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Mal du Siècle. From the Disenchanted Youth of the Romantic Age to the Disillusionment of Today's Young Graduates

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Abstract

Organisational absurdity is an emerging field of study in management sciences. Often described in conceptual terms in the existing literature as a loss of meaning arising from the collapsing frontiers of rationality, there have been few attempts to engage empirically with this absurdity, particularly from the perspective of new recruits joining organisations, and more specifically those who have recently completed their studies. Our research seeks to explore the ways in which young graduates respond to organisational absurdity and its consequences. To do this, we use an original empirical approach, which has been recognised elsewhere as a pertinent means of tackling absurdity, namely, fictional analysis. We thus propose an analogy between today's young graduates and the young Romantics of the 19th century, invoking a number of literary references for heuristic ends, in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon in question. Now as in centuries past, upon coming face-to-face with absurdity, a considerable number of young people respond by retreating from their professional responsibilities. This state of affairs is illustrated by a series of 35 interviews, revealing a profound sense of disenchantment, which, in many cases, can lead young professionals to turn inwards and withdraw from their professional environments. In the face of this distress, our research invites organisations to rethink the way they manage young graduates.

Keywords: *Young graduates; Organisational absurdity; Romanticism; Literature; Crisis of meaning*

Then came upon a world in ruins an anxious youth. The children were drops of burning blood which had inundated the earth; they were born in the bosom of war, for war. For fifteen years they had dreamed of the snows of Moscow and of the sun of the Pyramids. […] They had in their heads a world; they saw the earth, the sky, the streets and the highways; but these were empty, and the bells of parish churches resounded faintly in the distance.

(De Musset, 1910 [1836], p. 4–5)

On May 5, 2019, an article published in French magazine *Le Point* by essayist Laetitia Strauch-Bonart bored the striking title 'The rise of 'bullshit jobs', our mal du siècle'. Widely popularised by David Graeber in his 2013 essay, the idea of *bullshit jobs* refers to the proliferation of seemingly futile and entirely uninteresting jobs with no discernible connection to reality. Pointless, absurd and even actively harmful, *bullshit jobs* embody the shortcomings of our neoliberal economic system. Graeber (2013) argues that an incredible number of employees in the tertiary sector secretly believe that, were they to stop working, nobody would notice the difference. This feeling appears to be particularly deeply rooted in young graduates just entering the labour market (Cassely, 2017). Disappointed and disillusioned, these 'symbolic analysts' (Rifkin, 1997 [1995], p. 174) are abandoning their open space offices in search of new horizons, becoming artisans, farmers, self-employed entrepreneurs, NGO volunteers, etc. In a recent publication, Prevost-Bucchianeri and Pottier (2020) set out to analyse the career trajectories of recent graduates from France's elite *Grandes Écoles*. They describe the 'disillusionment' of the graduates they encountered (p. 100), their 'need for something concrete' (p. 129) and their 'need for meaning' (p. 129), something many of their number have decided to seek in a return to traditional professions, working on a modest scale and putting greater emphasis on human connections. Nivet (2019) describes a broader 'managerial malaise' and is unequivocal in her belief that management is

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currently in crisis. Indeed, the situation is striking: many recent graduates from business schools, whose education was specifically designed to prepare them for careers in management, no longer wish to be managers.

It is not just the content of Strauch-Bonart's article in *Le Point* (2019) which struck a chord; her choice of title was equally intriguing. In this case, the expression *mal du siècle* is applied to the contemporary context, but its origins hark back to the Romantic movement of the early 19th century. This 'sickness of the century' was a condition evoked to describe the disillusionment of a generation born in the era of Revolution and Empire, raised on a diet of martial exploits, then coming of age to find the world a decidedly mediocre place devoid of great expectations. The expression *mal du siècle* was first voiced in 1802 by De Chateaubriand (2012 [1802]) in his novel *René*. The expression was later taken up by De Musset (1910 [1836]) in his *Confession of a Child of the Century*, whence it has passed into posterity. As Prevost-Bucchianeri and Pottier (2020) note, our modern-day *mal du siècle* is also primarily a matter for the younger generations. Hence, our decision is to focus specifically on young graduates, defined as 'employees aged 30 and under, holding a level II degree (…) as defined by the National Education Board'.[1]

In order to explore the origins of the *mal du siècle*, we propose to examine the parallel between two groups of people from two different eras: the Romantic youth of 19th-century Europe and the young graduates of the present day. More broadly, this literary parallel with Romanticism and its young adherents may help today's managers to better understand the challenge and the importance of finding meaning in work. Convinced that they had been born in the wrong place at the wrong time, the young Romantics sought refuge in poetic melancholy (Mees, 2016) or else in the wilds of their imaginations (Barontini, 2020). Today's young graduates, meanwhile, are more likely to seek solace in the comforting surroundings of a workshop (Perruchini, 2018) or the direct human contact that comes from working for an NGO. What unites these two groups is a sense of being born in the wrong era, of having been washed up on the shores of a century in which they do not belong. This sense of internal suffering 'surely stems from that feeling of existing at the margins of history, of being a fleeting observer among the masses of living beings that have thronged the earth' (Marx, 2009, p. 11–12).

The young Romantics of the 19th century and the young graduates of today are thus united by a sense of living in the wrong era, of being at cross-purposes with a society which is not aligned with their individual aspirations. On this point, Garreau (2006) rightly notes that as far back as 1980, Schumacher and Gillingham were bemoaning the fact that 'one

of the bleakest aspects of modern life is that so many people find themselves in jobs which bear no relation to their inner lives, and which hold no meaning for them' (p. 31). In these circumstances, we need to engage seriously with the issue of organisational absurdity. In their insatiable desire to rationalise everything, organisations have burst the banks of rationality and strayed into the realm of the absurd (Bal et al., 2023; Honderich, 2005 [1995]), provoking a 'crisis of meaning' (Woodward, 2009) for all concerned. Within this context, our research question can be expressed as follows: 'how do young graduates perceive contemporary organisational absurdity, and what are the consequences?'

The objective of this study is therefore to draw upon 19th-century Romantic narratives as a means of better comprehending the combat currently being played out between young graduates and organisations over the issue of meaning. This study is, in this respect, almost fortuitous. It is largely inductive in nature, shaped by the themes which emerged from our interviews with young graduates, which were not directed with reference to the subject addressed here. Finally, our choice of literary parallels is informed by our heuristic intentions: to better understand today's young graduates with the help of narratives from the past.

In this article, we begin by looking to contemporary analyses of organisational absurdity and the resulting loss of meaning for clues to understanding the modern *mal du siècle*. We then present the details of our methodology and our heuristic use of fictional works. The results emerging from our interviews are then analysed with reference to a number of 19th-century sources and the upheavals with which they deal. Finally, we discuss the contribution of this research to our understanding of organisational absurdity, and its consequences for the way that young graduates perceive their work.

Organisational absurdity for newcomers: a confrontation with the loss of meaning

The absurd organisation

At first sight, absurdity has no place in organisations. From its theoretical foundations at the beginning of the 20th century and the subsequent overwhelming influence of Taylor (1997 [1911]), the organisation is presented as the place of rationality par excellence, serving as a showcase as well as a playground for experimentation, whose quality, HR or so-called compliance processes are only modern avatars. However, the organisation's rationality is not self-evident and cannot be taken for granted. The recent emergence of a stream of management research on absurdity allows us to challenge the rational organisation (Bal et al., 2023) and propose 'metaphorical alternatives' (McCabe, 2016) to organisational absurdity.

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[1] https://www.fo-cadres.fr/identite-cadre/les-jeunes-diplomes/. Accessed November 2, 2023.

Generally speaking, absurdity is 'a term used by existentialists to describe that which one might have thought to be amenable to reason but which turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality' (Honderich, 2005 [1995], p. 3). Thus, the eruption of a 'crisis of meaning' (Woodward, 2009) allows the revelation of organisational absurdity. In their recent analysis, Bal et al. (2023) first present absurdity as an inadequate challenge to logic, a deep sense that there is something rotten in the state of the organisation. Under these circumstances, several logics can coexist in the same organisational environment. Beyond the structure, it is also the behaviours and the perceptible gap between the 'pretence' and the reality experienced by individuals that evoke a feeling of absurdity. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Bal et al. (2023) challenge the rational view of organisations. Whilst individual behaviour is riddled with irrationality, it seems that organisational rationality is taken for granted. It is, thus, neoliberal modernity glorifying an ultra-rational *Homo economicus* that needs to be challenged (Bal & Dóci, 2018).

However, questioning absurdity in organisations does not amount to advocating the abandonment of the idea of rationality but rather to revealing a blind spot in organisational analysis (McCabe, 2016). Absurdity is not an end in itself but rather a way of looking at organisations differently and questioning current managerial logics (Starkey et al., 2019). Following this perspective, an organisation is no longer viewed in a traditional way but rather as the place of all fantasies – as an ode to the imaginary (Starkey et al., 2019) in which the interpretation of events, processes and structures cannot be univocal.

