

# Loyalty to Suffering: *Europe Central*, Vollmann's Telephonist, and the Absurd

Thomas Aiello

World War II is usually the exception to the general assumption by many that war is pointless, absurd violence. Because of the brutality of the Nazis, in particular, World War II is considered, above all, a just war. For William T. Vollmann, however, justness is neither antonym nor antidote for absurdity. "When you flee one menace for another, the world will call you brave" (Vollmann 507), says his German telephonist in *Europe Central*, trying to survive in the late days of the Battle of Kursk during Operation Citadel, an assault that was the apotheosis of the absurd, a suicide mission he assumed to be ordered by civilian leadership even though the German forces were hopelessly outmanned, outgunned, and outtanked. The telephonist responds to the violence by entering a kind of dream world, equally absurd, while running away from T-34 tanks. His statement about fleeing one menace for another is an attempt to justify not trying to capture one of the tanks, itself a perfect summation of the absurdity in which he finds himself, as everything surrounding him is menace. Valor becomes simply a synonym for kinesis; to be static is the only assumed weakness. In any other endeavor, certainly in any ethical endeavor, such would be considered crazy.

But that perverted version of group ethics trickles down to a perversion of personal ethics, as well. "I was determined not to change in any way; that would have been disloyal to my own sufferings" (Vollmann 499), the telephonist says a little earlier, an individual way of making the common argument that "we've always done it this way, so that's the way it should be." It is an argument at the root of the bulk of human bigotries, one proven inordinately wrong. "I suffered

for this so much that any attempt to fix it would devalue or refuse to acknowledge that suffering" is just as problematic for the individual. At the same time, it's an argument that, in essence, Hitler was making about the war itself, the reason he agreed to send the telephonist's army into certain defeat and death. It is, in other words, all so absurd, all so pointless, at both the national and individual levels.

The absurd as a philosophical trope was popularized by Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published a year prior to the Battle of Kursk, wherein he argues that the human desire to know the meaning of life and the commensurate inability to ever find an adequate answer to that question creates a paradox he calls the absurd. The trial of Sisyphus, pushing a rock continuously up a hill only to watch it roll back down, provides the grounding for this thought and prefigures Vollmann's interpretation of the Nazis' Sisyphean Operation Citadel, embodied in the character of the telephonist. Vollmann's telephonist serves as an avatar of Camus's version of Sisyphus, of the absurdity of war, and of philosophical conceptions of the absurd more broadly, from Kierkegaard to Camus to Thomas Nagel.

Vollmann's *Europe Central* tells a variety of connected stories describing central Europe in and around the Second World War, the novel interlacing accounts of historical actors with those of fictional characters in a broad-based meditation on morality, tyranny, and war. "Operation Citadel," a chapter in *Europe Central*, tells the story of one of the most pivotal battles of Germany's eastern front, and does so through the narration of a telephonist from Germany's Ninth Army, Forty-seventh Panzer Corps, Ninth Panzer Division (487). That division is part of a force that features roughly nine hundred thousand men. "But what's any number, compared to infinity?" the telephonist asks about the doomed mission (Vollmann 486). Not only does Russia have more troops, they have the area under assault littered with mines. "So now we knew exactly

how large infinity was" (Vollmann 487). The one potential hope for the men forced into this ill-fated attack is the new German Tiger tank that they anticipate being a saving grace for the mission. In the telephonist's Ninth Panzer Division, however—much to the disappointment of him and his colleagues—there are no Tigers (Vollmann 489). He later realizes that the thirty-one Tiger tanks have all been allocated to the Twenty-First Division (496), but there remains no choice for the telephonist but to follow orders and enter into the hopeless contest. "To be a German," he says, "means to do a thing for its own sake" (Vollmann 503).

