1966

The Concept of 'Identity' in the Theatre of Eugene Ionesco.

George Edward Craddock Jr

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation


https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/1116

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
CARRADDOCK, Jr., George Edward, 1932—
THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN THE THEATRE
OF EUGENE IONESCO.

Louisiana State University, Ph.D., 1966
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan
THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN THE THEATRE
OF EUGENE IONESCO

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Foreign Languages

by

George Edward Craddock, Jr.
B.A., University of North Carolina, 1960
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1962
January, 1966
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writer wishes to express his appreciation to his advisor Dr. Elliott D. Healy, to Mr. Henri B. Janin, and to the other members of the Foreign Language Department of Louisiana State University for their help, their criticisms, and their suggestions, all of which have been of aid to me in the writing of this dissertation.

Special mention must be made of the suggestion of the topic of identity as a study by the late Dr. Calvin H. Evans, who guided and encouraged me in the initial stages of the present work.

For their cooperation and for the use of material pertinent to this study the writer is indebted to the libraries of Louisiana State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Greensboro, and Duke University.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Marriage and Domesticity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Social Duties and Daily Routine</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Social Conformity and Intellectual Tyranny</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Alienation, Malaise, and the Search for Identity</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Man's Basic Nature and the Inner Life</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Bibliography</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The major avant-garde dramatists in France are interested in the fundamental man beneath his social identity. Ionesco's theatre, in particular, is concerned with conditioned human beings, whose habits, both physical and mental, are formed for them. My purpose in this study is to examine Ionesco's views on the individual's relation to his social identity and to his inner self.

The first chapter, "Marriage and Domesticity," deals with the role of the family in the formation of the individual's identity, showing how his behavior is controlled, his decisions are forced, his freedom of expression is denied, and even his emotional responses are modified by the family. In the second chapter, "Social Duties and Daily Routine," one sees how Ionesco draws our attention to the sheer mechanical ritual of living, which further separates man from himself. Man becomes identified with his social milieu, his function, and his possessions.

The chapter "Social Conformity and Intellectual Tyranny" discusses ways in which the individual's mental habits are also formed for him. Ionesco exposes what he calls "la sclérose mentale bourgeoisie," which is the passive acceptance of clichés, idées reçues, and slogans, which take the place of real thought and genuine communication. He sees as even more dangerous the active direction of the mind by schools of thought and political ideologies. To him,
any kind of directed thought limits the mind and blinds it from perceiving reality in any other way. He expresses, in *Rhinocéros*, the idea that people who follow ideologies in order to conform are reduced to unthinking creatures without a conscience.

The fourth chapter, "Alienation, Malaise, and the Search for Identity," deals with Ionesco's idea that the individual, by giving full attention to the exterior world, loses what is essential in his basic nature. Consequently he does not develop his full capabilities, and the result is a malaise and a search for what Ionesco refers to as "une dimension perdue." The individual does not feel at one with his identity and looks for his lost self in his childhood memories and in his dream world. He tries to relate to the material world, his routine life, and the outlooks of his society, but all this fails to give him the "lost dimension" that he is looking for.

The fifth chapter, "Man's Basic Nature and the Inner Life," examines what Ionesco suggests the individual beneath his social identity might be. It is evident that Ionesco treasures the natural man uncorrupted by his social milieu and that he wishes to awaken people's minds to the potentialities of existence. He calls for total liberty of thought and a new awareness of reality. He expresses the idea that one regains his basic self by exercising his full capabilities, and he cautions that people might lose all their powers if, by submitting to a mechanical way of life, they do not use them. Ionesco also suggests that artistic creation and the exercise of the imagination are ways to regain part of one's lost self. He believes that, by heeding the demands of the inner life, the individual can
recapture his equilibrium as a vital human being.
INTRODUCTION

Identity is a vital concept, and one which has increasing value in our changing society. The meaning of the word itself is especially pertinent to this study. In the Oxford English Dictionary, identity is defined as:

(1) The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness.

(2) The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.

In this work it is not in the literal meaning of "sameness" that the term will be used, but in its alternative meaning of personality and individuality.

Identity, although a frequently used concept, is also an emerging idea. It is interesting to note that a committee on world mental health could not agree on a unified convention of use for the term identity or for any of its related terms. Nevertheless the group found its investigation enlightening, and produced an interesting and informative study of the concept, describing identity as "an anchorage of the self in the social matrix." It is a person's property which is inalienable and, it might be argued, is needed only when he is

a member of a group. The formation of one's identity includes the separation of the rest of the world from the self, and therefore involves the formation of a concept of the world as well as of the self. As a child, an individual identifies himself with his parents; as he grows older his identification pertains more to the systems of values and way of life of his society. Loyalty to a group, such as one's immediate social group, or the people of his district or country, and the extent to which the individual feels responsible for what other people do, are indications of his degree of identification with those people. The group to which the individual refers his behavior often provides a standard of conduct. In some societies, especially in those which have been termed "closed value systems," there is a strong pressure to decrease individuality.2

An important question in relation to the concept of identity is: how are individuals identified? There are two parts to this question: (1) How does the individual identify himself? and (2) How is he identified by others? In elaboration of the first question one might ask: with what does an individual identify himself? To what extent does he identify with his belongings, his family, his country, and his society? In elaboration of the second question, that of being identified by others, one finds himself concerned with labels—the designation of the individual by others—and of the individual's acceptance or non-acceptance of his identity.3

2Ibid., pp. 5-24, passim.
3Ibid., pp. 25-27, passim.
Of all the facets of identity, perhaps those of the individual and his social environment and their interrelationship are most important. This relationship, in many respects, is not a satisfactory one. One's social life takes precedence over his inner life, and the real man is hidden behind his social identity. But what is this fundamental self? The writers of the avant-garde theatre in France of the 1950's and early 1960's are concerned precisely with this question. Deep-seated in these writers is the idea that the social scheme has been superimposed on the fundamental man, and they are concerned with tearing away the social edifice in order to reveal what lies beneath.\(^4\)

There is likewise a common spirit motivating the avant-garde writers, a spirit of revolt against the acceptance by the majority of people of the conventions of society, of the hollowness of language, and the lack of genuine communication. In many ways the plays of the avant-garde have a destructive role; they destroy our orientation to society so that we can re-establish something more solid on these ruins. They want man to see his condition face to face and become more aware of his responsibilities as an individual.\(^5\)

All of the plays of the "absurd," in one way or another, are concerned with the basic situation of man. They present the image of man trapped by his human condition, cut off from his fellow man,

\(^4\)From a seminar lecture by Dr. Calvin H. Evans on the Avant-Garde Drama, Louisiana State University, 1963.

\(^5\)Ibid.
unable to communicate or to understand what is happening to him.  
Leonard Pronko writes that the avant-garde dramatists, in returning to
a more primitive theatre, are also returning to "man, rather than
society, as the center of the dramatic universe." These writers reject
science and conventional psychology in order to get to the basic man
beyond. The social sciences can give us a procedure for dealing with
human functions in our society and give us ways to see ourselves in
our historical context. They can classify everything, except what
R. J. Kaufmann refers to as "the residual, unexercised inner self." 
The avant-garde dramatists try to reach the spectator directly through
his fundamental reflexes, which is their way of attacking the
established order of our daily routine, thoughts, emotions, and words.
Hence, the delirium and disorder of their plays, which upset our
familiar world and lead, through absurdity, to terror, but also to a
re-examination of ourselves.

These writers also wish to give back to the theatre its purity
and liberty by attacking what they consider the unreality of the

---

6[Anonymous], "Dreams of Reason," The Times Literary Supplement,
August 3, 1962, p. 556.

7Leonard Cabell Pronko, Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater

8R. J. Kaufmann, "On the Newness of the New Drama," Tulane Drama

9J. Lusseyran, "La France, laboratoire dramatique, de Jarry à

10Jacques Quicharamaud, "The 'R' Effect," L'Esprit Créateur,
Each of the major avant-garde dramatists has tried to create a poetic language in order to make the world appear in a new light, a procedure which is part of the surrealist movement. Their surrealism is actually a kind of extension of the reality of daily life; their work is in some ways a means of debanalizing the banal. One of the major revolutions in the avant-garde theatre is in the nature of language. For the writers of this new theatre, as Jean Vannier has pointed out, "the theatrical event is not played out at the level of language itself." They try to find, beyond words worn out and become almost meaningless by usage, a "kind of natural savage state of the word." The present-day avant-garde writers, just as the surrealists before them, wish to escape logic and a limited notion of reality in order to get to a world of fantasy, dreams, and the unusual—all for the sake of reaching a more profound reality.

The influence of the surrealists on the stage, however, was almost negligible until Eugène Ionesco arrived on the scene in 1950

---

and, using surrealistic techniques, accomplished what they had failed to achieve. Ionesco, who admits that he has certainly been influenced by surrealism, is, according to Philippe Soupault, considered by the great surviving surrealists as their greatest success in the theatre. Ionesco reports that in the 1952-53 theatrical season, when Soupault, Breton, and Benjamin Péret saw his plays, they told him, in effect, "Voilà ce que nous voulions faire!"

Often associated with the plays of Eugène Ionesco is the term "metaphysical farce," which goes back, by way of the surrealists and Dadaists, to Alfred Jarry, who wrote the first one of this genre. The "Ubu" plays are forerunners of today's avant-garde theatre in France, and in particular of the plays of Ionesco. Ubu-Roi, along with surrealism, reports Ionesco, was one of the "grands chocs intellectuels" of his youth. Even today, he considers this play as one of the very rare theatrical works. He believes that Jarry, in writing this "farce géniale," was re-establishing a primitive theatre, and thereby finding again the essence of drama. Ionesco says that

---

16 Pronko, op. cit., p. 10.
18 Ibid.
20 Pronko, op. cit., p. 6.
this is what he, in turn, tried to do. Another theatrical work which, because of its rejection of conventional forms and ideas, has impressed Ionesco is Guillaume Apollinaire's Les Mamelles de Tirésias.

Ionesco states that his early plays were largely exercises. What he was trying to do in these plays was to set in motion the mechanism of the theatre. He was aiming for a purity of style, and he wanted to free the theatrical language from its literary aspects. In his second period, he tried for a kind of amplification of his early style, in which objects themselves would become a language. He wanted to find a visual language of the stage which would be more direct, more shocking, and stronger than that of words. The important plays of this second period are Les Chaises, Victimes du devoir, and Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser. Beginning with Tueur sans gages, he began to write a more traditional kind of play, but still with surrealist overtones. Rhinocéros and Le Piéton de l'air belong to this later period. Of note in these plays is that they revolve around one protagonist, Bérenger, a kind of Everyman, who is also, as Ionesco admitted in an interview, an aspect of himself.

In many ways Ionesco is considered as the spokesman for the

---

22 Pronko, op. cit., p. 9.
23 Lamont, op. cit., p. 91.
25 Lamont, op. cit., p. 91.
avant-garde theatre, possibly since he has published more explanatory writing on the avant-garde theatre than any other contemporary dramatist. He has made the statement, "L'avant-garde, c'est la liberté." He believes that the avant-garde theatre is contributing to the rediscovery of the liberty of artistic creation, which he says has been suffering because of the "conventions théâtrales desséchées."

In his imagination, he feels, he can find a realism more profound than "la réalité réaliste," for, as he writes, "le réalisme [est] lui-même une stylisation, une manière, une convention comme les autres." Symbolism and surrealism, he states, can thus be as realistic as realism or naturalism: "Le réalisme, le naturalisme voulaient également étendre le domaine du réel ou en révéler des aspects nouveaux, encore inconnus. Le symbolisme et, plus tard, le sur-réalisme ont également voulu découvrir et exprimer des réalités cachées." He maintains that the absurd aspects of his plays are simply his carrying to the extreme certain aspects of our daily life:

L'insolite ne peut surgir, à mon avis, que du plus terne, du plus quelconque quotidien, de la prose de tous les jours, en le suivant jusqu'au delà de ses limites. Sentir l'absurdité du quotidien et du langage, son invraisemblance, c'est déjà l'avoir dépassées; pour la dépasser, il faut d'abord s'y enfoncer. Le comique c'est de l'insolite pur; rien ne me paraît plus surprenant que le banal; le surréel est là, à la portée de nos mains, dans le bavardage de tous les jours.