Absurdity is also a fundamentally individual lived experience; it is the 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (Camus, 1991 [1942], p. 10). In the Camusian sense, absurdity is a missed appointment – it is the desperate cry of a man who does not know why he is there and, for this reason, feels superfluous in a world that does not respond to him. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1991 [1942]) also makes a cardinal distinction between the notion of absurdity and the experience of it. He begins by trying to disentangle the concept from the experience by referring to the emergence of the sense of absurdity, which first appears in the daily experience of the employee who goes to work. For Camus (1991 [1942]), this experience of the ordinary is the most fruitful insofar as it is absurdity in its purest form that manifests itself in the very experience of existence. In these conditions, absurdity arises from a radical break with the everyday, particularly that of work in an organisation (Bal et al., 2023). In this case, the organisation and its normalisation processes (taking the rationality of structures and processes for granted) are questioned by individuals when absurdity arises.

However, the emerging literature on absurdity in organisations remains silent on the individual representations linked to this confrontation with absurdity, particularly when they emanate from newcomers, such as young graduates. Therefore, the purpose of this research was twofold: to understand the way in which absurdity shapes the representations of young graduates at work and to analyse the consequences.

Newcomers facing absurdity

Confronting young graduates with organisational absurdity presupposes questioning their *a priori* representations of organisations, particularly the way in which they are shaped by their student experiences. Some scholars have raised their voices against management education as it exists today. This is, first of all, linked to the quality of the courses offered in higher education and particularly in business schools, which has come under harsh criticism. As Abraham (2007) already pointed out more than 15 years ago in his analysis of HEC, 'it is not uncommon for HEC graduates to be very sceptical about the ''achievements'' of their time on the Jouy-en-Josas campus. To hear them tell it, they owe most of their learning to the 'preparatory classes' and their first professional experiences. Apart from three or four years of happy recklessness, the School itself would not have given them much' (p. 64). Robert et al. (2011) go one step further, arguing that management schools are 'up against the wall'. Management education as practised today is said to be unsuited to the new economic and social challenges.

For 40 years, those we call the 'Great' Management schools have been propagating a way of thinking whose deleterious effects can be seen today. Accreditation has become their obsession, to the detriment of pedagogy. They are churning out loyal servants whose capacity to criticise and question the system is close to zero (p. 90).

Finally, in his sultry and provocative essay *Shut Down the Business School. What's Wrong with Management Education*, Parker (2018) reaches a clear conclusion: business schools should be shut down. With such a radical proposal, Parker (2018) seeks to highlight the major dysfunctions and ineptitudes of management schools. He does not hesitate to present these structures as intellectually fraudulent institutions where money, networking and homophily are valued far more than ideas.

As soon as they start their studies, absurdity is the common thread running through students' lives. Since business schools are now places where rational neoliberal thinking is reproduced, confrontation with organisational reality can only lead to an awareness of its absurdity (Bal et al., 2023). For Starkey et al. (2019), management courses in higher education are as much the seat of the irrational – of the government of emotions – as is management in organisations. They are also prescribers of conformity, as what is taken for granted cannot be invalidated. Consequently, management education is based on a mythical construction: that of a manager whose authority is

legitimised by a rational judgement of his or her competence (Spillane & Joullié, 2015). Young graduates are then trapped by this fantasy in a kind of 'theatre of the absurd' since their confrontation with organisational reality is quite different from what they expected (Starkey et al., 2019).

Integration into a company often results in the 'disillusionment of the graduate' (Prevost-Bucchianeri & Pottier, 2020). Indeed, young graduates of the *Grandes Écoles* often have dreams but are also put on a pedestal during their studies. 'A recognized status and an enviable position in the company seem to be promised to them. [Unfortunately], the arrival in the big company is sometimes experienced as a brutal fall from the pedestal' (p. 100). After several years of studying, young graduates are quickly disappointed by the triviality of the tasks assigned to them. After having accumulated an astronomical amount of knowledge of mathematics, geopolitics, languages or philosophy, they are now asked to reply to their emails, prepare the next PowerPoint presentation or fill in their Excel spreadsheets correctly. The gap is so wide that it sometimes seems like an abyss. As a result, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) refer to companies where overeducated people who speak five languages are given trivial tasks as 'stupidity-based organizations'. On this point, Prevost-Bucchianeri and Pottier (2020) are convinced that overqualification is one of the factors behind the disillusionment of young graduates. Indeed, 'organizations hire a post-graduate to fill a position where the skills of an undergraduate would be more than sufficient […]. The result is a feeling of dissatisfaction for the graduate: his or her job does not push him or her to the very limits of his or her brain' (p. 101).

Absurdity as a loss of meaning: a key to understanding the mal du siècle

Beyond the disillusionment linked to overqualification, the awareness of *bullshit jobs* (Graeber, 2013) is perhaps at the root of this feeling of absurdity experienced by newcomers to the labour market. In this sense, Crawford (2010 [2009]) exhibits all the attributes of the young graduate affected by the *mal du siècle* and by this proliferation of *bullshit jobs*. After obtaining a PhD at the University of Chicago and just 5 months after starting to work as the executive director of a think tank, he decided to leave. It was at this point that he wrote his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, a manifesto in favour of the #12 spanner (Decréau, 2015) and bolts, and opened a motorcycle repair shop in Richmond, Virginia. It is, above all, a loss of meaning linked to the intangibility of his daily work that explains his withdrawal from the organisational world. This confrontation is all the more violent for Crawford (2010 [2009]), as it takes place in parallel with motorcycle repair activity initiated clandestinely in a basement. This discrepancy between the meaninglessness of his abstract work and the concreteness of repairing objects is a revelation of unbearable absurdity, leading to his resignation.

This escape route is perhaps the result of a breakdown in the meaning of work as articulated by Arendt (1998 [1958]) in *The Human Condition*. Arendt proposes a fundamental dichotomy between 'work' and 'labor'. When one is working, one produces something and can contemplate and enjoy the result. One works when one makes objects that last, not just consumer products. To work is to create a common and sustainable world. Work is also born 'in itself and is exteriorised in a metamorphosis of which the artist himself is the first to be surprised' (Chabot, 2017, p. 228). Conversely, 'labor' ('travail' in French) refers to the Latin *tripalium*, an instrument of torture: ultimately, one is constantly in activity, running all the time and at the same time, never sees the fruit of one's own labour. However, 'labor' does not entail the absence of the capacity to think, as Sennett (2008) reminds us, thus challenging this Arendtian distinction. 'Work' and 'labor' are not incompatible. With this postulate, Sennett (2008) restores the status of 'labor', but as a process that allows the individual to observe the result of his or her activity in a concrete way. 'Doing' is both an intellectual and a practical activity. It is, therefore, through a material relationship with things that it becomes possible to give meaning to activity and to overcome absurdity.

This materiality and solidity of work are now hotly contested. Our era seems to be characterised by the feeling of a Kleenex culture, a 'liquid life' as defined by Bauman (2000), which applies as much to organisations (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014) as to the individuals who are their actors (Philippe et al., 2022). Confronted with a permanent flux, life is now subject to novelty and consumption (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]). For Ascher and Godard (2003), modernity is undoubtedly drawing a 'new map of time' where speed, urgency and haste are becoming the mantras of a busy humanity. All this is happening against a backdrop of accelerating virtual exchanges and notifications of all kinds. 'Swipes' (Garmon, 2018), 'likes' and 'matches' become the common denominators of our interactions to the point of jeopardising our attention (Crawford, 2016 [2014]). Digital civilisation ultimately results in 'an incessant bombardment of propositions' (Saez, 2021, p. 37). Szendy (2019 [2017]) refers to this general circulation and commodification of images and views as 'iconomy'. With this boom, not only people's productions but also people themselves become ephemeral objects subject to the culture of flow (Trotzier, 2006). Uprootedness, loss of reference points and epilepsy are the characteristics of a civilisation that is now based on acceleration and virtual stimuli (Rosa, 2010).

Ultimately, all these studies point to the absurdity of the organisation as a condition of the modern employee. How are these symptoms characteristic of the *mal du siècle* experienced by young graduates, and, above all, how do they respond to them?

From the posture of the researcher to the heuristic function of literary fiction

Genesis of our research

There are several reasons for our interest in young graduates. The first is personal. As young business school graduates, we ourselves have been confronted with absurd situations during our internships. We have encountered toxic managers, been pushed to achieve meaningless quantitative objectives and spent days staring at a screen wondering what we were doing there. Therefore, in this study, we adopt the position of the 'committed observer' described by Aron (1983 [1981]) – that is, the double posture of the actor of his time and the thinker who seeks to embrace a phenomenon with eclecticism and exigency. This position of the 'committed observer' sometimes imparts an autoethnographic dimension to this research work (Chang, 2008; Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012). It is a matter of accepting our subjectivity as researchers and using it as data (Morrow, 2005). We become 'autobiographers in spite of' ourselves (Bouilloud, 2007), since 'the elements of [our] history inevitably find their way, to varying degrees and in varying forms, into [our] intellectual production' (Bouilloud, 2007, p. 75). Ultimately, we found both a reparative (Bouilloud, 2022) and an identity-related dimension in this research. Indeed, our interviews with young graduates are part of the 'identity work' that Alvesson (2003) lists amongst his eight interview metaphors. Our identities as interviewers and those of the interviewees are deeply relational. This posture echoes the analysis of Barus-Michel (1986), who considers the researcher the 'primary object of her/his research'. Through her/his investigative work, the researcher ultimately seeks nothing other 'than himself and in any case, if he wants to reach out to the other, he must first go through himself' (p. 801).

