with the rest of his oeuvre, takes this one step further placing the characters in a spatial-temporal no-man's-land, with his meagre scene setting: '(A country road. A tree. Evening)' (WG: 5). The only further element that is ever mentioned being a 'low mound.' This is a clear indication of all of the authors' belief in the primacy of dramatical conventions over life outside the stage, and over literary conventions.

Notwithstanding this abandonment of references to the outside world, Kharms' play is notable in the way the décor is another actor in the play. At various moments during the action, the backcloth is moved forward or backwards so that it is the scene that moves instead of the actors, and at points the scene comes alive, as in the trembling of the scenic elements towards the end of the play. If there is a unifying aspect in all of these works apart from their preoccupation with language, it would have to be time. All four of them exist either firmly outside of time or scenic time is clearly separated from time outside the theatre to ensure time is just another scenic element, rather than the unmovable, linear time outside the scene. There is a marked use of clowning, gestures unaccompanied by utterances or gestures that contradict what has been said, sounds, etc. that can only exist on stage and are separated from the literary medium. These dramatical devices, in their interplay with

or against language, represent the primacy of the dramatic medium over any other art form for the purposes of the play.

Language

Language specifically could be said to be the raison d'être of these plays, or, in other words, the protagonist. This is a remarkable consequence of the authors' aim to reject or subdue the literary-scented plot on the stage. By removing the primacy of the wordy literary plot, the authors transposed this communicative impetus into the form of the plays and the examination of the role of language within the play. Together with extraliterary elements like movements, gestures, and sounds, language represents the main element of the plays in detriment of a logical sequence of events. The role of language is also multifaceted. On the one hand, the authors show in their plays the inadequacy of language as the *sole* means of communicating meaning, as well as its potential automation and perversion. On the other hand, maybe with the exception of Ionesco, for whom language is impotent to affect any action or change and has no positive attribute other than to create comic situations for the spectator, language acquires a commanding role in the plays, making it, and not the characters' actions – with the exception of the use of violence in Beckett's plays, which in any event could be considered an alternative language – or the societal power dynamics, the only way to affect a change. This could be said to be double-edged. On the one hand it serves to represent the language of power, where statements by the powers that be are almighty and above any truth, reasoning or common sense. On the other hand, especially in Kharms' piece, hope is left open with the idea that art, which is represented here as language, can be used to affect change.

In *Elizaveta Bam*, the chasing that happens in the apartment is predominantly a language fight. At some point Elizaveta takes the upper hand by declaring 'Hurray, I haven't said a thing!', but in the end the persecutors win the day with a rotund 'Follow us.' In *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, once she has been processed at the precinct, the nanny is robbed of any agency the next time she speaks by having her speech taken over by the nurse at the asylum. From then on she does not utter a word, until her final words at the trial, 'I cannot live', which only serve to communicate to the secretary what she wants to hear, and not the angst the nanny was expressing. This in turn relates to the context Vvedensky was living in, and to how the average

person's language and reason were completely impotent against the official language. In *Waiting for Godot*, the slave is able to rise against the master by the sole use of language, regardless of his perceived lack of agency and servient position the moment he starts his monologue and everyone runs about in desperation.

Be that as it may, even though in Beckett's plays characters can at times affect a change in their societal status through language, these escapades are ever ultimately futile. As such, in spite of their shared preoccupation with language, it could be argued that the Theatre of the Absurd and the OBERIU differ significantly in their understanding of language in theatre. While both of them rejected rationalism and the dominance of the plot on the stage, the Petersburgian plays, in opposition to those from Paris, reinforce, rather than diminish the power of language, even when the consequences of this are dire for the individual.

Chapter IV. Comparative study of prose: an overview

When the average Western person thinks about the absurd, it is safe to say their mind will most likely be directed towards *Waiting for Godot* or *The Bald Soprano*. Theatre seems to be the ideal playground for the expression of the absurd for the many representational possibilities it opens up, especially in its paths freeing from verbal language. If these pieces are relevant and widely played for today's audiences, it is because they managed to perfectly express the absurd by absurd means, while avoiding lecturing the spectator. When it comes to prose, however, the representation of the absurd seems to come less naturally to the text. Prose is, after all, the medium of reason and academic discourse par excellence; it is the outlet for cold, calculated, measured expression. It could be asked then how an author can use this very same mode of expression to faithfully express the absurd, both in content and form, in the artistic medium, so that the author is not just writing a philosophical treaty on the absurd. If the above-mentioned average person were to be asked to think about absurd prose, needless to say they will come up with the names of Camus, Sartre and even Kafka. The reader may ask themselves, then, why the works of authors like Camus are not part of this comparative study of prose. The answer, as already alluded to in previous chapters, is that these writers failed to use absurd means when dealing with the absurd in literature. Notwithstanding the great achievement of their works, there is nothing remarkably absurd in the formal aspects of *Nausea* or *The Stranger*, as the absurd is solely exposed in the content of the traditional lines of prose the works contain. As such, in terms of the absurd, these novels are attempts to translate these authors' philosophies into the prose medium. They are not examples, as is the case with the authors included in this analysis, of a faithful and complete representation of the absurd both in form and in content.

Beckett is the most notable exponent of this attempt to truly express the absurd within the mid-twentieth century Parisian absurd. Although clearly influenced by Existentialism, the fact that he was brought up with Modernism, seems to have given him the means of malleating language to achieve absurd ends. The diffusely metaphysical vein of his oeuvre helps in distancing his work from the existentialist philosophical absurd of other adjoining writers. All these elements serve to close the

gap between Beckett and the oberiuts. Such is the proximity between them, that it has begot a monograph on Beckett and Kharms' similarities – and differences – (Tokarev 2002). Kharms is the main exponent of OBERIU prose with his short pieces. As in Beckett's case with Modernism, the fact that Kharms was brought up in the midst of Russian Futurism, as well as his own experiments with language, gave him an ample toolkit with which to approach the absurd in prose with absurd means. The OBERIU's brand of absurd clearly had a universal, all-encompassing aim, and was undoubtedly metaphysical and connected with the divine. Even if the 'death of God' – concurrently with the rise of Stalinism – in his oeuvre can be said to be a central cause of the hapless condition of his contemporaries, it could be argued, as Carrick (1998) does, that Kharms' of a negative theology persuasion, which urges the reader to restore the moral and the divine in life. In addition to this, his characters at times could be seen as ascetics or *yurodivie* by the misery in which they live, and the hardship they endure.

Another common thread in the prose of Kharms and Beckett, as pointed out by numerous academics, is the fact that the absurd in their works is not contained to the text itself, but overflows into unsettling the roles of the writer and the reader. As such, many works mention Kharms and Beckett as some of the earliest examples of Postmodernism because of their focus on the process of writing itself and the role of the reader. Another member of OBERIU, Vaginov, is included in the present analysis, and serves to illustrate these postmodern tendencies to the most extreme degree for such an early attempt. He has been included, not so much for his treatment of the absurd, but by the manner in which his novels deal with the process of writing and reading, as well as his portrait of the increasingly absurd position of the intelligentsia after the Revolution. In a parallel fashion with Kharms, Vaginov's output evolved from a verse interested in futurist devices and experimentation, into a progressively postmodern prose – with the caveat that he always had an interest in Neoclassical culture and did not reject Symbolism as sharply as other futurists. There is even a clear arch in the short period when he wrote his four novels, from the first, written in 1927, *The Goat Song*, to the last, written in 1933, *Harpagoniana*. As it will be shown, while in *The Goat Song*, the authority of the writer is cast into doubt, by the publication of *Harpagoniana*, they have completely lost their authoritative voice,

which becomes no more important than the discourse of the characters. Of Kharms too it could be said that, apart from his overarching move from verse into prose, there was an arch in within his prose output. Not only were his ministories, like those in *Incidents*, increasingly violent, grotesque, and self-destructive – after his initial stimulus to transport Futurism-inspired concepts into prose –, but by its late manifestations, like is the case in 'The Old Woman', it could be possible to argue that it is almost completely lacking in any of these Futurism-inspired ideas. As previously noted, even his close friend and fellow OBERIU member Vvedensky is said to have told Druskin, after leaving a private reading of 'The Old Woman', 'myself, I haven't abandoned left art.' Vvedensky's understanding of Kharms' evolution finds its analogue in his works, since he never abandoned verse as his preferred form of artistic expression – which, in turn, explains why none of his works are included in this chapter.

The link between the Kharms, Vaginov, Beckett and Postmodernism that has been established by several scholars will form part of the discussion of the authors and their works. Notwithstanding that, as a preamble, it is worth shortly delving into the field of metafiction, so intrinsically connected to Postmodernism, and which has been often attached to the authors in this exploration as well. For that, we shall turn to Patricia Waugh's seminal work, *Metafiction* (1984), for an illuminating definition of the term:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality … such writings … explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

This latter characterisation of metafiction as extending into the world outside the text – and how reality is equally mediated – is the key to differentiate it from a purely formalist understanding, and proves to be much more yielding than a closed-system conception of literature. In a Bakhtinian tint, metafiction also changes the role of the reader into an active one, as they become a 'fully active player in a new conception of literature as a collective creating rather than a monologic and authoritative version of history' (43). Taking the baton from Waugh, Graham Roberts sees an analogue in

Kharms and Vaginov's – and Vvedensky's – exploration of the authority of the writer, the role of the reader and the relationships that exist between the world and language as concerns their ontology. He goes on to paraphrase Raymond Federman (1978: 122) to conclude that these writers 'engage in the act of searching, in their fiction itself, for the meaning of what it means to write fiction, to read fiction, and to exist as fiction' (Roberts 1997: 172). By virtue of metafictional features present in their works like 'the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator', 'ostentatious typographic experiment', 'infinite regress', 'dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names', 'critical discussions of the story within the story', 'continuous undermining of fictional conventions' (Waugh 1984: 21-2) – which in turn could also be argued to be present in Beckett's novels –, Roberts inscribes the OBERIU in a transitional position between Modernism and Postmodernism (1997: 176), following the tradition of self-conscious writing initiated by Gogol, or even Pushkin.

After this initial exposition, what follows is a synthesis of each author's prose, the exploration of samples from their oeuvre, and a comparative analysis of the most pertinent characteristics of their prose; it will include as well an exploration of the Petersburg Text. The reader may realise that, while there is an examination of the role of Petersburg in the oberiuts' tradition, there is not an examination of Paris within the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. This is explained by the fact that, following the tradition of the Petersburg Text, Petersburg can be said to be a dominant character in the OBERIU's output, with special emphasis in Vaginov's novels. It is impossible to analyse or understand the OBERIU without understanding the tradition of liminality, artificiality and grotesqueness of the Petersburg in which their works are inscribed, as much as it would not be possible for the oberiuts' works to have existed outside this literary ecosystem. On the other hand, Paris cannot be said to have much of a relevant place in the Theatre of the Absurd's drama or prose. For example, Ionesco's most famous work, *The Bald Soprano*, does not even take place in France, but in the United Kingdom. Beckett's plays and novels, on their part, can only be said to exist outside space and time. Regardless of the geographical and urban markers, there is not an equivalent 'Paris Text' semiosphere from which it can be said that the works of the Parisian absurd sprang.

1. The Petersburg Text

The Petersburg Text, a term coined by Vladimir Toporov[61] in the 1970s to refer to a concept intuitively felt by previous Petersburgian authors, refers to the works created in this quintessentially literary city that inscribe into a specific semiosphere and supratextual unity, mainly during the century spanning from the 1830s until the 1930s, although there is scholarly discussion as to whether it continued to exist afterwards.

The creation of Petersburg at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Peter the Great's decree, in an essentially empty and unwelcoming space, at the mouth of a river, on the outskirts of Russia and with a view of Europe, with its rational and well thought of plan, is an integral part of the subsequent myth and duality of the city. All these elements set the scene from the start for a confrontation between the natural and the artificial, with the artificial inevitably married to culture from that moment on. The city was 'a challenge to Nature and struggles with it', creating the duality of either 'a victory of reason over the elements' or 'a perversion of the natural order' (Lotman 1990: 192). This led to the double view of Petersburg as an eternal 'Rome' and a doomed 'Rome' (194), and the associated eschatological connotations that will stubbornly remain of the latter. These two extremes proved irreconcilable, and it is this same antimony that is the essential pillar of the Petersburg's ethos and the Petersburg Text. This *cultural* unnaturalness is clear in the commonly mythologised contrast as an anti-Moscow in literature, where Moscow is seen as a concrete, organic, almost natural body that grew without a plan (Toporov 2003), instead of an artificial or fictional body imposed on nature. This also led to the inversion of rock and water in the Peterburg text, where water is ever present, and the only concrete reality, while stone is seen, not as something primordial, but artificial, temporary and movable (Lotman 1990: 193). In this view, the whole of the artificial, quarried stone of the Petersburg ensemble is a stone floating on water thanks to the unnatural and demonic artifice of culture that insists on its ontological reality, but that is ultimately

[61] Even though Toporov developed his concept from the 1970s, his essential monograph, which compiled his previous writings about the topic with a monographic aim, is *The Petersburg Text of Russian Literature* (2003). This is the work that will be referenced throughout this chapter and this study, whenever Toporov is mentioned.

fated to sink to the bottom once the artifice realises its empty nature, and the natural, divine order is restored.

The artificiality of its creation, as well as Petersburg's position *at the end of the world* or in a *threshold*, also created from the start a duality that confronted the sacred and the divine with the demonic. According to this, Petersburg has a markedly spiritual core, as its essence is not divided between the spiritual and the non-spiritual, but within a religious framework is composed of the duality of heaven-hell. The attack on and rationalisation of nature brought about by Peter the Great, as well as his perceived attacks on Orthodoxy through his religious edits, confronted with the possibility of doom brought about by this and the eventual triumph of nature, set the stage for a duality that has since remained. What this has meant for the Petersburg Text is a marked spiritual nature and the always present possibility of salvation after descending into the abysmal depths of evil, access to which, making use of Gogol's imagery, is unobstructed through Petersburg's wide-open mouth of hell.

Peter the Great's sweeping reforms that accompanied the creation of Petersburg, with a marked orientation towards Europeanisation and the rejection of old Russia as an Eastern nation embodied by Moscow, also created the special circumstances of Petersburg outsideness, both to Russia and to Europe. As such, Lotman (1990: 195) indicates the permanent self-evaluation and self-awareness of the city, which is conscious of its own oddity. As such, it always 'presupposes an external observer', be it with a 'view from Europe' or a 'view from Russia (i.e. "view from Moscow")', thus representing an 'Asia in Europe' or a 'Europe in Russia.' This outsideness and defamiliarisation brought about an intrinsic theatricality to Petersburg's reality right from the start. As masterfully illustrated by Lotman (Lotman and Uspensky 1984: 231-258), instead of a 'natural' – in the sense of unconscious – development of their behaviour, the nobility had to learn how to behave socially due to Peter the Great's insistence on adapting and following the European nobles' behaviour. As such, numerous manuals on the *correct* behaviour appeared and the nobility had to learn this as already fully formed adults. Thus, in order to be a member of this new society, one had to behave like a foreigner in their own country. As such, everyday reality was aestheticised, and became a play to be performed. This explains the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century there was a tendency to regard

one's life as a text, inspired usually by high literature, structuring one's life and daily performance towards the final act of death, which 'naturally activated heroic and tragic models of behaviour' (245). As we shall see in further sections, Konstantin Vaginov, considered by Toporov as the final exponent of the Petersburg Text, dedicates part of his novel *The Days and Works of Svistonov* precisely to this aesthetisation and aim towards the tragic in Petersburg's inhabitants' lives. This mode of conduct, eventually transformed the whole space of Petersburg into the ultimate stage:

> The theatricality of Petersburg is shown too in the clear demarcation between 'stage' and 'behind the scenes', a constant awareness of the spectator and, crucially, the replacement of existence by an 'as if existence' … From the point of view of stage space the only thing that is real is stage existence, while from the point of view of the behind-the-scenes space, stage existence is just play and convention. (Lotman 1990: 196)

This permanent self-awareness helps to explain why the formalists movement found its firmest ground in Petersburg, as tenets like *ostranenie*, or defamiliarisation, could be seen as already present in Petersburg from its inception. This artificialness and self-consciousness already made reality an aesthetic experience, and created the distance necessary to look at reality through defamiliarising lenses and to treat everyday life as a self-sufficient, ever-generating system. This unnaturalness also finds parallels in language, as in the forced use of foreign languages and expressions within the nobility. The Petersburg Text is fully aware of its corresponding dictionary, which restricts its organicity, and the use of a foreign language as a means of defamiliarisation is evident in the 'foreign' *zaum* language of the futurists, in which even other languages were enlisted to expound on its principles, as in Tufanov's use of English and Chinese phonemes in his elucidations (1924).

It is also interesting to think of Bakhtin's tenets through the optics of the Petersburg Text, as they fit perfectly with Bakhtin's predilection for genres over specific authors or schools. In this light, his concept of heteroglossia in the novel, where the novel represents the unifying element of variegated voices, could be seen as a parallel of the Petersburg Text being the unifying superstructure of the different

works in its corpus. The timelessness and synchronicity of carnival fit with the view of the Petersburg Text as a monolithic structure, rather than a diachronic progression – an ever-devouring and ever-generating force. His concept of *unfinishability* in the novel finds its parallel in the *unfinishability* of the works of the Petersburg Text, as the dualities and contradictions of Petersburg are not and can never be resolved. However, there are also significant differences between Bakhtin's philosophy and the Petersburg Text. His heteroglossia has a markedly universal aim and would be severely limited by being confined to a specific semiosphere, as would be the case within the Peterburg Text. Indeed, Peter the Great's attempt to make Russia wide open to Western influence – an ideal that Bakhtin would have appreciated – is reflected in many works of the Petersburg Text as a rejection of this imposition, resulting in a deeper exploration of *Russianness*. Finally, Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter runs contrary to the very essence of the Petersburg Text, as there is not a trace of liberating, fear and death-defying laughter in it, but an omnipresent and inescapable sense of doom, salvation from which is only possible through the deep acceptance of and immersion in the evil immanent to Petersburg.

A last element which is inseparable from the city of Petersburg is its geographical and climatological conditions, which cannot help but create an atmosphere of unreality. The constant feature of fog, mist, lack of light in winter and aethereal white nights in summer, the swampiness surrounding, are conducive to its phantasmagoria, metaphysicality, mirage, fantasticness, as well as an abundance of visions, divinations, dreams, prophecies, revelations, insights, and miracles. While there are more cities in the world with comparable geographical and climatological conditions, the specificity of the view from its inception of Petersburg as a doomed and evil-inhabited city opposed to God and nature made these conditions a foundational part of its myth in a more consequential manner than any other city.

We shall now turn our attention away from the manner in which the historical and geographical characteristics set the stage for Petersburg and into the specific characteristics of the Petersburg Text. The two deepest-running characteristics of the Petersburg Text, as exposed by Toporov and since reinstated, with some qualifying, by scholars a multitude of times, are the latent coexisting and insurmountable dualism of the opposites of life and death, order and chaos, good

and evil, the everyday and the miraculous, and a life above the abyss where a path to salvation – or overcoming of death – is only possible through evil. The raison d'être of the Petersburg Text is not the final resolution of these dichotomies, but the awareness and preserving of them. Another fundamental feature of the Petersburg Text, which explains its conception within the Tartu semioticians[62] and their interest in it, is its supratextual unity. This 'supra-semanticism' supplies an overall semantic meaning to the text, in which the 'meanings … exceed what is empirically possible in the city itself' (Toporov 2003: 28). As such, references to Petersburg in the text are not only reflections of reality to frame the text, but also a means of transubstantiate it into the spiritual sphere. This 'demands from its consumer the ability to restore ("check") the connections with the extra-textual text', so that the text 'teaches the reader the rules of going beyond its own limits' (7). This 'monolithic' supra-text is ever-increasing and fundamentally 'the path to moral salvation, to spiritual rebirth in conditions when life perishes in the kingdom of death' (27). In fact, the most important substrate is that of the spiritual-cultural sphere, the 'myths and legends, divinations and prophecies, literary works and art monuments, philosophical, social and religious ideas, figures and literary characters … all variants of spiritualization and humanization of the city.' The seemingly obsessive references to these 'create a hypertrophied signification which ties everything together and minimises randomness', while making the reader aware of 'deeper structures and levels' (34).