26Pronko, op. cit., p. 61.
28Ibid., p. 29.
29Ibid.
30Ibid., p. 142.
When accused of writing plays which are simply absurd and nothing more, Ionesco replies that it is the world which seems to him absurd. When he writes his plays, he does not try to explain the world; he only wonders what it all means, and then he tries to set this down. He feels that it is the playwright's duty not to answer questions, but to ask them, to point out problems. People always expect him to give answers, when actually he is looking for them himself. He is frequently asked to explain his plays, and he does his best to oblige, but he says that his explanations are no more valid than anyone else's. In fact, he writes that he has learned a great deal about his own works by reading commentaries on them by others.

When asked to define the theatre, Ionesco says that it is perhaps easier to say what it is not: "Le théâtre n'est pas littérature. ... Il n'est donc pas une histoire qu'on raconte sur la scène. Il n'est pas une copie de la réalité. Il n'est pas épique. Il n'est ni sermon ni thèse." But what is it?: "Disons qu'une pièce est une partie de tennis. ... Ou, si on préfère, un match de rugby ... ou encore de l'architecture en mouvement. ... C'est une construction vivante, c'est un jeu où des antagonismes fondamentaux sont mis en présence et s'affrontent." Ionesco has


33d'Aubarède, op. cit., p. 7.
also described the theatre as a complexity of words, movements, and
gestures;\textsuperscript{34} and he has expressed the opinion that perhaps the true
dimension of the theatre is not time, but space.\textsuperscript{35}

Ionesco believes that no one has yet defined satisfactorily
the \textit{avant-garde} theatre.\textsuperscript{36} He does not think that the term "\textit{avant-
garde}
" is a good one, and he prefers "\textit{théâtre d'art}." As for the
term "\textit{anti-théâtre}," he wonders which theatre merits this appellation
more, the \textit{avant-garde} theatre or the \textit{théâtre du boulevard}. To him,
what is today termed "\textit{anti-theatre}" is the true theatre, while so-
called theatrical plays are anti-theatrical and false.\textsuperscript{37} Ionesco
prefers a theatre which is bare and essential. He describes his kind
of theatre:

\begin{quote}
Il faut arriver à libérer la tension dramatique sans le secours
d'aucune véritable intrigue, d'un objet particulier. ...
Théâtre abstrait. Drama pur. Anti-thématique, anti-idéologique,
anti-réaliste-socialiste, anti-philosophique, anti-psychologique
de boulevard, anti-bourgeois, redécouverte d'un nouveau théâtre
libre. Libre c'est-à-dire libéré, c'est-à-dire sans parti pris,
instrument de fouille; seul à pouvoir être sincère, exact et
faire apparaître les évidences cachées.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

He feels that today's theatre is a prisoner of old forms and that
few authors dare to take advantage of its immense possibilities. As
for him, he wishes to use all the resources of the stage to give full

\textsuperscript{34}Josette Lazar, "Stormy Playwright," \textit{The New York Times},
January 5, 1958, II, 3.
\textsuperscript{35}d'Aubarède, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{36}Fowlie, "New Plays of Ionesco and Genet," \textit{Tulane Drama
Review}, \textbf{V} (September, 1960), 16.
\textsuperscript{37}Lamont, "The Outrageous Ionesco," pp. 94-95.
\textsuperscript{38}Ionesco, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 160-161.
play to his imagination: "Je veux, moi, faire paraître sur scène une tortue, la transformer en cheval de course; puis métamorphoser celui-ci en chapeau, en chanson, en cuirassier, en eau de source. On peut tout oser au théâtre, c'est le lieu où on ose le moins."\(^{39}\)

The extraordinary thing about Ionesco's theatre is that, while dealing with serious themes, and being on the whole pessimistic, it accomplishes its ends through comedy. But this laughter, as noted by Richard N. Coe, is of a particular kind; it comes from the tension of a contradiction between comic and tragic. It springs from the absurd, yet it is "most deeply and genuinely comic."\(^{40}\) In Ionesco's kind of "non-Aristotelian theatre" it is not tears, but laughter which is a catharsis.\(^{41}\) Ionesco himself claims that he can not tell the difference between tragedy and comedy: "Je ne vois pas de différence essentielle entre tragique et comique. Je dirais même que l'élément comique me paraît plus désespérant que l'autre."\(^{42}\) Leonard Pronko writes that Ionesco's theatre is comic, because language and caricature are pushed beyond credibility, and tragic because of the implications for man's situation.\(^{43}\) As a result of this absurd

\(^{39}\)Ionesco, op. cit., p. 32.
\(^{41}\)J. S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," Yale French Studies, No. 23 (Summer, 1959), 10.
\(^{42}\)d'Aubarède, op. cit., p. 7.
alternation of tragic and comic, Ionesco presents to us "the terror
and splendor of being alive."\textsuperscript{44}

Ionesco's special field of endeavor is that of conditioned
human beings; he expresses the anguish of "l'homme conditionné."\textsuperscript{45}
He also calls into question the conventional social virtues, as well
as our usual notions of dignity, accomplishment, intellect, duty, and
many other qualities which are thought important in the social man.\textsuperscript{46}
William Saroyan, in an article on Ionesco and the other writers of
the \textit{avant-garde} theatre, says that these authors, by having recourse
to the absurd, are not mad, but rather have "discovered the means by
which to reveal, in acceptable and deeply moving terms, that the
human race is mad."\textsuperscript{47} In Ionesco's metaphysical farce, nothing is
conceived to be unchanging, immutable, or clearly defined—least of
all, man himself. He tries to give us a picture of man in the full
absurdity of his condition. In the words of Jacques Guicharnaud,
"Ionesco once again presents the chaos and mystery of the
individual."\textsuperscript{48}

The picture which Ionesco gives of man is, in the final

\textsuperscript{44}Henry Hewes, "Sanity' Observed," \textit{The Saturday Review},

\textsuperscript{45}G. Gadoffre, "Eugène Ionesco," \textit{Dictionnaire de littérature

\textsuperscript{46}Kaufmann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 105.

\textsuperscript{47}William Saroyan, "Ionesco," \textit{Theatre Arts}, XLII (July, 1958),
25.

\textsuperscript{48}Guicharnaud, \textit{Modern French Theatre from Giraudoux to Beckett}
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 188.
analysis, not of an absurd being whom we watch on the stage, but an image of our very selves. As early as 1953 Alain Robbe-Grillet, who wrote one of the finest early criticisms of Ionesco's work, perceived this clearly:

"Quelle humanité cachée vit dans l'oeuvre d'Ionesco?," a question by Alfred Kern, 50 might be taken as the starting point for the present work, which, as well as being a study of the concept of identity in Ionesco's theatre, is also a search for the fundamental man. In order to find out how authentic this inner self is, we shall examine the relation of the individual to society, the influences society has in forming him, and the consequent effect on his inner life. The work treats, in the first chapter, the control exercised over the individual by the family and, in the second chapter, by society at large. It also treats, in the third chapter, the forces

49 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Eugène Ionesco," Critique, No. 73 (June, 1953), 564-565.

at work to control the individual's mind. The fourth chapter studies how the individual relates to his identity and how this, in turn, relates to his inner self. The final chapter explores what Ionesco conceives to be man's authentic nature.  

---

51 The plays of Ionesco written between 1948 and 1962 serve as the basis for this study. (Théâtre, 3 vols [Paris: Gallimard, 1954, 1958, 1963]; Le Roi se meurt [Paris: Gallimard, 1962].) Use is also made of his articles and essays, many of which have been collected and reprinted in Notes et contre-notes. (Paris: Gallimard, 1962.) Supplementing these are articles by various scholars and critics, books on the modern theatre in general, and notes on the avant-garde theatre from a seminar at Louisiana State University. (The Avant-Garde Drama, a seminar conducted by Calvin H. Evans, 1963.)
CHAPTER I

MARRIAGE AND DOMESTICITY

The problem of the loss of the individual's basic nature as a result of the stifling atmosphere of domestic life is one of Ionesco's major issues. His early plays have, as their theme, the relationship between the individual and the family and between man and wife. He shows people living in their own narrow worlds, where they limit themselves and one another. These plays take place in close quarters, where families live together and have no secrets. The couple restricts itself, with a resulting feeling of frustration, failure, and guilt.¹ Such an environment is, in the words of Georges Anax, "un monde fermé ... sans issue, sans espoir ... à la fois fascinant et asphyxiant."²

So many of Ionesco's plays are set in a family environment because he feels that there is as much of society's forces at work within the family as without. As he says in Notes et contre-notes, "L'univers familial est en somme une communauté, la société en raccourci."³ The setting for most of them is a typical bourgeois

¹ Renée Saurel, "Ionesco ou les blandices de la culpabilité," Les Temps Modernes, CIII (1954), 2287.


interior. Ionesco's plays are naturalistic in that they make use of the everyday speech and behavior of stereotypes amid a banal middle-class environment. But his naturalism proliferates and leads to extremes, resulting in such human and scenic absurdities as a girl with nine fingers on one hand and three noses, a dead body which grows to enormous proportions, and a young married couple which gives birth to hundreds of eggs. The naturalism of Ionesco is projected to the point of absurdity, until it finally discredits, through ridicule, the routines and ceremonies of social life.4

It is this kind of naturalism which we see in his early one-act play, Jacques, ou la soumission, called by Ionesco a "comédie naturaliste." In the notes for the avant-première of Jacques, Ionesco says that this is first of all "un drame de famille, ou une parodie d'un drame de famille."5 It begins in a typical middle-class living room with furniture which has been used to the point of decay. Note the stage directions: "Une chambre mal tenue, ... une fenêtre ... aux rideaux sales, ... un vieux fauteuil usé, poussiéreux, ... effondré. ... Les vêtements fripés."6 Note also the lack of anything interesting or picturesque to offset this dullness: "Un tableau ne représentant rien, ... des choses indéfinies, ... banales."7 The idea

---

4Juan Guerrero Zamora, Historia del teatro contemporáneo (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1961), II, 277.
5Ionesco, op. cit., p. 173.
7Ibid.
of dullness and sameness is further accentuated by giving all the members of Jacques' family the same name and having them wear masks.

In the first episode of the play the family does its best to bring about the conversion of Jacques fils to bourgeois values. He rebels at first, but under much pressure he finally submits and says that he accepts their outlook (represented by "les pommes de terre au lard," which Jacques is forced to say that he likes). After they have succeeded in this and are satisfied that he is a proper member of their group, they continue their invasion of his private life and decide to marry him off. Jacques mère is satisfied with his forced confession that he likes potatoes with bacon and with the look of submission on his face. She tells him, "Jacques, tout est en règle, le plan prévu à l'avance est déjà réalisé." His fiancée is about to be brought in, along with her parents.

Jacques père claps his hands, and immediately the bride and her family enter. The bride, Roberte, undergoes an inspection to see that she is suitable. She is touched, handled, and even sniffed. She is somewhat timid, but her parents push her along, encouraging her. She passes the inspection, and the Jacques family is pleased; only Jacques himself says nothing. Roberte's parents point out her attractive features: stuffed feet to walk with, green pimples on a beige skin, red breasts on a mauve background, and many other enticements.

During all this display Jacques shows himself to be

---

8 Ibid., p. 106.
disinterested. His family wonders why he is so reluctant to follow their plans for his future. They start their demands all over again, and this time Jacques gives in more easily: "Bon. Alors d'accord! Ça marchera avec les pommes de terre." The words of Jacqueline are ironic: "Ses sentiments distingués finissent toujours par prendre le dessus." When he agrees with them, they say that he is in his right mind. It is finally his father, not Jacques, who seals the bargain. The other members of his family say that they are greatly moved over such a sentimental scene.