The second reason is related to our immediate environment. As actors embedded in the management education context, we belong to the alumni of our respective business schools, and we still regularly interact with classmates who give us fresh news. We gradually discovered that many of them had experienced this *mal du siècle* in their jobs, to the point of radically changing their professional orientations: one had become an electrician; another was building eco-responsible villages. Beyond our own professional experiences, we felt that something crucial was at stake for schools that train young graduates for the working world and for companies that see their new recruits leave.

The third and final reason stems from the societal context in which we are evolving, which is progressively concerned with this *mal du siècle* (Strauch-Bonart, 2019) and highlights all those careers now centred on the search for meaning. The media and mainstream books (Cassely, 2017) regularly give voice to young graduates who have fled their *bullshit jobs* (Graeber, 2013). In contrast, the emerging academic literature on the subject leaves little room for the expression of individual representations. Although we were able to describe in our literature review the way in which absurdity has been apprehended by the extant organisational literature, to our knowledge, there is no scientific work on the malaise experienced by young graduates when they are faced with absurd situations in companies. It therefore seemed essential to us to conduct in-depth research into this matter.

Entering the field and its aesthetic restitution

For this research, we chose a qualitative approach and conducted 35 individual semi-structured interviews. We contacted young graduates by email or via LinkedIn and asked them to discuss their first experiences in a company. The interviewees held different positions in companies belonging to the tertiary sector (auditing, consulting, finance, etc.). We formed a generational cohort, since all interviewees were between 25 and 30 years old and graduates of French business or engineering schools. Moreover, our sample consisted of individuals who often attended preparatory classes, which is one of the specificities of the French education system. With intense work and maximum demands, these structures prepare students for 2 or even 3 years before entrance examinations for the *Grandes Écoles*.

With the participants' consent, the interviews, lasting between 40 and 90 min, were recorded and then anonymised. To preserve the coherence of our database, the interviewees were randomly assigned pseudonyms, respecting their genders (female/male). The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, yielding a corpus of 680 pages. NVivo was then used to organise and prioritise the data. The entire corpus was imported into a project in NVivo, and then each transcript file was converted to a case and systematically coded.

Several important and interrelated themes emerged from the coding. The theoretical construction flowed directly from these themes and the coherence between them, following the methodological tradition of *grounded theory* (Charmaz, 2014 [2006]). From this perspective, 'the researcher's positioning helps to discover concepts that emerge from the data' (Baujard, 2019, p. 8).

In addition to this classification effort, this work also resulted in an obvious 'patch-up job' (Dumez, 2016 [2013]). In what follows, we report on the links that we constructed as the research progressed from a theoretical perspective situated in the extant work on absurdity in management sciences. This study's overarching aim was to look at this missed appointment between young graduates and their companies from a non-essentialist perspective (Allard-Poesi & Perret, 2014 [1999]). From the beginning, our interviews revealed a strong resonance of the interviewees' words with the Romantic works of the 19th century. Romantic literature thus emerged

as a new point of reference for understanding the phenomenon studied. Ultimately, it is a question of 'considering scientific production from an aesthetic angle' – of arousing the reader's interest and questioning by making room for 'new rhetorical styles […] and more broadly other forms of expression' (Allard-Poesi & Perret, 2002, p. 272).

The heuristic function of literary works

Following Allard-Poesi and Perret's (2002) call to experiment with new aesthetic approaches, we chose to use fictional writing to account for our primary data. In section 3, we present our results by fictionalising Jules' daily life. This strategy is in line with Whiteman and Phillips (2006), who argued that fiction is useful both as a source of data and as a means of presenting a theory to an audience. From this perspective, Jermier (1985) used Wells' (2003 [1899]) short story *When the Sleeper Wakes* to contrast different versions of critical theory in narrative form. More recently, Agarwal and Sandiford (2021) showed that the use of fictionalised dialogue can achieve a twofold goal: to contribute to a richer interpretation of phenomena and to present the results in a more interactive way.

In addition to the interviews, the Romantic works of the 19th century served as a prism for deciphering the disillusionment of today's young graduates. The meaning of 'Romanticism' in this context should be clarified here. First and foremost, it is a fantasy of synthesis between the ideal and the real. Romanticism permeates and transcends the entire literary history of the 19th century, as it refers to all the cultural consequences in terms of the collective imagination of the transition from dynastic monarchies based on religions to liberal regimes (Vaillant, 2016). Thus, Romanticism accompanies the emergence of parliamentary regimes against the background of the gradual collapse of the Christian religious corpus. For Bénichou (1992), Romanticism is the result of a kind of secularisation of religious thought. Romanticism was born on the margins of Protestantism and mysticism and resulted from a transfer of all those great ideas into the secular sphere. Our aim was to ponder the situations experienced in companies in terms of the moods of young romantics. This back and forth – this resonance and echo between two universes (today's data and yesterday's novels) – is a potential source of conceptual invention.

Between yesterday's romantics and today's youth, it seems that 'history stutters, repeats itself', like 'an old woman who rambles on and on' (Désérable, 2016 [2015], p. 75). Marx (1994 [1852]) had the same intuition, as evidenced in the opening words of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:[2] 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add:

the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre' (p. 15) and the young graduates of today for the romantics of yesterday.

Finally, because the phenomenon of disillusionment specific to the *mal du siècle* is not new but repeats itself cyclically, we propose to management sciences a literary support relating the states of mind of the young romantic elites of the 19th century to articulate the experiences of today's young graduates. The use of fictional works is part of a heuristic perspective aimed at better understanding the present through the stories of the past. Accordingly, we agree with scholars who advocate for a place of fictional works in knowledge production. Coquio and Salado (1998) question the intimate link between fiction and knowledge, from Darwinian fables to the wise fiction of Balzac or Kundera. In the same vein, Barrère and Martuccelli (2009) regard novels as laboratories and consider certain works to be major sources for understanding our time. Finally, Baron and Ellena (2021) and Culié et al. (2022) argue that fiction has a heuristic function. By means of thought experiments or exemplary narratives, the fictional apparatus shapes not only our experience but also our ability to understand the world in which we live.

Discussing the place of fiction in academic research, Grimand (2009) identifies 'five modes of use' (p. 172) of fictional works in management sciences that can broaden our understanding of organisational phenomena. Fiction can become a 'potential empirical material, capable of inspiring and renewing the work of theoretical construction' (p. 174). Holt and Zundel (2018) argue that the boundaries between fiction and 'real facts' are blurred and that fictional narratives can generate knowledge of certain aspects of organisational and social life more effectively than conventional research methods. Moreover, through fiction, we can go beyond discourse and access a more intimate dimension of individual representations (Culié et al., 2022). Consequently, Germain and Laïfi (2018) argue that scientific knowledge is of equivalent value to fictional knowledge.

Research on absurdity indicates the extent to which fiction is necessary to access it. McCabe (2016) suggests that organisational rationality is fiction in itself. However, its unveiling is complex because the rational paradigm always presents itself as legitimate. It is, thus, necessary to resort to fictional works to question it and examine its absurdity. This is the strategy that McCabe (2016) employs in using Lewis Carroll's (2010 [1865]) novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to develop a new metaphor for organisations centred on disorder, irrationality and uncertainty. Starkey et al. (2019) do the same by 'emphas[ising] the importance of fiction and fantasy as key aspects of the organisation' (p. 591). To this end, they propose studying absurdity through the prism of the 'theatre of the absurd' (Esslin, 1987 [1961]) and, more specifically, the works of Eugène Ionesco. Finally, Kordowicz (2023) uses Polish writer Sławomir

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2. Original German title: *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Napoleon.*

Mrożek's (2018) work *Chocolates for the Director*[3] as a framework for analysing the bureaucratic rituals of present-day England. According to the author, the use of literature provides 'a lens of elucidating the absurdity' in organisations (p. 120). From this perspective, we used 19th-century novels as pre-existing empirical support. This strategy allowed us to find parallels with our interviews and highlight the 'key aspects' (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 591) of organisational absurdity.

From the loss of meaning experienced by young graduates to the *mal du siècle*

In this section, we present the findings of our research in two parts. To begin with, we present a fictionalised narrative which sums up the day-to-day experience of a respondent named Jules, intended to serve as a synthetic, dynamic means of conveying the principal aspects of the *mal du siècle*. Thereafter, we explore the various facets of the perceived absurdity of work, as reported by the young graduates we interviewed.

Confession of a young graduate of the century

As a means of drilling down immediately into the details of the experiences we observed, we propose to sum them up in a fictional narrative. This narrative features Jules, one of the young graduates who took part in our study. Born into an upper middle-class family, he has held a number of jobs since graduating from one of France's top business schools. His testimony was one of the most cogent and representative accounts to emerge from our research, touching upon all of the recurring themes which cropped up throughout the interviews. The fictional narrative presented below was constructed on the basis of our interview with Jules. He was invited to read the text, found that it was faithful to his experience, and declined to make any changes.