Delving deeper into the word level, the contraposition of nature and culture is given the adjectives of 'transparent' and 'ghostly' respectively. The ghostliness of culture is a chaos where darkness reigns and all is blurred, where doublings can occur and the spawned doubles can usurp the doubled and tease them. To this ghostliness, words like *mirage, dream, shadow, reflections* are attached. On the other hand, nature is associated with a transparent cosmos, given the characteristics of unity, harmony and clarity, and elevated to the spiritual with elements of revelations and clairvoyance. However, these seemingly opposing terms are two sides of the Petersburg coin, are in constant interplay and immerse the reader into their hall of mirrors. A quintessential element of this dual vocabulary is water, which in the

[62] Toporov was involved in many discussions and conferences in this group, while Lotman directly engaged with Toporov's concept in *The semiotics of Russian culture* (1984), and in *Universe of the mind: a semiotic theory of culture* (1990).

eschatological myth of Petersburg represents the full arch of the harmonic, majestic to the lower world and death. This water that Peter the Great monumentalised in canals and the ensembles of the Neva banks, through ever-increasing entropy represents the ever-present concept of the coming chaos and disintegration of Petersburg with its floods, mobility and tendency to create unstable, treacherous swampy ground in the Petersburg area. This apocalypse is not felt as something temporarily distant but a reality that has already arrived after the city became aware of this idea and it became an essential part of it. Returning to the ghostly aspects ascribed to culture in Petersburg, this lack of definition and obscurity is not something to be surmounted or clarified; on the contrary, it is 'the most accurate intuitive fixation of the existing state: it is what it is, and any attempt at clarification, discretization and rationalization, "logical" commenting is capable at once to destroy this *wonderful city of clouds*' (Toporov 2003: 51). Toporov is quoting Evgeny Boratynsky's 1827 poem, 'Wondrous City':

> Clouds can form a wondrous city
> Full of evanescent grace,
> But a blast— and what was pretty
> Disappears without a trace.
> So spontaneous, light creations
> Of the poet's dreamy world
> Scatter, doomed to dissipation,
> By the breath of turmoil whirled. (2020: 145)

Dostoevsky, in turn, shows himself fully aware of this fragility, in a rather less uplifting manner:

> A hundred times, in the midst of this fog, a strange but importunate reverie has come to me: "And if this fog breaks up and lifts, won't this whole foul, slimy city go with it, rise up with the fog and vanish like smoke, and leave only the former Finnish swamp, and in the middle, perhaps, for the beauty of it, a bronze horseman on a hot-breathed, overridden steed?" (2003: 135)

In his seminal study, Toporov includes a survey of the terminology representing the recurring *nodes* of the Petersburg Text in different areas – e.g. culture, nature, inner state – which constitute a Petersburg Text dictionary. The astounding closeness of the different descriptions of Petersburg by different authors is in fact emphasised, rather than hidden, by the authors. He posits that Petersburg requires its own descriptions with insurmountable authority and insistence, in contrast to any other city, which in turn curtails the choices of the author. This likeness in the descriptions of the city, however, does not come about only from the conscious use of this nodal dictionary, but it necessitates the incorporation of the supra-text to be fully grasped. Toporov goes on to add another characteristic of the Petersburg Text in that, by its nature, it refuses canonisation and is ever changing, something that connects this part of his description of the Petersburg Text to the Bergsonian-formalist view of reality and language. This refers to the peripheral words that are not specific for the self-sufficient and essential nodes of the Petersburg Text, which are usually foreign for the time they are used; words that belong to categories such as professional jargon, secret languages, informal or indecent expressions. These words are used in a way in which they transcend their meaning within the text and lose their reasonable certainty, all while increasing the entropy of the system. In an increasing rapprochement with *zaum*, and the Chinari-OBERIU concepts of *bessmyslitsa* and the *collision of meanings* to be further expounded upon in later chapters, Toporov makes a connection with these peripheral, foreign words and 'meaninglessness' – *bessmyslennost*:

> When a great writer writes about this material chaos and, as it were, nails down these parts of chaos with words – and the more exotic and peripheral they are, the more they approach meaninglessness or a strong destruction of meaning for the "non-specialized", "normal" consciousness, the better, the more successful –, these peripheral elements of the dictionary seem to flare up for a moment, breaking through the indifference and inertia of the reader … the memory of this flash is sometimes more essential and preserved more carefully than anything else, because such blissful meaninglessness, the more meaningless it is, the more it is a signal of a text we hold dear and our connection with it. (Toporov 2003: 64).

We shall now pass on to the authors who created the Petersburg Text themselves. The creation of this myth and cultural soil in this most artificial and unanchored of cities was fundamental for its cultural survival. It is widely accepted that Pushkin's 'The Bronze Horseman', written in 1833 – but not fully published until 1837 –, represents the start of the Petersburg Text. This poem, in which there is an element of prophecy, represents the first Russian response to the myth of Petersburg. It is worth letting Toporov speak at length of the importance of this first piece of the corpus:

> The combination of syntheticism … the "compositeness" of its text, containing abundant explicit and even more often implicit quotations, reminiscences, references to other – Russian and non-Russian – texts, with the depth of historiosophical thought and … the first … example in Russian literature of the theme of the "simple" ("little") man and history, private life and high state policy made "The Bronze Horseman" a kind of focus in which many rays converged and from which even more rays illuminated subsequent Russian literature … a special "sub-text" of the Petersburg Text and a special mythologem in the corpus of Petersburg myths began. (22-3)

As a first specimen of the Petersburg Text, it came fully formed, containing all of the elements pertaining to its myth. In it there can be found the contraposition of nature and culture, Petersburg as an affront or challenge to God as Peter the Great's creation from his Logos, the plight of the *simple person* against power and history, literature as artificiality – even metafiction and intertextuality –, as well as the city's phantasmagoria and madness-inducing conditions.

Following in the thunderous footsteps of Pushkin was Gogol, whose 1842 'Overcoat' represents the first example of intertextuality within the Petersburg Text and touches upon the themes of rebellion raised by Pushkin's poem. After the two founders of the text, came Dostoevsky, after whom the Petersburg Text passed through, amongst others, Symbolists like Andrei Bely or Aleksandr Blok, up until Konstantin Vaginov's burying of the myth. Whether the Petersburg Text survived afterwards is a topic of contention, and it is not in the scope of this study to resolve this discussion. What is relevant, and true in many cases, but especially in the nineteenth century, is that the authors of the Petersburg Text were not Petersburgians

by birth; neither Pushkin, nor Gogol or Dostoevsky were. As such, it cannot be conceived as an exclusive concept, but rather an inclusive one. The whole of Russia and its periphery spoke through the Petersburg Text. The strong reaction of the coming authors when faced with Petersburg is transparent in their works. What the writers of the Petersburg Text have in common, apart from their intuitive awareness of belonging to this corpus and being the 'sons of Pushkin', is their merging of the rational with the irrational, the logical with the intuitive, the concrete with the philosophical. They often break through into the mystical layer of the text in order to discover secret, deeper meanings in it.

The main criticism of Toporov's postulate resides in his focus on salvation through evil as the superstructure and raison d'être of the Petersburg Text. One of those critics is Kathleen Scollins, and we shall focus on her reimagining, updating or complementing of Toporov's vision in her 2017's *Acts of Logos in Pushkin and Gogol*, as it represents the most fruitful and pertinent critique of Toporov for the present study. Scollins sets out to dethrone salvation as the ethos of the Petersburg Text in favour of a battle of language, power and religious dogma. In a more summarised message, Scollins' proposed unifying principle is the 'engendering[63]' word. As much as in Toporov's view Peter the Great and his creation set the course of the Petersburg Text on his opposition of culture to nature, so Scollins assigns Peter the Great the responsibility, because of his creation, of the authors' reaction against his repression of the Old Orthodox Believers, and his rejection of the oral tradition. However, in this view, the authors parallel the use of the engendering word by Peter the Great. Thus, the authors sought the primacy of the authorial power of Petersburg's reality or at least to establish a competing narrative, so as to reconcile its myth with nature, the oral tradition and Orthodoxy. There was a popular and cultural consensus that Petersburg was Peter the Great creation by his God-like Logos, and this remained in the cultural semiosphere, imparting an unparalleled authority to both the words and the semiotic system of the Petersburg Text.

[63] The term Scollins uses throughout is 'creative.' However, I am aware of the broad and blurry nature of this word, as it invites immediate associations with anything that involves the imagination or is related to the arts. Within the framework of Scollins' work, this word is a synonym of 'Logos' or the divine word which engenders the world at the moment of its utterance; it is rather God's 'creating' – or 'engendering' word – 'Let there be light!', which is equated with Peter the Great's 'Let there be a city!'

Right from the start, in the works of Pushkin and Gogol, there are responses to Peter the Great's Logos and his language reforms, as these authors 'take evident pleasure in the flexibility and agility of the newly unfettered Russian literary word', but, in a critical, wary and Orthodox-influenced view of language that would persist in the Petersburg Text, 'the authors' self-chastening for daring to wield the creative word … the persistence of death, madness, and failure along [their] Petersburg heroes' paths toward linguistic autonomy inscribes the authors' own anxieties over the … tradition within which artistic originality is equated with the demonic' (Scollins 2017: xliii). They mimic, refute, and transcend the Logos of Petersburg's creator and give voice to the *simple man*, which in turn assumes literary influence against the system of ranks and orders. Subsequent writers of the Petersburg Text followed in this tradition and added their name to the increasing corpus, all the while elevating their literary position. This authority represents the attainment of 'linguistic agency', the capacity to 'create the self and control the world around.' The Peterburg Text acquires the qualities of giving while taking agency 'by providing a new order, an alternative "signifying system" that allows its users to reach a position of authority, a powerful Word to rival that of Peter' (xlvii).

The alternative view where salvation is removed or at least displaced, accepts the dualism inherent in the Petersburg Text, but posits its existence as a struggle between the oral and written traditions of the city. In the struggle between the oral tradition – representatives of which condemned Peter the Great and equated him to a demon, due to the signs of apocalypse associated with him – and the official and exalted written text that accompanied its creation, the double-sided essence of the city was conceived. Lotman (1990: 196) concurs with this tension – or more precisely, he affirms the precedence of the former over the latter –, when he states that Gogol and Dostoevsky canonized the 'Petersburg myth' and raised it, 'along with the tradition of the oral anecdote, to the level of literature', and that this oral tradition 'made Petersburg into a place where the mysterious and fantastic was the norm.' This dualism was paralleled by the struggle for the soul of the city. On the one hand, Peter the Great wanted a less Orthodox city and implemented sweeping religious reforms, which turned culture on to the word and away from the icon; this was reflected in the primacy of literature over visual forms of art. On the other hand, the people or *narod*

never abandoned their Orthodox roots, and in fact, while most of the authors of the Petersburg Text are not overtly religious, one can discern a refusal of Peter the Great perceived attack on the Old Believers and a transparent Orthodox sensibility.

Starting from Pushkin and Gogol, the authors aimed to return to the balance between image and word. If in Pushkin the Orthodox undercurrent can be glimpsed in certain themes and compositions, in Gogol's case, the influence of Orthodox thought is palpable. His stories often incorporate Orthodox iconography, either explicitly or implicitly. Scollins gives the enlightening example of the equating of Nevsky Prospect with the jaws of hell:

> in Gogol's "Nevsky Prospect," Petersburg's central artery is revealed to be the all-consuming mouth of hell, a well-known figure from medieval Christian iconography; at dusk, Petersburg itself is transformed into a narrative icon of the Last Judgment, its illuminated main thoroughfare drawing sinners toward the ravenous mouth at its center. (Scollins 2017: xlviii)

However, Scollins concludes that Gogol's guiding force was not to reassert the icon, but to balance the visual and the verbal. Following the spiritual dimension of the Petersburg Text and approaching Toporov's main tenet, the scholar uses an example in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, as another example of the restoration of the privileged position of the image-icon. She posits that Sonia's role has a strong connection with the icon, as

> the iconic image of Sonia restores the lost status of the image in Peter's secular empire; she is the embodiment of both Word … and icon … this … enables Raskolnikov to transcend the destructive word of Peter … and destructive rationalism of the Western logos… and rise toward redemption. (xlviii)

It is of notice that Scollins ends up proclaiming something akin to Toporov's unifying principle of salvation after setting out to take a different route, but she is protected from this possible criticism by her mention of some scholars' propositions that Toporov seems to have built his thesis on Dostoevsky's works and then tried to accommodate his conclusion into other authors. However, what remains unavoidable,

even when explicitly trying to find an alternative explanation of the Petersburg Text, is its spiritual and Orthodox undercurrent, something that is central to the present study.

***

It is difficult to find a city that is a more essential part to its art than Petersburg was up until the mid-twentieth century. Petersburg, a 'made up' metropolis, seemingly living outside of time and space, is the quintessentially literary capital, separated from real life by its deliberate invention from nothing. As already mentioned, this constant presence of the city where the authors resided is not present in the Parisian absurdist tradition. For Beckett, Joyce's influence of course is paramount, while *The Bald Soprano* had its genesis in an English learning method/book and was initially written in Romanian, in Romania, *Rhinoceros* comes, if anything, from Ionesco's experience in provincial, Vichy France. While different circumstances brought this group of writers and dramaturges geographically close, were this location to have been another European capital, it is hard to argue the works would have been substantially different. In fact, in the broader sense of the concept, there are Theatre of the Absurd representatives strewn all over Europe, be it Slawomir Mrozek, Vaclav Havel, or Harold Pinter.

On the other hand, all of the Russian authors studied, who can be said to belong to the Petersburg Text, resided, at least partly, in Petersburg and their works could not have existed without the city of Petersburg and its myth. As such, the OBERIU and Petersburg are inexorably linked. Not only the Petersburg literary tradition runs in their veins, but they can also be said to have been chroniclers of its change and perceived death, as in Vaginov's descriptions and collection of its culture and characters before their disappearance. By casting a look back at the preceding synthesis of the Petersburg Text, and as it will be further expounded in subsequent chapters, it becomes clear their position as members of the Petersburg Text tradition is undeniable.

To end this chapter, I propose to show the monolithic essence of the Petersburg Text by a comparison of two of its most distant members, Pushkin and Kharms, in order to show how remarkably fully formed the main tenets of the

Petersburg Text came to existence, and how the century it spanned cannot be thought of as a progression, but rather as a dialogue in equal terms between all of the authors involved, within the unifying, unmovable and generating semiosphere of the Petersburg Text.

The first text of the Petersburg Text, Pushkin's 'The Bronze Horseman' (2010) already had in it all the elements that form part of it. On its pages, there it is clearly to be seen, the dualism between nature and culture; the primordial 'moss-ruled, swampy shores' are contrasted with the 'granite banks' of the Neva and its 'iron railings', the previous 'wilderness of waves' is contrasted with present 'Neva's commanding flow'; the old 'forest unknown to the rays, in the fog' is compared to the present 'green gardens'; Petersburg is called the 'act of Peter', which has a 'strict and structured form', in implicit opposition to God's created nature, which is unruly and organic; this unnatural creation is reinforced by the contrast between the previously existing 'dark and scattered huts', who lived in harmony with nature, with the 'fine palaces and towers that crowd together on the shores busy with life.' There can be found the description of literature as an unnatural, artificial phenomenon, which is conflated with Petersburg's unnaturalness using the medium of its white nights, in the passage in which the narrator, in the room during the night, says 'I write and read without a lamp'. In addition, there is also an example of metafiction when Evgeny is presented, 'we'll award our hero this first name. It sounds fine enough.'

Immediately after introducing the character of Evgeny, an explicit example of intertextuality is presented. Although the Petersburg Text's characteristic of intertextuality refers mainly to texts within its own canon, Pushkin, having no predecessor in the canon, still made this dialogic connection with Karamzin – in another astounding example of how fully formed the Petersburg Text came to life. In the first place, the mere mention of Karamzin brings the foreboding of an idealistic tragic love that will never materialise or that will be cut short. At the same time, Pushkin managed to make a double reference with one strike of the plume when he stated of Evgeny, 'we don't need his [nicknames/surname], although in times gone by, [they/it] may have shone under the pen of Karamzin.' By using the word *prozvanya*, he referenced both a character with a different [nick]name, Erast in *Poor*

Liza, and another with the same name – but supposedly different surname – Evgeny in *Evgeny and Yulia*. This double connection extends not only to the male main characters, but also to the women and the overarching moral of the stories. Evgeny's future wife, Parasha, lives with her widowed mother in a hut, much like Liza; much like Liza and Erast, Evgeny and Parasha's future life together never comes to fruition; much like Evgeny, Erast loses all of his money; much like Parasha, Liza dies by drowning. The reference to *Evgeny and Yulia* is even more meaning-bearing; it is a story in which two lovers are tragically prevented from sharing a life together by causes stronger than them; as is true in both cases, the male protagonist dies after realising he is about to start a family with the object of his love.

However, the true stroke of genius, and what is most relevant for the Petersburg Text, is the allegory of culture versus nature that surrounds *Evgeny and Yulia*. The start of the tale is an idyllic description of the life of the widow and her adopted daughter in a small village, in complete harmony with nature. After this, comes the first omen of the irruption of culture in this bucolic world, when it is said that, with dark autumn and harsh winter cutting them off from nature, they have no other resource than to melancholically read books, 'the immortal creations of true philosophers who wrote for the benefit of the human race.' Immediately after this, Evgeny, the natural son of the widow, is introduced, and of him it is said that he 'studie[s] abroad.' Upon his return, this culturisation – or Europeanisation – is reinforced when the narrator says that he passes Yulia 'a lot of notes, a lot of French, Italian and German books.' However, in what becomes an allegory to Petersburg's creation in its dialogic relationship with Pushkin's poem, this 'forbidden marriage' between nature and culture only brings death and doom. When the semi-forbidden love between two people raised by the same person is given her blessing, the dual profanity and impossibility of this union brings about the death of Evgeny, unable to 'overcome nature' – from sheer emotion, after 'dark forebodings' – and the devastation of nature, which for the widow and her adopted daughter lose all appeal and becomes 'gloomy and desolate.'

In Pushkin's poem, there it is also, the equating of Moscow with Russia's past and Petersburg with the present and future, 'old Moscow fades, before the new tsarina stands a widow in purple.' There it is, clear as day, the confrontation of the

'simple person' with history and power; of Evgeny, it is said that 'he keeps away from nobles'; when the equestrian statue is mentioned, Peter the Great has his back turned to him; in contrast to the monarch's vociferous description, Evgeny wanders the streets 'mute.' In an authorial decision charged with multiple meanings, during the whole poem, the only parts of Peter the Great's body that are mentioned are his hands and face – the two parts that can produce the word –; these are also the only parts of Evgeny's body that are mentioned, and, in a contrasting parallel to Peter the Great, the initial image of the powerful monarch about to create Petersburg by his word, 'looking into the distance' is juxtaposed to Evgeny's image after the flood, where he is robbed of his dignity by losing his hat, his arms are described as 'clenched into a cross' – with its implications of inability to write –, and it is said of him, in an inversion of Peter the Great's surveying the horizon, that 'his despairing gaze was fixed on a distant place'; all this leads, as it is well known, to the final confrontation between the statue of Peter the Great and Evgeny, after the latter dares to speak with contempt and even threaten the statue, only to instantly run away in fear for his life. Petersburg atmosphere, conducive to its phantasmagoria populates the pages of the poem with words and expressions like 'moonless sheen of dream-soaked nights', 'foul night-mist', 'pallid day', 'dead amongst ghosts', 'murky', 'fog.' These same conditions are accentuated by inanimate objects coming alive; apart from the equestrian statue, there is talk of two stone lions that stand in guard 'as if alive', a description that is later repeated, 'life-like lions', and even the Neva is given human and animal features throughout the text, describing it as a 'sick person', as 'panting like a horse' or saying that 'like a beast' the Neva 'flung itself across the city.'

This phantasmagoria is accompanied also by the presence of madness, into which Evgeny descends soon after the flood, having been preceded by his inability to sleep and the subsequent dream-like state before the flood, which turned into a vision state after the flood and the final descent into madness 'breaking into giggles', becoming homeless, and 'neither animal not human'. Lastly, the position of Petersburg at the end of the world, or in 'the midnight regions' and 'at the sea's brink', is the stepping stone for the eschatological theme of Petersburg, where death and doom are ever-present, as is its Orthodox connotations of this being the punishment from rejecting and wanting to take the place of God's word; this presence

can be felt soon enough in the text even before any mention of the flood, in the prologue, where the mythological introduction of the creation of the city is undermined by the premonition of the unsettling of 'the ever lasting dream of Peter', and the plea 'may the defeated elements make their peace with you'. After the flood, however, Alexander the Blessed exclaims 'no tsar can master God's elements', and the narrator says that 'God's anger is there to see', 'all is gone' and 'coffins washed from the cemetery now bob through the streets!'; Petersburg has reverted to the aqueous land it sprang from, 'squares resembled lakes, streets fed into them like broad rivers, the Palace was a desolate island'; at the closing of Part I, after the flood, Peter the Great's statue is referred to for the first time as an 'idol.'

A last element that encapsulates the constant fear of doom in Petersburg is the image of the bridges, which can be interpreted as the city's path towards the future and an antidote against isolation. A bridge turns isolated islands into parts of the city and it *bridges* the gap between the dark old past and the bright future. Specifically for the hero of the story, the bridges represent the future – his approaching marriage, children, and better job –, which in turn also implies his escape form isolation. As the flood approaches, 'the Neva bridges had been raised, cutting him off from his future bride.' In an unambiguous assertion of the death that awaited the doomed city, this proves to be a final severance for Evgeny, as it is said that the storm 'torn down the bridges' ,and took away his future wife's hut. The poem ends with Evgeny's corpse among the ruins of his future, to which he is denied access – represented by the door, which is the first thing he worries about when he reaches the previous place of the hut, and in place of which he is eventually found –; the hut's is said to have been taken by the flood into an isolated and 'desolate island.' Even the structure of the poem itself, with its circularity, reinforces the idea that Petersburg must return to the swamp it emerged from; the image of the 'dark and scattered huts that shelter the miserable Finns', is repeated at the end with the image of the hut on the isolated island with Evgeny's corpse.