Until now the bride-to-be has been veiled. Now they decide to unveil her so that Jacques can see exactly what he is marrying, even though it is a mere formality. Her veil is removed and it is seen that she has two noses. There are cries of admiration from everyone, who exclaims that she is indeed richly endowed. Jacques père is satisfied, thinking that his son is really admitted to the bourgeois brotherhood. His son has finally seen the light; he is truly a man: "Enfin, te voilà un homme." But his family has been celebrating all this without Jacques' support. Now he speaks, and he is not satisfied. He must have a bride with at least three noses. They try to dissuade him from this, but he is adamant. Roberte's father, however, is not perturbed; he has another daughter ready—this one with her three noses all intact. Roberte II is brought in, and everyone is delighted with her. They

---

9Ibid., p. 109.
10Ibid., p. 111.
feel that Jacques is indeed fortunate to have a bride with three noses, and they think that this time he can not possibly have anything to complain about; but he says that she is not ugly enough. The two families have now been pushed beyond their endurance. They had been willing to please him up to a certain point, but they will go no farther. They become more forceful. His mother even regrets that she ever raised him: "Si j'avais su, j'aurais dû t'étrangler dans ton dernier berceau, oui, de mes mains maternelles."\(^\text{11}\)

Roberte's parents demand apologies, Jacques mère faints, and Jacques père severely upbraids his son for having lied to them when he said that he liked potatoes with bacon: "Ce n'était qu'une ruse indigne des appréciations que nous avons eues tous pour toi dans cette maison aux bonnes traditions, depuis ton enfance."\(^\text{12}\) Everyone glares at Jacques, and this time his true feelings take control of him, and he declares, "Je les exècre!" He is called a fils dénaturé; and they say that he is hardhearted, that he has no feeling, that he is even a monster.

Everyone leaves the room, except Jacques and Roberte, the latter at first attempting to leave also, but staying on the order of her parents. She is just as much a victim of duty as Jacques, as she is ordered, "Monte la garde et fais ton service!" Both families peep in the door from time to time, however, so that they can see what happens when the two are left alone. They have tried everything that

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 114.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 117.
they could, and now they are leaving it up to sexual attraction.

Roberte sits down directly across from Jacques and tries to interest him in herself. She describes herself to him in surrealistic terms:

Je suis légère, frivole, je suis profonde.
Je ne suis ni sérieuse ni frivole,
Je m'y connais en travaux agricoles,
Je fais aussi d'autres travaux,
Plus beaux, moins beaux, aussi beaux.
Je suis juste ce qu'il vous faut.13

Eventually she manages to win his confidence, and Jacques, in a long expressive monologue, talks about himself. This monologue is rendered by Ionesco in poetic prose and enables the audience to grasp what goes on in Jacques' mind and what has caused him to be the rebel that he is: He was more perceptive than the average run of people, and he realized early in life what the world was all about. He did not like the things that he saw, and he complained about them openly. Whenever he complained, people told him that everything would be remedied. To make up for all this, they promised him decorations, awards, and other trivialties. But he was not pleased with them, for they did not touch upon the real problem. He insisted that the situation be changed. Everyone swore to give him satisfaction, even gave him official promises with many legal seals. He laid down absolute conditions. They swore to him that things would not continue to go on like this. To pacify him, as well as to divert his mind to other things, they took him on voyages, and at first he let himself

13Ibid., p. 119.
fall into this trap. But eventually he realized that all this was faked, that they had changed nothing, that the world was as bad as ever: "Les gens ... ils avaient tous le mot bonté à la bouche, le couteau sanglant entre les dents." He wanted to protest, but there was no one who would hear him. He wanted to escape, but all the exits were blocked. He was told that there were trap doors still left, but he could not find them. But there was still the cellar. If he could not escape from above, he could at least escape from below.

It is this form of escape which Roberte offers him. She knows all the trap doors to the cellar. Jacques is willing: "Nous pourrions nous entendre." Roberte begins to seduce him in a scene which is expressed surrealistically. The two make love while sitting in chairs on opposite sides of the room. The dialogue begins slowly; then the rhythm intensifies, finally showing down at the end of the scene. Jacques finds Roberte interesting, and in spite of himself, he lets himself be won over. His mind tells him no, but his baser instincts get the better of him. She tells him about a horse with a flaming mane, and Jacques goes along with her, aiding her from time to time. At the end of her story the horse is consumed by flames, and once again Ionesco has recourse to surrealistical language as Roberte chants her siren-song:

Viens ... ne crains rien. ... Je suis humide. ... J'ai un collier de boue, mes seins fondent, mon bassin est mou, j'ai de l'eau dans mes crevasses. Je m'enlise. ... Je t'enlace de mes bras comme des couleuvres; de mes cuisses

\[\text{bid.}, \text{p. 121.}\]
molles. Tu t'enfonces et tu fonds ... dans mes cheveux qui pleuvent, pleuvent. Ma bouche dégoule, dégoule mes jambes, mes épaules nues dégoule, mes cheveux dégoule, tout dégoule, coule, tout dégoule, le ciel dégoule, les étoiles coulent, dégoule, goulent.15

Jacques is ecstatic, and the two utter words beginning with "ch": charmant, château, chameau, chaminadour, charrue, chagrin, chabot, chaloupe, and others. She tells him that in the basement of her château everything is pronounced "chat." This sound, according to George G. Strem, represents sensual pleasure, the lure of which conquers Jacques.16 He tells Roberte that he will marry her. The young couple embrace, while their families enter silently, satisfied that all has turned out to their liking. They do a strange, ridiculous, almost ritualistic dance around the two lovers, a dance which is, according to the stage directions, supposed to "provoquer chez les spectateurs un sentiment pénible, un malaise, une honte."17 The stage becomes darker, and the characters all emit moans and cries of animals. It becomes darker still, until the actors are no longer visible: "On n'entend plus que leur gémissements, leurs soupirs, puis tout disparaît, tout s'éteint."18

This last scene is quite primitive, as the lovers lose themselves in sensual pleasure and are unaware of the fellow members of their tribe who squat around them, celebrating their initiation

15Ibid., pp. 124-125.
17Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 127.
18Ibid.
into their ranks. Even the language Ionesco employs is indicative of this primitive ritual: "Les acteurs s'accroupissent ... poussent de vagues miaulements ... des gémissements ... croassements ... On aperçoit les Jacques et les Robert grouiller sur la scène."

The subtitle of the play, "ou la soumission," is worthy of note. It represents the submission of one's individual freedom and one's higher self to basic biological urges. Jacques finds in Roberte a source of pleasure which is capable of annihilating the unattractive features of the family environment, if only momentarily. Little does it matter that it is only a temporary escape, for it has served its purpose, and the hero is caught. Jacques resigns himself to being a creature of habit, of custom, of tradition; he becomes another number in the Jacques clan, another member of mass society.

The sequel to Jacques, a short play with a long title—

L'Avenir est dans les œufs, ou il faut de tout pour faire un monde—shows still further control by the family over the individual. This play begins as Jacques and Roberte are still in each other's arms. They have now been married for three years, and they are very happy.

---

19 Strem, op. cit., p. 152.

20 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 127.

21 Henri Gouhier, "Un théâtre humain de la cruauté," La Table Ronde, No. 147 (March, 1960), 180.


with each other. But being happy is not their function, or so they are informed by their families. "Au nom de la tradition" they are reproached for neglecting production. They are awakened to reality and told that it is their duty to produce. Then they are fed the bourgeois diet of "pommes de terre au lard" and ordered to eat, for according to Jacques père, "le lard fait du bien à l'espèce." There is a momentary hesitation on the part of Jacques to have this food stuffed down him, but Roberte persuades him to eat it, just as she does.

Roberte is taken aside by her parents for instruction, while Jacques is taken aside by his. The Jacques family tries to arouse in him loyalty to their cause by use of well-planned strategy. First, they tell him that his grandfather is dead. Jacques had not noticed this until now. They all stand around waiting for his reaction, but Jacques has none. They repeat that his grandfather is dead, but still there is no reaction. His mother says: "Ta corde sensible ne vibre donc pas? ... Nous allons la faire vibrer." She orders him to cry, for it is necessary that he react as they see fit. He obeys and sobs, but then stops and smiles. He is ordered to cry again; and this time the rest of the family sobs along with him, while his mother says, "Comme il souffre!" They all console one another, and the Robert family gives its condolences. They all do what is expected of them in such a situation and put on a great display of emotion.


25. Ibid., p. 214.
By this time Jacques' "corde sensible" is working so well that he is the only one who is sincerely moved. The rest tell one another, over and over, "Cordoléances! Chaleureuses cordoléances, nos sincères cordoléances," ad nauseum and ad absurdum. Jacques, rather than joining in their formal display of emotion, cries genuine tears. Jacques père thinks that they have activated his "corde sensible" too much and that it is necessary to stifle it. Jacques is slapped, and he stops crying. He is not even allowed any real emotion, as this too is controlled by the family group.

After this, they get down to more pressing business. Jacques is told that it is necessary to replace those who die and that they are counting on him: "Il faut assurer la continuité de notre race." He, along with Roberte, is ordered to produce. They want to see what he is worth. He protests that he is not inspired, but his family does not consider this a valid excuse. He goes to work and struggles until several baskets of eggs have been laid. The two families are delighted, expressing their satisfaction over the fine quality of the eggs and how much they resemble their parents. Jacques is then ordered to hatch out the eggs: "Couve, couve pour la gloire et la grandeur des nations, pour l'immortalité!"

The two families begin to wonder about the future of the offspring. They all give their ideas of what to make of them: "athlètes, officiers, valets, diplomates, banquiers, employeurs,

26 Ibid., p. 218.
27 Ibid., p. 224.
papes, policiers, humanistes, anti-humanistes!" But even this is not enough, and here Ionesco gives free rein to his word-play as he has them add: "De la chair à saucisson! ... De la chair à camion! ... Il en faudra pour les omelettes. ... On en conservera pour la reproduction. ... De la pâte à modeler. ... De la laine à tricoter. ... Et des omelettes! Surtout, beaucoup d'omelettes!" It seems as if the list will go on forever, but Jacques, whose advice has not been asked, interrupts to say in a feeble voice, "Des pessimistes!" Everyone is indignant at this new outburst on his part and wonders how anyone can dare protest what is decided upon by the group, but Jacques continues, "Des anarchistes, des nihilistes." They say that he has lost his faith, and they wonder what he really wants. He replies in a poetic outburst: "Je veux une fontaine de lumière, de l'eau incandescente, un feu de glace, des neiges de feu." This sudden outburst is his real nature trying to break out of his bondage to middle-class life. It is, according to Rosette Lamont, "the cry of the poet," which has been stifled by the duties of social life.

Yet Jacques is brought back once again to reality, as he is told, "N'oublie pas ton engagement." If he needs any beauty in his life, he can always go to displays of fireworks or perhaps take in a château from time to time. But the important thing is to produce,

---

28 Ibid., pp. 226-228.
29 Ibid., p. 228.
and the play ends as everyone shouts:

Vive la production!
Vive la race blanche!
Continuons! Continuons! 31

Thus the eggs will produce both human beings and things in an indistinguishable mass of matter. What is used up will be replaced, as life continues to go on. The "supreme duty of so-called civilized man" is to create this matter. Everything is a usable product, including human beings. 32 The individual must do his part in this process. Indeed, he is identified primarily with his function in society's machinery, and his own will is kept in check. Just as Jacques has little control over his present condition, so he is helpless to have any influence over the future of his descendants.

Ionesco's treatment par excellence of the effect of marriage and domestic life on the human personality is the play Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser. The hero, Amédée, might be considered as Jacques at middle age. This play concerns a married pair who have been married for fifteen years. The scene is again the typical bourgeois interior of so many of his plays, but in this one there are mushrooms growing in the living room and a dead body growing in the bedroom. Amédée Buccinioni, a petit bourgeois, bald, wearing a sombre-toned suit, is nervously pacing the floor. From time to time he goes to a table to write (he is, like Ionesco, a playwright), but then immediately strikes out what he has written. His anxiety grows,

31 Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 229.
32 Lamont, op. cit., p. 195.
as he casts glances towards the room on the left. He stoops down and picks up a mushroom and says that it is really going too far when they start growing in the dining room.