It's seven in the morning and I'm perched on the end of my bed, staring into space. If I eat breakfast, I'll throw up when I get to work. If I don't eat breakfast, I'll throw up when I get to work anyway. The first thought that pops into my head when I wake up: what did I do last night? Oh yeah, I got the tube home after eight. Then I got drunk on rum – as I do most nights of the week – with my flatmate, Adrien. We drink to forget, mostly. To forget the daily grind, the jobs that make us puke every morning. Just to forget. If I keep up this mental dance of death, I'll end up being late for work. 'Jules, get up', says the voice inside my head which has been running things for the past two years. If that little voice disappeared, I would chuck it all in within an hour. I'd run away and become a waiter in Prague or somewhere like that, whistling merrily among all the happy people, the sad people, the well-mannered people, all those people… But instead I get up, hastily iron a white shirt,

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[3.] Original Polish title: *Czekoladki dla Prezesa*.

neck a glass of water, pull on my black trousers (which are just a little bit too big for me) and almost forget my keys, before finally getting out of the door. I have to run or I'm going to be late. I hop on the tube. Change at the usual station. Once more with feeling. Get off the train – am I still asleep? Walking now, up the stairs. Through the glass doors. There it is; the sickness. The palpitations, the nausea. The feeling that my heart is about to jump out of my mouth. 'Hey Jules, can you take care of the PPT for the pow-wow at ten please? I just didn't have time to do it yesterday, I'm snowed under – I can count on you, can't I?' *All said with a little smile and a knowing wink.* 'Yeah sure, sure. No problem, I'll have it ready in time'. *And then I'm off, running through the corridors. Left, left again, now right, everything is grey, grey, grey. In my office (also grey) the only window is a tiny round opening in the middle of the wall – like a full moon cropped out of the starry sky and stuck there on its own. Now it's time for my moment of reflection, my thought for the day (this is the point where I usually vomit). Now that I think about it, only the preparatory classes were worthwhile… Ever since I got into business school, it's just been constant anxiety. And I haven't learned a thing since then. No more development. No more thinking. Am I just empty? A PowerPoint presentation? For ten o'clock? What is it even supposed to be about? Should I guess? Better still, just make it up. This is just not working anymore. It's like business school all over again. You put the work in, but you're never really confident. Then somehow you come away with an A-, and you don't even know why. You felt like you were just bullshitting, but who cares? You got an A-! Whereas back in preparatory class you would pull out all your best references and line them up like a pro, then get landed with an E. Because what you should have done is use more pertinent references, and in fact your reasoning was quite disjointed. But at least you get some detailed, relevant feedback. You go home with something to work on, and next time you end up getting a D. Who knows? Maybe if you keep at it you'll get a C – a passing grade, the Holy Grail – three weeks later. But this… this is all fake. They really hyped it up in the job description, they needed someone 'capable of bringing in new contracts, with the skills to boost cross-selling, manage accounts, identify new business opportunities, imagine and pitch pertinent financing solutions'. What they actually meant was that they needed someone who knows how to copy-and-paste SmartArt into PowerPoint slides, to answer 100 emails a day and to answer the phone with their best receptionist's voice. Financial engineering my arse!*

While I'm cobbling together 20 PowerPoint slides, my mind wanders. Am I happy here? No. At least my parents are proud. They think I'm all set up. But do I feel like I'm doing something which is useful to anybody, anybody at all? No. I feel like I'm totally useless – well, almost useless. The one person I'm helping out is Michel, who is only 42 but already has two divorces to pay for, and who has a meeting at ten o'clock with no presentation to show.

By ten o'clock, I'm sitting in the big (grey) meeting room. Michel hasn't arrived yet, but somehow his PowerPoint precedes him – it's

already being proudly projected onto the wall. Nobody appears to be surprised by this. I wonder how Michel is going to make this sound convincing, with the help of a presentation he only saw for the first time five minutes before he was due to speak (I emailed it to him just before heading upstairs for the meeting).

Ten past twelve. Against all odds, Michel really pulled it out of the bag. A technical pirouette here, a little verbal jousting there, and somehow he ended up with a round of applause. In fact the big boss was so impressed he invited Michel out for lunch. The voice in my head starts singing 'Take me out!'

What I actually do next is buy a chicken sandwich in a plastic packet, eat it with the regular, mechanical movements of a robot on a production line, then wait for the afternoon to pass me by. It's going to be a long afternoon, too, with no choice but to start plowing through the fifty-plus emails and returning the calls I missed this morning. Oh God this afternoon is dragging on. So much boredom. I slump down in my chair, a picture of abject defeat – imagine Napoleon about five minutes after Waterloo. My neck hurts, my back hurts and, most of all, my mind hurts… In fact, this afternoon is so long that it's probably best to skip over the rest of it…

Eight o'clock in the evening. My legs feel like jelly because I spent too long curled up in the fetal position in my armchair when I got in. Now all I want to do is forget today, forget the way I feel every day: a little bit more damaged, downtrodden, discredited (not a good look for a banker…). I feel useless and lost, my eyes glaze over as I watch the ice cubes melt into my glass. The liquid, heavy and oily, drips down the sides of my glass.

I don't know it yet, but tomorrow I'm going to have a fully-fledged burn-out.

This fictional narrative, which incorporates all of the key points emerging from our interviews (refer to Table 1), provides a basis for further discussion.

In the next section, we seek to establish a parallel between the Romantic youth of the 19th century and today's young graduates, in order to better comprehend what it is about contemporary organisations which causes such anguish.

The shock of the absurd: What are you working on? What are you working for?

In *The Village Rector*, De Balzac (2023 [1839]) proffers a critique of the absurdity of France's *Grande École* system, a factory for future professionals which deals entirely in abstractions, turning out graduates who are incapable of dealing with the concrete realities they encounter in their work. Way back in the first half of the 19th century, De Balzac (2023 [1839]) had already astutely identified some of the most absurd facets of this system. He is particularly critical of the dogmatic abstraction of an educational system incapable of producing talented professionals in any field whatsoever:

If it is a reproach to our great Écoles that they have not produced men superior to other educational establishments, it is still more shameful that the Grand Prix of the Institute has not as yet furnished a single great painter, great musician, great architect, great sculptor; just as the suffrage for the last twenty years has not elected out of its tide of mediocrities a single great statesman. My observation makes me detect, as I think, an error which vitiates in France both education and politics. It is a cruel error, and it rests on the following principle, which organizers have misconceived: – Nothing, either in experience or in the nature of things, can give a certainty that the intellectual qualities of the adult youth will be those of the mature man. (…) Our highest education is manufacturing temporary capacities, – temporary because they are without exercise and without future (p. 170–171).

Interestingly, our research revealed a recurring sense of disillusionment amongst today's young graduates, a feeling of being out of place both in the *Grandes Écoles* and in their professional lives. Our respondents often discussed these experiences with reference to the very dense, theoretical nature of the preparatory classes they took in preparation for the competitive entrance examinations of their respective *Grandes Écoles*. Mareva addressed this emphasis on abstract knowledge directly, recalling that '*intellectually, [preparatory classes] were interesting [but] there was a lot of cramming involved*'. She later added that: '*ultimately you're there to prepare for an exam. To actually think more deeply about things… that wasn't necessarily the priority in prep school*'. A very modern problem, but one which is not without echoes of De Balzac's (2023 [1839]) criticisms of the excessively intellectual turn taken by engineering institutes. Our interviews also revealed the low opinion that many young graduates have of the teaching dispensed in business schools, with some going so far as to dismiss it as useless. One respondent evoked the '*feeling of wasting her time from an intellectual perspective*' (Audrey), whilst others described an '*intellectual void*' or a '*feeling that it's all a waste*' (Aurélie) when asked about their studies. Finally, our young graduates systematically reported having the impression that some aspects of their training were essentially useless. They were beset by a pervasive and unpleasant feeling that they had learned next to nothing since graduating from their preparatory classes.