A hundred years after the writing of 'The Bronze Horseman', Vaginov was finishing his last novel, *Harpagoniana*, and Kharms was starting to write the pieces of his *Incidents* cycle. Surely, one could be forgiven to think that, by this time, the Petersburg Text had evolved and changed in a way to make it almost unrecognisable.

However, the central elements of the Petersburg Text remained monolithically unchanged. As we shall see in more detail in further sections, all its elements are as much there as they were a century before. Apart from Toporov's prescribed theme of salvation through evil, there is also the confrontation of nature and culture, the conflation of the rational with the irrational, intertextuality, phantasmagoria, eschatology and madness, the theme of the *simple person* against history, their constant use of both his nodal dictionary – especially *water* – and *foreign* words with displaced meaning, they also can be said to be sensible to the Logos and its power dynamics. The generative and concrete power of the word is most famously surmised in Kharms' already cited assertion that 'poetry should be written so that if you throw a poem at the window, the glass will shatter.'

To avoid a mere listing of all the elements of the Petersburg Text in the OBERIU, I will use two of Kharms' stories to elucidate this, the ministory 'Lynch Law' and the short story 'The Old Woman.' 'Lynch Law' can be conceived as a revisiting of Pushkin's poem and the theme of the *simple person* against power and history. The references to the poem are not especially subtle, with the protagonist being called Petrov – which apart from containing within it the Russian name *Petr*, literally means Son of Peter –, and riding a horse. The references to the *simple person* are not hidden either, as Petrov's antagonist is not given a name, but only the description 'man of medium height.' As it is usual for Kharms, he inverts the canonical image – especially in his contemporary environs –, as it is the equestrian figure that ends up running for its life. The story opens with Petrov addressing a multitude, trying to convince them to build an American skyscraper where there is a public garden – a clear reference to Peter building his incongruous city of stone over nature. The only two body parts alluded to are also the head and the arms. As such, after finishing his speech, Petrov writes something in a notebook – a reference to literature and culture –, to which the man of medium height objects and whose protestation the multitude supports – a reference to the *narod* suspicion of literature and the poet's generative word as profane or evil –, forcing Perov to escape at full gallop. However, the – uncultured and brute – *narod*, in order to satiate its brutish desire for violence, tears off the head of the man of medium height, which comes to rest upon a quintessentially urban feature, the hatch of a sewer drain, preventing it from reaching the primordial water,

forcing this *simple person* to remain in Peter the Great's city. This disembodiment of the head is also a reference to 'The Bronze Horseman', in which Pushkin disembodies Peter the Great when he makes a reference to his head, 'the one who stood motionless in the darkness with his bronze head', as if the rest of the body were not made of bronze.

In 'The Old Woman', which will be further analysed in this chapter, we can see the themes of salvation through evil, an equation of the divine with nature, and the ever-presence of death in the Petersburg Text. As we will see, while the text is plagued by intertextuality, it can already be seen in the old woman herself, who derives from the stock character used by Pushkin and Dostoevsky, and specifically pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna in *Crime and Punishment* and the Countess in *Queen of Spades*, imposing herself into Kharms' text (Carrick 1995). The rational and the irrational are woven throughout the story and there are also plenty of examples of Toporov's nodal dictionary and references – swamp, Nevsky Prospekt, dreams, insomnia, doubles, dead people walking – and water can be said to be the main image throughout. The eschatological theme colours the whole story, with the dead old woman coming alive at times, and the protagonist having to deal with her corpse, which impedes his everyday life and wants, while the awaiting doom is represented by the death of the old woman almost immediately after her equating with eternity – by the image of the old woman holding a clock with no hands. Lastly, the overarching theme of salvation through the demonic makes Kharms' a Petersburg Text story par excellence, all of which will be further expounded upon in the section below.

Outside 'The Old Woman', Kharms' works, be it poetry, prose or drama, also find parallels with the Petersburg Text in Toporov's described use of *peripheral* words to create nonsense, the frequent use of everyday language, the questioning of the language of power – and that of the related canonised texts –, and the incompleteness of the stories. With that said, finally, it is now the moment to pass on to the analysis of the fundamental prose writers and works for this study.

2. Daniil Kharms

One of the most widely known facts about Kharms' oeuvre is his almost complete abandonment of verse and turn to prose during the first half of the 1930s. As noted in the introduction to this chapter Jaccard's article (1995) dedicated to this change, while being sharp and illuminating in general, maybe erring on francophone point of view, arrives at the maybe too pessimistic conclusion that Kharms completely abandoned 'left art' for being too utopian in favour of an existential absurd, closer to that of the later European Existentialism[64], even going as far as seeing a rapprochement to Ionesco's absurd already in 1927 with *Elizaveta Bam*. While this complete abandonment of *left* art may be debatable in the sole case of 'The Old Woman', it is not applicable in full to the rest of Kharms' prose. While some academics, like Anemone (1991) – who inadvertently also pointed at similarities with Ionesco[65] –, have shared this pessimistic point of view of the entirety of Kharms' prose, even going as far as to make the polemic claim that Kharms was acknowledging the role of the Russian avant-garde in creating the new Soviet, Stalinist, reality, a majority of academics have taken a more positive, metaphysical view of Kharms' prose, even, as in the case of Brandist (1996), directly responding to Anemone's claim[66].

What all academic literature does agree with is that Kharms wanted to apply, be it initially or throughout his prose output, the same avant-gardist concepts he had used in his verse and theatre. The consensus is that the *absurdity* achieved in verse through alogical semantics and grammar was translated in prose into, in Epstein's (1994: 262) words, 'situational absurdity'. Most academics also agree that the

[64] Jaccard shows a similar tendency for an existentialist-centred interpretation in his monographic book, when he describes Kharms' ministory, 'Incidents', as an example of the abandonment of the concept of *point zero* as a constantly happening, creating, moment in time between past and future where are possibilities are open, in favour of an existential angst due to the insignificance of human life compared to eternity (1991: 279-280).

[65] 'Kharms characters are totally alienated from each other and incapable of establishing any meaningful contact with others' (1991: 84).

[66] 'However, this is not to imply that Kharms' work results in a repudiation of the radical nihilistic aesthetic of the OBERIU declaration and an acknowledgement of the avant-garde's participation in the creation of the obscenities of Stalinist Russia as Anemone claims. Kharms' work highlights the wilful distortion of language and value structures precisely by those means that the early OBERIU declaration advocated' (1996: 1945).

perceived lack of morality or humanity of the characters in Kharms' prose does not have a negative impulse, as in a mere denunciation of the social abandonment of morally-based behaviour, but that its absence is a positive tool, there precisely to force the reader to fill the gap and to restore what is so clearly missing both in the text and in Soviet reality[67].

In its most metaphysical aspect, Epstein has seen in this translation of the absurd into prose a parallel with the previously mentioned *fifth signification* of the object, which in Kharms prose's case is achieved by the introduction of the *miracle* to complement the four other elements of reality, reflected in the *byt*. Nakhimovsky (1982: 92) furthers this metaphysical view with the highlighting of the spirituality present in 'The Old Woman', and sees this last short story as a positive progression of Kharms' prose, that adds the sacred to the already present grotesque and ordinary, instead of the renunciation of the principles of the avant-garde that Vvedensky saw.

Lastly, in relation to the above-mentioned view of Kharms as a postmodernist, this view has to be qualified by his implication that 'God [is] the one with creative power' (Roberts 1997: 43), so that it could be said that it is not so much the case of the *death of the author*, but a matter of conceding that authorial power rest ultimately upon God. Both of these differentiating elements of Kharms' *Postmodernism* are succinctly summarised by Brandist when he says that the heteroglossia promoted by Bakhtin present in Kharms' prose, ultimately finds its unity through God (1996: 178). These carnivalesque elements in Kharms' prose are the heteroglossia achieved through intertextuality, the uncrowning of the author as the main authority in the text and the inclusion of the reader in the process of *writing*, and the chaotic and game-like features of carnival. However, to any life-affirming and rejuvenating character of carnival, Kharms adds darker undertones tone which distances it from pure carnival and takes it closer to Rus' medieval laughter. In his reading of Likhachev, Panchenko and Ponyrko (1984), Lipovetsky (1999: 74) ventures to say that *yurodstvo* is a precursor of Postmodernism, as the postmodern writer, like the *yurodivie*, 'enters into a dialogue with chaos, striving to find the truth in filth and obscenity'. In addition, Lipovetsky (1999: 11) posits that Kharms' metafiction

[67] See, for example Aizlewood (1991: 111)

'equates writing with death, with nonexistence' to reach its ontological status, as this takes writing into its own existence, outside mundane life and culture, and considers some of Kharms' prose an example of Barthes' concept of 'writing degree zero' (2007: 199). However, keeping in mind Kharms' late short story 'The Old Woman', Lipovetsky may have gone too far into the postmodernist analogy, when he sees in Kharms prose an abandonment of transcendence or of a unifying order, that turned them into 'complete and hopeless absence, disappearance and erasure of the subject and of meaning' (208).

To go back to the start of this chapter after this exposition, it may be argued that what was missing in Jaccard's (1991) analysis at least the mention of the postmodern colouring of Kharms' prose, or their transitional place between Modernism and Postmodernism. He does express many elements that could be considered postmodern, like fragmentation, incoherence, the orientation of all components of the text towards silence, the impossibility of ending a story, or the mechanisation of conventions; these are the kind of elements that Lipovetsky would consider postmodern. In fact, reading these lines that form part of the conclusion to his outstanding book on Kharms, it would seem that Jaccard was making the connection to Postmodernism:

> the fact that he did not success to show anything else from the world than its incoherence is not a synonym of failure. On the contrary, there can be found the markings of an unforgiving lucidity of which language is the faithful reflection. This is the reason why, much more than a failed attempt to express the inexpressible, which would locate it within the Modernist project, his oeuvre should be considered a successful attempt to express the limits and impossibilities of this enterprise. (289)

However, both in his book (1991), as well as in his article about Kharms' passage from verse to prose (1995), he does not make the connection to Postmodernism, but as previously examined, reaches the conclusion that Kharms' loss of belief in a unifying order ultimately overwhelmed him and provoked in him an existential crisis akin to that of the Parisian absurd's authors. What is missing in that conclusion is the fact that Kharms never completely abandoned the belief in the role of literature as a device to provide this unifying order, something that Jaccard himself seems to,

somehow contradictorily, posit when saying that Kharms, even in the worst of the 1930s never gave up on becoming a 'Great Poet' according to the 'Total Word' (1991: 288). Even if one were to consider his latter prose a complete abandonment of this belief in the unifying power of writing, Kharms could still be said to be placing it on God's shoulders. Relating to this, Tokarev (2002) posits a distinction between Kharms and Beckett precisely in the concept of God as a unifying order, which would be regarded by the Irish-born as the greatest danger due to the 'stabilisation of being' it represents. If this aspect of Kharms' philosophy presents a demarcation from Beckett and Camus, it also implies its ill-fitting conception as postmodernist.

2.1 *Incidents*

Incidents, a collection of thirty ministories, resists any attempt at a synopsis by the variety and seeming independence of each story. The overarching elements in the collection, however, can be advanced to be a grotesque, violent atmosphere, an utter disdain for injury, death and moral corruption, the presence of evil in Petersburg, and a formulaic style, and minimalistic exposition with a tendency towards *unfinishability* or self-destruction. If 'The Old Woman' has attracted a multitude of studies, it being Kharms' longest prose piece, *Incidents*, as the most recognisable of Kharms' output in culture after his *rediscovery* in the late 1960s / early 1970s, has received even more academic attention. The minimalist story entitled 'Blue Notebook #10', commonly known as 'The Red-Haired Man', included in this collection, can be said to be Kharms' *Waiting for Godot* or *The Bald Soprano*, as the first work that comes to mind when mentioning an author.

The reader is directed to Aizlewood (1991) and Epstein (1994) for a reading that connects *Incidents* with Kharms' avant-gardist principles and further connects him with Dostoevsky and Gogol, to Brandist (1997) for the carnivalesque elements present within, and to Lipovetsky (2007) for a more postmodern take.

Incidents is, for the purposes of this study, also the best work from Kharms to delve into his prose. It is, not only the most representative work of Kharms' prose in general, but it also resides in the middle point of his prose output, being in the midpoint between his first forays into prose and his latter pieces. On the one hand, his first stories were attempts to bring his and his fellow travellers' concepts of the

collision of meanings, juxtaposition and *zaum*, amongst others, used until then mainly in his poetry, into prose form. As such, it could be argued that they were still subjugated to a lyrical framework and that they did not come into their own as pieces of prose written within a prose framework. They are at times strongly reminiscent of Kharms' verse, to the point that they seem like little else than crude adaptations of verse in prose form, with the *collision of meanings*, juxtapositions and *zaum* ever present, as in this passage from an untitled 1930 ministory:

> Now let's look through the telescope: there we will notice a little flatbread, sometimes light, sometimes dark. Gentlemen, this is not a little flatbread, but a sphere. At that time, three objects were standing on the board: a decanter, a bolide, and a man with a blue tie.
> The decanter said: Gentlemen, let's look at the land of the Mehmets.
> Where? – the bolide crashed.
> On that sphere that is visible through the telescope, – said the decanter. This sphere is the Earth.
> Man: I am a resident of the Earth.
> Bolide: I am a resident of space.
> Decanter: And I am a resident of heaven.
> All three fell silent and no one walked, drove, or flew past them.
> The decanter said:
> – Oh Che! Oh Chelo! Oh Cheloche! Tell me how do they live there? What do they do? (2015: 508)

On the other extreme, Kharms' latter pieces, like 'The Old Woman'– at the least – leave the door open to the interpretation by some academics of having abandoned the avant-garde concepts altogether and metaphysical underpinning for a more classical form and nihilistic flavour.

The collection of ministories that make up *Incidents*, should be viewed as a whole composition, rather than a collection of individual, unrelated stories. As pointed out by Aizlewood (1991), Kharms deliberately composed this cycle's structure to give it overall formal unity. The two stories that open the collection are paralleled with the two closing stories, giving the cycle a formal circular unity and closed nature. If the second story finds its parallel with the penultimate one, both in

form and in theme, and their titles are interconnected[68], so also the first story is reflected formalistically and thematically into the last one, while also bringing together other elements of the cycle as a whole. This formal unity is especially necessary due to the composition of *Incidents* as a montage of heterogeneous stories, both in medium as in genre, which to the uninitiated could make *Incidents* look like a completely random and separate collection of writings.

This conscious formal composition of the cycle is echoed in its turn in the form and content of the stories. The juxtaposition of seemingly unconnected stories is paralleled with the juxtaposition of seemingly random and unconnected actions, of stories that lack connection or contradict their titles, of concluding morals that are completely alien from the content of the story or *fable* just narrated, or cherished historical-literary figures with a complete lack deference. This *collision* is also applied to the form by combining popular forms of literature with more *elevated* ones, or intermingling prose, drama, and verse. This juxtaposition is further reinforced by the use of seemingly incongruous connectors that create a nonsensical cause-and-effect relationship, and also by the separation of the signified with its signified. The coherence given to the seemingly disperse pieces by the author by means of a 'purity of order', is achieved in the stories through writing, interposed with the everyday reality. This everyday reality is expressed not through discourse, but through violence, the grotesque and death. All these were exacerbated in Kharms' St Petersburg with the rise of Stalinism, but they were already ever present within the Petersburg Text.

Epstein (1994) talks about this order through the author's reality when he points out that people tend to make up the logic and stabilise the lack of coherence and instability of the real world, which follows no logic, by means of reason. Thus, if one is to glimpse a deeper meaning in the actions narrated in *Incidents*, it has to be through a means other than reason, that is, *transreason*. This is made quasi explicit in one of the stories, 'An Optical Illusion', with the figure of a blind man, who does not have access to the immediate, visual medium and has to understand reality in an

[68] 'The subtitle "Symphony" is also misplaced as a description of a chain of accidental events, and yet, just as *Incidents* serves as the title of the whole cycle, so "symphony" could serve as its subtitle, for the order of art has transformed the montage of pieces into an orchestrated whole.' (116)

alternative, less passive way. After a quantity of old women keep falling from windows to their deaths when they try to see what is happening below, the narrator turns his attention to a blind man who, in contrast, does not die but is just given a knit shawl – the knit shawl representing cohesion and protection are contrasted with the death of the old women for wanting to use their eyes to see. Another example of this is the story entitled 'Optical Illusion', where a man looks and only sees a tree, but once he has put his spectacles on – indicating a viewing aid –, he sees a man waving his fist at him. This donning and removing the spectacles is repeated several times, until he decides to remain *unspectacled* and consider the man waving his fist at him an optical illusion. This is a clear reference to someone being able to *see beyond* through art and intuit a deeper reality through the *zaum* aid to reason – as in the rest of *Incidents*, transcendence is equated to violence –, but refusing to do so and choosing a shallower reality. This seeing, instead of experiencing, reality is equated to using language in its rusty, mechanised version to achieve communication, that is to say the impossibility to communicate anything through language. In no story the dialogue between the characters can be said to represent any real communication. In the story 'The Mathematician and Andrei Semyonovich' (2009: 59–61), this impossibility of communication through language is exposed through repetition and circularity. This repetition is both reflected in the utterances themselves

> – No, I won't put it back!
> – Well then don't.
> – Well I won't put it back!
> – Well alright then.

as well as in the formal aspect of the sentences being repeated a number of times in each utterance:

> Andrei Semyonovich:
> Put it back.
> Put it back.
> Put it back.
> Put it back.
> Mathematician:

I won't put it back!
I won't put it back!
I won't put it back!
I won't put it back!

As the title suggests, one character is defined by his social role (Mathematician), while the other one is not given one. The character with a social role seems unable to escape his condition, as he can be said to speak in numbers (by repeating every utterance a number of times), and is incapable of real communication, since all he does after his first, self-referential, utterance, 'I removed a sphere from my head', is to say the opposite of what the other character says. In contrast, the character without a social role, while initially engaging in the Mathematician language game by repeating his sentences the same number of times, does not contradict the other a single time, and after a while, gets tired of engaging in that kind of conversation and stops repeating his sentences as he progressively gets angry and his utterances more violent, until finally, in exasperation, he leaves. When he leaves, the Mathematician is left dumbfounded and does not know what to do with himself, so, after a minute, he just goes after the other character.

However, there is an intertextual *hieroglyphic* in this story, which turns the story upside down when foregrounded: Andrei Semyonovich is the name and patronymic of the character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* that represents a stereotypical character that embraces any new idea for the sole reason that it is new or in fashion, wanting to be seen as progressive, but denoting an actual moral vacuum. As such, Andrei Semyonovich could be said to represent the new Soviet man, who readily accepts any new idea that is fed to him and who embraces Soviet literature for all the wrong reasons. If Andrei Semyonovich is the unilluminated one, then the Mathematician has to be the illuminated one. In this reading, the Mathematician is using language games, as the ones performed by Elizaveta Bam, or as the Chinari's Carroll-inspired *bessmyslitsa* nonsense, to try to change or transcend reality. This is pointed out right at the start of the exchange, when the Mathematician mentions a sphere – an analogue for the infinite or absolute. While initially attempting to join this game, Andrei Semyonovich is shown to be incapable of following it and resorts to violence when he does not understand or is not able to keep up with the

game, and thus he is unable to transcend reality. While Kharms uses violence in the content of his stories to try to achieve transcendence, this is a dialogue between the author and the reader, not between the characters. In none of the stories, as much as language achieves no real communication, can it be said that violence makes them achieve any positive results.

This veiled criticism of the reality of the new Soviet order is another element that cannot be overlooked in *Incidents*. It should be clear by now to anyone studying Kharms, that he was interested in art over anything else. His focus was never to moralise, but, as an artist, he needed to incorporate his reality into his art. Otherwise, his would not have been a pursuit of *Real Art*, but a purely aesthetical one. This being the case, the new Soviet dimension is thoroughly incorporated into the stories. The ever-increasing violence and proximity to the precipice is evident, as is the risk of becoming a *non-person*. The two above-mentioned stories that involve seeing, have a further dimension when the new Soviet reality is accounted for. Those who follow a *don't see, don't tell* approach are protected, but those whose curiosity gets the best of them, face death or violence. The man with the spectacles could be read as a Soviet citizen who is able to access momentarily – through this *looking glass* – the reality of his new Soviet life, but is overwhelmed by it. Using Rylkin's (1993: 55) words, the trauma endured by the new inhabitants makes their vision 'utopian' and 'common sense can overwhelm them as a revelation'. As Aizlewood (1991) points out, the fact that one old woman keeps falling to her death when trying to see what happened to the previous one also implies a 'death infection', common in those days, when one could face death just by implied association with someone that had been killed, as in the case of members of artistic circles. The disregard for the human costs in favour of fulfilling a plan or quota is evident in the story 'What They Sell in Stores Nowadays' (2009: 73), in which, after a character is killed with a cucumber, the narrator reaction, which doubles as the moral of the story, is being impressed by the size of cucumbers being achieved in agriculture '[those] days.' This lack of concern for the human cost has been pointed out in several studies, for example by Brandist (1996: 180), who, in his latter article about Kharms and Blake (1997), goes as far as to say that Kharms' attempt to differentiate himself from the futurists was based on the social side of OBERIU in contrast with the previous nihilistic Formalism. This conclusion by Brandist

seems rather excessive, and brings Kharms closer to a moralising author, something he definitely was not. Brandist himself seems to undermine his own conclusion, accurately this time, when he cites Cornwell's (1991) summary of Druskin's analysis to say that *Incidents* is not written against the Stalinist regime, but against any regime, making it anti-political and anti-social.