His wife, Madeleine, appears. She is as tall, or perhaps even taller than he. She is harsh-looking and wears an old scarf on her head. Her husband moves aside to let her pass. She scolds him for pacing around nervously and tells him that she is the only one who does any work; furthermore she is the one who has to make a living for both of them. A bitter quarrel ensues with accusations and counter-accusations. Then they bring up the main problem in their lives: the body in the next room. They wonder how far the body has grown today, and Amédée suggests that perhaps it is going to stop growing. Madeleine belittles him about his stupid optimism, and she wonders why his play never gets written. He replies: "Je n'ai pas d'inspiration. Avec ce qui pèse sur la conscience... la vie que nous menons... l'atmosphère n'est guère favorable."\(^{33}\)

Amédée speaks of their being cut off from the rest of the world. For fifteen years they have been living like shut-ins; they never go out and visit anyone. And always there is the body which keeps growing in the next room. It was once very small, but it is now getting larger and larger. Madeleine says that it is the body which is causing the mushrooms to grow, and she wonders what she has done to be so persecuted. They both wonder why the corpse has such a grudge against them; after all, they have placed him in their best

---

\(^{33}\) Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 242.
room, their bedroom when they were first married. Amédée says that the corpse is still handsome, but Madeleine says that he is no longer handsome, that now he is too old.

There is a noise outside their apartment, and they hear the name "Buccinioni" being called from a distance. They both sit up with a start. They wonder who it could possibly be, for they had broken with the world fifteen years ago. They are frightened, but it turns out to be the postman. This does not alleviate their fright, however, and Amédée denies that he is the one whose name is on the letter. The postman goes away. Then they wonder who sent the letter, since after all no one has written them in the last fifteen years. But it is too late; the postman has gone.

The significance of the letter is puzzling, and none of the critics of Ionesco have attempted to explain it. It would seem, in connection with the rest of the play, that this letter from the outside world represents a call to something that Amédée has given up, and it is perhaps a chance to re-establish contact with the world. The letter was clearly addressed to him; yet he denied that he was the same Amédée Buccinoni whose name appeared in the address on the letter. Perhaps it is because he is now so changed, in comparison with the way he used to be, that he considers himself a different person.

They notice that another mushroom has grown in the dining room, and from the next room they hear the sound of glass breaking, as the body expands against the windows. Madeleine is worried about what the neighbors will think, and she utters, "La vie est devenue
vraiment impossible." Another noise comes from the bedroom, and then two enormous feet come out of the room, slowly advancing into the dining room. The couple becomes more upset than ever, and Madeleine is in the depths of despair. All she can do is sob: "Ce n'est plus humain, non, ce n'est plus humain ... humain ... humain ... humain. ... Je n'en peux plus, c'est trop. ... Je suis à bout ... Au-dessus de mes forces." Amédée, fatigued, worried, and bewildered all at the same time can not comprehend what it all means. But worse than that, there is no one of whom to ask advice. The curtain of Act One descends on this morbid domestic scene.

Act Two takes place a few hours later, and already the body has expanded halfway across the stage. The other side of the stage is crowded with the furniture which has been moved there to accommodate the body. Amédée measures its progress; it is growing at the rate of twelve centimeters every twenty minutes. He comments on the new growth of mushrooms and says that it is a pity that they are poisonous ones. They can not even eat them or sell them. He says that he was never a success in anything, that anyone else would manage things much better than he: "Je suis désarmé dans la vie. Je suis un inadapté. ... Je ne suis pas fait pour vivre dans ce siècle." Madeleine tries to blame all their troubles on him: "Quel mauvais caractère! Quel homme impossible! ... Au moins, si tu avais

34 Ibid., pp. 266-267.
35 Ibid., p. 269.
une qualité quelconque. Tu vois bien où nous en sommes, où tu m'as amenée." More reproaches follow, and Amédée is so tired that he sinks into his chair. She tells him to get rid of the body, but he says that he no longer has any strength or will. She tells him to take some medicine or a tonic. But his fatigue is something more than physical, and medicine no longer has any effect on him: "Moi aussi je souffre. Moi non plus je ne me reconnais plus. Et tu dis que je n'ai pas changé!" His face expresses a look of great fatigue, but he promises that he will do all that he can to get rid of the body.

They speak of the past, as they wonder how the body came there in the first place. Madeleine says that it was a young lover, whom Amédée killed. But Amédée can not remember doing it. He suggests that they are both responsible.

This body which continues to grow is one of the most striking symbols in Ionesco's theatre and one which has given rise to various interpretations. In general, it is assumed to represent what was the happiness of the young couple, or rather what could have been their happiness. More specifically it represents the death of love between them. The idea that it is, in addition to their dead love,

---

36 Ibid., p. 270.
37 Ibid., p. 273.
39 Lamont, op. cit., p. 191.
their whole bitter relationship and meaningless life together has been put forth by Leonard Pronko.\(^{40}\) A similar interpretation is that of Renée Saurel, who writes that it is not only their dead love, but also their complaints and bitterness, a "monstrueux fibrôme conjugal."\(^{41}\) Michel Zéraffa offers the suggestion that it is simply "l'ennui conjugal."\(^{42}\)

Several critics have suggested that it represents guilt. According to Laurence Kitchin, it is "an objective correlative of procrastination and guilt."\(^{43}\) This idea of guilt is supported by Renée Saurel.\(^{44}\) Guilt is also mentioned by Simone Benmussa, who says that the body represents the "souvenir d'un péché lointain."\(^{45}\) C. J. Greshoff offers the explanation that it is the growth of a child and represents a possible abortion.\(^{46}\) This is also suggested by the text itself, when Amédée says, "Une voisine nous a confié un jour un bébé."\(^{47}\)


\(^{41}\)Saurel, op. cit., p. 2289.

\(^{42}\)Michel Zéraffa, "Rhinocéros," Europe, No. 372 (1960), 257.


\(^{44}\)Saurel, op. cit., p. 2287.


\(^{47}\)Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 276.
One of the most telling explanations is that of George Strem that it is Amédée's own higher self. This would seem most in keeping with the general theme of Ionesco's plays that one's self is submerged, or even killed, by the cares and duties of social life. Ionesco himself, in his introductory speech to a performance of this play in London, gives us a clear insight into the meaning of the body when he speaks of the alienation of man from what he calls "la troisième dimension indispensable à partir de laquelle l'homme commence à être vrai." It would seem that this "third dimension" has been almost killed in Amédée, and perhaps it is to this that Ionesco has given visible form in his play. Whatever may be the explanation, it is certainly one of Ionesco's memorable images. It presents, in the words of Martin Esslin, "what is probably his most powerful symbol of the proliferation of matter and its stifling of the spirit."

To Madeleine, however, it is not so much a matter of explaining the body's presence as it is of getting rid of it. Amédée promises that he will take it away this very night; then she will at last be happy. She merely replies: "Heureuse ... Heureuse ... Comme si on pouvait rattraper le temps perdu! Toutes ces années gâchées, c'est un poids mort. ... Ça restera toujours." She will not mind waiting

---

3. Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 175.
until nightfall; after all, she is accustomed to waiting: "Hélas, je suis habituée d'attendre, attendre, attendre, attente, manque de confort, voilà ce que fut ma vie." "La mienne aussi," replies Amédée. 52

While they wait, Madeleine knits and Amédée tries to write. He shuts his eyes, and the stage grows darker. Madeleine and Amédée fade into the darkness, and a dream sequence is enacted by different actors representing the couple when they were newly married. Amédée II is young and romantic; he moves toward Madeleine II, calling her name. She backs off, saying, "N'approche pas. Ne me touche pas. Tu piques, piques, piques. Tu me fais ma-alt Qu'est-ce que tu veu-eu-eux! Où vas-tu? Où vas-tu?" 53 Amédée II tells her to open the curtains and regard the dawn of spring and the warmth and sunshine. Madeleine II says that she can see nothing but night, rain, and mud: "Aveugle, tu embellis la réalité! Ne vois-tu pas que tu l'embrillis?" 54 He tells her to look at the green valley where lilies bloom, but all she can see are mushrooms. He begins to sing, and she says: "Quelle voix stridente! Tu me perces les oreilles! Tu fais ma-a-li ... Sadi-ique! Sa-di-i-que!" 55 He tells her of his feeling light and free: "Univers aérien ... Liberté ... Puissance transparente ... Equilibre ... Légère plénitude ... Le

52Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 279-280.
53Ibid., p. 286.
54Ibid.
55Ibid., p. 287.
monde n'a pas de poids."

At this point the dream sequence is momentarily interrupted by Amédée I, still half asleep in his armchair:

Le temps est lourd. Le monde épais. Les années brèves. Les secondes lentes. ... C'est lourd. Et pourtant, c'est si mal collé ... il n'y a que des trous ... les murs chancellent, les masses de plomb s'affaissent! ... Cela va se désarticuler tout à fait, tout à fait.57

The contrast between his spirit now and when he was a young man is quite striking. The reason for it is also evident, as Amédée's romantic feelings are stifled by Madeleine.

Amédée II continues: "Nous nous aimons. Nous sommes heureux. Dans la maison de verre, la maison de lumière."58 "Maison de verre" is converted by Madeleine into "maison de fer." This continues for several replies, until finally Amédée lets himself be won over to Madeleine's viewpoint:

Amédée II: Maison de verre, de lumière...
Madeleine II: Maison de fer, maison de nuit!
Amédée II: De verre, de lumière, de verre, de lumière...
Madeleine II: De fer, de nuit, de nuit...
Amédée II: Hélas, le fer, la nuit...59

Amédée has failed to persuade her to join him in a life of beauty. Madeleine wins, and it is, according to Richard M. Eastman, her "fears of sex, insecurity, neighbors—of life itself" which have

56 Ibid., p. 288.
57 Ibid., p. 289.
58 Ibid., p. 290.
59 Ibid.
killed this possible life of love and beauty. To the words, "au secours," they both run off the scene and then the light comes up once more on the older couple.

Madeleine tells him that it is almost time to take the body out. Amédée, possibly still under the influence of his dream, says: "Sais-tu, Madeleine, si nous nous aimions en vérité, si nous nous aimions, tout cela n’aurait plus aucune importance. ... Aimons-nous, Madeleine, je t’en supplie. Tu sais, l’amour arrange tout, il change la vie. Me crois-tu, me comprends-tu?" To which Madeleine replies: "Laisse-moi donc ... Ce n’est pas une affaire de sentiment. ... Ce n’est pas l’amour qui peut débarrasser les gens des soucis de l’existence."^61

It is time to start removing the body. They begin to drag it towards the window. This requires a great effort, and Amédée puts all his strength to it. Madeleine tries to help, but actually her movements only impede his progress. The body finally yields, and there is a thunderous crash as the whole apartment trembles. Plaster falls from the ceiling and furniture is turned over. The stage directions at this point are indicative of just how deeply rooted in their apartment, and hence in their lives, the body has been: "On doit avoir l’impression que le cadavre ... entraîne dans son départ toute la maison et les entrailles des personnages."^62 Amédée

---


^61 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 291.

^62 Ibid., p. 301.
continues to pull until most of the body is out of the window. He then climbs out and continues to pull, while Madeleine shouts directions to him from inside. The act ends as the body is finally pulled through the window.

The third act, in contrast to the first two, which were rather morbid, is pure comedy. It is a very short act, and it takes place on little Torco square, near the Seine. Amédée comes into the square dragging the body. There he meets a drunken American soldier, who has been thrown out of a bar. The soldier asks Amédée about the body that he is dragging, and Amédée tells him that it is a friend, adding, "Ah, c'est un malheur, le grand malheur de ma vie ... notre drame. ... Vous ne comprenez pas!"

Amédée's load is too heavy for him, and he can drag it no longer. He stops and looks up at the sky, which is beautiful this time of the night. The soldier wants to aid Amédée, and he has a sudden idea. He spins Amédée round like a top, and the body rolls up around him. By this time the whole district is astir. Lights are on in all the windows, several other soldiers come up with their girls, and eventually two policemen. Amédée, frightened, runs behind a wall, and the policemen follow him. Then a surprising thing happens, as the body wound around Amédée becomes extremely light and goes up to the sky, carrying Amédée along with it. Everyone screams with surprise and runs to watch.