Taking place three months after Germany's February 1943 defeat at Stalingrad, which occupies so much of the text of *Europe Central*, the Battle of Kursk focused on the Russian city and its surrounding areas, a massive salient that disrupted the German line. Nazi commanders realized that after their prior losses, a broader assault across the Eastern Front was unavailable to them, but that a focused attack on Kursk might be possible. If it was, the Germans could clean and straighten their line and regain a measure of momentum after the failure at Stalingrad (Lak 910). The Germans, however, had suffered huge losses over the previous two years, culminating in the bloodletting at Stalingrad. Still, with roughly two thousand tanks still available, including a limited number of the new, more powerful Tiger tanks, Nazi leaders saw success at Kursk as at least a possibility (Lak 911; Wheatley, "Slain Tiger" 228). But the supply of Tigers was truly limited. The Ninth Army, to which Vollmann's telephonist belonged, only had twenty-six of the new machines at the time of the battle (Wheatley, "Slain Tiger" 229; Lak 912). It was a lack of preparation also made manifest in long travel distances on poor roads and a significant underestimation of "enormous wear and tear on the infantry and armoured units" (Lak 913). The Russians, meanwhile, had laced the area with almost a million mines (Lak 914).

The danger that faced the Nazis led many in Hitler's administration to oppose the offensive,

but the opponents were ultimately overruled (Lak 914; Zamulin, "Red Army's" 5737). Hitler saw Operation Citadel, originally proposed by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, himself a character in Vollmann's novel, as the military's best chance to regain the advantage in the east (Lak 914-915). Manstein argued that obtaining a Soviet surrender would be impossible with a defensive strategy, not least because German forces were too depleted to defend the entirety of the long line of the Eastern Front. So assuming a limited window of opportunity and the need for a military success, Kursk seemed the last, best hope (Manstein 44).

It was anything but. The Nazis inflicted heavy damage on their Soviet counterparts, but their own losses and the limited resources with which they started ensured a catastrophic defeat. Ben Wheatley blames the German failure on "Hitler's operational and strategic incompetence" (122). It was a campaign functionally doomed from the beginning (Zamulin, "Could Germany" 606). The Russian military had limited intelligence but an accurate analysis of German forces; they had more men and more supplies, but they also had preparatory knowledge of what they would face at Kursk (Zamulin, "On the Role" 254-255; Zamulin, "The Role of" 199, 214-215). "We confronted a hydra," Mainstein remembered, "for every head cut off, two new ones appeared to grow" (305). The failure of Citadel is often represented in microcosm by the Battle of Prokhorovka, where Vollmann's telephonist suffered. "The Prokhorovka axis was where we were truly beaten," says Vollman's telephonist in *Europe Central*. "Kursk was really the end" (490). A battle that featured close-contact fighting with tanks colliding with one another, thousands dying, and hundreds of both German and Russian tanks lost (though the losses at Prokhorovka have been regularly inflated in the historiography) (Lak 916-918; Wheatley 123-124, 164; Zamulin, "Battle" 409), the telephonist and his colleagues tilted at an enormous, deadly windmill.

Even at the outset of the battle, the telephonist narrator makes it clear that inevitable defeat

was clear to almost everyone,<sup>1</sup> the absurdity of the situation made all the more apparent when an elderly man, a military veteran, eagerly arrives to help the force. That the old man is a figment of the telephonist's imagination is not immediately clear, but his presence and enthusiasm in the face of the fated suffering of the soldiers and the seeming surety of their failure sets Vollmann's presentation of the absurd against a stark wartime background. For Vollmann, human survival and contentment "depend on knowledge. And knowledge can only be obtained through openness, which requires vulnerability, curiosity, and suffering" ("American" 330). The human task is ultimately to "respect the inertia of an alien situation" (*Rising* 461).

Camus, too, is concerned with alien situations. "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger," Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (Camus 6). As the soldiers at Kursk surely understood when waiting for their summer deployment, Camus sees "the feeling of absurdity" in the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting" (6). That sense of divorce is regularly described by enlisted men experiencing the horrors of war far from home; they are actors removed from their settings and placed instead in a dangerous situation that for many will end in death. The telephonist's own sense of divorce is evident in his memories of a former girlfriend back home, a failed relationship the memory of which simultaneously reconnects him to the failure he experiences on the Russian front. "In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world," Camus argues. "The body's judgment is as good as the mind's, and the body shrinks from annihilation" (8).

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<sup>1</sup> "The absurd has meaning," Camus argues, "only in so far as it is not agreed to" (31).