In his article, Brandist (1997) also elucidates an additional colouring of *Incidents* in its carnivalisation, and its inverting, playful and freeing elements. The carnivalesque dethroning of official discourse is done through 'the suspension of the normal hierarchy of significance and the semiotic system of the official culture', which 'opens up a utopian space where creative play can take place' (68). With this suspension, the author shows the automatism and conventionalism of the official language, but also how language and literary forms are abstractions of real life with no relation to it. This dethroning also is extended to important literary figures, like Pushkin or Gogol, not to mock, but to liberate them from their unchanging and fossilized existence as classics and take them closer to a contemporary, live reading, and open up experimentation possibilities. At the same time, taking a Bakhtinian position, something akin to the Menippea is used by Kharms to strip old literary forms from their sanctity and *seeminglyness*. This use of Menippea, also allowed to uproot and *collide* different types of discourses, that would otherwise never have come into contact, opening up new possibilities. The old literary forms are also equated to the new sacrosanct Soviet art, so their parody helps remove the fear attached to this new monoculture and liberate the reader to reality. The parody was therefore used, as Likhachev, Panchenko and Ponyrko would put it, to destroy the semantic system – equated to official discourse – in order to build an unregulated world of *anti-culture*. Therefore, a carnivalised view that combined 'slum naturalism' with the fusion of individual and public time – characteristic of folkloric time –, together with exposing the unsurmountable gap between the 'official collective' and individual life was the best way to counter the new artificial reality, and to liberate the reader and the artist.

Brandist then introduces a characteristic of *Incidents* that starts to open a gap between the playful and regenerative qualities of Bakhtin's study of carnival, and into a more medieval sensibility. By introducing the concept of the Devil, a darker tone starts to rear its head, a tone that is altogether too dark for Kharms' *Incidents* to be

considered squarely within a carnivalesque frame. This introduction adds a phantasmagorical dimension to the cycle, where the sudden brutal tendencies of the characters can be seen as a series of possessions of people. Thus, a picture starts to emerge in *Incidents*, which will be taken to a more extreme level in the latter prose 'phantasmagoria interwoven with realistic detail, horror with absurdity and philosophical universalism with slum naturalism' (1996: 115). The comic and laughter, so essentially embedded into carnival, is of a different kind in *Incidents*. It is the laughter of the Russian Orthodox tradition, shared with Gogol and Dostoevsky, which is not altogether liberating and is distant from the Western carnival tradition. It is here that the figure of the *yurodivy* should be introduced again to better understand *Incidents*. Brandist points out the 'sheer extremity of behaviour' characteristic of the *yurodivie*, and the 'complementing of illogicality with outrageous violence and malevolence' (171) that form part of his bag of nasty tricks, and posits that this tradition of *yurodstvo* gives *Incidents* a further overall unity. As already mentioned, this *yurodstvo* is taken up by Lipovetsky, to bring Kharms' stories simultaneously back to the Russian Orthodox tradition and forward, into a postmodern sensibility.

Reprising the above concept of Kharms' being an early example of Barthes *writing degree zero*, Lipovetsky (2007) sees *Incidents* as happening almost outside time and space, and to express no one's inner world. This, if the world and the self are excluded, means *Incidents* is about language, about writing in pure form, literature thus becoming an 'apotheosis of nonexistence', erasing the subject of representation, thus undermining its own ontology. This deconstruction is equated with the violence within the stories, thus creating a parallel between the metatextual and the textual. The author is protected from this chaos and nonexistence by the act of writing itself, which achieves a unifying order. Dobritsyn (1997: 163) uses the example of the story entitled 'Sonnet', where all the characters forget how to count; however, on the formal level, the text contains 14 sentences, as the 14 lines in a sonnet, there are 14 words in the first sentence, and 196 (14 squared) in the text. This shows that, unlike the characters in the narration, the author has achieved a unifying order at the metatextual level.

To show violence as the only way of communication when language has become an empty husk is not Kharms' leading intent in *Incidents*. What would be the artistic interest in this fairly evident and trite assertion? It is in fact a byproduct of Kharms' true intent, to equate violence within the stories to art and the act of writing. As is the case with art, or writing as its literary manifestation, violence is self-sufficient and does not require a reason to exist. The violence in the stories is unmotivated, and it seems as if the act of violence itself is what matters to the characters, rather than the reason behind it. If violence is the only means for the characters to get in contact with others to escape or transcend their individual world into the more collective world of others, it is precisely because violence is taking the role with which art is endowed outside the text. The artist is able to transcend his individuality and get in contact with a more universal absolute through art, as much as the capable spectator. As seen in the chapter focusing on drama, Elizaveta Bam achieves a temporary respite with words and one of the enforcers *kills* the other by taking over his speech.

While the erasure of the demarcation between the self and others sends us back directly to the Bakhtinian view of carnival as a humanist universality, violent language games direct us towards Kharms' concept of words as the author's *sabre* against an artificial view of reality. As in Kharms' diary entry entitled 'The Sabre' (Kharms 2006), this sabre, with its violent connotations, is to be used, and had already been used by authors like Gogol or Khlebnikov to better represent reality, not through scientific measurements, but through a gauge sympathetic with reality's immanent ontology, which is independent from reason. Lipovetsky equates the unity achieved via metatextual order with violence as a means of communication within the stories. However, after this illuminating reading, Lipovetsky goes on to make this violence double-sided, giving it a much more negative connotation. He posits that this violence offers no possibility to transcend chaos for the characters, and sees in the mention of broken jaws, amongst other associations of speech and violence, the justification for this. Thus, he posits a dichotomy of violence being the only means of transcendence for the characters, while simultaneously seeing this replacement of speech by violence as a deconstruction of transcendence.

There is a progressive increase in violence and death through the cycle as a whole. If the thirty stories are divided into three equal parts, the first part contains no violence towards other characters, either verbal or physical. The characters have a hard time and suffer injury or death, but this is not caused by other characters. Even when some obscenities are said by Pushkin and Gogol when they trip over each other, these obscenities are uttered into the ether or to oneself, instead of to the other. The second part starts already with a physical fight, the utterances to others become more violent and there are two stories where death is caused by other characters. The third part sees these stories increased to four stories and there is not a single story with more than one character in which some kind of violent act towards another character is performed. This serves to progressively identify communication with violence until the cycle's end, where one character physically subjugates the other by violent utterances, until his grotesquely contorted body gives up and he dies, turning – by losing its head – into a literary character, as his neck is then compared to a – Gogolian – nose.

Lipovetsky uses this last story to compound his pessimistic reading of *Incidents* and expand on his analysis of Kharms' double-sided view of the author as a Godlike creator while deconstructing the figure of the author by equating speech to violence, and seeing death as the ultimate signifier. While the authorship problematic will be analysed further in this chapter, it is necessary to deal with the pessimistic view of *Incidents*, as this will colour further analysis of the cycle. In his conclusion, while aiming to refer to a supposed critique of Modernism, Lipovetsky uses a description that, interestingly, seems to be aligning Kharms with Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd – much as academics like Jaccard have posited: 'It does not promise transcendence …, rather it manifests the complete and hopeless absence, disappearance and erasure of the subject and of meaning'. I have to disagree with this reading of *Incidents* and, specifically, Lipovetsky's reading of the closing story, 'Pakin and Rakukin' (2009: 85–6). Lipovetsky's interpretation is quite straightforward: Pakin uses his *authorial power* to control and subjugate Rakukin, forcing him into an increasingly impossible position, until he *kills* Rakukin by the sole force of his words. This death is then explained as his turning into a literary character, having lost his worldly life, by the power of authorial speech. The verbal violence

exercised by Pakin is equated to Kharms' suggesting that violence is the primary source of the author's power, in an exacerbated 'deconstruction of modernism'.

However, I posit that the key to understanding the text is its essential inversion. Thus, the reader has to approach the text in a reverse manner. While a first reading may paint the picture of a despotic Pakin mercilessly and senselessly killing Rakukin, when adding the metatextual element of the equating of violence/communication with art, a very different picture emerges. It is a picture of Good v Evil, in which Pakin represents Good (and thus is associated with art's transcendental power), and Rakukin represents Evil (or a life without art/transcendence). While Pakin is the only one being ostensibly verbally violent, there is no other element in the text denoting any malice on his part. He never makes a violent or derogatory gesture, no negative descriptors are added to his utterances, just 'said Pakin', over and over. When he sees Rakukin is dead, he crosses himself, something that reinforces his belief in God and the fact that he is not a 'God-like author through violence' as Lipovetsky suggests, but rather that he is submitting to a higher power. On the other hand, Rakukin, while only saying one word in the whole story, which in addition is not violent – the Russian equivalent to 'I believe' – is constantly described in a negative light. He is first described as having a *malevolent* gaze, his actions are qualified as *indignant* and *sceptical*, he is a grotesque character from the start, and, even after death, his soul remains *small*, still has an *evil* look, and is shown in a twisted light when his soul skips and stumbles after the Angel of Death, and follows a *bendy* road, as opposed to a *straight* one, before disappearing. Returning to the only word that he utters, the contrast and implications are clear. While Pakin is constantly using violence in his speech, but represents good, Rakukin only says he 'believes', with its strong divine connotations, but represents evil. The dichotomy is clear between art on the one hand not able to express a higher truth directly through writing, but rather making its presence implicit *behind* the text through artistic devices – *collision of meanings*, *zaum* –, and a philistine life that boldly states its understanding of the world while never being able to access or intuit its deeper reality, as well as the negative consequences of this approach.

Therefore, while I agree with Lipovetsky's assessment of Kharms' view of the author as God-like in the realm of literature – in Kharms' words, 'Into everything I do

I put the consciousness that I am the creator of the world.' (2013: 415) –, I disagree with this being a negative or deconstructive view, the kernel of this disagreement being that Kharms never completely equated writing with the real world – rather he used it as a mainstay element in his writings –, and that he always subjugates his 'power' as a writer to the higher notion of the *purity of order* of the text. As we can read in Kharms' notebooks, violence and impassivity are a stylistic choice, 'Works of art describing the negative side of human nature work better. As do works that begin with an indifferent or even poor word.' (2013: 391), while he states that his primary preoccupation is not with content, form, 'quality', or the idea, but 'something hazier and less comprehensible to the rational mind … the *purity of order*' (415). The violence in the story is a literary device with which the author has given the power to the 'Good' character to erase Evil and achieve transcendence, while the author is doing as much for himself and the reader by means of what can be intuited behind the text and the formal purity of order of the story and the cycle as a whole. A further element that supports this view is this author's disagreement with Lipovetsky in the reading of what transpires after Rakukin's death. As mentioned, Lipovetsky takes the negative view that his death turns him into a purely literary character, devoid of worldly existence through the use of verbal violence, and sees the introduction of his soul and the Angel of Death as a move into the purely literary world through the author's despotism.

I take the view that this death is seen unequivocally as a positive event. First, it can be seen as one of Kharms' *miracles* –through violence/art a miracle, that has revealed what is hidden behind *byt*, has been achieved, art has become *Real Art*. The *loss* of the head is a clear reference to OBERIU's prescribed use of *transreason* to arrive at a deeper meaning, while the remaining nose, implies that what was a 'malevolent' – philistine – presence has been turned into an element within art by its connection to Gogol's story. Furthermore, a clearly benevolent presence is introduced in the figure of the Angel of Death, who is in charge of separating the soul from the body – adding a further element of signification, and reinforcing that what has been lost is the part with the most negative and less spiritual connotations. Lastly, as pointed out by Lipovetsky, the Angel of Death appears 'from behind the cupboard' – the cupboard being OBERIU's hieroglyphic par excellence to represent art, which

serves to reinforce the tripartite relationship of art–*zaum*–*miracle*, and art's role as a mediator with the divine.

While Lipovetsky's main thrust is illuminating and acute, taking the violence in these stories excessively at face value risks missing the essential inversion necessary to fully recognise their motivation. This equating of violence with writing plagues Kharms' oeuvre to such an extent, and on occasion approaches separate stories so intimately, as to represent a conscious foregrounding of its fundamental nature in his oeuvre. Apart from 'Pakin and Rakukin', needless to say, his most known ministory is 'Blue Notebook #10', in which the red-haired man is made to disappear line by line, in an eraser-like manner of writing. This ministory opens the cycle, arguably, precisely because of its lack of explicit violence, to both help construct the structure of increasing violence of the cycle, as well as to not draw the attention of the reader directly to violence in order to avoid a misreading of the cycle. This lack of violence cannot be explained away as a chronological evolution of violence in Kharms' writing, as it was written in 1937, later than a similar story, 'The Carpenter Kushakov' (2009: 53–4), which appears further in the cycle. In a similar fashion, carpenter Kushakov loses all of his facial features by unexplainedly slipping and falling onto the pavement a number of times. Once he returns to his apartment building, he is not let in because the amount of injuries and bandages renders him unrecognisable. In a strikingly similar story written in the same year, which does not form part of *Incidents*, and whose protagonist has an almost identical name, Kuznetsov, and goes to buy *carpenter*'s glue, we find a bridge between 'The Carpenter Kushakov' and 'Blue Notebook #10'. This untitled story (2009: 21–20) sees Kuznetsov having the ground cut from under his feet first by his stool being broken, and then by forgetting his identity one brick throw at a time.

On the opposite side of the spectrum of explicit violence from the author to that of 'Blue Notebook #10', Kuznetsov keeps being hit with bricks that fall out of nowhere, each brick seeing him desperately trying to remember who he is by stating aloud what he can remember of himself, until he completely forgets who he is. However, once the story reaches its end by the complete disintegration of Kuznetsov's description, Kharms reinforces that this has indeed been a story, even if one that instead of building a character *brick by brick*, is one that exists by throwing

or removing bricks. As such, he gives a final description of the character and the main elements of the story 'a person on the street with five lumps on his head … his name is Kuznetsov … he needs to buy carpenter's glue to fix the broken stool.' Lipovetsky is discerning, especially in the book (1999), that preceded the article mentioned above, in his estimation of Kharms' equating of literature 'with death, with nonexistence … the only "real reality": only through self-negation can literature attain an ontological status, the status of a self-sufficient thing' (11).

However, it needs to be emphasised that the essence of this equation with death and non-existence, is not a negative, deconstructing one, but on the contrary, a positive, constructive one. As we have seen, Kharms' saw himself as the creator of reality in his writing, so that the violence that populates his stories, this *de-constructing* of the characters, is in fact a device, not for a 'radical deconstruction of modernism' as negating the author's creative powers, but for aiming the text towards *zero* through the negation of expression, as the best and only means available to express the inexpressible. In fact, it could be argued that, after each of Kharms' stories, what is left is *nothing*; the author has created nothing and resolved no conundrums, if anything he has *removed* something that existed, while simultaneously erasing logic and reason-based meaning. This, however, is the best device to arrive at this *nothing* that *creates* a better intuition of the deeper reality. If writing is the contrary of erasing in the physical realm, Kharms is turning the pencil upside-down and aiming for the *miracle* of writing with the eraser at the bottom of the pencil, all while not negating the power of the author, since he is still holding that pencil.

2.2 'The Old Woman'

Kharms' most famous short story, 'The Old Woman' (2009: 87-112), a relative rarity amongst his ministories, opens with the old woman holding a clock with no hands, but able to tell the time by it nonetheless to the protagonist, who is on his apparently going for an aimless walk, and meets his friend Sakerdon Mikhailovich by chance. He has to return to his apartment once he remembers he has not turned the stove off, and once there, gets ready to write a story about a miracle worker who chooses to perform no miracles at any point in his life, and eventually retires into poverty, being

contempt with the mere knowledge of being able to perform them if he so chose to. Being unable to write anything beyond 'The miracle worker was tall.', he gives up and is soon startled by the old woman knocking on his door. She then orders him to prostrate himself on the floor, which he immediately does, and falls asleep. Once he gets up, he realises the old woman is dead. He then goes out to buy groceries, meets a young woman and invites her into his apartment. However, remembering that there is a dead old woman in his apartment, he flees and goes to visit his Sakerdon Mikhailovich again. Once returned to his flat, concerned about being accused of killing the old woman – especially after having hit and bruised the corpse –, he decides to put the corpse in a suitcase and drop it into the Petersburg swamps. On the train journey there, while using the toilet to relieve his indigestion, the suitcase is stolen. He then alights from the train, finds a quiet, secluded spot, gets down to his knees to touch a caterpillar and then bows his head and starts praying.

As in the case with *Incidents*, for an exhaustive analysis of 'The Old Woman', in order not to encumber the reader with an analysis longer than necessary here, they are directed, for a more spiritual focus, to Alice Stone Nakhimovsky's analysis contained in her eminent book *Laughter in the Void* (1982: 87–103); for a further analysis of spiritual implications and a carnivalesque framework, to Craig Brandist's *Carnival Culture and the Soviet Modernist Novel* (1996: 190–195); and for a study of the story's form and a more postmodern view of the role of the author, to Neil Carrick's (1995) article.

In fact, one of the main merits of the story can be said to be the multiplicity of interpretations it inspires. As a way of summarising and unifying these different approaches, with the addition of the interpretation of some elements unexplored so far, suffice it to say that Stone Nakhimovsky (1982) sees in the character of the old woman the representation of the otherworldly and the sacred that lurks below the *byt*, as opposed to the more ordinary pleasures and needs represented by the young woman, a life that the old woman makes impossible for the main character to pursue. The story is imparted circularity by both its spiritual supratextuality, and – more loosely – by its internal structure. If the story opens with the old woman appearing out of thin air and holding a handless clock – representing timelessness –, it ends with the old woman's equally sudden disappearance and a prayer – representing the

connection with the timeless and divine. The search for spiritual truth represented by the old woman is reinforced by her reflection in the character of Sakerdon[69] Mikhailovich – hereafter Sakerdon M. – who is, in the manner of an ascetic, doing nothing but meditating on the floor, almost naked, when the protagonist arrives, and then resumes this position when he leaves. This happens to be almost the exact same position and description of the old woman when she falls – or moves – from the armchair onto the floor. It is also relevant to point out that the only time that the narrator intrudes into the narrative of the story is precisely at this point, in order to describe for the reader Sakerdon M.'s actions once the protagonist leaves. This seems to be done to reinforce the idea that the mystic has access to a world which the main character cannot access.

To these points, most of them raised by Stone Nakhimovsky, I would add the further element of the use of water in this *scene*. Water represents, needless to say, the satiation of spiritual thirst, as opposed to the earthlier sustenance. The protagonist, in a full-blown crisis, brings three things to Sakerdon M.'s apartment: vodka, bread and sausages. Of these things, the host only partakes of one, the vodka. Vodka, of course, is just an endearing variation of the Russian word for water, *voda*, and it has the added symbolic value in the story of changing people's minds or perceptions. He does not eat any bread, which was bought by the 'young lady', and is one of the driest (less *watery*) foods imaginable. In addition, while saying that vodka is *healthy*, he quotes Aleksandr Menshikov to call bread *unhealthy*. The sausages, he does not eat either, arguably because of the fact that it hadn't been possible to boil – with *water* – the sausages, on top of their sexual and scatological connotations. It is worth pointing out that the initial plan of the protagonist was to buy *boiled* ham at the shnop, but having run out of it, he had to content himself with sausages. However, Sakerdon M. does eat the boiled meat he had left from a previously half-eaten soup – this meat having been *watered*, so to speak, and soup being, again, a symbol of a soul-comforting meal.

As soon as the protagonist leaves the building, there are two references to water: he walks down Nevsky Avenue – whose name is derived from Petersburg's

[69] Sakerdon comes from the Latin *sacerdos*, meaning *priest*.

ubiquitous Neva river – and mentions being 'submerged' in his thoughts. After this visit, the protagonist's previous, and only other, interaction with Sakerdon M. is cast in a new, *aqueous*, light. When they first meet, they drink vodka, *boiled* eggs, and sprats – fish, needless to say, live in water – in the cellar of a building (*podvalchik*). The Russian *podvalchik* has a specific connotation of a place where mainly basic alcoholic drinks are served, sometimes, as in this case, with chasers.

The role of Sakerdon M. as a mediator and spiritual guide through water is thus crystal clear. Apart from this, the protagonist always has to go to a *different level* to spend time with Sakerdon M.; either he has to go down into the cellar or 'up the stairs' to Sakerdon M.'s apartment. His clearly higher spiritual acumen puts him in a position of power over the protagonist; the dialogue is one of someone seeking advice – the protagonist – and someone listening and giving it – S. Mikhailovich –, almost condescendingly. When the protagonist tells him about a girl he met that morning, Sakerdon M. is utterly uninterested and does not ask him about it, so that the protagonist has to insist on this to obtain a comment. When he mentions the 'other woman' in his apartment, the strange and only comment from Sakerdon M. is to tell him to marry her. This dialogue shows the complete lack of interest of Sakerdon M. in the mundane intricacies of love, in any carnal or more earthly concerns, and his interest only in the religious side of a relationship.

This theme of water is later reprised at the very end of the story, when the protagonist alights the train at the swamp. Here, together with his deep spiritual and metaphysical realisation, the water is not a clear and pure water that satiates, but a muddied liquid more associated with death – mixed with soil, as a point of access to what lies below, with phantasmagorical connotations. Therefore, the end of the story is left wide open, at least giving the possibility of a signification different from what most scholars agree it to be.