In some cases, our respondents did not experience their first disenchantment when they got to their respective *Grandes Écoles*. For many graduates, the trivial nature of the tasks assigned to them in the earliest days of their professional careers can be a source of profound, stinging disappointment. In *Lost Illusions*, De Balzac (1874 [1837]) describes the *first steps* and thwarted illusions of Lucien de Rubempré, a young poet from the provinces who arrives in Paris dreaming of a brilliant literary career. Young Lucien cedes to the siren calls of society journalism, gradually compromising his high-minded ideals in the name of convenience. He writes fiercely but without much intellectual effort, betraying his friends, his principles and

Table 1. Extracts from interview transcripts

Theme	Extracts
Lack of intellectual stimulation at business school	**Antoine:** 'You don't do anything for the first three months'.
	'Now I admit I didn't like that very much, because it's just not interesting, you know?'
	Audrey: 'From an intellectual perspective, with regard to my career or just in terms of knowledge, I feel like I've wasted my time'.
	Aurélie: 'The first year of business school was like an intellectual void, to be brutally honest'.
***Bullshit lessons* at business school**	**Livia:** 'The lectures which are supposed to be really theory-focused don't always have a lot of substance to them. That's the problem'.
	Marc: 'I worked myself half to death in my preparatory classes, all for the honour of getting here and sitting through lessons which I find useless'.
	Martin: 'I actually went to see the course director at the end of the first year to talk about how disillusioned and disappointed I was with the content of the lectures at my business school. I felt really let down by the content'.
Illusions and business	**Estelle:** 'And then I struggled again when I went to work for a company and I… I think the first internship I did with a company, not during my undergrad studies but during the actual business diploma, it was a big shock to me because it was like 'OK, we do stuff in school which is clearly very detached from the reality of things'. I realised the extent of the disconnect between business school and actual business'.
	Esther: 'I worked in the watchmaking sector and they really sold it to me as a dream job. To be honest, I was young and leaving university – well I'm still young now, but then I was fresh out of university – and I said to myself 'Fuck, this is great'. I told myself 'OK great, let's have it'. I didn't even think twice, I just went for it, and then I realised that the job was totally different'.
	'Since that experience I've been very suspicious of the 'businessman' type, people who talk a lot, who sell you this great image just to get you on board, when there's actually nothing at all behind all the talk'.
	Jules: 'I felt like 'Fuck, they sold us all these lies', they sold us all these careers in banking and consulting as if they were dream careers, when it turns out that it's all just a mirage, it's nothing like that, there is nothing to do'.
	'Why lie about it… tell you that you're going to have a dream job when for 99.9% of people that's just not… not what happens?'
	'In any case, between the way I was educated and the way society is set up, there is a massive problem there between work, the image we have of work, our studies, and I think people, a lot of people get it wrong'.
Lack of intellectual stimulation at work	**Adèle:** 'Stop making stupid PowerPoint presentations and start consulting (laughter)'.
	André: 'I was on an internship, it was kind of like an intern factory, and so it was a bit… I mean it was sort of like a modern version of factory work, just stuck behind a computer screen. I mean it was really just repetitive tasks. But at least it gave us a glimpse behind the scenes in finance, how it actually works'.
	'Still, I hope I don't have to translate the SQL again next year'.
	'That was really very… I mean yeah it was fucking boring (laughter)'.
	Aurélie: 'With auditing, I found the work completely stupid'.
	Estelle: 'Basically, I got to see what consulting was, what it means to be a consultant, but without doing anything interesting'.
	Esther: 'I spent days and days and days in a really cold stock room, because it was winter, and even though it wasn't my team organising this event I had to do the work. And all I had to do was put a lipstick and some other baubles in each bag… I remember thinking 'this isn't…' I mean, it was a bit stupid, they could have got some external people to do it. But that was also just my perspective as a 22-year-old girl who really did not want to be in the stock room doing this job'.
	Frédéric: 'I started out in accounting, but that wasn't very exciting'.
	Guillaume: 'Intellectually, I didn't enjoy it'.
	'I'm the same, sometimes I get lost looking at tables. I'm OK with numbers, you know, but sometimes it's just such a pain in the arse. Like you're looking at the thing, you have to tick here, you have to check fifty numbers, then I'm like ''Fuck! Is it 112, 113? I don't fucking know! Alright, 113'''.
	'On the other hand, if you give me jobs to do which are much more practical, which are also fucking boring, after three hours I'm exhausted'.
	Iris: 'A lot of the time you just get your head down and get on with it. It's about output, with very little thinking involved'.
	Jessica: 'In any job there are always things that are boring, that annoy you'.
	Jules: 'It wasn't very interesting, it was pretty difficult for a first experience'.
	'There was a lot of repetition'.
	'After a while I found it… I was bored as hell, actually. After a few months, then a year, it just became repetitive'.
	'In your average company the guys are all bored as hell because they've been doing the same thing for ten years, so obviously they're sick of it'.
	'I cannot just do the same thing all the time, for the rest of my life, it is just not possible. I get bored too quickly'.

Table 1 (Continued). Extracts from interview transcripts

Theme	Extracts
Constant stimulation and distraction	**Mareva:** 'The most annoying thing, I find, is being chained to your phone all the time. Our digital director does a lot of things by text message, so a lot of the time she'll be texting me even during a meeting, you know, sometimes just to send me jokes, not even serious stuff, you know, but it just means that you're always… Yeah, what I find most exhausting is the fact that you're always having to check your email and other stuff, just to be sure that there isn't an emergency'.
	Mélanie: 'You're constantly getting emails. And actually, our productivity was rubbish because you're constantly responding to emails, phone calls, and the worst of all is Skype. People send you messages on Skype and you have to answer'.
	Pauline: 'These days I'd say my work gets interrupted by Skype about, I don't know, maybe twenty times a day. Because people can't be bothered to type an email, so it's 'Have you got a second to talk? I need to check something with you'. So you say 'OK call me' and there you go.
	Sometimes I activate the 'Do no disturb' function because it's so irritating, but then it's just a pain in the arse because I know what my boss is like. She loves people who are super-responsive, like as soon as I get an email she wants me to turn around and respond instantly'.
Institutionalised lying	**Audrey:** 'All the lies they tell you during the interview'.
	''Don't worry, we have missions in your area of expertise' when in fact they have nothing at all. So yeah, all the lies in the interview process. Personally, from an ethical perspective, from a moral perspective, that was really a big problem for me'.
	Baptiste: 'One of the founders gave me one of his slides, which had a methodology for successfully conducting a mission. It was a consulting tool which basically told you how to ask the right questions, and how to resolve problems effectively. And he said to me 'Alright take it, but don't send it to anyone. Just don't share it around, normally we don't give this to juniors'. So basically, what that means is there's this institutionalized ignorance, to justify and sort of legitimize that power and that knowledge. And I was just like 'What is this?' I was really surprised. I don't see the point, why wouldn't you let everybody have access to the same information? But that's the nature of the hierarchy. So yeah, I reckon that's the kind of thing that goes on in big companies'.
	Iris: 'Sometimes we'd have meetings which would go on for an hour or two, all about what we could do to recruit as many people as possible, bearing in mind that we were struggling a bit, we weren't managing to recruit 1,000 people per year. So these were really brainstorming sessions. Brainstorming, OK great, that's fine, that's the essence of this job. But then you'd end up with these absurd situations, these moments where the manager is telling you that the best way to recruit someone is, when you've got them on the phone and they're telling you 'I'm interested in cyber-security and the technical side of things', you say to them 'Oh yeah, our agency is big into that. We have a really super-technical cyber-security operation'. And if they say they're interested in something very technical, and that's what they want to do, you say 'Oh yes, our agency does some amazing work in that field'. And if they say 'I'm interested in… I'd like to do charity work on Fridays' you say 'Oh yeah, we know how to do that'. In fact, during this meeting, what the manager was telling us was that you just say yes to everything the candidate says, up until the moment they accept the contract. When they've accepted the contract, they arrive at the agency and they're not prepared to go back to the job hunt. So by default they will just end up staying with the agency, and then you can say 'Actually, we didn't really understand what you wanted, we didn't realize that you were looking for something so technical. It's strange, there must have been some kind of misunderstanding'.

ultimately himself. Lucien embarks upon this adventure filled with strong convictions, ignoring the repeated warnings of his friends:

The more the Cénacle forbade this path to Lucien, the more his desire to find out more about the danger grew and whispered to him that he ought to take the risk. He began to debate the issue internally: after all, wouldn't it be ridiculous to let himself run into money distress again without having tried to do something about it? And having seen the failure of his attempts to place his first novel, Lucien was little tempted to begin a second one. And anyway, if he did write one, what was he supposed to live on meanwhile? A month of privations had exhausted his patience. Couldn't he do what journalists did, but do it nobly, retaining his conscience? (De Balzac, 1874 [1837], p. 185).

In thrall to his illusions, Lucien is convinced that he can change the literary world from the inside. These high-minded beginnings make his eventual awakening that much ruder.

Much the same could be said of today's young graduates: for many, their first experience of professional life is a brutal, disconcerting shock to the system. This emerged clearly from our interview with Estelle, a recent graduate of a prestigious business school:

I'm still struggling [to understand what happened] when I started working… I think the first internship I did with a company […] came as a big shock […] I realised the extent of the disconnect between business schools and actual business.

What we have here is a clear disconnect, a mismatch, a yawning abyss between what young people are taught, what they are promised by the organisations that take them on (in terms of the responsibilities discussed in the interview process) and what actually happens when they take up their first jobs.

The young graduates we interviewed were stunned by the banality of some of the tasks assigned to them. After years

devoted to intensive preparatory studies, followed by degree programs at the country's top *Grandes Écoles*, they suddenly find themselves working for organisations which expect them to perform menial tasks, entirely unrelated to their prestigious academic careers. In one example, Esther found herself in the stock room filling up promotional goodie bags for an event being hosted by her company. She clearly felt that her capacities were being under-used: '*I spent days and days and days in a really cold stock room […] and all I had to do was put a lipstick and some other baubles in each bag… I remember thinking […] 'This is stupid, they could have got some people in to do this'.* Mélanie reported a similar experience: '*I spent a month going through all the archives, or all the records of presentations, which is so boring (…) I was doing the whole company's dog work'*.