In the state of existential angst that comes from finding oneself in proximity to annihilation, what remains is the void. Camus describes "that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity" (12). Vollman's telephonist, facing the void of the Kursk salient and a real proximity to annihilation, recognizes the sign of absurdity but attempts in the experience his own form of eloquence. "Operation Citadel was Operation Suicide," he argues. "I was a telephonist; I sat there cranking my grey box" (Vollmann 489). His ordeal is a full demonstration of the Camusian absurd in microcosm. His body's judgment, as good as the mind's, attempts to regain its setting by reconnecting the chain of daily gestures. "My hope was for something both more private and more realistic," he says: "a moderate wound. I was moderate in everything" (Vollmann 489). The absurd, however, "is the contrary of hope" (Camus 35), immoderate in its very nature. Moderation itself, then, is a form of rejection when facing that which is alien in its hyper-immoderation, but recognition of the absurd provokes a realism that limits any potential sanguinity. "From the very beginning we'd known that it was no use," the telephonist admits. "It was up to us as frontline soldiers simply to obey orders and bear the responsibility" (Vollmann 489-490).

The telephonist becomes, in the words of Camus, "the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs," an embodiment of the otherwise peaceful self at war (15). He experiences "the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (Camus 21). Even before the battle begins, the telephonist experiences "weariness tinged with amazement." It is weariness that "comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows," which is "the definitive awakening" (Camus

13). The telephonist's impulse of consciousness creates his own awakening in his realization that the acts of his original, mechanical life are now decidedly over. "It was if someone were holding my head underwater and I had to accept my first breath of fatality," he says, "but although I choked, it didn't kill me; death was in my lungs now and soon would be in my blood, but I just went on choking; thus my German fortitude" (Vollmann 490).

Fortitude or no, however, the telephonist was staring into the face of war, man's ultimate inhumanity to man. "This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are" is, for Camus, a manifestation of the absurd (15), which "depends as much on man as on the world" (21). Particularly in times of war, the violent outgrowth of hatred, it is absurdity that links them—man and the world—together. "It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together" (Camus 21). Camus quotes Kant in arguing that "the consciousness of death is the call of anxiety and 'existence then delivers itself its own summons through the intermediary of consciousness.' It is the very voice of anguish" (24). Thus for those like the telephonist, caught in the violent web of the absurd, he has little choice but to seek "his way amid these ruins" (Camus 24). The telephonist's descent into absurdity results from existing in a state of war, "in this ravaged world in which the impossibility of knowledge is established, in which everlasting nothingness seems the only reality and irremediable despair seems the only attitude" (Camus 25). Existing in war, the telephonist "stands face to face with the irrational," at a point of "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." It is "the absurd that is born of their encounter" (Camus 28). The absurd need not come with the kind of body count present at Kursk, but the violence of war serves as an apotheosis of the irrational, underlining the sentence of existential consequences often faced in peacetime.

The absurd is a concept often misunderstood; it is equated with nihilism, moral relativity, and paradox (Querido 765). The absurd has been a part of literature going back to the Greeks, but it found its peak in the postwar world (Cornwell 311). Ramona Fotiade has even argued that the twentieth century itself could be interpreted as a series of "avant-garde waves that bear witness to the presence of a single unifying, pervasive concern with the Absurd" (1), waves punctuated by devastating global conflicts. Camus's absurd, then, was inherently political, a product of the wartime context in which it was written, an effort to make sense of the fates of so many, like the telephonist, in World War II. He worked on the piece in Paris throughout 1940 as German bombs were falling on the city; the absurd was literally all around him (Skrimshire 286-287).

"If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider this act to be absurd," Camus argues, noting "the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view" (29). And so what Camus calls "the magnitude of the absurdity" is measured by the relation between intent and corporeality. "It bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it" (30).