This turning into non-flowing, muddied and unhealthy water, together with the more negative implications of the ambivalent image of the caterpillar, which as sharply pointed out by Brandist (1996: 193) reminds the reader of the snake and the *eating of the apple*, with the suggestion of the cost of knowledge and the expulsion from Eden – while also making a connection with Lipavsky's horror of stagnant water, in whose treatise a description of the caterpillar as the most *liquid* of creatures also

appears –, one possible ending is a squarely negative one, turning the protagonist, as per Sakerdon M.'s reply[70] and as pointed out by Brandist, 'from one who believes but wants not to, to one who does not believe but wishes to do so' (1996: 193). On the other hand, the story could be interpreted as the revelation, through a final miracle, of the presence of God, and the necessary submission this prompts through the act of praying. This reading is reinforced if the inclusion of the Chinari's concept of *vestniki* is remembered. This miracle is conflated with a visit from these messengers from other worlds, perhaps implying that it was them who performed the miracle. In a similar vein to Kharms' 1937 ministory 'How I Was Visited by Messengers' (2009: 240–1), where the protagonist becomes aware of their presence by a 'knocking sound in the clock' and a draft of air in the room moving the curtains, in 'The Old Woman', right after the suitcase is stolen, the protagonist, in a seemingly incongruous manner, starts thinking of the episode in which, at Sakerdon M.'s apartment, a strange sound started to be heard – due to the pot's enamel cracking as was later revealed. This image has the accompanying consequence to remind the reader of the moment when the protagonist had to return to his apartment having left the stove on, which in turn facilitates the intrusion of the old woman into his life[71].

To these interpretations of the story's conclusion, yet a third reading can be added, which until now has not been explored, if we remember Kharms' reading of Kierkegaard and the markedly religious tone of the story; an end that could be said to be halfway between the two previous readings. Kierkegaard, who ultimately does not question the existence of God, nor strays from God as the unifying principle, still gives the person the choice of living as if God did not exist, focusing on shallow earthly matters, or submitting to God's existence in order to access the eternal and divine that lies beyond reality. In this proposed reading, the whole arch of the character of the old woman, either alive, dead, outside or inside a suitcase, could be seen as the protagonist's visions or hallucinations. This interpretation is supported by the fact that no one else in the story ever interacts with, sees or even acknowledges

[70] 'In my opinion, there are no believers or nonbelievers. There are only those who want to believe and those who do not want to believe' (Kharms 2009: 101).

[71] I have Stone Nakhimovsky to thank for the connection between the pot cracking in the stove and the protagonist's forgetting to turn off the stove.

the old woman or the suitcase, as well as by the phantasmagorical nature of the old woman. It is also reinforced by the suitcase being oddly light once loaded with its contents, as well as the odd choice of possible culprits for its eventual theft – a well-dressed village dandy and an exhausted worker.

Following a Kierkegaardian reading, it is conspicuous that the suitcase disappears at the same time as the protagonist is purging himself in the toilet. Thus, Kierkegaard's choice between an uncomplicated, mundane life, and one that incorporates the divine and makes the mundane seem unreal is brought to the forefront with the dual image of the young and the old woman. After strenuous spiritual probing and searching, encapsulated in the figure of the old woman, the protagonist finally chooses Kierkegaard's proposition to consciously and deliberately submit to the deeper reality, at the same time abandoning his more mundane wants, represented by the young woman. When this decision of following the divine is final, the protagonist's weight of paralysing doubt is lifted in the most physical of ways in the train's toilet. Once the protagonist executes this action, a further connection with the divine and the *vestniki* is implied by the *emergence* of 'a cold *sweat*[72]' on his forehead and his saying – in a parallel with the above mention of the identification of the visit of the *vestniki* with 'a draft of air': 'a slight chill flutters around my heart.' Similarly, water is a central element in the 1937 story. Once this unease disappears together with the suitcase, the first thing the protagonist does when he alights from the train is to get to his knees and pray, in an explicit act of submission to God.

Whichever reading one makes of the story, what is irrefutable is the story's deep metaphysical and divine undercurrent, which in turn helps to further elucidate one of the main differences between the oberiuts and the theatre of the absurd. The palpable religiosity concerns of the story are not to be found anywhere in Beckett or Ionesco's works. While a Kierkegaardian view of Beckett is possible, upon inspection, Beckett's turns out to be an empty choice between accepting or not the existence of god, as this is of little or no consequence to the person – this god being shown to be absolutely impassive to human concerns. Therefore, the person is left with the choice between an absurd immediate reality or an absurd God. In turn, Ionesco's world is

[72] My emphasis

one of purely human concerns, any reference to the divine is omitted, and God is conspicuous in his absence.

A final reading of the text is possible through the framework of the Petersburg Text. The protagonist is surrounded by representations of the demonic and chaos in his urban environment: the old woman barges into his apartment and orders him to prostrate himself, which he is incapable of resisting; the corpse of the old woman is shown with false teeth jutting out; the dead old woman is able to move; a drunk pushes him, a 'cripple with a mechanical leg' is mocked by boys; a mysterious old man came looking for him, but the woman that reports this is not sure of when it happened or how he looked. This only intensifies when he boards the tram, leaving the city and heading towards the swamp. As he boards, he sees a citizen being carried away by militiamen – which could represent either the bad deeds committed by the citizen or the evil of the Stalinist terror –, then, in a representation of the devil, a village dandy – as the devil, coming for a visit under disguise – with 'curly' hair, a peculiar attire including a *green* cigarette holder and a pink collar shirt – this being a recurring image in Kharms to represent the passing to the underworld, as in Elizaveta Bam's vision of a cockroach with an axe and red collar as she is about to receive dead – glances at him *insolently*; then in a further descent into the Hades, he has to run to the toilet because of his stomach pains and expresses that this experience is 'as sweet as moments of love'. When he leaves the toilet, another evil act has happened, his suitcase has been stolen. It is only when he finally gets off the tram, and into nature at this swampy spot and goes into 'a little forest', having been physically and materially emptied by the demonic in the city, that the possibility of salvation arrives for the protagonist.

Of note too for the way in which it further inscribes Kharms' story into the Petersburg Text is its intertextuality, which it exudes. This intertextuality is voluntary, as the passage in which the protagonist strikingly asks the young woman he has just met before inviting her to his apartment whether she believes or not in God, a question that flusters the young woman; a clear reference to his fellow oberiut Vaginov's *The Goat Song* (2015: 126), where the character of Teptelkin has an equally startling first question for a prostitute:

- “Do you believe in God?” Teptelkin asks her.
- “Of course I believe!” the woman crosses herself.
- “Let’s go, let’s go,” Teptelkin energetically drags her down Nevsky.
- “I won’t go for less than three Rubles!” she declares, looking sullenly at Teptelkin’s figure.

However, to this intentional intertextuality that crowds not only this but all of Kharms’ writings, Carrick (1995) adds an inspired equation of the intrusion of the old woman into the protagonist’s life with the intrusion of characters from the Russian literary tradition into the author’s writing. According to this view, the inclusion of the old woman is not an enriching and dialogic *allusion* to other texts where the stock character of the old woman can be said to have appeared – as in the works of Pushkin and Dostoevsky implicitly referenced in ‘The Old Woman’ –, but an *invasion* of the ‘dominant narrative patterns’ that restrict and overpower the narration. As such, her role is to perish and haunt the conscience of the main character, and she does just that, even if her death remains unexplained and she haunts the protagonist even though he is not responsible in any way for her death.

To leave this exploration of the story, it is pertinent to use the image of the train that the protagonist takes at the end, as it provides a further superstructure to the story while simultaneously adding the potentially yielding association with the previously mentioned view of the avant-garde artists as exiles. The protagonist is submerged into a world of chaos, evil and paralysing doubt while in his city. It is not until he leaves the city onboard a train, that his angst subsides and he finds peace and a connection with the divine. Once on the train, he is purged from his stomach problems and his suitcase disappears. The image of exile is further reinforced by the citizen being led away by a militiaman shortly after he boards the train. Of note to is that he is only able to take this train because his neighbour the *engine driver* lends him some money, further reinforcing the separation between the city and the distance from it, since this temporary *exile* is both enabled and performed by a train’s engine driver. It is also worth dwelling on the choice of the protagonist for a destination, a train stop whose name translates as Fox’s Nose. The connotation is clear; smell is the only sense that is not connected to any physical reality – even sound being a translation of physical vibrations. Additionally, this sense is the only sense not

referred to in the whole story, even when there are numerous instances in which it could have been used to describe the scene – a dead woman, food, a visit to the toilet. As such, the sense of smell can be interpreted to be present in the overall form of the story, rather than in its narrative. The story can thus be understood as the search for the invisible through means other than immediate experience – or reason. It also helps establish the overarching structure of the story in its circular return to the image of the old woman being able to tell the time by a clock with no hands. This understanding of the story fits into Stone Nakhimovsky's (1982: 89) reading of the story representing an internal struggle, rather than the external violence and grotesque that dominates *Incidents*, as there is nothing absurdly violent or grotesque in the story apart from what happens inside the protagonist's apartment.

3. Konstantin Vaginov

Vaginov, older than Kharms and Vvedensky by half a decade, also saw his poetry published sooner, from 1921, and had a stronger, more intimate connection to established figures of the intelligentsia like Bakhtin. His work, and especially his poetry, was thus more connected to early Russian Modernism – Symbolism – than younger members of OBERIU. In fact, according to Chukovsky (1989: 186), Nikolay Gumilev labelled Vaginov as a Symbolist, something with which Vaginov agreed – although his *symbolism* was far removed from the previous school, and just based on his use of symbols for the mythical themes in his novels. Vaginov, thus, is widely considered less *avant-gardist*.

Interestingly, Vaginov, in a remarkable parallel to Kharms, also shifted his emphasis from an all-verse output to almost exclusively writing prose. However, this happened earlier than in Kharms' case, and coincided with Vaginov's joining the OBERIU in 1927, his first novel *The Goat Song* being published in 1928. The joining of OBERIU was prefaced by his participation in the Bakhtin Circle, presided over by none other than Bakhtin himself, laying the ground for a further commonality with other OBERIU members. Anemone (1985) sees in his relation with OBERIU the main reason for his shift from poetry and lyricism to prose, satire and the grotesque. However, this assertion seems to be wrong at first glance, due to the fact that he was

already writing his first novel when he joined OBERIU, and the fact that he started writing prose soon after his affiliation with the Bakhtin Circle; Bakhtin was, of course, a committed proposer of the novel as a superior form of literary expression. In fact, Vaginov's novels have a strong, if peculiar taste of Bakhtin's propounded carnival in them, with special emphasis on Menippean satire. As pointed out by Anemone (1998: 58), the style of Menippean satire 'is marked by the maximum possible contrast and variety, juxtaposing high philosophical and/or religious seriousness with low, "slum naturalism" and a concern with topical and current events, issues, and personalities.' These elements, together with a synchronic, rather than historicising view of world culture, are strongly present in Vaginov's novels. However, Vaginov's brand of Menippean satire lacks the positive elements ascribed to it and exhibits profound pessimism for the intelligentsia and the centuries-old cultural movement associated with it. In fact, the possibility of rebirth, or at least of an immediate rebirth, is negated throughout, since in Vaginov's novels, the only tragic-heroic response to the new prevailing society and culture is death – committing suicide when it becomes clear the old culture is no longer viable.

However, as pointed out by Firtich (2001), Vaginov's perceived connection to *left* art has different roots than that of Kharms or Vvedensky's. As an example, the alogism in his oeuvre, which was a central part of the futurists and the OBERIU, can be traced back to the alogism already present in Russian literature from the nineteenth century rather than to Kruchenykh's concepts. Even though Vaginov's alogism was as metaphysical as Kharms and Vvedensky's, in an attempt to 'expose the superficiality of the common logic, and an appeal to the logic of the higher order' (259), his alogism, which has 'dramatic and tragic dimensions', was borne out of the 'uneasy tension between the author's nostalgia for classical clarity and the acute awareness of the alogical absurdity of life' (ibid), or even more specifically for the tension and incompatibility of the new Soviet reality with the pre-existing Petersburg intelligentsia (Roberts 1997). The problematic of the place of the intelligentsia in the new Soviet reality can be said to be, together with the relationship of life and art or the word and the world, the central issue in Vaginov's oeuvre. In fact this question was not specific to Vaginov, as the role of the old intelligentsia in Soviet society was a common theme in the cultural milieu of the 1920s and it 'occupied a central place

in polemics and discussions in newspapers, journals, and literary works by authors such as Shklovsky, Mandel'shtam, Olesha, and Zoshchenko' (Anemone 2000: 256).

The first concept that comes to mind to those familiar with Vaginov's oeuvre when his prose is mentioned is that of the writer as a *coffin maker* – a term coined by Vaginov himself. The mind of the initiated will also quickly be reminded of an author who obsessively collects pieces from Petersburg's dying intelligentsia milieu and cultural past in a futile attempt to save it from irrevocably disappearing. The image of the artist retreat – or self-exile – into his ivory tower of pure art in the face of the incoming Philistine hordes, is also readily associated with Vaginov – which, again, was proposed by Vaginov himself in his description of the artists retiring into the dacha in *The Goat Song* and the character Teptelkin loudly proclaiming 'We are the last island of the Renaissance … in the dogmatic sea that surrounds us; we, we alone, preserve the sparks of criticism, respect for science, respect for man … We are all in a high tower, we hear the furious waves beating against the granite sides' (2015: 94–5).

It is worth dwelling on Vaginov's image of the obsessive collector. This collecting is shown in his novels to be double-sided, with the positive side being that of the preservation of culture for the future and providing a continuation of the cultural tradition when it was being systematically erased/replaced. The negative side is shown to be that by taking these elements out of the realm of current, real life, and pasting them into a purely literary medium, their real-world existence is erased. As Anemone (2000: 260) puts it, the real-world characters that the narrator of the novel inserts into his texts, 'feel that their lives have been rendered redundant and meaningless, that others have lived their lives, and there is nothing left for them to do'. As Vaginov evolved in his prose output, the double-sidedness of this collecting became increasingly one-sidedly negative and grotesque. By his last novel, the positive side of collecting became, in parallel with Vaginov's own experience, a desperate attempt – which is considered heroic by Anemone for its tragic nature – to find order in the enveloping chaos. The negative side, in contrast, became exacerbated until the point of becoming an overbearing and grotesque fetishizing of culture. The increasing grotesqueness of this collecting can be paralleled with the

increasing incongruity – or cultural exile – of the aims of the intelligentsia against the new reality.

Another aspect worth bringing up is Vaginov's exploration of the role of the author and of the creative process itself, which, as already mentioned, is often seen as a postmodern tendency. This exploration can be said to be palpable and central to his novels in an even more overt and all-consuming way than that of Kharms. These postmodernist endeavours, like the aforementioned 'writing a novel about writing a novel' or equating reading with writing are probably borne out of the combination of the Russian tradition of self-consciousness in literature and Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism. However, as much as with Kharms, Vaginov's novels cannot ultimately be considered to be either fully carnivalesque or postmodern, since the *carnivalisation* became gloomier and lost much of its regenerative power, and there are remnants of a unifying order through artistic endeavour, even though this was increasingly challenged in his prose up to the point of almost complete disappearance. For Segal (2006), Vaginov's carnivalisation included himself as a writer, something that points towards the complete disintegration of authorial control and autonomy, in line with Vaginov's immediate reality. For Roberts, in fact, by *Bambocciada*, Vaginov's third novel, he had completely abandoned any Romantic view of the author, considering books 'nothing more than an amalgam of a multitude of social discourses', with literature being 'no privileged discourse, merely one discursive practice among many' (1997: 74). Needless to say, these lines would fit nicely in any description of postmodernist literature.

Before passing onto the exploration of his novels, it is worth repeating Vaginov's notion of the Revolution and subsequent reality, alluded to in previous chapters. Before his first novel, according to Chukovsky (1989: 182),

> He perceived the revolution as a gigantic catastrophe, … that brings liberation. And not only to the people … but also to himself. … Vaginov believed that the victory of the revolution over the old Romans was similar to the victory of Christianity over paganism … beneficial and fair, but at the same time deeply tragic … in the fact that along with the slave system of the Roman Empire, ancient culture also perished … However, in general his myth was optimistic. He believed that culture is similar to the

> mythological bird Phoenix, which burns in fire many times and is then reborn from the ashes, and is therefore immortal.

He often used the Philostratus as a 'symbol of that same ascetic humanist who was destined to secretly carry culture through the darkness of the new Middle Ages until the happy moment of the rebirth of the Phoenix bird' (188). His faith in this myth, however, was increasingly tested in his novels, to the point of becoming almost impossible to discern.

3.1 *The Goat Song*

The Goat Song is Vaginov's novel with the widest reception due in part to the many encoded references to the members of the contemporary Petersburg intelligentsia and as the novel that represents and expounds on Vaginov's move from verse to prose, and from a more classical orientation to a more avant-garde one. The overarching theme of the novel is the tension and anxiety of the problem of how the pre-existing intelligentsia fits into the new Soviet reality, with the conclusion being a clearly negative one. It is also the first step of what would be the perfecting of Vaginov as a consolidated prosaist and the introduction of the concepts that will be later developed. As such, in this novel, there is already a marked tension between the form and the content of the novel, in which the tragic loss of a culture in which classicism plays a leading role is encoded within a form that belongs to the 'realm of avant-garde experimentation, with all its spatial, temporal shifts and alogicality' (Firtich 2001: 247). This tension is reflected within the text in the figure of the unknown poet, who is interested in Greek, Roman and Renaissance literature, but uses avant-garde devices in his writing. These shifts and alogicality are set already form the very start of the novel. A first foreword by an author 'at the threshold of the book', is immediately followed by another foreword by an author 'who appeared in the middle of the book', creating a time shift and alogical confusion to set the tone of the novel. This is reflected in the content with the confusion and temporary-spatial displacement of the characters (248). There is an interesting spatial tension that plays throughout the novel. From the start, the narrator makes clear he is interested only in talking about Petersburg, while simultaneously admitting that it does not exist anymore. Therefore, by centring the *action* in Petersburg, the discourse is essentially

in the past, while the present where the narrator resides, is constantly shifted into the future of the past Petersburg.

It can be considered a novel about its own creation or about literary creation in general. The problematic of the authorial authorship is the mainstay of the book, which will be further expounded. Suffice it to say that *The Goat Song* already contains elements like the questioning of whether the author engenders the text or vice versa, a theme, that of the relationship between hero and author, which was alluded to by Bakhtin just before the writing of the novel (1990). To follow with the Bakhtinian frame, carnivalisation of the author is also used to put them on a pedestal, dethrone them, only to restore them with renewed energy, although this last part is somehow weakened in the novel.

His myth of Philostratus is challenged in this novel with the character of Teptelkin, who is a double of real-life, Bakhtin Circle member Lev Pumpyansky. Vaginov mocked Pumpyansky's perceived warming towards the new State-sanctioned ideology – something that strained their relationship irreparably – and in so doing showed how similarly flawed the previous culture was, denouncing philistinism. As such 'philistinism remains undefeated in it, because Teptelkin does not cease to be a philistine even when … he enters the Soviet service … philistinism remained undefeated … because it had not yet been defeated then and in life' (Chukovsky 1989: 193). In connection to this, Segal (2006) contends that the novel shows that the preserving of culture for the future that Philostratus represented was indeed a vain and unworthy endeavour, with the death of the artist being shown as the only appropriate response as 'only … death … can stand in grandeur and authenticity next to the two-thousand-year cycle of the previous culture' (119). This dethroning of the myth of Philostratus in achieved through the novel's form via the double nature of laughter contained within. It is a laughter that entertains and implies compassion, but also has a destructive role. There is an identification of the author with the lowest instincts of the characters in a seeming parting from the previous literary tradition, as 'unlike Gogol, who strove to separate his heroes from himself in his writing and insisted that he was "not like them," Vaginov's "author" ultimately absorbs all his heroes into himself' (111).

All the previous is perfectly encapsulated in this lucid dream of the Unknown Poet (2015: 96-7):

> *The earthly sun still shines in the west… -*
> one poetess will say later, but he knows for sure that the old sun will never shine, that it is impossible to enter the same stream twice, that a new circle begins above the two-thousand-year circle …
> "The Last Judgment," he thinks.
> - What were you doing there on earth? - Dante rises. - Did you hurt widows and orphans?
> "I did not offend, but I gave birth to the author," he answers in a quiet voice, "I corrupted his soul and replaced it with laughter.
> "Was it not my laughter," Gogol rises, "through tears?"
> "Not with your laughter," the unknown poet answers even more quietly, lowering his eyes. … I allowed the author to immerse us in the sea of life and laugh at us.
> …
> "There is no place for you among us, despite all your art," Dante rises.
> The unknown poet falls. The gatekeepers lift him up and throw him into the terrible city. How quietly he walks down the street! He has nothing more to do in the world. He sits down at a table in a night cafe. Teptelkin climbs the stairs and approaches.
> "There's no point in grieving," he says. "We are all unhappy in this world. After all, I also thought to bring the flame of rebirth, but this is what happens."