This day-to-day triviality is a symptom of our hyper-rational modern world, entirely devoid of poetic grandeur. In the 20th century, progress came to be revered as something akin to a sacred duty incumbent upon all organisations. But this reverence was never unanimous, particularly in the literary sphere. Later on, in the 19th century, Baudelaire (1919 [1897]) was stunned by the social transformations in progress, declaring that '*the world is coming to an end'*, and that

we shall perish by that through which we thought to live. The mechanical will so have Americanized us, progress will so have atrophied all our spiritual side, that naught, in the sanguine, sacrilegious or unnatural dreams of the Utopians can be compared to the actual outcome. I ask every thinking man to show me what of life remains (p. 223).

For the poet, it was beyond all doubt that the triumph of '*the mechanical'* would cause our spiritual side to wither and die. In this respect, the way that Clémentine describes an average work day chained to her desktop computer has echoes of Baudelaire's lament: '*actually, having to do that kind of sucked the life out of me, the living part of me, it was… yes there was something almost annihilating about it'*.

One consequence of this ruthless rationalisation is the requirement for workers to be wholly, permanently available, transforming individuals into subordinates whose autonomy is overruled by a form of reification. In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*[4] (2020 [1915]), Gregor Samsa finds himself shunned by his family and 'reified' when he awakens one day to find himself transformed into a giant cockroach. This metaphorical evocation of reification as the annihilation of individual autonomy is echoed in the testimony of Mélanie, reflecting upon her relationship with her immediate hierarchical superior: '*she didn't regard interns as human beings, they weren't real employees, they were just like ragdolls that happened to be there (…) In her eyes, we just didn't exist (…) We were there to do the dog work'*.

[4.] Original German title: *Die Verwandlung.*

The prosaic realities of work: caught between the flow, constant acceleration and mendacity

From a literary perspective, the predominance of 'flow' thinking corresponds to the widespread disillusionment, which resulted from the sudden irruption of a new force into the cultural life of the 19th century: the press. Poetry was suddenly, brutally devalued; the poetry market effectively collapsed. This, at least, is what De Balzac (1874 [1837]) contends in *Lost Illusions*, in which the titular illusions are primarily love, politics and literature. When there are no illusions left, there are effectively no personal convictions. The dawning era of mass culture brought about a vast literary disillusionment, a turn away from poetry which incidentally gave rise to the image of the poet as a tortured, misunderstood genius (Verlaine, 2021 [1884]). Many writers wrote scathingly of contemporary society, aghast at the social transformations playing out before them. De Balzac (1996 [1833]) himself bemoaned the '*current state of literature'* at a time when the ravenous '*reading masses'* were expanding and demanding more books to consume. In his view, the press was the real monster, and the entire media culture more broadly. For De Balzac (1996 [1833]), '*the damage done by journalism is much greater [than the book trade]. It kills and devours true talents*' (p. 1223). What most terrified Balzac and his contemporaries was the programmed obsolescence inherent to this new media culture, wherein any written text, no matter how interesting, is destined to be superseded and erased by the next one to come along.

Nowadays, email and instant messaging applications (Slack, Teams, etc.) embody this state of flow. Mareva felt bound by a tacit obligation to constantly be checking her emails or telephone messages: '*The most annoying thing, I find, is being chained to your phone all the time… yeah, the most exhausting thing is the fact that you're always having to check your email and other stuff, just to be sure that there isn't an emergency'*. Mélanie employed similar terms to bemoan this state of permanent solicitation: '*you're constantly receiving emails, phone calls, [messages on] Skype…'* 'Flow' is a concept evoked by several of our respondents, describing a working day occupied by an uninterrupted succession of seemingly Sisyphean tasks. For example, Valentine, a graduate of one of France's top business schools, felt like she was caught up in a never-ending stream of '*calls, emails and reports'*. Julia, meanwhile, reported a sense of alienation at work: '*it was pretty boring [auditing]. (…) I honestly experienced a sort of Taylorist alienation [at work], I felt like I was on an assembly line'*. In the examples cited earlier, the young graduates felt as if they were struggling under the weight of the demands placed upon them by the organisations for which they worked, and in which they struggled to find their place. Distracted by the multifarious, fragmented nature of the tasks assigned to them, they lost sight of the bigger picture and the broader meaning of their work. They might spend an entire

afternoon responding to emails, edging ever further away from the meaning of their profession as it was presented to them. Instead of allowing individual workers to concentrate on specific missions, companies shatter their personal engagement and concentration through the sheer multitude of tasks sent their way. Juggling multiple deadlines and tight turnaround times, young graduates find themselves struggling to keep pace with this frenetic pace of work. And yet, paradoxically, they have the '*feeling that they're not doing much*' (Mareva). Indeed, the constant succession of small, repetitive tasks can cause them to lose sight of the actual purpose or meaning of their profession. In these conditions, some young workers experience a crisis of meaning which can go as far as *burn-out* (an experience suffered by three of our respondents).

In *Lost Illusions*, De Balzac (1874 [1837]) also decries the ascendancy of money and doublespeak, concerns shared by some of the participants in our study. This theme is notably explored in Lucien de Rubempré's dealings with Vautrin, an ex-convict now posing as a priest. Vautrin is a decidedly evil character, but one who has fully understood the nature of contemporary society. He duly imparts his skewed historical and social philosophy to Lucien de Rubempré, providing an opportunity for Balzac to formulate a reactionary view of society, denouncing as artificial the grandiose theoretical discourse which runs through the novel. Balzac's critique is founded upon a central pillar: the belief that modern society exists in constant contradiction with itself, engendering a profound conflict between morality and reality. In *Lost Illusions*, De Balzac (1874 [1837]) evocatively describes the sense of disorder resulting from this state of permanent conflict and combat. For Balzac, novels are necessarily governed by the poetics of disorder. Modern society not only is profoundly contradictory but also built upon outright lies. Appearances are all that really matter, and appearances no longer bear any relation to reality; the connection between signifier and signified has been severed. Also central to Balzac's poetics is a desire to pull back the veil, to interpret the signs as a means of transcending appearances. In short, Balzac's works are underpinned by the aesthetics of disorder and the hermeneutics of signs.

We can detect echoes of both in Iris' description of her relationship with a manager who had no qualms about lying to potential candidates in order to recruit them:

She just makes stuff up, and I'm looking at her and thinking 'We work for the same company, and you're telling me things that just aren't true'. It's absurd. She is capable of inventing absolute bullshit for hours on end, with bad intentions, namely to attract candidates for the wrong reasons and leave them stranded right at the start of their careers. That was too much for me. That's one of the reasons why it came to a point where I could no longer look the other way, and I couldn't get up and go to work in the morning.

On some occasions, lies were acknowledged and endorsed by more senior managers in the interests of '*improving the*

department's statistics' (Mélanie). Once again, young graduates get the impression that they have been cheated by job advertisements, which appear to use intentionally deceptive wording. Above and beyond the Balzacian comparison, the parallel with the 19th century is particularly apposite here: just as the cult of reason which epitomised the Enlightenment was at odds with the Romantics' poeticised vision of the world, there is a clear disconnect in today's labour market between the slick rationality of the capitalist-bureaucratic system and the sensitivities of young graduates. In addition to the institutionalised mendacity, our respondents share the impression that they are beholden to the cult of appearances described by Balzac. It is simply impossible for them to behave authentically at work, at the risk of being shunned or even fired. As Charles put it, '*you really have to go along with playing the part*'. In a similar vein, Clémentine described '*the constant impression that you have to hide a lot of things about yourself, to not be yourself*'.

Work and idealism: straying from the beaten path and renouncing futility

Romantic youths were inhabited by a desire to move beyond the pervasive rationality inherited from the previous century, replacing it with a heightened aesthetic sensibility. To make something beautiful; such is the most cherished desire of the young Romantic tipsy on transcendence. As De Musset (1857) put it in his poem *After reading* ('Après une lecture'):

> *But beauty is everything, as Plato himself confessed,*
> *Beauty reigns supreme here on earth.*
> *And light was created that we might gaze upon it.*
> *Truth is beauty, as the great poem goes;*
> *To which I reply, without a hint of blasphemy:*
> *Only the beautiful is true, and there is no truth without beauty.* (p. 215)

One final finding to emerge from our study was the profound desire of many young graduates from *Grandes Écoles* to invest their efforts in projects with a transcendent dimension. Few of them reported turning to poetry as a means of restoring the sublimity of the world, but the majority of our respondents expressed a desire for social engagement. Feeling that they are of use to others, combating inequality or becoming directly involves in humanitarian projects: such are the aspirations of the youth of today. Baptiste, by way of an example, spoke of '*reimagining a fairer, more human model*'. However, many of our respondents reported feeling that their careers were actually diametrically at odds with the social priorities of the age, employed as they are by bureaucratic organisations concerned chiefly with maximising their profits. As Julia succinctly put it, '*businesses getting rich; that's not useful to society*'.

To begin with, the careers chosen by our young graduates after graduating appeared to be compatible with their convictions. But as time went by, many came to realise that the tasks

entrusted to them were totally divorced from their expectations. They found that their organisations were primarily interested in standardising procedures, establishing strict boundaries between different roles and tasks. The young graduates interviewed for our study suffered as a result of this experience. They often had the impression that they were far removed from any productive activity, and incapable of seeing the point of their own work. This frequently led to very negative assessments of their own contributions, which they regarded as futile. An example from Aurélie: '*there wasn't really any need to do [a particular task], it was completely useless. It was never any use to anybody, even after I had left. Basically, it was a complete joke for them to ask me to do that*'.