Thus it was that the telephonist's Ninth takes action, moving forward with metaphorical swords against the Soviets' metaphorical machine guns, their intentions and their reality in full disproportion. "We sucked in our cheeks beneath our helmets and off we went," he says (Vollmann 499). Even with everything bearing down on them, the telephonist "almost convinced myself that we would actually break through and shatter these supernatural enemy concentrations, because an illusion was better" than the approbation of his sergeant, who tells his men, "Whoever doesn't get killed is going to be called a traitor for losing, so you might as

well give it your all!" (Vollmann 492). When describing his division's futility against Russian tanks, the telephonist argues in a mimic of Camus's sword analogy, "You can shoot a vampire with a machine-gun, but if none of your bullets are silver you might as well use them on yourself" (Vollmann 493). As the division moves forward, the soldiers find themselves "refusing to acknowledge the stepped silhouettes of more tanks on the horizon. Beware of being too wise, it is said" (Vollmann 493).

The telephonist is particularly fond of his fellow soldier Rüdiger, "because he always expected the worst." Rüdiger refuses to be wise; he "searched for death with his bitter, wary eyes" (Vollmann 491). When Rüdiger is killed, the telephonist misses him, "but precisely because I identified with him so perfectly, his death was no more tragic than mine would have been" (Vollmann 497). The telephonist, then, becomes an avatar for Sisyphus, pushing a rock up the hill only to watch it roll back down. Sisyphus understands his fate; he does not like it, but he accepts it, his full knowledge of the meaningless life he has been given providing a kind of strength of awareness, a self-actualizing knowledge (Chang 7). As Edward C. Chang has explained, Camus's absurd is "a primordial and embodied understanding," one that appears without warning, "a feeling of both anguish and lucidity that we are ultimately alone in the world" (3). It is a revolt of the body against the mind at the arbitrary nature of existence, the result of the individual human desire for reason encountering an unreasonable, irrational world. "In short, I had nothing," says Vollmann's telephonist. "I was nothing" (Vollmann 508). Existence is arbitrary, futile, indifferent, and those who seek meaning in that existence find themselves confronting the absurd (Chang 4-5).

"My existence had become as heavy as a Stalinets S-60 tractor," the telephonist explains in an admission of anguish and lucidity. "What could I do but drag it forward?" (Vollmann 498).

When he unrolls his cable and attempts to use the telephone to call for help, he discovers that the FREYA network, an early-warning radar system developed by the Germans during the war, is down. There is no one to call; there is no help from above (Vollmann 493). "What's the difference?" the telephonist asks about reliance on religion in troubling wartime situations, ultimately denying a more Kierkegaardian interpretation of the absurd. "Going to church won't save you" (Vollmann 488). Ultimately, "we were getting smaller while infinity was getting bigger" (Vollmann 494).

Here Vollmann addresses a vision of the absurd rooted principally in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. Camus's absurd results from a distance between man and the universe, a solitude and despair that comes from recognition of that distance. For Kierkegaard, who also interprets solitude and despair in the condition of man, overcoming such states comes from religious faith. Or, perhaps, religious faith itself develops from a confrontation with the absurd (Verbin 302-303). For Camus, there is no escape; solitude and despair are constituent parts of the human condition (McGregor 57). Kierkegaard's absurd, however, is as inherently paradoxical as the telephonist's wartime situation. "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come about in time," he argues (177). But the absurd also exists for Kierkegaard in the accessibility of eternal truth by reason. It facilitates faith, a connection to God (Ohaneson 35-36). Camus reads Kierkegaard as giving "the irrational the appearance and God the attributes of the absurd: unjust, incoherent, and incomprehensible" (Camus 39). But Camus, like Vollman's telephonist, rejects a Kierkegaardian interpretation. The absurd "does not lead to God," he argues. "The absurd is sin without God" (Camus 40).

Kierkegaard, however, is not the only thinker to provide an alternate vision of the absurd. The understanding of life as an absurd event, Thomas Nagel argues, "arises when we perceive,

perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself" (718). He recognizes a more philosophical, universal absurdity in the serious human conception of events that are ultimately arbitrary. Our ability to see the arbitrariness of our concerns and yet simultaneously and seriously commit to them is the ultimate evocation of the absurd (718), Nagel perhaps comes closest to what might be called a telephonist theory of military conflict. Whereas Camus sees defiance or revolt as the proper response to absurdity, Nagel argues that there is no such reason for consternation. "A sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation," he argues. "It results from the ability to understand our human limitations," and therefore "need not be a matter for agony" (727).