3.2 *The Works and Days of Svistonov*

By now, it would seem no mention of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* can be initiated without quoting Gerasimova's description of it as 'a novel about a writer, who is writing a novel about a writer, who is writing a novel about a writer…' (1989: 152). This exploration will not be an exception. To this should be added Nikolskaya's oft-shared reading of the tragedy of a novelist who refuses to distinguish between literature and life (1967). Here, Vaginov's main character considers literature an 'existence beyond the grave' and sees his collecting of books, newspaper clippings, and other *bric-a-brac* as an 'extraction of people from one world and the insertion of them into another sphere…more real than this perpetually disintegrating world.' (120) This is taken literally, to its extreme, when his collecting is shown to extend to

the people he meets, his acquaintances and his friends. Thus, he also becomes a 'collector of souls', and starts rejecting any worldly existence in favour of a purely literary one, seeing any new friendship or encounter only in terms of the possibilities of 'collecting souls' it brings. He also loses any empathy for the people of the real world and mercilessly exposes their most sensitive weaknesses and secrets. Thus, the view of art as a means of transcendence and the author giving an overall unity of order to a chaotic world is undermined; the author himself ends up inside this world at the end of the novel, incapable of differentiating reality from it. Anemone, however, leaves the door open to a more positive interpretation 'as the deserved punishment for his wilful and destructive inability to distinguish between art and life; as the tragic end of an artist whose complete and total devotion to art destroyed his life; or as a heroic renunciation of the new reality of Stalinism' (260).

The novel can be read as a polemicising with Bakhtin, rather than a blind incorporation of the literary theorist's tenets. Notwithstanding this, the novel has an overarching carnivalesque ethos in that it mocks its heroes, but also the author's authority; this carnivalisation, according to Segal (2006: 149) represents 'not only debunking and mockery, but also exaltation, not only killing, but also revival, resurrection'. However, this Bakhtinian reading, as much as was previously said about Kharms, is undermined by a gloomier undercurrent that takes the novel closer to a medieval sensibility. Brandist says that 'the creative practices of the writer take sinister forms which emanate from the separation of art and life and turn the writer into something akin to a medieval demon' (1996: 221) who has created a hell for his characters in which he finally ends up. Thus, this view denounces the failure of the writer to integrate into social progress. Contrary to this view, Chukovsky sees this 'demonization' of the author as something altogether more welcomed, in a Spenglerian notion of cyclical growth through destruction.

Polemicising Bakhtin, the novel contains an identification of a deaf-mute character as the ideal *listener*, which represents the absolute negation of dialogism. According to Segal, this is 'a symbol of how Svistonov imagines the relationship between text and reader: literature influences people, but this influence is not rational, but purely magical' (2006: 132). The collection and collage-like nature of the writer in the novel is equated to Bakhtin's proposed intertextuality and dialogic

nature of all communication, and especially literature. This however, is taken to an extreme with Svistonov's novels being little more than a collage of images, characters and texts 'cut and pasted' into a book. This taking to an extreme is also done, parodying Vaginov's own style, with the form of the novel, taking the formalist concept of art as a set of techniques to an absurd level (Nikolskaya 1988: 75). In further opposition to Bakhtinian thought, Svistonov equates literature with the afterlife, while for Bakhtin, this beyond-the-grave existence is equated to dead literature. Additionally, Svistonov can be said to choose a monologic act of reading over a dialogic one. However, in Roberts' estimate (1997: 119), the novel – and by extension, Vaginov – leaves no doubt that this is 'the "wrong" choice' between 'passive and timeless' and a 'creative and historically determined' type of reading. If the Bakhtinian reading is then foregrounded, *The Works and Days of Svistonov* is a novel that forces the reader to *write*, by leaving gaps in its narrative.

The most shared reading of the novel is through this equating of writing with reading, but also through the questioning of the frames, both internal and external, of the novel. Segal (2006) sees the essence of the novel to be the writing of a work that substracts life; in the transfer of people into the world of literature, it hunts reality while simultaneously 'killing' it. This is exemplified in the figure of Kuku, whose identity is stolen by Svistonov's novel, which in turn marks the disappearance of Kuku from Vaginov's novel. As such, 'Svistonov's novel "absorbs" not only reality, but also Vaginov's novel itself, which gave birth to it' (138). The annihilation of Kuku

> gives Svistonov the opportunity to continue building his world, but this world brings pain and death not only to Kuku, but also to Svistonov himself. The harmonious unity of the author and the "bright" heroes he created is over. Svistonov's novel has acquired its own existence, independent of the author, and has begun to make changes in the surrounding reality, destroying and devastating it. (141)

This destructive nature of writing is reinforced by the novel's conclusion, in what is, on the whole, accepted academically as its thrust. In the end, both Svistonov and Vistonov – the writer in Svistonov's novel – end up locked within Svistonov's' novel, but also the previous reality of Petersburg – and for Toporov, the Petersburg Text by extension. The authority of the writer is questioned by making them another

convention in order to show that reality and literature are not absolute, do not possess any ontological reality, and flow into each other' (Segal 2006: 141) – with the caveat that there is still a remnant of a suggestion that literature's ontology is superior to reality.

3.3 *Bambocciada* and *Harpagoniana*

Bambocciada was Vaginov's third published novel. As such, it serves as a bridge between *The Works and Days of Svistonov* and *Harpagoniana*. The two main themes of the novel are the distinction or lack thereof between art and life, and the problematics of mimetic representation. This line is represented by the main character, who, having been a clown amongst other activities in the past, is now trying to live his life in a world of constant play – both in the ludic and theatrical sense – in order to achieve the ontological status of play and become *eternal* (Roberts 2006: 70–3). This character could be said to represent Kharms, who, in a manner that could not have been more opposite from Vaginov, saw no distinction between personal life and art, and lived his life in a constant state of theatricality – one is readily reminded of Vvedensky's words: 'Kharms is art' (Vvedensky in Nakhimovsky 1982). In Roberts' estimate, while the characters in the novel refuse to draw a line between the *word* and the *world*, that is to say, between *life* and *play*, Vaginov does this in an ironic way that denotes his absolute separation of both. This is also the view of Anemone (2000: 263), who endows it with darker connotations pointing at the confusion of ethical with aesthetic categories:

> Judging by the lives of Vaginov's heroes, the consequences of not distinguishing between figurative and literal meaning can be fatal. Not only do his heroes become spectators of their own lives, but they constantly go wrong by applying aesthetic, rather than ethical, categories in their dealings with other people.

Mimetic representation, in turn, is critiqued for refusing its own ontology, making it merely a fictitious copy of the real world, instead of the representation of a different world. The name of the main character, Felinflein, is used as an example of this repudiation, the second half of the name not being exactly the same as the first, but adding nothing of value. Finally, as a conclusion, Roberts agrees with Anemone's

(1985: 186-7) analysis (although Anemone was analysing two poems from the mid-1920s), to say that in *Bambocciada* Vaginov completely abandoned the idea of art's power to transcend, of the poet's words being as real as objects, and of an organic relationship between life and art.

Harpagoniana, as Vaginov's last – and unfinished – novel, represents the final evolution and taking to their extreme of the concepts present in his prose. Everything seems to be reaching its extreme logical conclusion, with collecting becoming an increasingly grotesque endeavour in the figure of collector-*systematiser* Zhulonbin, high and low culture becoming completely fused, and the author in their novel seeming to finally completely lose their voice by the irruption and taking over the reins of the characters' unrelated narratives, in a Bakhtinian dethroning of the author (Shepherd 1992). The title is already a clue of the negative view of *collecting*, having been taken from Harpagon, the main character in Molière's *The Miser*. The theme of collecting as a separation from the real world becomes altogether more pronounced and obsessive, with the characters' lives – specifically those in the society of collectors – lives being nothing but a constant search for meaning and order, to the point of madness.

The central character of the novel is Lokonov, who is an image of the dying intelligentsia. His disconnection with reality is and inability to integrate are shown throughout the novel, be it by the fact that he, at thirty-five still lives with his old-fashioned mother or his problems trying to connect with young Yuliya, his object of attention, as he feels too old and cannot find the topics that would interest her. When he sees another man regularly visiting her, he, understandably, draws the expected conclusion. However, in his *old-world* mind, he imagines that his rival lives in *old world* opulence and luxury, is an erudite, and has travelled the four corners of the world. Avoiding the dangerous reveal that this is just a philistine proletarian, this visitor is ultimately shown to be a sixty-year-old collector, member of the society of collectors, there merely for interest in old, valueless items. On top of this, what is of most interest in *Harpagoniana* is the taking to the extreme of the act of collecting by the introduction of dreams as a collector's item. These most immaterial of items are shown in turn to be the most expensive ones, and can be ordered on demand depending on the buyer's needs. This serves to further reinforce the unreality of the

previous culture cycle in contemporary Petersburg and the inadaptation of the intelligentsia to the new reality. Lokonov, at some point, makes this explicit: 'for me, unadapted and feeling that the world is terrible, dreams are necessary' (2015: 219).

4. Samuel Beckett

There is little this study could add to the weighty total of academic literature surrounding Beckett. What is of most relevance for the present investigation is his novels' position between Modernism and Postmodernism. He clearly makes use of modernist devices, but these are often deconstructed, as is the case with his *stream-of-consciousness* style of writing, which rather than representing self-absorption in *thought*, is a circular, self-conscious and self-destroying *writing*; In Tokarev's words, it is rather 'the stream of the unconscious, which "floods" the author himself, playing the passive role of a powerless witness to the loss of his own individuality' (2002:127-8). In a demarcation from a Romantic view of the author further from that made by Modernism, while of Joyce, Beckett affirms that he was 'was a superb manipulator of material' and tended towards 'omniscience and omnipotence as an artist', of himself, he states 'I'm not master of my own material' and 'I'm working with impotence, with ignorance' (Beckett in Shenker 1956). As much as Beckett didn't consider himself master of his material, the role of the author in his works is still a privileged one – if weakly so, as, even if there is deconstruction of the author and some rebellion from the characters, their efforts are always futile and never reach the level of the postmodernist complete removal of the authorial voice. The oberiuts, in turn, shared this view of the author as the privileged creator, as well as Beckett's refusal of psychologism and of the use of *style*, although they also progressively approached a postmodern sensibility to the point of grazing the definition of a postmodernist work that Vaginov's last novels represent.

Even if Beckett's oeuvre could be considered a healthy contrasting with Joyce's works, especially in Beckett's use of sober and minimalistic expression and lack of style against Joyce's most eccentric language manipulation which for Beckett represented the apotheosis of the word, the influence of the Irish modernist is palpable in Beckett's output. In Beckett's essay, *Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce* (1972), originally published in 1929 within *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for*

Incamination of Work in Progress, we find not only an acute investigation into Joyce's aims, but a foreshadowing and the best reflection of Beckett's own purpose. In his contrasting of Joyce with the Italians, it is possible to envisage the main tenets of Beckett's own oeuvre and the modernist undercurrent of the Irish dramaturge. When drawing parallels between Giambattista Vico and Joyce, Beckett gives voice to the most modernist preoccupation with form:

> Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself* … When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep … When the sense is dancing, the words dance. (1972: 14)

Here, we find not only a foregrounding of form, but also, in a Bergsonian parallel to the formalists, how this form achieves a new active and virginal perception of the work of art. The widely shared reading of Beckett's scenarios as purgatories is also given explicit voice by Beckett in his paralleling and contrasting of Joyce and Dante. Of Dante's purgatories he says that they are 'conical and consequently [imply] culmination' and are characterised by 'absolute progression guaranteed consummation', where 'movement is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance', while of Joyce's, he considers them 'spherical and [exclude] culmination', sees in them 'flux - progression or retrogression, and an apparent consummation', where 'movement is non-direction or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back' (21-22).

In what represents a clear analogy with his own work, Beckett considers human reality a purgatory which is the space between the two absolute extremes of Heaven and Hell. The constant collision of these tensive elements releases 'a flood of movement and vitality' through which 'the vicious circle of humanity is being achieved' (22). In the form of Beckett's works, thus, we see an escape from the absolute extremes and the refusal of any certitude, as it is considered by the author the fixation or arresting of this – Bergsonian – flux. In Beckett's analysis of Giordano Bruno's theoretical-philosophical works, we see strong parallels with the Chinari-Kharms' concept of zero as the ever-generating point of transition between the past

and the future, and between one extreme of the infinite-absolute and the other. In Beckett's words, for Bruno there is 'no difference between the infinite circle and the straight line. The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent' (6). As has been examined, the Chinari-OBERIU identify this zero-absolute with God, something that Beckett also attributes to Bruno: 'and all things are ultimately identified with God, the universal monad, Monad of monads' (6).

Lastly, Beckett provides the best link between his work and that of Joyce through the medium of the *corruption* and *reduction* of language that he attaches to Vico, Dante and Joyce. In a parallel with the vicious circle of existence as a purgatory, he sees in these authors a constant corruption and desophistication of language, in a 'endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate', which 'imparts a furious restlessness to the form' (16). Of Dante and Joyce, he goes on to state that both wrote in a language that ran contrary to their context. While Joyce's eccentricities could not be spoken by anyone, Dante wrote in a compendium of dialects that would have hurt the sensibilities of the ecclesiastical Latin readership. This is transparently not the case with Beckett's language, which is as sober and grounded as it could possibly be conceived. Once more, Beckett explains this away in his essay through Vico's 'little or no attempt at subjectivism or abstraction, no attempt at metaphysical generalisation'.

As such, taking Vico's concept of language evolution from 'Hieroglyphic (sacred)' to 'Philosophical (capable of abstraction and generalisation)' through a 'Metaphorical (poetic)' phase, it could be argued that Beckett's works could be situated at the end of this circular evolution, with Beckett aiming to corrupt abstract language and simplify and particularise it to return to it its original generating power. In his case, this is not done with the end to arriving at a newly sacred language, but this tripartite evolution is condensed with the help of form within his works, which become a circular purgatory in which words attempt to reach their sacred roots through metaphor, get lost in abstraction, and are corrupted to a particularising form to impart them with the above mentioned 'cyclic dynamism of the intermediate.'

There is a last element of Beckett in which it is worth dwelling, and which offers an intriguing parallel with the two other prose writers in this chapter. If Kharms and Vaginov turned away from verse, and into prose, it could be argued that, similarly,

Beckett abandoned prose in favour of drama. Whereas *The Unnamable*, written in 1953, represents his last novel, his first major theatre production, *Waiting for Godot*, was written in 1952 and his theatrical output extended until the 1980s.

Already in 1937, Beckett had his focus on the corruption and deconstruction of language to better express reality:

> And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become … a mask … since we dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through … perhaps one will already be able to sense a whispering of the end-music or the silence underlying all. (2009: 518)

The incognita of whether it is music or silence that remains after the total corruption of language becomes transparent in Beckett's prose, and with it, the door that Beckett had left open towards a positive outcome before the Second World War was shut close. It would seem that Beckett's aim to deconstruct language did not achieve the intended circular regeneration after the generation-maturation-putrefaction cycle, but that, in a parallel with the Theatre of the Absurd as a whole, it achieved to express the absurd through absurd means, but stopped at that, paralysed by the turn from the solid ground treaded on by the modernists with the energy of the turn of the century and its faith in progress into the bog of post-Second World War multifaceted loss of faith. Beckett said as much of his prose already in 1956, when he affirmed that 'in the last book, *L'Innomable*, there's complete disintegration … no way to go on. There very last thing I wrote, *Textes pour Rien*, was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed' (Beckett in Shenker 1956). The parallel with the OBERIU authors is translucent; if Kharms and Vaginov abandoned verse together with the faith in progress associated with their early Futurist devices, so Beckett seems to have abandoned prose together with his early modernist faith in cyclical progress through the total corruption of the old forms shortly after the end of the Second World War, which would render his *trilogy* an ill-fated pursuit of the reigniting

the modernist impulse after the war, and would serve to explain his approximation to Postmodernism.

4.1 *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*

In this oft-considered trilogy – a compilation that Beckett himself rejected – Beckett gives numerous examples of his distrust of language, of its clichéd and fossilised nature and exposes this again and again through his characters' constant deconstructions and contradictions. However, in light of the above exposition, this distrust of language acquires the additional layer of Beckett's espousing of the *cyclical dynamism* of language through its *germination* and *putrefaction*. In *Malone Dies*, we can read: 'For I never doubted it would come, sooner or later, except the days I felt it was past.' (110), or 'An aeroplane passes, flying low, with a noise like thunder. It is a noise quite unlike thunder, one says thunder but one does not think it, it is just a loud, fleeting noise, nothing more, unlike any other' (90). In *Molloy*, in turn, the protagonist states: 'And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer your lesson … life without tears, as it is wept' (42), while in *The Unnamable*, we find: 'I should mention, without any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don't know' (100), or even 'That's soon said. But let me complete my views, before I shit on them' (112).

These works also exemplify the use of an absurd prose to represent the absurdity of the human condition, marrying form and content, as well as a rejection of rationalism and of any scientific positivism. This rejection of any positivism knowledge cannot be, in Beckett's case, explained away by the influence of Sartre's or Camus' thought, and neither can it be fully grasped in light of the war. As we have seen, for Beckett, any positive statement could be equated with one of the absolute extremes or contraries, with a maximum or a minimum, which would freeze thought and the senses. He saw in the space and tension between the extremes the most generating and fecund ground for existence.

However, in a move which represents a step away from Modernism, the world inhabited by the characters of these novels is a world of complete isolation, distrust

and constant self-negation. In all of these novels, but increasing with time, there is a fraught and tyrannical relationship between the author and the characters which is expressed both by the characters' remonstrations under their breath, as well as by the narrator indirectly addressing the reader with their despotic actions towards the characters. There is an omnipresent rejection of rationalism to understand the nature of reality, which is made explicit in these lines from *The Unnamable*: 'That the impossible should be asked of me, good, what else could be asked of me? But the absurd! Of me whom they have reduced to reason' (51). The flavour of Existentialism in these works can be argued to be more that of Sartre than that of Camus; while Camus advocated for a more intense experience of life in answer to the absurd, Sartre's focus was rather on the *nothing* created by the distancing of the self from existence and the freedom this entailed. In this light, Beckett's characters use reason and language to attain this distance from reality, which simultaneously gives them the freedom to separate themselves from it while making them aware of the nothingness of existence. This passage in the latter part of *The Unnamable* serves as a pertinent example of the discussion of this existential angst:

> he'll appear any moment, he'll begin any moment … that's the show, waiting for the show, to the sound of a murmur, you try and be reasonable, perhaps it's not a voice at all, perhaps it's the air … and the spectators, where are they, you didn't notice, in the anguish of waiting, never noticed you were waiting alone, that's the show, waiting alone, in the restless air, for it to begin, for something to begin, for there to be something else but you, for the power to rise, the courage to leave, you try and be reasonable, perhaps you are blind, probably deaf, the show is over, all is over, but where then is the hand, the helping hand, or merely charitable, or the hired hand, it's a long time coming, to take yours and draw you away, that's the show, free, gratis and for nothing, waiting alone, blind, deaf, you don't know where, you don't know for what (99)

This orientation towards *nothing* could be advanced to be the most salient preoccupation in these works. Both in the novels' internal progress, as well as in the evolution of his works as a whole, there is a tendency towards the removal of any and all elements until only the gap left by these elements remains. If the novels do away with plot and style from the start, they progressively shed any references to time and

spatial setting until it can be argued that only language remains talking to itself. If the first novel in the trilogy, *Molloy*, contains deconstructive descriptions of places, 'I beg your pardon, Sir, this *is* X, is it not?, X being the name of my town. And this name that I sought, I felt sure that it began with a B or with a P, but in spite of this clue, or perhaps because of its falsity, the other letters continued to escape me.' (29), then *Malone Dies*, as the second issue contains sharp rejections of the setting, 'A stream at long intervals bestrid – but to hell with all this fucking scenery. Where could it have risen anyway, tell me that. Underground perhaps.' (108), and finally, *The Unnamable* rejects time as well 'I say years, though here there are no years. What matter how long? Years is one of Basil's ideas. A short time, a long time, it's all the same' (19). All the previous represents Beckett's espoused duality of language as both the means to express *nothing* and the only issue from the nihilating nothing represented by silence.

Conclusion: writing *nothing* and the author's violence

A discussion of the different conceptions of the absurd of the three authors in this chapter does not present as the most yielding endeavour due to these authors' marked dissimilarities – if Kharms absurd has as pillars *zaum*, *sdvig*, and *bessmyslitsa*, had a marked metaphysical-divine-absolute spirit, and was increasingly characterised by a situational absurd, Vaginov's absurd centred around the increasingly incongruous position of the intelligentsia, and Beckett's was an existential and language-language focused absurd-, as well as the fact that this contrasting was already explored in chapter II of this thesis. What is of more interest, and something shared to a greater or lesser extent by the three authors in their prose is their liminal position between Modernism and Postmodernism, the importance of *nothing* and death in their writing, and to a varying degree their equating of writing or communication with violence. What these authors also share is their increasing loss of faith in progress after the start of their literary output. Needless to say, none of these authors ever believed in linear historical progress, but they started their literary careers attaching some positive potential to the cyclical renovation of language and culture.