Madeleine rushes up, asking where her husband is. She is

---

63 Ibid., p. 309.
astonished to see him in the air, and she calls to him to come back down. Amédée, continuing to go up, excuses himself: "Je voudrais bien rester. ... Rester les pieds sur terre. ... C'est contre ma volonté. Je ne veux pas qu'on m'emporte. ... Je suis pour le progrès, je désire être utile à mes semblables. Je suis pour le réalisme social." Madeleine begs him to come back home, and she tells him that the mushrooms have bloomed. Amédée only replies: "C'est le vent, moi je ne veux pas! ... Ce n'est pas exprès! ... Ce n'est pas librement consenti! ... Pardon, Messieurs-dames, je suis confus! Pardon! ... Oh, oh! je me sens cependant tout guilleret, tout guilleret." He disappears, as Madeleine and the crowd all watch.

Thus the body, which had caused so much worry and anxiety when it was growing in the apartment of the couple, becomes the instrument of Amédée’s liberation from the cares of domestic life. He has won back his youthful joyousness and lightness. This harks back to the dream sequence of Act Two, in which the young and optimistic Amédée describes the possibilities for happiness: "Si tu voulais ... il y aurait, il y aurait: sève d'abondance ... aux pieds des ailes, nos jambes des ailes ... les épaules des ailes ... abolie, la pesanteur ... plus jamais la fatigue." The liberation from his worldly burdens is brought about by the resurrected body

---

6Ibid., p. 317.
65Ibid., pp. 317-318.
66Ibid., p. 288.
of all that had been killed in him—all the optimism, appreciation of beauty, creativity, and worth as a vital human being, which have somehow survived the anti-spiritual forces in life—and to which he is rejoined. 67

Amédée is indeed fortunate to escape from this world, but he, along with the Bérenger of Le Piéton de l'air, are the only two characters of Ionesco's theatre to do so. The rest of his characters are all buried within their restricting universe by the cares of daily life and their social duty. 68 The hero of Victimes du devoir, another playwright like Amédée, has no such good fortune.

The scene is again the "intérieur petit-bourgeois," and the wife is again called Madeleine, but the hero this time is named Choubert. As the play begins, he is reading the newspaper, and his wife is darning socks. He tells Madeleine about a new recommendation by the Administration, and he complains how all their recommendations have a way of turning into strict laws. His wife has no complaint about this, however, and even agrees with the Administration. She does not mind sacrifice; one always gets used to new habits.

Their calm domestic scene is interrupted by a detective, who is looking for the previous tenant of this flat, a certain Mallot. The treatment of the search for Mallot (who represents what the detective assumes to be Choubert's basic self 69) will be dealt with

67 Pronko, op. cit., p. 34.
68 Ibid., p. 35.
at greater length in later chapters. Suffice it to say here that the detective, and later other characters in the play, represents society's control over the formation of the individual's identity. The important thing is that this control is achieved with the full cooperation of the wife. In the play Madeleine does all that she can to aid the detective and hold Choubert bound to his duties.

In one of the main episodes, Choubert, in a kind of trance, attempts to climb a mountain and take off into the sky. Madeleine says that he can not leave her, because she has four children who need to be fed. She offers gold and fruit to him to try to keep him from flying away. He gets ready to fly, and Madeleine ridicules him. Then suddenly in distress he feels dizzy; he loses his confidence and falls. He is brought back to his duty, and Madeleine takes him back with a vengeance. She mocks him, treats him like a child, and tells him that he must always do as he is told. She takes the part of the detective against Choubert and orders the latter to obey him. Choubert has no refuge from the world of social living, where society's rights are vigorously defended by his wife.

Madeleine's identity changes several times during the course of the play: at times she is his wife, at other times she is his mother, and at still other times she is the seductive young woman whom Choubert married; but at all times she represents woman—one

---

70 See Chapter II, pp. 64-69, and Chapter IV, pp. 149-154.

71 Pronko, op. cit., p. 34.
of society's forces which serve to engulf the individual. In Ionesco's theatre man is betrayed by woman. He is degraded by her and trapped into submission to the bourgeois social outlook and routine. In these early plays, Ionesco is concerned with love and marriage in the bourgeois world, where love is formalized and killed. It is his female characters who represent the dominant spirit, and the men exist only negatively, subdued, even feminized, by their women. Marriage is represented as a social function which is one of the principal means whereby the individual loses part of his identity.


73 Ibid., p. 57.

CHAPTER II
SOCIAL DUTIES AND DAILY ROUTINE

Ionesco shows concern over his belief that the mechanical aspect of life is increasing at the expense of the human aspect. He reproaches people who let their lives be so controlled by exterior forces that they have no identity other than that of their social function. Those who belong only to their social milieu, he feels, and in effect prisoners of it; by being only social they have become alienated and empty.\(^1\) The social facet of life, which Ionesco calls the *épaisseur sociale*, consists largely of all those actions which are little more than routine, formality, and habit. It is the performance of one's social obligations, of the thousand and one trivial duties that a person must do in daily life. To Ionesco the banality of this *vie quotidienne* is deadly to vital human life, especially to that of the mind. This is what Albert Schulze Vellinghausen, in his penetrating study on Ionesco, calls "der H-Bombe 'Banalität'."\(^2\)

Ionesco draws our attention to the sheer mechanical aspect of living. He believes that routine makes of a person a stereotype.

---


He once said in an interview that routine separates man from himself and from his deepest truth. Ionesco's characters perform routine actions without really knowing why they are doing them or what purpose they serve. They go through these movements almost as if they were going through a ceremony, but it is a ceremony which has lost all meaning for them. Ionesco shows us people who are dead on the inside, yet who go through the motions of live people. But they are not so much people as they are "energies in movement." They have lost their sensibility and the ability to have new sensations; there is no novelty in their lives. They have let their basic selves become so encrusted with routines and obligations that they have become non-existent.

It has been said that Ionesco's plays are all the more striking because they only translate the réalité quotidienne. His characters are immersed in a world where life goes on the same from day to day, where each one has the same thoughts as the others, where people speak as a social obligation, perform their duties, and expect other people to do theirs. Ionesco attempts to show that the social

---


6Juan Guerrero Zamora, Historia del teatro contemporáneo (Barcelona: Juan Flor, 1961), 277.

aspect of human life is both absurd and inhuman. This social force is what Ionesco sets out to discredit. His characters go through fantastic actions, which nevertheless have their basis in reality, in our everyday social habits and customs. The more these people come close to daily life, the more terrifying they are. They imply for the audience what is their own life, their own destiny.

Ionesco's characters, as they move rapidly and thoughtlessly around, are illustrative of Bergson's idea that a mechanical element introduced into nature, or an automatic regulation of society, or in fact, any example of something artificial taking the place of the laws of nature, evokes laughter. The characters themselves do not realise this; it is only when they are perceived by others that their actions become comic. In Ionesco, however, they are more than comic, for beneath is the impression of a machine out of control. This technique of something mechanical applied to something living explains a great deal about Ionesco's plays. So many of his characters, especially those of his early plays, are nothing more than pieces of mechanism which have no will of their own. They are human beings on

---


11Guicharnaud, op. cit., p. 110.
the surface, but inside they are more dead than alive.\textsuperscript{12} His characters substitute speed and activity for will. In spite of having full lives, they are empty. But the implication behind this is darker still, for it suggests, according to Jacques Guicharnaud, that "creation itself is nothing other than the mechanical ballet of sorrowful and grotesque masks, which continues on its own momentum, without justification and without control."\textsuperscript{13}

In \textit{La Cantatrice chauve} Ionesco has created characters who are guided in everything by formality and routine. They act according to their social role, not from any individual motivation. They are, in the words of Ionesco, "des personnages sans caractères ... des personnages creux, le pur social; car l'âme sociale n'est pas."\textsuperscript{14} Their language and gestures are automatic, and they have nothing personal to say, because they have no inner life. In writing about his first play in his journal Ionesco says that such people are part of "la mécanique du quotidien" to such an extent that they are indistinguishable from it. The Smiths and the Martins do not think for themselves, no longer are moved by anything, no longer have any passions; in short, they do not know how to \textit{be}. They can become any one, for, not being individuals, they are only the others, "le monde de l'impersonnel," and thus they are interchangeable.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13}Guicharnaud, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{14}Ionesco, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 160.
La Cantatrice chauve shows us people who live the perfect serenity of a life preserved by solid institutions. They are satisfied with their way of life, and they do not question it. They are tranquil and assured, perfectly content within their own little world. The opening scene reflects this peace of mind, as Mr. and Mrs. Smith, a bourgeois couple, are sitting in their living room engaging in a typical middle-class after-dinner conversation. The stage directions at this point are very revealing. Ionesco uses the adjective "anglais" fifteen times, but with a meaning far broader than "English," for, as Ionesco says, this could be a middle-class couple anywhere. Hence it would not seem inappropriate to substitute the word "bourgeois" for "anglais" in order to get the full effect of the stage directions.

During the after-dinner conversation Mr. Smith mentions an old friend of the family named Bobby Watson. This causes some confusion in pinning down the exact identity of this person, as there are many people they know who are named Bobby Watson, all of them, in fact, traveling salesmen. Bobby Watson's wife is also named Bobby Watson, as are both of their children, a boy and a girl. These two children have an aunt and an uncle with this same name, and it seems as if there is no end of BobbyWatsons.

Mr. Smith tries to describe the wife of Bobby Watson, but his description is only hollow verbiage, even contradictory, and does nothing to let anyone know how she looked:

16Ibid., p. 155.
It seems as if her appearance does not really matter, any more than her name, since all their middle-class friends have similar lives, and minor distinguishing characteristics such as physical appearance and names are not important. There is no real difference in their pattern of living, so the name Bobby Watson would seem to apply equally well to any one of them.

Mary, the maid, enters. Her identity is immediately established, but nevertheless she informs us that she is Mary the maid. She recounts to the audience her daily routine; and as soon as she finishes, Mrs. Smith asks her what she has done that day, her question incorporating what Mary has just said almost word for word. She knows, of course, just what Mary always does on her day off, and their speaking of it is only another formality. Mary informs the Smiths that their guests for the evening, Mr. and Mrs. Martin, have arrived.

There follows a delightfully comic scene, in which Mr. and Mrs. Martin, by careful reasoning, conclude that they are married to each other. They have just been ushered into the house by Mary, and they sit down to wait for the arrival of the Smiths. They sit opposite each other, and each one, in his turn, says that it seems as if he has seen the other somewhere before. From their questions

---

and answers it comes to light that both of them are from Manchester, both of them had left there five weeks ago, both had taken the 8:30 train to London, had traveled second class, in car No. 6, 6th compartment, and both had sat next to the window. They say that they must have met there; yet neither can remember it.

They continue their reciprocal interrogation, and it is discovered that both of them live on Bromfield Street, No. 19, 6th floor, apartment No. 8, and both sleep in a bed covered with a green spread. They decide that it is in bed that they must have met; yet neither one can remember it. Mr. Martin says that he has a little daughter named Alice, who is two years old, blond, with one white eye and one red eye. Mrs. Martin says that she also has such a daughter. This appears to them to be a strange coincidence. They remain in silence for a while; then Mr. Martin stands up and says that there can be no doubt about it, that Mrs. Martin is his very own wife. Mrs. Martin also stands up, and the two of them go toward each other slowly and embrace without emotion. Then they sit down again and go to sleep.

Here bourgeois love is seen to be so standardized that even man and wife no longer recognize each other. Even their embracing seems to be formalized to the point of being more a duty than a pleasure. The fact that this entire scene is performed in a steady monotonous tone of voice makes it seem almost like a ritual. Real passion is absent from their stereotyped love-making, and boredom has taken its place. At the end of their long recognition scene they fall asleep. When they awake Mr. Martin tells Mrs. Martin to
forget what has not happened between them, and now that they have
found each other again, they will live exactly as before. Their
married life, colorless as it is, will continue unchanged.