For Jeffrey Gordon, absurdity requires a fundamental discrepancy, "between intention and outcome, between pretension and fact, between aspiration and reality, between subjective assessment and objective worth" (17). Gordon's, then, is a rejection of the Nagel concept in favor of something more Camusian. At the same time, its emphasis on discrepancy provides a conduit to joining the thinking of Nagel and Camus with a useless German telephone cord, creating something more descriptive of Vollmann's telephonist, who experiences each of Gordon's discrepancies on the battlefield of Kursk.

Camus's essential detachment in response to meaninglessness, a detachment shared by the telephonist, was countered by Jean-Paul Sartre, who did believe that engagement could salvage meaning (Bogaerts 15). Sartre's concept of the fantastic indicates a higher meaning to life, one that exists though it remains inaccessible to humans, putting his own sense of the fantastic in conflict with the broader meaninglessness proposed by the absurd of Camus (Bogaerts 16;

Duncan 237).<sup>2</sup> Sartre's own thinking on the absurd might best be seen in his novel, *Nausea*, where he portrays a relatively static senselessness of the human condition rather than an absurdity rising from ontological conflict as does Camus. For Sartre, the absurd "is the contingency of being, which is universal" (Sartre quoted in Bogaerts 19). Those aspects of human life imposed upon humans and demonstrating their contingency Sartre called "facticity," which is in tension with transcendence but does not, as in Camus, contradict its possibility (Bogaerts 19-20).<sup>3</sup>

Sartre sees Kafka in particular as a turning point in the development of the fantastic in fiction, wherein works of fiction can expound upon the reality of the human condition without recourse to the former fantastic tropes of fairies or genies (Bogaerts 20). To accomplish the feat, Kafka places his characters in a "world turned upside down," wherein traditional logical assumptions no longer hold and any reliance on predictive technology to plot the possible future dissipates (Bogaerts 21-22). The fantastic is thus "the revolt of means against ends" (Sartre quoted in Bogaerts 22). This is a decidedly different situation, Sartre argues, than results from Camus's absurd. Sartre reads Camus's absurd as "a total absence of ends," wherein the world is not turned upside down at all, where humans themselves provide all too real limitations and ends are disconnected from means (rather than a more Kafkaesque inversion). Kafka's characters, Sartre reasons, would welcome the absurd as a respite from their more fantastic trials (Bogaerts 23; Brombert 120).

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<sup>2</sup> Sartre interpreted a version of the absurd in the work of Karl Jaspers, Georges Bataille, André Malraux, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, and Franz Kafka (Cruikshank 48; Bogaerts 18, 19).

<sup>3</sup> But Camus cared about transcendence, as well, and saw in the absurd a torment created by a desire for an otherworldly unity that was ultimately unreachable (Skrimshire 287).

It is at the moment of means revolting against ends that Vollmann's telephonist begins experiencing his own fantastic trials in a world turned upside down. "A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future," Camus argues. "But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator" (31-32). Faced with the absurd, then, the telephonist decides that "perseverance is eternally correct" (Vollmann 500). He remembers the fairy tales told to him by his grandmother, then devolves into his own personal absurd, or perhaps into a Kafkaesque fantastic. "What if saying so could make it so?" he asks in Camusian fashion. "What if Operation Citadel would win us the Golden Princess if and only if we threw ourselves away?" (Vollmann 500). From that point, he embarks on a quest, amidst the deadly, very real battle raging all around him, to find the mythical Golden Princess, devolving into a form of madness that warps his reality and keeps him alive. "If I'd only had something or someone to sell to the devil," he admits, "you can be sure that I would have done it, for I was in difficulties!" (Vollmann 502)

At this point of his psychic break, the telephonist's difficulties are mental just as much as they are physical. "There can be no absurd outside the human mind," Camus argues (30). The man facing the absurd understands "his own impotence" and cannot "infer any satisfactory principle" from his situation. But it is at that point that "he suddenly asserts all at once the transcendent, the essence of experience, and the superhuman significance of life," one that, "through a blind act of human confidence, explains everything" (Camus 32-33). Thus it is with the telephonist's search for the Golden Princess while dodging tanks and gunfire all around him. Nietzsche in particular speaks to such conditions, concerned as he is with unworldly dream states, a sense of unreality created by the experience of art (Seidler 417). Humans crave such unreality, as it takes them out of a reality of despair, but "we still have a residual sensation that

they are illusions" (Nietzsche 20). Craving, however, takes precedence; the telephonist's residual sensation of illusions matter less than the self-preservation function of his dream states.