The early Vaginov, who was named the last representative of the Petersburg Text by Tokarev, considered the coming intelligentsia debacle as the natural and periodic closing of a centuries-old culture from the ashes of which the phoenix of the new culture would emerge, and aimed to preserve the value of the dying cultural milieu for future, less antagonistic generations; Beckett, in turn, was focused before the war on corrupting and deconstructing a language that had become impotent through excessive abstraction, while leaving the door open to this effort exposing and freeing the generating sap below; Kharms, on his part, joined the Futurist permanent carnivalisation of culture – and in his case, daily life –, dethroning canonical authors so that they could be engaged in a more fruit-bearing dialogue, and pursued a renovation and expansion of perception and of language. However, as the Stalinist terror advanced and the echoes of the horrors of the Second World War died away, these authors abandoned their previously predilected means of expression – from poetry to prose, or from prose to theatre –, with a simultaneous souring of their previous modernist thrust. Vaginov increasingly realised that the culture he was trying to preserve was flawed and perhaps not worth preserving at all, while the conspicuous philistinism of the emerging culture eroded his believe in a cyclical renovation of culture; Kharms' formal devices turned increasingly self-destructive, and the absurd, increasingly situational rather than formal; Beckett abandoned prose altogether when he was unable to find a generative way out of the bog he had turned language into, unable to follow his early interest in Vico's tenets of a constant regeneration of language through its creation-maturation-putrefaction.

As has been analysed, the understanding of *nothing* as the point from which and as a reaction to which all creative endeavours emerged was shared by Kharms and Beckett. For the latter, following Sartre's tenets, the void created by the distancing of the individual from existence was filled with potentialities, but also caused a nausea of possibilities. He aimed to constantly fill this 'unreasonable silence' of the world with words, even when listless and not in control of his own material, but ultimately, his prose progressively approached the *nothing* that lies behind language and reality. The potentiality of this *nothing* turned out to be, for Beckett, fully negative, as his prose was ultimately cast into a silent void rather than uncovering the muted music of reality. For Kharms', his earlier modernist belief in

the power of the artist to establish an absolute-divine purity of order was progressively undermined, and was eventually left fully in the dominion of the divine. His concept of zero as the ever-generating now, developed in parallel into a prose that was increasingly self-destroying, unable to escape this zero, which, while remaining the generating point, simultaneously became the black hole whose attraction the word could not escape. This dimmer view of *nothing* came together with the reinvigoration of the eschatological theme of Kharms' stories. Vaginov considered the writer a 'coffin maker' and the theme of depriving reality of its ontology by transposing it into the book's pages is central to his novels. With the increasing desperate situation of the intelligentsia, Vaginov proposed death as the only heroic exit for its members. Beckett's novels are firmly directed, not towards creation, but towards death as the only exit, while simultaneously pointing towards the impossibility of finishing for the novel and of death for their characters, some of whom are increasingly stripped of their body and its functions, until they are reduced to a pile of matter that is still unable to die. In Tokarev's analysis, this impossibility of dying leads the characters to abandon their own reality as an ineffectual means of achieving it and to seek it with external means: 'Death, therefore, must come as if from the depths of being itself, but if immersion in the depths of the unconscious leads to its even greater stabilization, is it not simpler to listen to the surrounding space, hoping that death will come from the outside?' (2002: 42).

This aim towards death and even its striving towards it by the novel's characters is parallelled with Kharms and Vvedensky's understanding of death as the only tangible event in life after birth, the only definitive happening that can be said to truly take place. After the previous juxtaposition of *nows*, death is the delimiting event that gives life as a river its ontology, separating it from an infinite reality, or, not leaving the water analogy, a non-flowing or unbounded body of water. This presence of death as the central preoccupation in Beckett's novels also serves to associate it to the Petersburg Text as a whole and its inception at the historical moment – Peter the Great's reign – which originated the tragic choice of living of the Petersburg intelligentsia, made so by the conspicuousness of imminent death throughout the life of the noble-tragic hero, explored in previous chapters.

While the use of violence as a way to achieve communication or transcend language in Kharms and Beckett has been explored, these authors share the exposing of the author's violence towards their characters which accompanies their refusal of a Romantic view of the author, and even of Modernism, and takes their prose closer to a postmodernist sensibility. While Beckett's novels are saturated with disdain for and undervaluing of his characters, as well as their remonstrations against the author, Vaginov's protagonist in *Works and Days of Svistonov* performs the ultimate inhumanity when he robs Kuku of his life by faithfully transposing him into his novel. As we have seen, this violence then turns on him, making him as much a fully literary character, thus locking him inside the world of own creation. Kharms, in turn, directly equates writing with violence in his most famous ministory, in which, with each line of text, the character that had been introduced is robbed of parts of his body until he disappears. This theme reappears throughout the cycle with characters that are turned by the author into marionettes which cannot help by fall once and again, as is the case with carpenter Kusakov – who also loses his identity in the process –, or by the verbal violence performed upon Rakukin in 'Pakin and Rakukin', in which with each utterance Rakukin increasingly loses his autonomy until his body becomes increasingly contorted to the point of breaking his own neck, leaving only a nose-shaped Adam's apple reminiscent of Gogol's disembodied appendage, in a parallel of losing his identity and becoming a purely literary character. This use of violence as a form of writing is separate from the character-to-character violence or the indifference towards suffering and death in the cycle, which, as we have seen, can be understood as an exhorting of the reader to restore the lacking moral order in the Stalinist reality.

All of these aspects, together with the increasing questioning of the role of the author and the reader, are an exemplification of their move from Modernism towards Postmodernism, although having their roots in Modernism and they never completely abandoning it, this move was never consummated and these authors can't therefore be considered fully-fledged postmodernist writers.

Conclusion

This study started with the double question of why the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd shared so much with one another, and whether they were that similar altogether to begin with. The approach that this aspiring scholar has followed is perhaps akin to a Bakhtinian approach in letting these different voices speak their truth and inserting his own *arbitration* together with these discourses in the form of agreement or qualifications. It could also be advanced that the writer of these lines had a similar approach to that of Camus towards the works studied – in a potential criticism of lack of scholarly thoroughness –, in that the investigator has selected the sections of the authors' output that better fitted into the argument or that served as best polemicising interlocutors for the thrust of the thesis. In my defence, I must say that the scope of this study would have needed to be monumentally extended had a nuanced analysis of all the names included been pursued. Additionally, most of these authors have such a long dust tail of unexcelled academic literature following them that it would have been a futile effort in little else than repeating these incisive exegeses. I thus believe, in a Shklovskian light, that the process – dialogue – of composing this thesis may be more valuable than any finished product, which an authoritative conclusion may be taken as. Lastly, returning to the Bakhtinian colouring of this study, the Russian intellectual's concept of *unfinishability* seems apt; not as a synonym of *incompleteness*, but as an affirmation of the heteroglot value of – academic – literature against a monologic view of the text. All that said, what follows is an attempt to illustrate the main thrust of the advanced thesis running through the juxtaposition of discourses.

Before delving into this thrust, it is worth foregrounding again the disparity in output of the two sides. While for all of the OBERIU authors poetry represents a big part – when not the totality – of their output, their prose output is limited, and the whole of the group's theatrical output can be counted with the fingers of one hand, needless to say, for the authors of the theatre of the absurd, their plays represent their major output when taken as a whole, and their poetry works was severely limited. This, in turn, makes, by necessity, this study even more dialogical in its form,

since it deals not only with exchanges between different discourses, but also between different mediums.

There is much more that brings close the OBERIU and the Theatre of the Absurd than a first glance may suggest, while there is also more that divides them than has been stated. Until now, in a synthesising oversimplification, the parallels have been advanced to be the mistrust of reason and language, the abandonment of plot and causality, the extensive use of non-discursive devices and those from low or popular theatrical genres – clowning, musical hall practices –, an overarching feeling of absurdity, as well as the occasional connection of their analogous historical contexts – war and totalitarianism. All of this is an accurate, if rather shallow preliminary statement of the similarities. As to what pertains their influences, of the Theatre of the Absurd it had been said that they took the baton from Dada and, similarly, that they took the baton from Sartre and Camus. The accuracy of these propositions is less secure. This view implied, from its connection with Dada, that theirs was a nihilistic *anti-theatre*; from its parallels with Sartre and Camus, similarly a degree of nihilism and a level of moral didacticism. Most of these are unviable paths to pursue. If they share with Dada the rejection of a passive and comfortable bourgeois theatre, and the characters in their plays share the clownish antics of the Dadaists, their theatre is not nihilistic, but a denunciation of the nihilism that humanity had been forced into, and a yearning for a way out. In opposition to Sartre and Camus, they did not venture into moral didacticism – be it from the extra literary statements and denunciation of certain societal shortcomings of the former, or a quasi manual in the correct attitude of the *absurd person* by the latter. Conversely, Camus would have approved of the Parisian theatre and would have considered it *absurd* in his terms, as it did not advance any solutions or explications, but rested well within the 'commandments of the absurd.' Sartre, in turn, would have appreciated Beckett's theatre for its treatment of the absurd as something absolute and not solely resting on human reason – something that Ionesco's first plays also conveyed in a more diluted form.

The oberiuts, in turn, have been tried to be understood either as a late manifestation of Russian Futurism or as a negation of and retreat from it. In their case, the academic literature is rich in a multiplicity of views towards their brand of

absurd and that of *left* art, so that it is more difficult to isolate which approach is the predominant. What distinguishes them from the – other – futurists, apart from their marked preoccupation with the concept of God, is their loss of faith in progress. They present as a unique episode of a futurist grouping that lost its futurist raison d'être *after* its formation. A clean-cut delimitation of when and to which extent this happened is difficult to arrive at, since the individuality of each member was always respected, and all the authors involved went through a different timeline in the loss of this faith. As we have seen, Kharms all but abandoned poetry and his poetic concepts of the *collision of meanings*, in favour of an absurd reflected increasingly in the content of the stories over the devices used. On his part, Vaginov initially took in his stride the new reality, in a detached manner, as the inevitable and unstoppable start of a new cycle, with the last two-thousand-year cycle – which started with Christianism's victory over paganism, bringing to an end the previous millennia of Greco-Roman tradition – coming to an end. However, his initial acceptance of what could be understood as cyclical progress soured, uncertain of his position in this new reality and increasingly isolated, and this reality saw him first abandoning poetry for prose and then his novels turning increasingly grotesque. Notwithstanding this increase in the grotesque, even his initial detached acceptance is far removed from any idea of faith in progress, as the concept of a cyclical view of history negates any pretension of progress.

If the oberiuts' special place within the Petersburgian avant-garde can be explained in part by their loss of faith in progress – together with the rest of the intelligentsia –, then the specificity of the Theatre of the Absurd can be elucidated partly by their combined loss of faith in progress – after seeing the atrocities committed in the name of progress and the corroboration that in fact, if anything, scientific progress and positive knowledge had led to an escalation in inhumanity rather than progress in humanism –, loss of faith in the divine – which had a long tradition in French philosophy and could only be expunged by the war –, loss of faith in any positive knowledge, and loss of faith in – or at the least deep wariness of – humanity. The fact that these authors started their output after all these rejections of faith were common currency helps to explain why none of these themes are treated directly in their works, but rather that this is done obliquely, since there is little need

to delve into an accepted truth that they themselves had accepted. Theirs is oftentimes a world of post-apocalyptic existence, with no clear path to follow having lost all faith in any pre-apocalypse convictions, where not even a humanistic impetus could offer profound consolation, and thus the person is utterly isolated from others and from the world. As such, they could be considered nihilistic in that they present such a bleak vision with no outlet. However, in fact, theirs is not an espousing of nihilism, but its denunciation to no one, where no recourse can be glimpsed, and where any affirmation is to be suspected.

The above already offers a glimpse into some of the key differences between the two groups. The OBERIU members did not lose their faith in the divine – quite the opposite. Neither did they completely lose their faith in humanity. While Kharms depicted an increasingly grotesque and inhuman reality, with evil taking control of the streets, this thesis, as other scholars, has advanced the contention that he did so precisely to incite the reader to restore the appropriate moral behaviour that was lacking; had he lost his faith in humanity this effort would have been pointless. In Vaginov's novels, in turn, a sense of community – at least within the intelligentsia – can be discerned, and there additionally the supratextual unity of the city of Petersburg into whose monolithic concept the community of its inhabitants is indelibly inscribed. This helps to explain why Kharms' stories retain their grotesque and violent characters until the end and why in stories like 'The Old Woman' there can be discerned a metaphysical search, and the presence of immortality.

If any metaphysical preoccupations can be discerned in the Theatre of the Absurd, this is more in the atmosphere of their plays and novels, than in any deliberate transcendental search by the characters. With the multifaceted complete loss of faith, the metaphysical is reduced to a semi-antagonistic cosmic presence, and an acceptance of the inability to transcend the all-encompassing absurd. Needless to say, the Theatre of the Absurd authors barely published any poetry, the most metaphysical of all literary mediums. In addition to this, the fact that the OBERIU started their existence having not lost their faith in progress serves to further distance their output from that of the Theatre of the Absurd and confers them a more generating essence, with what can be considered futurist devices, like their use of *zaum*, *sdvig* and their own *collision of meanings*. The Parisian current, in this respect,

is seen to have a more nihilating impetus, in their rejection of aspects like plot and causality and their distrust of language and reason. If, it could be argued, the OBERIU shared the rejection or distrust of all of these, they differed from the Theatre of the Absurd both in the reasons for this, as well as in their reaction to it. Where the abandonment of plot and causality was an effort to make the plays absurd both in their form and in their content and also to make them less literary for the latter group, for the former it was due to an even stronger aspiration towards *pure* theatre and in favour of *bessmyslitsa*; whereas if the Theatre of the Absurd denounced the *crisis of language* and distrusted reason in the heels of the dire manipulation of language by totalitarian regimes and the, by then, clearly misguided approach to trusting reason to achieve humanist progress – and, importantly, stopped at that –, in turn the OBERIU, in line with Bergsonian-formalist thought, sought to actively renovate language, and did so by 'expanding the meaning of the word' through their *collision of meanings* and through *sdvig*, while, here as well, their mistrust of pure reason was adhered to their concept of *bessmyslitsa* and *zaum* thought, which implied a way out of the impasse of the limits of reason, in opposition to the Parisian absurd's paralysing wariness of reason with no resource to circumvent it.

If the searchlight is to be cast upon the absurd, the similarities and differences advanced by previous scholarship have both been made more marked. The OBERIU's absurd was firstly a futurist absurd based on the use of *transreason* – which for reason is nonsense – to leap over the limitations of reason, and in their case it was deeply imbued with the understanding of God as the absolute, which cannot be approached through reason, but only intuited through *nonsensical* means. This absurd as the confrontation of sense and *zaum*, that was omnipresent in their early poetry, became less dominant – to different extents for each author – as the 1930s progressed, while the absurd in the content of the stories, and in the reality of their characters began to rise sharply, in detriment of a more formal absurd. In connection with the absurd in existentialist thought, they share with authors like Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky the ultimate *conscious* leap into God as the unifying force amongst an absurd human reality. If Kharms' 'The Old Woman' is to be taken as the best representation of their divine thought, as much as the Danish philosopher or the writer of *Demons*, the person is aware that this leap is not an inevitable given, but a conscious human choice

to approach the absurd, not exempt from doubts. If they have less in common with Sartre and Camus' existential propositions, due to the French philosophers being soberly anchored in reason and due to their moralising impetus, they still approached their thought occasionally in the view of humanity's existence within the world together with its being irremediable separated from it by its self-consciousness, making the person aware of their belonging to an incomprehensible all, with no way to comprehend it. Thus, the only possible comprehensible division into parts being the separation between the individual and the world is reflected in Kharms' ad infinitum articulation 'And I'm the world. But the world is not me'.

In the Parisian case, the absurd had no traces of God or the transcendent and was linked to Camus' espoused idea of an absurd work of art not being allowed to offer any solution or definitive statement, and the imperative for it to remain within the 'commandments of the absurd'. As such, as much as Sartre and Camus, the exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd, while not seeking nihilism per se, use nihilating devices in line with the all-encompassing faith loss of their time. The intention of this nihilation is not philosophical despondency, but to be a faithful depiction of reality in order to allow for the distance necessary between the person and their absurd existence, creating the *nothing* in between that allows the individual to write their own reality through their choices, something which was advanced by Sartre, or bringing forth Camus' proposed absurd awareness to the same end.

It is worth shortly dwelling on the impact of the trauma of war and totalitarianism that helped shape both currents, something which is made even more transparent for the impact it had mid-existence for the OBERIU. If the OBERIU members started their artistic lives with certain ambiguity towards the new Petersburgian reality, they soon after lost all affinity with it while becoming profoundly aware of its horrors. The Parisian group, in turn, wrote some tentative works before the Second World War, then lived through its horrors, and then started their main output shortly after the end of the war. As such, their post-war output was characterised by a post-apocalyptic existential atmosphere, not with the horrors decidedly behind their backs, but fully conscious of what had led to that apocalypse. If anything can be drawn from the exposition of these analogous contexts, is the fact that war and totalitarianism were found to have a correlation with a stifling of

generative impulses, the prevalence of a more concrete and overbearing absurd, as well as the placing of these twentieth-century stains within the domain and responsibility of reason, and by extension, language.

In what pertains to theatre specifically, we have seen how the two currents' versions of the absurd, in spite of the superficial similarity in their rejection of plot and reason, the unfinished nature of the plays, and their preoccupation with language and communication, differed in its purpose. OBERIU's theatre made full use of *left* art devices in a metaphysical strife to arrive at the absolute through the absurd, or in other words, through nonsense in the *bessmyslitsa* sense. On their side, the Theatre of the Absurd plays' absurd resides in the inadequacy of language to communicate meaning and an existentialist questioning of the role of the individual in a world that has suffered an all-encompassing loss of faith.

The same can be said of their literary output when contrasting the oberiuts' early efforts with that of the Theatre of the Absurd. After some of the Petersburgian authors' loss of faith in progress and their increasingly desperate situation, this contrast is less straightforward, and the ensuing commonalities can be surmised to be an equal preoccupation with communicating meaning, with the role of the author – and the accompanying rejection of personal style in favour of a flat or formulaic discourse – and the act of writing itself, as well as the marked self-consciousness of the narrative, and its tendency towards self-destruction or towards *nothing*.

And it is this *nothing* that appears as a most fruitful motif for concluding this thesis, in relation to which the analogue of the city of Petersburg shall be illuminating. As the example par excellence of an unnatural city – or as Dostoevsky would put it, the 'most intentional of cities' –, it invites strong parallels with the act of writing itself. It is a city that was *instantly* created through Peter the Great's word – or *logos*, over a previous nature-dominated emptiness. As has been explored in this study, the novels of Vaginov and Kharms explore the ontology-generating view of writing and its ability to create worlds outside reality which can become more real than life, as well as its artificiality and destructive nature. This is in addition to the generating power of the text, which can be said to create the author. The fact that human language rests upon the thin stilts of reason can be equated to Petersburg's placement atop the Neva's swamps. We have also seen how this creative impulse is

impelled by a *nothingness* that asks to be filled, how this absence is the point zero from which the authors believed creation should always emanate, in the infinitesimally small present point within the continuum of the past ever flowing into the future, and from the void created by the artist's distancing of the self from reality. A city is also the best place for the heteroglot collision of objects and discourses. As such, existence can be equated to the absolute incomprehensible *nothing* of the swamps and water upon which has been conceived an intricated and seemingly imposing city of stone, which, by nature of its lack of awareness of its unreality – or by its rejection thereof –, is not only able to keep existing, but becomes self-sustaining; it establishes itself thus as a generative source of its own artificial actuality, managing not to succumb to the waves in spite of its uncertain foundations.

Bibliography

Aizlewood, R. (1991) 'Towards an Interpretation of Kharms' "*Incidents*"', in N. Cornwell (ed.) *Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 97–122.

Anemone, A. (1991) 'The Anti-World of Daniil Kharms: On the Significance of the Absurd', in N. Cornwell (ed.) *Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 71–96.

———. (2000) 'Obsessive Collectors: Fetishizing Culture in the Novels of Konstantin Vaginov', *The Russian Review*, 59(2), pp. 252–268.

———. (1985) Konstantin Vaginov and the Leningrad avant-garde: 1921–1934. University of California, Berkeley. Available at: https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100689391 (Accessed: 4 February 2018).

———. (1998) 'Carnival in Theory and Practice: Vaginov and Bakhtin', in D. Shepherd (ed.) The contexts of Bakhtin: philosophy, authorship, aesthetics. London; New York; Amsterdam: Routledge (Studies in Russian and European literature, v. 2), pp. 57–69.

Artaud, A. (1988) *Selected Writings*. Edited by S. Sontag. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. (1938) *Le théâtre et son double*. Paris: Gallimard.

———. (1970a) *Theatre and Its Double*. Translated by V. Corti. London: Calder.

———. (1970b) 'Le théâtre d'après-guerre à Paris', Cahiers Renauld Barrault, 71(1), pp. 3–19.

———. (1976) 'A Manifesto in Clear Language', in S. Susan (ed.), H. Weaver (tran.) Selected Writings. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Bakhterev, I. (1984) 'Когда мы были молодыми (Невыдуманный рассказ)', in *Воспоминания о Н. Заболоцком*. Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel, pp. 57–100.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981a) 'Epic and the Novel', in Bakhtin, M. M., *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. 18. Edited by M. Holquist. Translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin, Tex: Univ. of Texas Press (University of Texas Press Slavic series, 1), pp. 3–40.