It would seem that there is no spark of vital life left in
either the Smiths or the Martins. This is made especially evident
at the entrance of the fire chief, who comes looking for a fire,
any kind, even just a little spark. When he asks whether there is
one around, he is told, "Non, malheureusement," by Mrs. Martin.
This fire is perhaps symbolic of vital life, which has been
smothered by bourgeois routine. This vital life, which Ionesco
sometimes calls "la vie intérieure," is precisely what is lacking
in their lives. But it is useless for the fire chief to come to
such a bourgeois household looking for sparks. They have long ago
been extinguished. There is not even a hint of anything burning.

The idea of fire is again taken up when Mary comes in to
recite a poem entitled "Le feu." It is a short, stark poem, full of
life, in which everything catches on fire, even the fire itself:

Les polycandres brillaient dans les bois
Une pierre prit feu
Le château prit feu
La forêt prit feu
Les hommes prirent feu
Les femmes prirent feu
Les oiseaux prirent feu
Les poissons prirent feu
L'eau prit feu
Le ciel prit feu
La cendre prit feu
La fumée prit feu
Tout prit feu
Prit feu, prit feu. 18

18 Ibid., p. 50.
This perhaps represents the fire of creativity and purposeful action. At the end of the poem, Mary becomes so excited that she has to be pushed from the room. Her energy and verve are out of place in this placid domestic scene.

Eventually the fireman has to go, for in exactly three quarters of an hour and sixteen minutes he has a fire to put out on the other side of town. He is escorted to the door and told that thanks to him they have spent "un vrai quart d'heure cartésien," which is precisely what has not happened, but is perhaps Ionesco's ironic way of saying a truly bourgeois conversation, full of idle chatter and words with little solid content. After the fire chief leaves there is a frenetic scene in which their social behavior deteriorates to the point of absurdity. The people become like robots out of control, as they stand around speaking nothing but sounds. At this point the lights go down and then come up again, and the play begins exactly where it started the first time, with the Martins taking the places of the Smiths. This rebeginning serves to point up the lack of a meaningful life of these characters. The lack of a plot corresponds to their lives without purpose. It does not matter who takes which role in the social structure; one person can be replaced by another, as their routine life continues. In fact, it is this very interchangeability that led Ionesco to end the play as he did: "Pour marquer le caractère interchangeable des personnages, j'ai simplement l'idée de remplacer, dans le recommencement, les Smith par les Martin." So, not only are the persons interchangeable, but
their destinies as well.  

Daily chores so control people that they find themselves slaves to them. They have become so accustomed to them that they cannot stop. This is especially true of Madeleine in *Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser.* For years she has been doing the same household tasks, wearing herself out with this dull routine, yet never changing it and never stopping it. She has become old and shrewish, always complaining and nagging, but nevertheless keeping up the routine. The fact that the whole atmosphere of her married life has become unbearable, even the fact that there is a body in the next room, does not stop her from her hundred and one little tasks about the apartment.

At the beginning of the play she is busy doing the housework, even sweeping out the room where the body is. She moves about, opening doors and windows, closing them, and reopening them, then changing her mind and closing them again. She even realizes that she is a slave to her routine, and she tells Amédée, "Je ne m'appartiens plus, je ne suis plus moi-même, je suis une esclave." She is the one who earns the living for this household, and her position as a telephone operator enables her to work without even leaving the room. When it is time to go to work, she puts on her hat and goes over to the switchboard with the same attention as if

---

19 Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes,* p. 164.

20 This play is also discussed in Chapter I, pp. 27-39, and in Chapter IV, pp. 142-143.

she were going to an office across town. She goes about her work, automatically, faster and faster, as the hands of the clock at the back of the stage move rapidly to show how fast time is flying. Her words might be spoken by an automaton:

Je vous le passe. ... Je vous la passe. ... Je vous les passe. ... Allô, allô ... allô ... je vous le passe, je vous la passe. ... je vous les passe. ... Allô ... Allô!

All this routine goes on in the midst of intolerable anguish. Amédée can hardly do anything, and eventually even Madeleine is affected. During her lunch hour her anxiety gets the best of her, and she no longer has the energy to work. At first, however, she still tries to go back to work. She puts her hat on, but then says that she has come to the end of her strength. She is like a mechanical doll that has broken down. She has no inner strength, for she has always relied on routine to keep her going. Now all this fails her, and all she can do is sob.

The anxiety of the couple mounts while they are waiting for nightfall so that they can get rid of the body. Madeleine knits to keep herself busy. She says that she no longer has the heart to continue working, but still she does not stop. It seems almost as if her movements are beyond her control. This becomes even more apparent near the end of this act when she tries to help Amédée move the body. First, she picks up a dust cloth from the armoire and cleans the body's shoes. Then she moves over to the armoire and puts the cloth back in. She does not stop her movements for

\[22\text{Ibid., p. 248.}\]
even an instant. She continues, darting here and there, getting in Amédée's way as he tugs at the body, all the while giving him orders and grumbling. She attempts to make room by pushing furniture here and there, without any particular order, only adding to the confusion. She stands in his way, steps on his feet, encumbers him at every turn. He does manage to get the body out of the house, but it is in spite of her useless efforts. Even then, she does not stop. As he goes into the distance with the body, she calls to him, almost like a broken record:

Alors, vas-y ... Ne perds pas ton temps! ... Dépêche-toi. ... Tire. ... Tire. ... Tire. ... allez ... encore ... encore ... tire ... ça n'a pas fini de se dévider, tire ... tire ... Alors, tire ... tire ... tire! ... Tire, Amédé-e-e-e ... tire. ... Amédé-e-e-e ... ti-ire ... tire ... tire ... tire. ...
Attention aux péniches. ... Dépêche-toi. ... Ne prends pas froid! ... Ne t'attarde pas sur la rou-oute! ... Ti-i-re! ...
Ti-i-re! ...23

Victimes du devoir shows us another character named Madeleine, who performs the same types of trivial actions. At the beginning of the play she is darning socks, while her husband is reading the newspaper. He says that there is nothing new in the paper, always the same old thing. She is satisfied with this; to her, in fact, life is just a series of habitual actions. When her husband reports to her on a new law by the Administration, she comments that it will only be a matter of changing certain habits, of substituting new ones for old ones. She is a creature of habit, and she does not care whether the way of life is handed down to her from above. She is quite

23 Ibid., p. 304.
content to play the role imposed on her by society.

Later in the play, when she is asked by the detective (who represents the Administration) to bring in coffee, she runs to and fro from the kitchen to the living room, piling up cups of coffee until the entire table is covered with them. Ionesco's stage directions describe her robot-like actions:

Madeleine entre, avec une tasse de café; elle ne voit plus personne. Elle posera la tasse sur le buffet, sortira de nouveau. Elle fera ce manège beaucoup de fois de suite, sans arrêt, de plus en plus vite, en amoncelant les tasses, jusqu'à couvrir tout le buffet.24

She continues this for the rest of the play—entering, going out, re-entering—always with the same mechanical movements and without paying attention to what is going on around her. Furthermore, no one is paying her any attention; no one drinks all this coffee, or even picks up a cup, or even notices them. It seems as if all this action is performed in a vacuum, unrelated to life. In response to orders from the Administration Madeleine has become like a robot, performing her tasks upon command, as if dehumanized.

Similar mechanical action is seen in Les Chaises, as throughout the greater part of the play the Old Woman brings onto the stage forty or more chairs for the invisible guests. The automation of her movements is such that in the later moments of the play she does not stop at all, and it seems as if she and the chairs are coming from all sides at once. She moves faster and faster until the stage is covered with chairs. The movement and

24 Ibid., p. 223.
rhythm of all this are extremely important to the play, and Ionesco states in a footnote that it is preferable that the comedienne who plays this role be young and strong in order to carry so many chairs onto the stage and with such precision. It is a real tour de force, which is almost like a circus act. All this time, the Old Woman's husband is answering the door, bowing to the guests, greeting them ("comme un pantin"), his head darting from right to left. In fact, to add to the sheer automation of the scene, Ionesco suggests that two actresses be used to play the part of the Old Woman, so that, as one runs offstage, the other runs on from the opposite side, giving the illusion of even greater motion.25

Automatic actions are again seen, in a humorous way but with serious overtones, in the third act of Tuer sans gages. There is a traffic jam, and two policemen are standing on opposite sides of the stage, giving signals. The protagonist, Bérenger, goes over to one to ask him a question, but the policeman merely responds, "Circulez!" He goes over to the other and is told the same thing. They do not even listen to him, so absorbed are they in their function. They continue giving orders: "À gauche! À droite! Tout droit! En arrière! En avant!" An old gentleman attempts to ask a question of the policemen, but he is no more successful than Bérenger. In fact, he finds himself under their control, and he moves according to their commands. A soldier, standing near his military truck, also falls under their domination, and he too moves in response to

their directions. Even Bérenger, as he waits to get through, moves backwards, forwards, etc., like a conditioned animal. For a while it seems as if the two policemen are directors of a monstrous ballet of robots. Note the stage directions:

Le Deuxième Agent dit de plus en plus vite, d'une manière de plus en plus automatique: "Tout droit! à gauche! à droite! tout droit! en arrière! en avant!, etc." et ... le Second Agent répète les ordres de la même manière, en tournant la tête, à droite, à gauche, etc., comme une marionnette.\footnote{Ibid., II, 153.}

The fact that Bérenger has an extremely important mission—that of presenting evidence of the killer's identity at the police station and thereby saving his fellow citizens from this killer—underscores the irony of the scene, and illustrates Ionesco's idea that the important goals in life are lost sight of in the maze of routine behavior.\footnote{Ionesco, "Dans les Armes de la Ville," Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, No. 20 (October, 1957), 3-5.}

One's duty as an employee and as a useful member of society is another force which takes away part of a person's basic self. A case in point is Jean, the friend of Bérenger in Rhinocéros. Jean is very carefully dressed, and his life is extremely well regulated, even to the smallest detail. He makes up a schedule of his daily activities in advance; and he sticks to it, always keeping busy and never wasting a moment. By contrast, Bérenger is a man upon whom social duty does not sit well. He can never seem to pull himself together. He is unshaven, his hair is uncombed, his shoes unpolished,
his clothes wrinkled; his life is definitely not well regulated.

When Bérenger complains that he can not keep up with all his work and that he is always tired, Jean tells him that what he needs is more attention to his duty:

Mon cher, tout le monde travaille et moi aussi, moi aussi comme tout le monde, je fais tous les jours mes huit heures de bureau, moi aussi, je n'ai que vingt et un jours de congé par an, et pourtant, pourtant vous me voyez. ... De la volonté, que diable! ... Tout le monde doit s'y faire. ... L'homme supérieur est celui qui remplit son devoir. 28

Bérenger asks "Quel devoir?" and is told that it is his duty as an employee. But this duty is exactly what weighs upon Bérenger, what has taken away his willpower. To Jean, duty is enough to keep a man happy; he does not try to fight it, he simply performs it and keeps his mind free of worries. In this way he always has strength. As he tells Bérenger: "Oui, j'ai de la force, j'ai de la force pour plusieurs raisons. D'abord, j'ai de la force parce que j'ai de la force, ensuite j'ai de la force parce que j'ai de la force morale." 29

But Bérenger's feeling of being weighed down with the cares of material existence has taken away his strength: "Moi, j'ai à peine la force de vivre. Je n'en ai plus envie peut-être." 30 When he says "C'est une chose anormale de vivre," he means to live the life of an employee in the workaday world, where no one has time to be oneself, to give attention to his inner needs. He is not one of

---

29 Ibid., p. 24.
30 Ibid.
the majority of men whose lack of a vie intérieure has made of them beings who are alive on the outside and dead on the inside. He speaks of such people to Jean: "Les morts sont plus nombreux que les vivants. Leur nombre augmente. Les vivants sont rares." Jean merely laughs at him and tells him that life is a struggle. Bérenger says that he is disarmed for this struggle, and Jean tells him what he needs to arm himself with: "Les armes de la patience, de la culture, les armes de l'intelligence. ... Devenez un esprit vif et brillant. Mettez-vous à la page. ... Faites un effort de volonté, voyons. Appliquez-vous." Jean goes on to say that Bérenger should maintain a neat appearance, dress correctly, shave every day, wear a clean shirt, a hat and a tie, and keep his shoes well polished.