In search of more transcendence, young graduates would prefer to make a greater contribution to the world in which they live, striving in good conscience towards a clear goal, rather than scrambling to obey repeated injunctions of very limited scope. Much like the Romantics of the 19th century, then, today's young graduates appear keen to discard the existing model. Their dreams and aspirations are no longer aligned with the myth of progress, whilst large companies remain in thrall to this way of thinking.

Discussion. Young graduates and the structures of work: Journey to the end of absurdity

Ultimately, what our research reveals is the creeping sense of disenchantment experienced by young graduates upon entering employment, a state of affairs with potentially serious consequences. In this section of the article, we discuss the pertinence of our literary parallels as a means of illustrating the central role that organisational absurdity plays in this process. We then analyse the ways in which our respondents perceive their own position within their respective organisations, their thoughts of resignation and in some cases their actual experiences of quitting. We conclude by exploring some potential managerial responses.

Organisational absurdity: From revelation to disenchantment

As illustrated by McCabe (2016), using fiction as a tool can be an effective means of laying bare organisational absurdity and its consequences. Our invocation of 19th-century literature seeks not only to explore the young Romantics' perception of the absurdity of the world, but also to draw a parallel with today's young graduates. The early 19th century saw Europe enter into an era of rapid transformation, shaped by the manufacturing boom and the advent of liberal modernity. In France, this period witnessed the beginnings of industrial capitalism and the consumer society; the young elites of the age were ill-prepared for this shift. As Löwy and Sayre (2005 [1992]) have argued,

Romanticism emerged as a counterweight to modernity: the movement was implacably opposed to the Industrial Revolution and the triumph of the market economy, a force seemingly destined to destroy '*our spiritual side*' (Baudelaire, 1919 [1897], p. 223). The *mal du siècle* described by De Musset (1910 [1836]), one of the most astute observers of the tribulations experienced by the young people who came of age in the 1830s, would become a societal phenomenon familiar to all young Romantics '*born too late into a world that was already too old*', to paraphrase Marchal (1993). When De Musset (1910 [1836]) writes that '*they had in their heads a world; they saw the earth, the sky, the streets and the highways; but these were empty*' (p. 5) what he is describing is the absurdity of the new world inherited by these unsuspecting youths. He witnessed first-hand the transition from an exalted world to a world defined by rational organisation, much to the despair of the young Romantics.

Today's young graduates find themselves confronted with a similar situation. The revelation of the absurdity of the world is not so much an affront to contemporary management thinking (Starkey et al., 2019) and a challenge to the ultra-rational model of *homo economicus*, which dominates the organisational sphere (Bal & Dóci, 2018); it is first and foremost a matter of young graduates coming to the realisation that their careers thus far have led them into an impasse. For these highly qualified graduates, facing up to reality and its everyday absurdity means coming to terms with the fact that their university degrees are simply badges of legitimacy, visas proving that they have successfully served their time in the cradle of neo-liberal thought (Bal et al., 2023), and certainly not indications that they have developed any particular, or even pertinent, skills. On the contrary, the young graduates we interviewed not only did feel undervalued but also ended up associating themselves with their work and its disappointments. In short, they put themselves down. The issue here is not a failure to comprehend the nature of their professional responsibilities. Indeed, our results suggest that our interviewees know perfectly well what their employers expect of them, and which tasks they are required to perform. What they do feel acutely, however, is the gulf (or perhaps the yawning abyss) between what they were promised before signing on and what they actually ended up doing. This raises the issue of individuals' compatibility with the work they do, and the importance of finding meaning in one's work (Morin & Forest, 2007). Our findings suggest that this involves facing up to the absurdity of work. The idea that organisations are purely rational structures is shown to be a fantasy (Starkey et al., 2019), since in reality the organisational sphere is wracked with uncertainty, and nothing can be taken for granted. This realisation is enough to set young graduates' heads spinning, engendering a sense of anguish which in many cases leads them to quit. What emerges clearly from our interviews is that the absurdity of work leads to a 'crisis of meaning' (Woodward, 2009), which is not simply a case of the actors

involved losing their sense of meaning: these young people find themselves in a situation which should be meaningful to them, but which actually fails to match their expectations, despite the fact that these expectations appeared to coincide with the promises made by their employers.

There are different levels of meaning at work here (what young people expect, what they have been promised and what they come to realise is the reality of the situation) which, since they are in conflict rather than consensus, result in a crisis of meaning (Garreau, 2006). Back in 2006, Garreau was already warning businesses about the stasis and tedium induced by repetitive tasks devoid of meaning: 'such situations must only be temporary, so as not to compromise the mental and physical health of the individuals forced to work in such conditions, experiencing negative feelings and emotions as a result' (Garreau, 2006, p. 398–399). In our case, young graduates feel like the meaning is ebbing out of their work on all sides as a result of fragmented, disjointed working practices (Brook & Brook, 1989). Ultimately, it is the mismatch between two modes of thinking, which leaves young people with a sense of meaninglessness: on the one hand, the rigid, preordained, institutional meaning imposed by the company (Garreau, 2006), and, on the other hand, a personal, subjective sense of meaning which is struggling for air. This paradox is perpetuated *ad absurdum*, resulting in a surfeit of competing meanings and laying bare the flagrant discordance between the expectations of young employees and the expectations of their employers (Garreau, 2006). Our research supports the theory that individuals become disillusioned with the absurdity of work precisely when the organisations for which they work overload them with meaning. Ultimately, the modern *mal du siècle* stems from this awareness of the fundamental incompatibility between conscious beings and their social environment. This is precisely what emerges from our study: the incompatibility between young graduates and the organisations by which they are employed.

Nevertheless, realising the absurdity of work is not always necessarily a Damascene moment. The young graduates we interviewed regarded it more as an everyday reality, an ordinary experience (Camus, 1991 [1942]), which casts doubt upon the constant normalisation of organisational processes which we tend to take for granted (Bal et al., 2023). What, then, are the symptoms of organisational absurdity as perceived by young graduates? To begin with, a feeling that the work is beneath their capabilities. Young graduates often report feeling overqualified (Prevost-Bucchianeri & Pottier, 2020), and thus ill-suited to their day-to-day work. This feeling is exacerbated by the constant demands placed upon them, and the sense that they are swamped with pointless tasks. The young graduates we interviewed felt simultaneously overwhelmed by the sheer volume of emails they were expected to handle and distressed by the feeling that this work was essentially useless.

The missions assigned to them do not give them the impression that they are 'working with purpose' in the sense defined by Arendt (1998 [1958]). This further reduces the likelihood of imbuing work with a sense of purpose, as Sennett (2008) recommends. On the contrary, the evident banality of work is a source of suffering. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the perceived triviality of their work does not lead young graduates to seek out more intellectuality, preferring instead to turn to more tangible occupations. This reflects a desire to shun *bullshit jobs* as defined by Graeber (2013). What makes work absurd, and engenders a crisis of meaning, is first and foremost the feeling of futility, which results from the lack of control over productive processes, and the bloodless, disembodied relationship to work which ensues (Crawford, 2010 [2009]; Sennett, 2008). Deprived of the 'feeling that the tasks they perform produce results which transcend the tasks themselves' (Garreau, 2012, p. 56), workers struggle to find meaning in their work. Last but not least, our respondents described various situations which they perceived as examples of 'organizational hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 1989). Work may be perceived as meaningless as a result of divergent discourses or double binds, with organisations presenting a misleading image during the recruitment process, only for the banal reality of the work to be revealed later on.

Disenchantment is the direct consequence of this confrontation with absurdity. In the 19th century, this 'malaise of the soul' and this 'modern ailment' described by De Musset (1910 [1836]) manifested itself at three levels.

The first dimension was a sense of historical disenchantment: 'excel, and thou shalt live' (Joubert, 1850, p. 150); very well, but how can one excel within the strict confines of the Restoration monarchy, a far cry from the epic days of Revolution and Empire, when the Church and the press were the only soul-sapping career avenues available.

On top of this came a sense of spiritual disenchantment: 'excel, and thou shalt live' (Joubert, 1850, p. 150); very well, but how can one excel and embrace the ideals of fulfilment and completeness when one has received such a paradoxical education? These young idealists were steeped in Catholic religiosity but had also inherited the scepticism which characterised the 18th century. Another 'child of the century', Gérard de Nerval, would describe his generation as being torn between two contradictory teachings, between the Revolution and the Reactionary response, between doubt and dogma and between the impossibility of faith and the desire to believe.

Finally, there was a very real sense of political disenchantment: 'excel, and thou shalt live' (Joubert, 1850, p. 150); very well, but how can one excel when such great expectations yield such mediocre results? The half-cocked revolutions of 1830 and 1848 compounded the profound political disenchantment felt by the young Romantics, consummating their

break with affairs of state and turning them towards Art as an 'alternative absolute'.