———. (1984) Rabelais and his world. 1st Midland book ed. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. (1990) 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', in M. Holquist (ed.) Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays. New York: University of Texas Press.

Barrault, J.-L. (1972) *Souvenirs pour demain*. Paris: Éditions du Seouil.

Beckett, S. (2011) *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber & Faber.

———. (2009) *Molloy*. London: Faber & Faber.

———. (2012) *Malone Dies*. London: Faber & Faber.

———. (2010) *The Unnamable*. London: Faber & Faber.

———. (1972) 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', in S. Beach (ed.) James Joyce / Finnegans Wake: A Symposium; Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work In Progress. New York: New Directions, pp. 1–22.

———. (2009) The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929–1940. Edited by M. Fehsenfeld and L.M. Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

Bennett, M.Y. (2015) *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*.

———. (2011) *Reassessing the theatre of the absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bergson, H. (1911) *Creative Evolution*. Translated by A. Mitchell. London: McMillan and Co.

———. (1935) *Laughter*. Translated by C. Bereton and F. Rothwell. London: McMillan and Co.

———. (1913) *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by T. Hulme. London: McMillan and Co.

———. (1910) Time and Free Will. Edited by J. Muirhead. Translated by L. Pogson. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Boratynsky, E. (2020) *Evgeny Boratynsky and the Russian Golden Age: unstudied words that wove and wavered*. Translated by A. Liberman. London: Anthem Press.

Brailer, K. (1976) *Absurdist Features in Russian Drama: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. University of Illinois.

Brandist, C. (1996) *Carnival Culture and the Soviet Modernist Novel*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

———. (1997) 'Deconstructing the Rationality of Terror: William Blake and Daniil Kharms', *Comparative Literature*, 49(1), pp. 59–75.

Brée, G. (1964) *Camus*. Rev. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Brik, O. (1988) 'We Are the futurists', in A. Lawton and H. Eagle (eds & trans.) *Russian futurism through its manifestoes, 1912–1928*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Brustein, R.S. (1991) *The theatre of revolt: an approach to the modern drama*. Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks.

Camus, A. (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Translated by J. O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books.

Carrick, N. (1995) 'A Familiar Story: Insurgent Narratives and Generic Refugees in Daniil Kharms's "The Old Woman"', *The Modern Language Review*, 90(3), pp. 707–721.

———. (1998) *Daniil Kharms, theologian of the absurd*. Birmingham, UK: Department of Russian Language and Literature, University of Birmingham (Birmingham Slavonic monographs, no. 28).

Cebula, G.F. (2014) 'Aleksand Tufanov's "Udhkuiniki", historicist "Zaum", and the Creation of OBERIU', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 58(1), pp. 93–112.

Chukovsky, N. (1989) *Литературные воспоминания*. Edited by M. Chukovskaya. Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel.

Clark, K. and Holquist, M. (1984) *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Cornwell, N. (1991) *Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials*. Basingstoke: Macmillan (Studies in Russia and East Europe).

———. Cornwell, N. (2006) *The absurd in literature*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.

Cox, L. (2018) *Afterlife of an avant-garde: subversion, spectatorship, and psychoanalysis*. Bruxelles, New York: P.I.E. Peter Lang.

Cunliffe, R. (1993) 'Charmed Snakes and Little Oedipuses: The Architectonics of Carnival and Drama in Bakhtin, Artaud, and Brecht', in D. Shepherd (ed.) *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference University of Manchester, July 1991*. Leiden: BRILL, pp. 48–69.

Curtis, J. (1976) 'Bergson and Russian Formalism', *Comparative Literature*, 28(2), pp. 109–121.

Davison, R. (1997) *Camus: the challenge of Dostoevsky*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Derrida, J. (1978) *Writing and difference*. Translated by A. Bass. London: Rouledge & Paul.

Dobritsyn, A. (1997) '«Сонет» в прозе: Случай Хармса', *Philologica*, 4(8–10), pp. 161–7.

Douglas, C. (1980) *Swans of other worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the origins of abstraction in Russia*. Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press (Studies in the fine arts. The avant-garde, no. 2).

Dostoyevsky, F. (2003) *The Adolescent*. Translated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House.

Druskin, Y. (1998) 'Чинари', in *«...Сборище друзей, оставленных судьбою»*. Moscow: Ladomir, pp. 46–66.

———. (1989) 'Чинари', *Аврора*, (6), pp. 103–123.

———. (1985) 'Чинари', Wiener Slawistischer Alamanch, 15, pp. 381–413.

———. (1991) 'On Daniil Kharms', in N. Cornwell (ed. & tran.) *Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 22–31.

Dvinyatina, T. (2008) 'Велимир Хлебников в творческом сознании А. В. Туфанова', in W.G. Weststeijn (ed.) Дело Авангарда. Amsterdam: Pegasus, pp. 177–235.

Esslin, M. (2014) *The theatre of the absurd*. London: Bloomsbury (Bloomsbury revelations).

———. (1976) *Artaud*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins (Fontana modern masters).

Epstein, T. (1994) *Fragmented unity: Thought, language and reality in the poetry of Vvedensky, Harms, and Olienikov*. Brown University.

———. (1989) 'Искусство авангарда и религиозное сознание', *Новый мир*, (12), pp. 222–235.

Federman, R. (1978) 'Fiction Today or the Pursuit of Non-Knowledge', *Humanities in Society*, (1, 2), pp. 115–131.

Fink, H.L. (1999) *Bergson and Russian modernism, 1900–1930*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press (Studies in Russian literature and theory).

Firtich, N. (2001) *Alogism in Russian Modernism: An Investigation of Alogical Concepts in the Works of Gogol, Bely, Kruchenykh, Malevich, Vaginov and Vvedensky*. Yale.

Fondane, B. (1979) *La conscience malheureuse*. Paris: Plasma.

Fotiade, R. (2001) *Conceptions of the absurd: from surrealism to the existential thought of Chestov and Fondane*. Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford.

Gerasimova, A. (1988a) 'ОБЭРИУ (Проблема смешного)', *Вопросы литературы*, 4, pp. 48–79.

———. (1988b) *Проблема смешного в творчестве обэриутов*. Maxim Gorky Literature Institute.

———. (1989) 'Труды и дни Константина Вагинова', *Вопросы литературы*, (12), pp. 133–166.

Ghéon, H. (1944) *L'Art du Théâtre*. Montreal: Éditions Serge.

Glanc, T. (2023) 'Transfer as the key: Understanding the intellectual history of the relationship between formalism and structuralism from the perspective of the Prague Linguistic Circle', in Mrugalski, M. et al., *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West*. Translated by D. Short. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 613–631.

Gogol, N. (1985) *The Overcoat*, in L. Kent (ed.), C. Garnett (tran.) *The complete tales of Nikolay Gogol*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Golub, S. (1984) *Evreinov, the theatre of paradox and transformation*. Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press.

Gunter, P. (1992) 'Bergson and Sartre: The rise of French existentialism', in F. Burwick and P. Douglass (eds) *The Crisis in modernism: Bergson and the vitalist controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 230–244.

Hirschkop, K. (2021) *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge introductions to literature).

Holquist, M. (1982) '"Bad Faith" Squared: The Case of M. M. Bakhtin', in *Russian Literature and Criticism: Selected Papers from the Second World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies*. Berkeley: Evelyn Bristol, pp. 214–234.

———. (2002) *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Routledge (New accents).

Ionesco, E. (1964) Notes and Counter Notes. Translated by D. Watson. New York: Grove Press.

———. (1966) *Notes et contre-notes*. Paris: Gallimard.

———. (2006) *Rhinocéros*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

———. (1958) 'The Bald Soprano', in D. Allen (tran.) *Four Plays*. New York: Grove Press, pp. 7–42.

———. (1957) 'There Is No Avant-garde Theater', *Evergreen Review*, 1(4), pp. 101–5.

———. Ionesco, E. (1969) 'Ni un dieu, ni un démon...', Cahiers Renauld Barrault, 69(1), pp. 22–25.

Jaccard, J.-P. (2010) 'Александр Туфанов, поэт-становлянин: традиции Хлебникова в заумной поэзии 1920-х гг.', in A. Ustinov (ed.) *Vademecum: к 65-летию Лазаря Флейшмана*. Moscow: Vodoley, pp. 232–246.

———. (1991) *Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avant-garde russe*. Bern Berlin: Lang (Slavica Helvetica, 39).

———. (1995) 'Daniil Xarms: poète des années vingt, prosateur des années trente: les raisons d'un passage', *Revue des études slaves*, 67(4), pp. 653–663.

———. (2013) 'L'eau et la pierre. Quelques échos des réflexions de Bergson sur le temps dans la poésie du début du XXe siècle', in J.-P. Jaccard and I. Podoroga (eds) «Temps ressenti» et «temps construit» dans les littératures russe et française au XXe siècle. Paris: Éditions Kimé, pp. 55–80.

Jarry, A. (1901) 'Le Temps dans l'Art', in. Salon des Indépendants: Collège de 'Pataphysique, p. 18.

Kharms, D. (2009) *Today I wrote nothing: the selected writing of Daniil Kharms*. Translated by M. Yankelevich. New York: Ardis Publishers.

———. (1991) 'Elizaveta Bam', in N. Cornwell (ed. & tran.) Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 220–240.

———. (2013) *'I am a phenomenon quite out of the ordinary': the notebooks, diaries and letters of Daniil Kharms*. Edited by A. Anemone and P. Scotto. Boston: Academic Studies Press.

———. (1992) ‘«Боже, какая ужасная жизнь и какое ужасное у меня состояние»’. Edited by V. Glotser. *Новый мир* (2), pp. 192–224.

———. (1988) ‘«Я думал о том, как прекрасно все первое!»’. Edited by V. Glotser. *Новый мир* (4), pp. 129–159.

———. (2015) *Полное собрание сочинений*. Saint-Petersburg: Azbuka (Malaja biblioteka shedevrov).

———. (2001) Неизданный Хармс (4). Saint-Petersburg: Akademichesky proekt.

———. (2006) ‘The Saber’, in Kharms, D. et al., OBERIU: an anthology of Russian absurdism. Edited by E. Ostashevsky. Translated by M. Yankelevich. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, pp. 84–90.

Kharms, D. and Vvedensky, A. (1974) *Russia’s lost literature of the absurd: a literary discovery*. Edited by G. Gibian. New York: Norton.

———. (1997) *The man with the black coat: Russia’s literature of the absurd*. Edited by G. Gibian. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press (European classics).

Kharms, D., Vvedensky, A., Lipavsky, L., Oleynikov, N., and Zabolotsky, N. (2006) OBERIU: an anthology of Russian absurdism. Edited by E. Ostashevsky. Translated by M. Yankelevich et al. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.

Khlebnikov, V. (1933) *Собрание произведений*. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo pisateley v Leningrade.

Kierkegaard, S. (1980a) *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by H. Hong and E. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Kierkegaard’s writings, 19).

———. (1980b) *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by R. Thomte and A. Anderson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Kierkegaard’s writings, 8).

Kobrinsky, A. (2013) *Поэтика ОБЭРИУ в контексте русского литературного авангарда XX века*. Saint-Petersburg: Svoe izdatelstvo.

Kuznetsov, A. (1913) *Юродство и столпничество: религиозно-психологическое исследование*. Saint-Petersburg: V. D. Smirnova.

Landes, M. (1924) 'A Suggested Interpretation of Bergson's Doctrine of Intuition', Philosophical Review, 33(5), pp. 450–462.

Lawton, A. and Eagle, H. (eds) (1988) *Russian futurism through its manifestoes, 1912–1928*. Translated by A. Lawton and H. Eagle. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Lehan, R. (1992) 'Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns', in F. Burwick and P. Douglass (eds) *The Crisis in modernism: Bergson and the vitalist controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levin, I. (1986) *The Collision of Meanings: The Poetic Language of Daniil Kharms and Aleksndr Vvedenskii*. University of Texas at Austin.

———. (1978) 'The Fifth Meaning of the Motor-Car: Malevich and the Oberiuty', *Soviet Union = Union Sovietique*, 5(2), pp. 287–300.

Likhachev, D. and Panchenko, A. (1976) *«Смеховой мир» древней руси*. Leningrad: Nauka.

Likhachev, D.S., Panchenko, A.M. and Ponyrko, N.V. (1984) *Смех в Древней Руси*. Leningrad: Nauka.

Lipavsky, L. (2005) *Исследование ужаса*. Moscow: Ad Marginem.

Lipovetsky, M. (2007) 'A Substitute for Writing: Representation of Violence in "*Incidents*" by Daniil Kharms', in M.C. Levitt and T. Novikov (eds) *Times of trouble: violence in Russian literature and culture*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 198–212.

———. (1999) *Russian postmodernist fiction: dialogue with chaos*. Edited by E. Borenstein. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Listengarten, J. (1996) *Russian Tragifarce and its Cultural and Political Roots*. University of Michigan.

Lönnqvist, B. (1979) *Khlebnikov and carnival: an analysis of the poem Poėt*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

Lotman, Y. (1990) *Universe of the mind: a semiotic theory of culture*. Translated by A. Sukhman. London: Tauris (Second world).

Lotman, Y. and Uspensky, B.A. (1984) *The semiotics of Russian culture*. Edited by A. Shukman. Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan (Michigan Slavic contributions, no. 11).

Mayakovsky, V. (1988) 'We, Too, Want Meat!', Lawton, A. and Eagle, H. (eds) (1988) *Russian futurism through its manifestoes, 1912–1928*. Translated by A. Lawton and H. Eagle. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Mayakovsky, V., Brik, O. *et al*. (1988) 'What Does Lef Fight For?', in A. Lawton and H. Eagle (eds & trans.) *Russian futurism through its manifestoes, 1912–1928*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Mayakovsky, V. *et al.* (1988) 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste', Lawton, A. and Eagle, H. (eds) (1988) *Russian futurism through its manifestoes*, 1912–1928. Translated by A. Lawton and H. Eagle. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Malevich, K. (1971) 'God is Not Cast Down', in T. Andersen (ed.), X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin (trans.) *K. S. Malevich: Essays on Art: 1915–1933*. New York: George Wittenborn, pp. 188–223.

Medvedev, P.N. (1985) *The formal method in literary scholarship: a critical introduction to sociological poetics*. Translated by A. Wherle. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Meilakh, M. (1990) 'Русский довоенный театр абсурда: К пятидесятилетию пьесы Александра Введенского «Елка у Ивановых»', in N. Cornwell (ed.) *Ново-басманная, 19*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, pp. 356–385.

———. (1987) 'О «Елизавете Бам» Даниила Хармса', *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1, pp. 163–246.

———. (1991) 'Kharms's Play "Elizabeta Bam"', in N. Cornwell (ed.), A. Shukman (tran.) *Daniil Kharms and the poetics of the absurd: essays and materials*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 200–219.

Meyerhold, V. (1968) *Статьи, письма, речи, беседы. Часть 1* (*1891–1917*). Edited by A. Fevralsky and B. Rostotsky. Moscow: Isskusstvo.

Nietzsche, F. (1923) *The Brith of Tragedy*. Translated by WM. Haussmann. London: George Allen & Unwin.

———. (1992) ‘On Truth and Lies In A Nonmoral Sense’, in D. Breazeale (ed. & tran.) *Philosophy and Truth: selections from Nietzsche’s Notebook of the early 1870’s*. New Jersey: Humanities Press International, pp. 79–97.

Nikolskaya, T. (1999) ‘Константин Вагинов, его время и книги’, in Vaginov, K., *Полное собрание сочинений в прозе*. Edited by T. Nikolskaya and V. Erl. Saint-Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agenstvo ‘Akademičeskij proekt’.

———. (1967) ‘О творчестве Константина Вагинова’, in *Материалы студенческой конференции*. Tartu.

———. (1988) ‘К.К. Вагинов (Канва биографии и творчества)’, in M.O. Čudakova and Institut Filosofii i Prava (eds) Četvertye Tynjanovskie Čtenija: tezisy dokladov i materialy dlja obsuždenija. Tynjanovskie Čtenija, Riga: Zinatne, pp. 67–88.

Pronko, L.C. (1962) *Avant-garde: the experimental theater in France*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Pushkin, A. (2010) ‘The Bronze Horseman’. Translated by A. Noon. Sheffield: Longbarrow Press.

Revzina, O. and Revzin, I. (1975) ‘A semiotic experiment on stage: The violation of the postulate of normal communication as a dramatic device’, Semiotica, 14(3), pp. 245–68.

Roberts, G. (1997) *The last Soviet avant-garde: OBERIU--fact, fiction, metafiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. (1994) ‘Of Words and Worlds: Language Games in “Elizaveta Bam” by Daniil Kharms’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 72(1), pp. 38–59.

Ryklin, M.K. (1993) ‘Bodies of Terror: Theses toward a Logic of Violence’, *New Literary History*. Translated by M. Williams and D. Wesling, 24(1), pp. 51–74.

Rymar, A. (2006) ‘Комедия города Петербурга даниила хармса как “обериутский предмет”’, *Russian Literature*, LX(III–IV), pp. 452–465.

Sartre, J.-P. (1956) *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by H. Barnes. Secaucus: The Citadel Press.

———. (1964) *Nausea*. Translated by L. Alexander. New York: New Directions.

Scollins, K. (2017) *Acts of logos in Pushkin and Gogol: Petersburg Texts and subtexts*. Boston Brighton, Mass: Academic Studies Press (Liber primus).

Segal, D. (2006) *Литература как охранная грамота*. Moscow: Vodoley.

Sewell, E. (1973) *The field of nonsense*. Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Library Editions.

Shattuck, R. (1959) *The Banquet Years*. London: Faber & Faber.

Shenker, I. (1956) 'Beckett: Moody Man of Letters', *New York Times*, 6 May, pp. 1, 3.

Sheppard, R. (2000) *Modernism, Dada, Postmodernism*. Evanston, IL: North Western University Press.

Shepherd, D. (1992) *Beyond metafiction: self-consciousness in Soviet literature*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.

Shklovsky, V. (2017a) 'Resurrecting the Word', in A. Berlina (ed. & tran.) *Viktor Shklovsky: a reader*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 63–72.

———. (2017b) 'Art as Device', in A. Berlina (ed. & tran.) *Viktor Shklovsky: a reader*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 73–96.

Stelleman, J. (1992) *Aspects of Dramatic Communication: Action, Non-action, Interaction:* (*A.P. Čechov, A. Blok, D. Charms*). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

———. Stelleman, J. (1985) 'An Analysis of "Elizaveta Bam"', *Russian Literature*, XVII, pp. 319–352.

Stewart, S. (1979) *Nonsense: aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stone Nakhimovsky, A. (1982) *Laughter in the Void*. Vienna: Wiener Slawistischer Almanac.

Strem, G. (1966) 'The Theme of Rebellion in the Works of Camus and Dostoevsky', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 40(1), pp. 246–57.

Thiher, A. (1984) *Words in reflection: modern language theory and postmodern fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tigges, W. (1988) *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. University of Leiden.

Tihanov, G. (2019) *The birth and death of literary theory: regimes of relevance in Russia and beyond*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Tokarev, D.V. (2002) *Курс на худшее: абсурд как категория текста у Даниила Хармса и Сэмюэля Беккета*. Moscow: Новое литературное обозрение.

Tolmachev, D. (1927) 'Дадаисты в Ленинграде', *Жизнь искусства*, (44), p. 14.

Toporov, V.N. (2003) *Петербургский текст русской литературы: Избранные труды*. Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB.

Tufanov, A. (1924) *К зауми, стихи и исследование согласных фонем*. Petersburg: Peterburg: A. Tufanov.

———. (1991) *Ушкуйники*. Edited by J.-P. Jaccard and T. Nikolskaya. Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties (Modern Russian Literature and Culture: Studies and Texts).

Tzara, T. (2001) 'Dada Manifesto', in M.A. Caws (tran.) *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 297–304.

Vaginov, K. (2015) *Избранное: Поэзия. Проза*. Moscow: Knizhny Klub Knigovek (Поэты в стихах и проэе).

———. (1991) Романы. Edited by A.I. Vaginova. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura.

Vicks, M.C. (2011) Narratives of Nothing in Twentieth-Century Literature. University of Colorado.

Voloshinov, V. (1973) *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*. Translated by L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik. New York and London: Seminar Press.

Vvedensky, A. (2013a) *An invitation for me to think*. Translated by E. Ostashevsky and M. Yankelevich. New York: New York Review Books.

———. (2001) 'Christmas at the Ivanovs'', in R. Knopf and B. Cardullo (eds), J. Listengarten and K. Coonrod (trans.) *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890–1950*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, pp. 394–413.

———. (2006) ‘A Certain Quantity of Conversations, or The Completely Altered Nightbook’, in Kharms, D. et al., OBERIU: an anthology of Russian absurdism. Edited by E. Ostashevsky. Translated by E. Ostashevsky and T. Epstein. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, pp. 28–51.

———. (2013b) *Всё*. Edited by A. Gerasimova. Moscow: ОГИ.

Waugh, P. (1984) *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. London; New York: Routledge.

Wellwarth, G.E. (1971) *The theater of protest and paradox: developments in the avant-garde drama*. Rev. ed. New York: New York University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

Yeats, W.B. (1955) *Autobiographies*. London: McMillan and Co.