When confrontation with the absurd "transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity," Camus argues. "The intoxication of the irrational and the vocation of rapture turn a lucid mind away from the absurd," because "to an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason" (35). A traditional encounter with the laws of nature holds "up to a certain limit," but then those laws eventually "turn against themselves to give birth to the absurd" (Camus 36). "Everything is sacrificed here to the irrational, and, the demand for clarity being conjured away, the absurd disappears with one of the terms of its comparison." But the absurd man, like Vollmann's telephonist, "recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational." Whether he understands that searching for a Golden Princess during one of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War is itself irrational is beside the point. The vocation of his particular rapture in turning away from the absurd is an act of survival, a replacement for the ugly reality all around him. In that struggle, "he knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope" (Camus 36-37).

"Before encountering the absurd," Camus argues, man lives by imagining the future and establishing goals to reach it; he assumes that he acts in a state of freedom. But encountering the absurd upsets those assumptions. "That idea that 'I am,' my way of acting as if everything has a meaning," Camus argues, "is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death" (57). He has not actually been free; the future is a myth. Still, after embracing absurdity, "the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him" (59). He "catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness."

He must, at that point, choose to accept the situation “and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (Camus 60).

So it is for Vollmann’s telephonist. He finds himself searching for a Golden Princess, but “she’s too high, too far away. That’s how I’ve felt about each woman in my life” (Vollmann 508). But it is not the Golden Princess from whom he draws strength; he draws it from the search for her, his passionate attention an act of protection from the burning, limited universe. After meeting a witch who offers him “the secret of death,” the telephonist tells her, “I’m afraid of death.” He asks, “How can knowledge be anything but death?” Thus he rejects knowledge (Vollmann 503). He asks himself what he would do if placed “in a position of trying to be supernaturally noble,” concluding, “I’d only kill myself” (Vollmann 510). “I’d crept beyond almost everything,” he says. “I was deep in the unconscious now” (Vollmann 505).

Being beyond everything, deep in the unconscious, the telephonist has come to his conclusion. “The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself,” Camus explains in a fitting encapsulation of the telephonist’s experience. “The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance” (Camus 55). Adam Gillon interprets Camus’ conception of the absurd as similar to that of Joseph Conrad, a fearsome gulf separating man from his ideals, from his surroundings, from other men, and ultimately from reality itself (3). “Droll thing life is,” Conrad argues in *Heart of Darkness*, “that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most that you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (65). For Conrad, however, as for Sartre and Kafka, the darkness of the absurd need not end in despair, largely because, though “man’s strife is bound to be futile,” the “outcome of man’s quest is not

as important as the nature of his quest" (Gillon 7).

The absurd only exists in the relationship between the human and the world, "precipitated by a weariness that is also tinged with amazement" (Phillips 10). It exists in perception and the encounter between subject and object (Querido 779). The absurd person, then, is aware of both death and the indifference of the universe but, in revolt, refuses to allow that awareness to immobilize him (Valkeakari 60). The absurd carries with it an "attritional character," a "resistive force pitted against the likes of death, modernity, totalitarianism, colonialism, or simply the status quo" (Querido 766). David Carroll has described absurdity as the feeling of "living in a once familiar but now suddenly radically alien homeland, of being adrift between past and future and unable to rely on either to give meaning to the present" (56). The absurd hero, like Vollmann's telephonist, acknowledges his alienation while attempting to play past it without domination or exploitation. His is a generative tension that is both "dynamic and restless" (Skrimshire 289-290), even as it devolves into hallucination.