It is revealing at this point that Jean uses the word "extérieur," for this is indicative of the difference between the two men. Jean is a person who lives only on the surface; he is hollow on the inside, hence he has no anxiety and he is at one with his surroundings. Bérenger is one of those rare beings who are still alive on the inside. His inner life conflicts with the dull routine of his exterior life, and he is ill at ease in life. Jean is always concerned with the surface of things, and even his advice to Bérenger on how to become an "esprit vif" reflects this:

Il faut être dans le coup. Soyez au courant des événements littéraires et culturels de notre époque. ... Le peu de temps

31 Ibid., p. 25.
32 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
libre que vous avez, mettez-le donc à profit. Ne vous laissez pas aller à la dérive. ... Vous avez huit heures de travail, comme moi, comme tout le monde, mais le dimanche, mais le soir, mais les trois semaines de vacances en été? Cela suffit, avec de la méthode. ... Et vous pouvez passer vos moments d'une façon intelligente. ... Visitez les musées, lisez des revues littéraires, allez entendre des conférences. Cela vous sortira de vos angoisses, cela vous formera l'esprit. En quatre semaines, vous êtes un homme cultivé.33

The type of cultivated man recommended by Jean, however, is the average citizen with just enough of an intellectual life to follow the fashionable culture of the masses. He is part of the audience of the "théâtre du boulevard" and of the Broadway hit. He is the type who watches television every evening. It is ironic that Jean thinks that all this exterior activity will get rid of Bérenger's inner anguish. Jean believes that one's inner life should be just as regulated as his exterior life, an idea which is alien to both Bérenger and to his creator, Ionesco. To put oneself on a schedule, to let one's life follow a rigid formula, is exactly that kind of "dirigisme passif ... de la routine" which Ionesco sees as one of the menaces to the individual's freedom.34

Dedication to duty can take the extreme form of reduction to nothing more than a function in the social scheme. Although many of Ionesco's characters can be described as being no more than the embodiment of social functions, perhaps his most fully-developed character in this respect is the architect in Act I of Tueur sans gages. An interesting critical appreciation of Franz Kafka, written

33Ibid., pp. 27-38.
34Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 207.
by Ionesco for an issue of the Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, contains the idea of loss of identity through functions, which is certainly behind the creation of the character of the architect. The following passage from this article, written during the same year in which the play was written, gives an excellent insight into this:

Sans doute, Kafka doit en vouloir à une certaine identification sociale de l'homme à une fonction aliénante, celle qui brime, refoule une part entière (considérée essentielle par Kafka) de l'être humain. En effet, lorsque le général ou le juge, ou l'employé de bureau est réduit à sa fonction de général (ou de juge, etc.), à son uniforme; lorsqu'il couche avec son uniforme, n'a plus que des rêves d'uniforme, qu'il ne sait plus qu'il est aussi autre chose qu'un uniforme; lorsque l'employé de bureau n'est plus qu'une machine à enregistrer des requêtes; lorsque chacun de nous est empêché d'être autre chose qu'un "emploi" dans l'administration, il est déshumanisé ou déspiritualisé.35

In Tueur sans gages Ionesco attacks this kind of dehumanization. In the architect he gives us a character who, although obviously highly intelligent, does not think for himself, but only performs his duty. He is a calm, socially well-balanced person who does not question the social scheme and would never think of rebelling against it—a man totally without human feeling or conscience.

It is interesting to compare him with Bérenger in Act I, as he shows him around the cité radieuse. Bérenger is ecstatic over this radiant city and can hardly contain himself. He lavishly praises the architect for having created such a marvelous city, surpassing even the imagination. The architect, cold and officious, merely replies, "Je suis appointé pour faire ce travail, c'est dans

mes attributions normales, c'est ma spécialité." Bérenger continues to pay him compliments and the architect again replies, courteously, but in a detached manner, "J'en suis très, très, très flatté!" He simply does his duty, and he adds: "J'en ai fait les plans sur ordre de la Municipalité. Je ne me permets pas d'avoir des initiatives personnelles." He is indeed a very officious man, a "fonctionnaire consciencieux," as Bérenger calls him. He describes the city in his own terms, that is, in official terms: Happiness and calm are the rule in this part of the city, "c'est calculé, c'est fait exprès. Rien ne devait être laissé au hasard dans ce quartier." The architect goes about his official business while he shows Bérenger around the city. From time to time he talks over a telephone (which he takes from his pocket) and gives instructions to his office force: "Qu'il fasse les formalités. ... h'nez son signalement. Enregistrez. Envoyez au service de la statistique." The architect is a man who can even do two things at one time. As he tells Bérenger: "J'ai deux oreilles: une pour le service, je vous réserve l'autre. Un oeil aussi, pour vous. L'autre pour la commune. ... Je suis à mes dossiers, et aussi à vous." He is clearly uninterested in Bérenger as an individual, merely

---

36 Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 64.
37 Ibid., p. 65.
38 Ibid., p. 66.
39 Ibid., p. 69.
40 Ibid., p. 75.
as a number, a statistic. When he starts to reply to Bérenger, he has to look at his card first in order to find Bérenger's name.

When Bérenger starts talking about himself to the architect and asks him what he thinks about making a change in his life, the architect replies, "Je n'ai pas réfléchi à la question." Indeed, he never reflects on anything. To him whatever is important must be written in the record; he has all the information he needs about Bérenger; it is all in his dossier. When Bérenger, trying to explain his inner feelings to the architect, wonders if he is doing this coherently, the architect says: "Je ne saurais en juger. Ce n'est pas dans mes attributions. C'est le service de la logique qui s'en occupe."\(^1\)

For the architect there is no other way of life than in the Administration. Here there is safety, security, a comfortable life, and no need to have individual responsibility. This is especially evident in the scene in which Dany, his pretty blonde secretary tells him that she cannot bear the Administration and that she wants to leave. To him this is abandoning everything. He tells her: "Vous abandonnez, sans raisons sérieuses, une brillante carrière! Chez nous, vous avez pourtant l'avenir assuré, et la vie ... et la vie! Vous ne craignez pas le danger!"\(^2\)

Dany is aware of this danger. She has been in the Administration long enough to know about the killer but nevertheless

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 74.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 79.
wants to leave. She tells the architect: "Je déteste l'Administration, j'ai horreur de votre beau quartier, je n'en peux plus, je n'en peux plus!"\textsuperscript{43} It seems that what she is no longer able to bear is the lack of conscience of a functionary. She tells the architect that this is what he lacks. He coldly tells her that the Administration is not responsible; therefore he has no need of a conscience. Dany leaves, and it is only a few minutes later that the architect receives a call notifying him of her death. He is unmoved, saying that she was very foolish. He knew all along that this would happen. The killer preys only upon people who are divorced from the Administration, but the architect himself is safe: "Je suis l'Architecte de la ville, fonctionnaire municipal, il ne s'attaque pas à l'Administration."\textsuperscript{44} He feels no responsibility for her death; after all, he had tried to dissuade her from leaving the service where she was protected. As he tells Bérenger: "Elle était dans l'Administration! Il ne s'attaque pas à l'Administration! Mais non, elle a voulu sa liberté! Ça lui apprendra. Elle l'a Maintenant, sa liberté, je m'y attendais."\textsuperscript{45} This liberty to be oneself, to have a conscience, to be something more than functionary, is indeed difficult to acquire. Ionesco even implies that there is no real way that one can obtain it; the power of the Administration is too great.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 97.
Ionesco's most famous treatment of social duty as a killing force on the individual is in *Victimes du devoir*. In this play he shows that society's control over the individual is so thorough that even his inner life—his solitude, imagination, and memory—is in danger of being controlled by exterior forces. The individual has little of his basic self left, for society tries to form a person as it sees fit. The protagonist of *Victimes du devoir* is called Choubert, and he is, like so many of Ionesco's characters, a married man of middle age. At the beginning of the play Choubert remarks that modern man has lost his serenity of former times. He reads in the newspaper that the Administration (which, for Ionesco, represents control by the group, by the government, and by society at large) is issuing a new recommendation to the people to exercise detachment in their lives. This is just another duty for the law-abiding citizen to perform. Choubert's wife, Madeleine, has no complaint about it:

"Que veux-tu, mon pauvre ami, la loi est nécessaire, étant nécessaire et indispensable, elle est bonne, et tout ce qui est bon est agréable. Il est, en effet, très agréable d'obéir aux lois, d'être un bon citoyen, de faire son devoir, de posséder une conscience pure!"

So far, this suggestion by the Administration has no direct effect on Choubert. But shortly thereafter a detective knocks on the

---

46 This play is also discussed in Chapter IV, pp. 149-154.
door and asks for information about a certain Mallot. At first the detective is very friendly, and Choubert and Madeleine even comment on his good manners. Then he changes before their eyes into a very authoritarian man who coldly asks personal questions. He takes a seat without being asked, calls Choubert's wife by her first name, and asks her to bring him some coffee. It becomes apparent as the play progresses that this Mallot, for whom the detective is looking, is Choubert's own basic self, at least as conceived by the detective. The detective tells Choubert that he must descend into his past in order to find Mallot. This descent will not be voluntary; it will be directed carefully by the detective, who says: "Je te dirigerai. Tu n'auras qu'à suivre mes conseils: ce n'est pas difficile, tu n'as qu'à te laisser glisser." Under the detective's guidance Choubert is put into a kind of hypnotic trance, while the detective becomes a kind of psychiatrist. Choubert lets his arms fall limply at his side and, with his face inexpressive, he follows the directions of the detective. He is told to descend into the mud (which, for Ionesco, represents life) until he encounters Mallot.

At first Choubert lets himself be completely guided by the detective; but later, at least for a few moments, he escapes the detective's domination. He goes off into little side paths of his

---

Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 194.

own, pausing here and there over some particular souvenir of his past. The detective scolds him and guides him back onto the main path: "Tu perds ton temps, tu oublies Mallot, tu t'arrêtes, tu t'attardes. ... Toi tu t'attendris, tu t'attendris sur toi-même et tu t'arrêtes, il ne faut jamais s'attendrir, il ne faut pas t'arrêter." Choubert obediently promises that he will no longer get sentimental about his past. He goes down further and further into the thick mud, into the épaisseur. This épaisseur is actually the épaisseur sociale about which Ionesco writes at length in his Notes sur le théâtre on the occasion of a revival of Victimes du devoir at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1954: "Je crois que l'épaisseur sociale, la pensée discursive cache l'homme à lui-même, le sépare de ses désirs les plus refoulés, de ses besoins les plus essentiels, de ses mythes, de son angoisse authentique, de sa réalité la plus secrète, de son rêve." This épaisseur sociale is what Choubert is supposed to go down into in order to find his basic self, which, of course, can not be found there.

Madeleine aids the detective, and she also tells Choubert to descend farther into the mud. He does, but then he once more stops to evoke his past, again to the displeasure of the detective. In his mind's eye Choubert sees a forest, wind, and lightning, which for a moment rend the épaisseurs noires. The detective tries to put him back on the right road again, saying that it is his duty to find

---

50 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 198.

51 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 200.
Mallot. Choubert again obeys, and he follows their directions until he is exhausted. He says that the detective is asking too much, that after all he is only a man; but the detective finds this all the more reason for Choubert to do as ordered.