We can detect something similar in our own interviews with today's young graduates: a sense of personal disenchantment with the age in which they live and a depoliticised era in which each individual seeks out their own idea of meaning. In short, graduates find that they are the protagonists of nothing except their own stories, and they have every intention of regaining control in that department. If they express a desire to 'break out of their cages', it is primarily for their own sake, with scant regard for broader societal questions. This critical inward turn is a distant echo of the Romantic exaltation of the self as found in the works of De Musset (1910 [1836]) and De Chateaubriand (2012 [1802]).

The exaltation of the self-turned inwards: Seceding from the world

In the 19th century, a budding generation was gripped by a new phenomenon, a widely shared feeling that a new perspective was afoot. Man was no longer a *subject*, but an *individual*; the revolutionary moment, still fresh in the memory, had laid the foundations for the affirmation of the *self*. The young generation that came of age amid the ruins of the imperial adventure was tirelessly devoted to expressing its selfhood, which it held to be self-evident, in outpourings of exalted sentiments and the celebration of self. This lyrical élan went hand-in-hand with a feeling of deep-seated malaise, which is particularly associated with the Romantic youth, but has been taken up by every generation since: the quintessential *modern* ailment. In its original form, the *mal du siècle* was an absolute affirmation of the self and the bitter realisation of its incompatibility with the demands of society and the world at large. In this view,

The evolution of civilisation [in the 19th century] appears to demonstrate that the great collective values (religion, morality, society) are running out of steam. Individuals are increasingly aware of their autonomy and their own worth, which they seek to affirm at the margins of society, or even in direct opposition to it. The Romantic movement is individualism writ large, where the self becomes an absolute value (Bergez et al., 2020, p. 285).

In these conditions, young Romantics turned their focus inwards as a means of escaping the indigence of the age. As Nadim (2020) puts it, 'in a world turned on its head […] the Romantics sought introspection, solitude and the passing of time' (p. 32).

Our own findings appear to confirm this tendency for individualism and withdrawal, contradicting the social media buzz, which occasionally paints young graduates as a mutinous bunch. Recent, high-profile examples have included the 'abandon ship' appeal launched by graduates of AgroParisTech, or the speech given by Anne-Fleur Goll at the HEC Paris graduation ceremony in June 2022. Our research reveals the more narcissistic side of hypermodernity. The absence of collective spirit chimes with the analysis proffered by Sadin (2020), who evokes the emergence of a new figure: 'the tyrannical individual'. This tyrant is entirely wrapped up in his own subjectivity, safe in the knowledge that he is the centre of the universe, all-knowing and all-powerful. One consequence is the 'end of the shared world'. The hypermodern individual 'has become predominantly individualist and pragmatic' (Bobineau, 2011, Online, § 18). In short, the question of whether or not a professional activity is meaningful is a profoundly individual affair.

In order to escape the mediocrity of the world, the youth of the Romantic era did not run off to join NGOs: they turned to poetry, art and music. They foreswore the ugliness of the world to pursue the beauty of rhyme and metre, carving out artistic havens in a world where beauty was no longer deemed necessary. In doing so, they took on the role of dissidents, championing an ironic contestation of reality. Romantic poetry aspires to be at once intimate and universal, cosmic and inspired. Nowadays, a certain number of young workers are abandoning their careers and taking up activities which they feel to be more worthwhile, more tangible. These new 'intermittent workers' (Pérez, 2014) often opt for an existence which on the surface appears to be less comfortable (undemanding jobs, temp work, part-time work, seasonal jobs, etc.). In doing so, they prioritise quality of life over salary and social standing. Traditional career objectives are no longer their chief concern.

As we have seen, our interviews contain nothing to suggest that this movement is a primarily altruistic phenomenon, part of a broader dynamic of collective renewal. The testimony of the young graduates we interviewed suggests that it is in fact a new manifestation of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). When work loses its concrete certainties, it too becomes liquid, trapped in the cycle of consumerism (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]) whereby everything is transformed into an ephemeral product, even work itself. The ultra-rationalisation touted by organisations is simply a façade because things can change at any moment. Liquid modernity is the fate of a society 'in which the conditions in which members operate change too rapidly for modes of action to crystallise into habits or routine' (Bauman, 2013 [2005], p. 7). This process has implications for individuals in the working world. Many of our young graduates reported feeling reified by the organisations for which they worked. Within this framework, the individual is liquefied, transformed into an ephemeral object (Trotzier, 2006) and consumed by the organisation (Philippe et al., 2022). Any initial altruism is turned inwards to become a form of narcissistic projection. Disenchantment thus leads to the 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1998) and the desire to seek meaning in collective endeavour.

Possible managerial responses

Determined to impose their own meaning by virtue of standardisation and rationalisation, organisations no longer leave any room for the aspirations of their members, who have no choice but to comply. The fact that the 'meaning' sought by young graduates is so far removed from the meaning imposed by organisations is perhaps a matter of inflexibility. Nevertheless, there is a genuine need to resist the ultra-rationalisation imposed by organisations, with its inherent risk of absurdity, and to rediscover the quest for meaning. In this respect, we share the opinion of Moriceau (2019), who argues for the need to 'seek meaning everywhere'. Moriceau argues that management techniques or practices that attempt to impose meaning in an unequivocal, top-down fashion can never settle the question of meaning. Meaning will always resist, persist and insist. On top of the democratic and ethical recriminations which it engenders, the desire to impose a shared, unique meaning with which all actions and decisions must be aligned actually sidesteps, and thus fails to understand, questions of meaning. Such questions of meaning are doubly significant because, on the one hand, management is not isolated and impermeable to the desire for meaning, to which it must respond, and, on the other hand, meaning is a matter of holding management to account (p. 303).

Moriceau thus contrasts the unequivocal meaning imposed by organisations with a pluralistic, individual appreciation of meaning, which is rooted in self-examination. For this to be possible individuals need time, they need to be given the freedom to explore for themselves the limits of their work, no longer beholden to pre-existing rules and procedures which to them seem as absurd as they are desperately boring (Culié et al., 2022).

One of our respondents, Raphaël, alludes to this possibility: '*they do that at Google; their employees get one day a week to work on personal projects or group projects. So everyone has a side-line which is of interest to them [although it remains] connected to the company*'. Leaving aside the case of Google, whose motivations remain to be seen, such free time could enable young graduates to further explore subjects which are *meaningful to them*. This could potentially be a way for employers to show that they are attentive to the desires and aspirations of their employees, whilst also keeping pace with a broader societal shift.

Finally, this is not simply a question of the relationship between the educational system intended to train young managers and the organisations which they subsequently join. Our interviewees ask broader questions about the limits of institutional formatting, perceived as a negation of individual singularities. The shift towards a form of 'singular individualism' is a phenomenon which has already been observed by Rosanvallon (2013 [2011]). The challenge facing organisations is to engage seriously with the plurality of meaning as experienced by individuals (Moriceau, 2019), and to avoid the temptation of imposing a unified worldview upon their members, an intangible and incontestable ultra-rationality to which all must conform.

Conclusion

By way of a final twist, we might turn the methodological approach of this article back upon itself. We have invoked literary fiction as a heuristic device, a means of engaging with a specific period of time and getting beneath the skin of its social, economic and organisational problems. This approach was ambitious to say the least. We set out to harness literature for scientific purposes, highlighting the similarities between the experiences of today's young graduates and those of the young Romantics of the 19th century.

Pursuing that logic, what can contemporary literature tell us about the age in which we live? This could be a potentially fertile avenue for future research, research which might profitably include the works of French travel writer Sylvain Tesson (2019). In *The Art of Patience. Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet*, he reports a conversation with his friend and fellow-traveller Vincent Munier, locating our *mal du siècle* in the state of information overload in which we live:

the night before, [Vincent Munier] was telling me about his family. 'They think I'm neurotic: I can sit and watch a nuthatch fly by while something really important is happening'. I told him that the real neurosis here was the diffraction of our information-addled brains. A prisoner to the city, drip-fed a constant stream of novel distractions, I felt like a man diminished. The fun fair was in full swing, the washing machine was spinning, the screens were sparkling (Tesson, 2019, p. 125).

Acceleration, accumulation and consumption are the symptoms of a society which leaves its young people feeling disoriented, then as now. Revisiting Romantic literature provides a reminder of the enduring relevance of these 19th century problems, which persist to this day: from disenchantment in the face of absurdity to the temptation to turn inwards, detaching oneself from the world.

This lack of bigger horizons, of space in which to evolve and thrive, to achieve one's ambitions and reveal one's talents; this painful shortcomings of a banal reality incapable of satisfying the burning desire to prove oneself and leave a mark on History; this widespread malaise, perhaps the defining characteristic of the Romantic mindset, will burst from the pens of young writers dreaming of a brighter tomorrow. As Hugo (1889 [1830]) declared in his preface to *Hernani*: '*Young men, let's have good courage! So hard is the present, so beautiful will be the future*' (p. 1).

Much like the young Romantics, the youth of today is beset by a sense of latent yet persistent frustration, as pervasive as it

is hard to define. The distress is real, and organisations have a duty to respond. Our study is an invitation to organisations to rethink their managerial models and give proper consideration to the hopes and dreams of young graduates, arriving at a new consensus infused with a renewed sense of dynamism and aspiration, and thus beneficial to all. The goal must be to lay the foundations for a new mode or organisation, drawing strength from the past whilst remaining open to new ideas.

Acknowledgements

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