In describing the absurd in another novel of World War II, Christina Howes claims, in an observation that could just as easily apply to Vollmann's telephonist, that "the Absurd entices the reader into the narrative to see themselves as unwitting provocateurs" (227) devolving simultaneously into their own hallucinatory states. Still, the telephonist, in Camusian fashion, remains decidedly alone. Celeste Derksen has described an "inflexibility and inability to understand or to communicate with one another" as generating the condition of the absurd (213). Her analysis is in relation to the intersection of gender and the absurd, and while there isn't any gendered content in the "Operation Citadel" section of *Europe Central*—a novel that in many other sections very much does include such intersections—her framing emphasizes individual rather than universal responses to the absurd, which "Citadel"'s telephonist very much

embodies.

The novel also presents broader interactions with the absurd outside the bounds of its section on Operation Citadel and the Battle of Kursk. The telephonist even quotes Stalin's daughter Svetlana, "I see you shining, my beloved, chaotic, all-knowing, heartless Russia" (Vollmann 507). Christopher K. Coffman points to the Stalinist slogan repeated throughout *Europe Central's* narrative, "Life has become better, comrades: life has become more joyful" (Vollmann 161). It is a slogan given lie by the reality of life in Russia, Coffman describing "the easy violence of its dishonesty" developing "in contrast to the nobility of those who suffer and die in opposition to such abuses of language and to the physical and political violences they hide" (28). In an echo of Camus, Coffman argues that Vollmann's novel argues that "art offers individuals psychological or spiritual means to express and to resist political horrors" (29), a kind of social transformation that Camus also sought through an honest engagement with the absurd (Skrimshire 289).

Those horrors are reinforced throughout the text, not just in "Operation Citadel," by the metaphor of the telephone, which, Coffman argues, "serves in the text as an emblem of the pervasive and controlling powers of fascist and totalitarian oppression," its "sinuous reach...a tool of remote surveillance and destruction" (31). That the novel's ultimate victim of the absurd is himself a telephonist only heightens the story's relation to a Camusian existential angst, as is the telephonist's relatively brief appearance in a sprawling novel with hundreds of characters; he is overwhelmed on the battlefield and on the page itself.

In juxtaposing Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, Vollmann "explores the ethical foundations of historical agency," emphasizing in particular the "individual response to terror, betrayal, war and sacrifice" (Schwieger 230). Florian Schwieger argues of Vollmann's portrayal of

Stalingrad what could also be argued of his depiction of Kursk: the author “attacks the mythological matrix that has dominated the historiographical memory” (230) by emphasizing, as in Napoleon’s early nineteenth century incursion into Russia, Germany’s misinterpretation of conditions on the ground and misguided confidence in its technological superiority (234). Or, as Camus explained in the heart of the war, absurdity “becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one’s passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt—that is the whole question” (Camus 22).

In the “Operation Citadel” section of Vollmann’s *Europe Central*, the telephonist protagonist struggles to survive his passions, burning the heart they simultaneously exalt. When facing the unimaginable horrors of one of the most brutal battles of the Second World War, the telephonist escapes the absurdity of his circumstances through transcendent imagination. Or, in the words of Camus, “The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits” (49). If the absurd “cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action” (Camus 57). The telephonist’s freedom of action leads him to a search for the Golden Princess as he dodges tanks and bullets on the Kursk salient, a quest as unsuccessful as the German campaign itself, one presaging the absurdity at the heart of the existentialist project following the bloodshed of the war. It is no coincidence, for example, that Samuel Beckett, preeminent author of the theater of the absurd, developing in the aftermath of World War II, also emphasized Sisyphus as representative of the futility of so much of human existence (Verhulst 118-119). After all, as Camus warned in the year before Citadel, “the absurd and the extra life it involves *therefore do not depend on man’s will*, but on its contrary, which is death” (italics in original; 63).

It was as if the war and its aftermath existed as a grand enactment of the telephonist’s own horror and resulting psychological escape. “And so the final German offensive in the East ended

in fiasco, no matter that the enemy opposite the two attacking formations of Army Group South suffered four times their losses in prisoners, dead and wounded," the telephonist concludes. "Well, after all, what's the difference?" (Vollmann 510-511).

**Thomas Aiello** is a professor of history and Africana studies at Valdosta State University. He is the author of more than twenty books, which have won multiple awards and have been nominated for others, including the Pulitzer Prize. He holds PhDs in history and anthrozoology. Learn more at [www.thomasaiellobooks.com](http://www.thomasaiellobooks.com).

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