Once more Choubert escapes the orders of the detective, as, in his imagination, he climbs a mountain, where he feels all alone and suddenly has the desire to fly. He is told by his wife that solitude is not good. The detective, realizing that Choubert is about to escape him, tries to recall him: "Entends la voix de la solidarité humaine." He reminds Choubert of his duty. Here, Ionesco's satiric vein is seen to fine advantage, as he has the detective and Madeleine go through a parody of what are supposed to be the advantages of social life. Note the stage directions at this point:

Pour faire redescendre Choubert, Madeleine et le Policier lui présentent tous les avantages de la vie quotidienne et sociale. Le jeu du Policier et de Madeleine est de plus en plus grotesque, jusqu'à en devenir une sorte de clownerie.53

First, the detective, to the accompaniment of a military march, reminds Choubert of his duty to his country as a soldier:

Un, deux. Une, deux. ... Je t'ai appris le maniement des armes, tu étais fourrier de la compagnie. ... Tu ne vas pas faire la sourde oreille, tu n'es pas un déserteur. ... Tu ne vas pas manquer de respect à ton adjudant! ... La discipline! (Il sonne du clairon.) ... La patrie qui t'a vu naître a besoin de toi.54

52Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 217.
53Ibid.
54Ibid., p. 218.
Then he tries to lure Choubert with the promise of a great career:

Tu as la vie, une carrière devant toi! Tu seras riche, heureux et bête, voïvode du Danube! Voici ta nomination! (Il tend vers Choubert, qui ne regarde pas, un papier....) ... Et la récompense pour qui trouvera Mallo! Si tu perds ton honneur, m'entends-tu, il te restera la fortune, l'uniforme, les honneurs!55

All these promises are calculated to bring Choubert back down to earth, back to his duty. But Choubert does not listen to them; he still wants to fly. He gets ready to do so, but then his wife ridicules him and he loses his confidence. He becomes dizzy and falls into a wastepaper basket.

After Choubert's failure to escape his duty, the detective and Madeleine dominate him more than ever. They tell him that they will cure him of forgetting his duty. Choubert becomes a very young child, dependent on his elders and very much under their control. They are going to fatten him up, to feed him a diet which will give him the identity they desire. The detective tells him: "Je vais t'en redonner des forces. Tu ne peux pas retrouver Mallo, tu as des trous dans la mémoire. Nous allons boucher les trous de ta mémoire! ... Je t'ordonne de manger, pour avoir des forces, pour boucher les trous de ta mémoire!"56

The detective gives Choubert an enormous crust of bread, which he must eat. This bread represents what Leonard Pronko terms "the crushing force of life" and "the inhuman force of duty," which

55 Ibid., pp. 218-219.
56 Ibid., pp. 223-224.
no one can escape.\textsuperscript{57} Choubert complains, saying that it is like the bark of a tree, very hard, and so sharp that it is lacerating his tongue and palate. The detective merely orders him to continue eating, faster and faster. Choubert's protestations are not heeded, as all the other characters tell him "Avalez! Mastiquez!" many times over. Nor are even they exempt from this duty, for each one of them turns to the other and tells him to eat also. "Nous sommes tous des victimes du devoir!" says Madeleine, as the movements of everyone become more rapid, like a ceremonial.\textsuperscript{58} Here again action is carried to the point of caricature, where it takes on aspects of the mechanical forced onto the natural.

The excessive attention paid to the \textit{épaisseur sociale} brings with it a consequent excessive attention to materialism, and the inanimate takes precedence over the animate. The world becomes dominated by substance and by objects of man's fabrication. Ionesco points out the danger inherent in such materialism: "Le trop de présence des objets exprime l'absence spirituelle."\textsuperscript{59} The proliferation of matter has often been mentioned in connection with Ionesco's theatre, in particular that of the chairs in \textit{Les Chaises}, of the coffee cups in \textit{Victimes du devoir}, of the baskets of eggs in \textit{L'Avenir est dans les œufs}, and of the dead body which keeps


\textsuperscript{58} Schulze Vellinghausen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{59} Ionesco, \textit{Notes et contre-notes}, p. 111.
expanding in Amédée. These objects tend to crowd man out, to overwhelm him with matter, to take his place in the universe. This fullness of exterior being takes precedence over man's inner being. In Ionesco's theatre the object even plays an independent role. It does not try to become integrated in man's world, nor does it try to serve him. On the contrary, it is man who must submit to the object. What were meant to be his auxiliaries end by enslaving him, until his very existence is annulled. This material épaisseur covers over the absence of the human.

Such a great role is given to the object in Ionesco's theatre that at times it becomes almost personalized and takes on a movement of its own. Le Nouveau locataire, one of Ionesco's shortest, starkest, and most memorable plays, shows us man abdicating his place in the world to objects. This very disturbing play begins in a room totally bare of furniture. A gentleman dressed in black, called simply "Le Monsieur," enters quietly. The concierge tells him all about the previous occupants and asks him many personal questions. She so overwhelms him that he can hardly say anything. He politely endures her as best he can until she finally leaves.

Then the movers start to bring in his furniture. He has a satisfied expression on his face; and he uses a monotonous tone of

---


voice as he directs the movers—almost as if he were directing a ceremony. They begin with small objects, which they treat as if they were extremely heavy. The gentleman makes measurements, draws circles on the floor, indicates to the movers the precise places to put his furniture. He is satisfied with the whole process, and he exclaims contentedly, "Voilà. Ça prend forme." They bring in larger and larger objects, which they treat as if they were very light. Soon, the entire walls are covered with furniture, and the light from the windows is blocked. When one of the movers tells him that there will be no more light, he replies that there will be electricity.

Finally the room is full, and the gentleman is informed that the stairway is full also. But there is even more: the courtyard, the street, in fact the whole city are encumbered with furniture. All traffic is at a standstill, the metro is blocked, and even the Seine has stopped flowing. The movers suggest that the roof be opened to allow more furniture to be brought into the room. (Since it is a modern house, it naturally has a roof which rolls back.) Furniture now descends from above, and the gentleman is completely walled in by the furniture, which is in all shapes and sizes. Huge planks descend from the ceiling, imprisoning him even more. One of the movers has a bunch of flowers, which he tosses over the furniture to the tenant. They ask him whether he wants anything, and he answers that he wants them to put out the light. They do this, and

\[6^{3}\text{In the stage direction Ionesco writes: "Le rythme, à peine marqué, donnera insensiblement au jeu un certain caractère de cérémonie." (Théâtre, II, 174.)}\]
there is total darkness on the stage as the curtain falls.

*Le Nouveau locataire* seems to be a parable of modern man, who encloses himself in a living tomb of materialism. In a world where he has promoted the object to a role of major importance, he himself has become little more than an object. Little by little he has given up his place as a free individual. Objects, which Ionesco calls the "concrétisation de la solitude, de la victoire des forces anti-spirituelles, de tout ce contre quoi nous nous débattons," have won out over man. Man has let himself give in to a shrinking of his position in the world; he has let himself be limited to such an extent that he has become a prisoner of his own making. This short play, perhaps because of its directness and immediacy to the situation of modern man, has been performed in many countries and has received high praise. Friedrich Schreyvogl, Viennese director, calls it a fine photographic document of the *Lebensangst* of today because of its dark and severe quality and its portrayal of what he considers "eine Wahrheit von morgen." This play presents Ionesco's treatment of the victory of the forces antispirituelles in its purest form. It is indeed a powerful warning of what may happen if man completely submits to a mechanical way of life.

The ending of *Le Nouveau locataire* is quite similar to that

---

64 Rolf Geissler, "Ionesco—Zeitloses Theater?," Neue Deutsche Hefte, LX (July, 1959), 339.


of L'Avenir est dans les œufs, except that in the latter play man is overcome by excessive production of human beings, represented visually by huge baskets of eggs. So man is threatened not only with steadily increasing amounts of objects, but also with overpopulation. When the parents of Roberte and Jacques tell them to produce eggs, they are in effect telling them to manufacture people. Jacques and Roberte sweat and strain and keep laying eggs until the stage is covered with them. The people thus created are meant for every possible kind of occupation. They are to be used just as any other object is to be used. They are an expendable and a replaceable commodity. Even procreation becomes just another unending routine, and everyone is so caught up in this activity of producing more matter that they do not even notice when the stage caves in beneath all the weight. Men even crowd themselves out of the world.

In Ionesco's theatre one notices especially the domination of the living by the dead—whether it be dead formality and routine or dead matter. Richard N. Coe, in his fine essay entitled "Eugène Ionesco and the Tragic Farce," points out this particular aspect of Ionesco's theatre:

The infinite ease with which man may be engulfed and obliterated in the lesser reality of things is terrifying to contemplate. . . . Ionesco's objects . . . attack, invade, they ambush, they creep by night within the fortress; they suborn language, sound and image; all that they touch is turned to stone and is henceforward their ally. This vision of the inanimate, advancing and destroying like some obscene and cancerous growth, is one of the most horrifying, and at the same time one of the most comic, aspects of Ionesco's theatre.67

67 Richard N. Coe, "Eugène Ionesco and the Tragic Farce,"
So man himself becomes all but an object, as his human qualities are lost in the vast universe of things. He surrenders to the world of objects and allows his destiny to be created for him. The anti-spiritual forces of the exterior world win out over man's inner life. The individual takes his place in the world and becomes identified with his social milieu, his function, his duty as an employee, and his possessions. He loses his individuality to the all-powerful and far-reaching machinery of social living.

CHAPTER III

SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INTELLECTUAL TYRANNY

The idea of control over a person's identity by his being compelled to follow a way of life decided upon by others is in all of Ionesco's theatre. Sometimes this is by conformity to public opinion, to an ideology, a political doctrine, or indeed to any closed system of thought. Quite frequently, too, it simply takes the form of the individual's not bothering to think for himself, or his accepting and repeating the idées recues and slogans of the average man. The majority of Ionesco's characters are people who have given up the use of their ability to think creatively and originally in order to accept instead, as Richard N. Coe puts it, "the warm and sheltered refuge of a belief in logic and purpose, and to vegetate therein, smug as in some metaphysical suburbia."¹

Professor Coe sees as one of the main themes in Ionesco's theatre what he calls "the annihilation of intelligence by stupidity."² The use of clichés, for example, kills original thought, and is thus responsible for the giving up of still another part of man's liberty to be himself. It separates him from his basic nature and creates a false world. Ionesco himself


²Ibid., 219.
has stated, "Nous vivons dans un monde faux, parce que notre langage nous sépare de la vérité, en devenant formule. Dès qu'une chose est dite, elle est morte. Il faut briser les formules pour retrouver la vie. Les clichés ne correspondent plus à la réalité." The real man is hidden behind the clichés he uses.

In an interview in the periodical Bref Ionesco writes that his early plays were a criticism of "des lieux communs ... du langage creux ... des idées recues, des slogans." The object of his criticism is the conformist, the bourgeois "average man," defined by Ionesco as "l'homme de ces idées reçues que l'on retrouve dans toutes les sociétés, dans tous les temps: le conformiste, celui qui adopte le système de pensée de sa société quelle qu'elle soit (ou de l'idéologie dominante) et ne critique plus. Cet homme moyen est partout." The petit bourgeois, by repeating the ideas which others have imposed on him, becomes the directed man.

In an article published in Express Ionesco explains that his plays are not so much a criticism of the language of the bourgeois as a criticism of bourgeois thought, manifested by "les mots ne signifiant plus rien, les systèmes de pensée n'étant plus eux-mêmes que des dogmes monolithiques, des architectures de clichés dont les éléments sont des mots comme nation, indépendance nationale,

---


5Ibid., p. 110.
démocratie, lutte de classes aussi bien que Dieu, socialisme, matière, esprit, personnalité, vie, mort, etc.\textsuperscript{6}

It has been pointed out that since Ionesco's university studies were those of a philologist (he taught French while in Rumania), he is perhaps more aware than most people of language as a form of social behavior which is not always a means of communicating ideas or feelings.\textsuperscript{7} The problem, as Ionesco presents it, is that people, instead of using language to think, let language think for them, thus taking over that part of their mental faculty wherein lies much of their identity.\textsuperscript{8} Professor Coe sees Ionesco's criticism of man's use of clichés as actually a philosophical criticism of the human condition: "Man has signed his abdication; within, there resides a void, a nothingness, to be filled by words and slogans, until the slogan becomes the whole man."\textsuperscript{9}

All of Ionesco's plays abound in examples of hollow, everyday conversation, in which man's stupidity is shown by his all too ready use of maxims and sayings. In this respect Ionesco has more than once been compared to Flaubert. Again I quote from Professor Coe: "No writer since Flaubert has been so mesmerised, so utterly fascinated, by the impenetrable bêtise of the average man. From

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p. 223.
\item \textsuperscript{7}Dorothy Knowles, "Ionesco and the Mechanisms of Language," \textit{Modern Drama}, V (May, 1961), 7.
\item \textsuperscript{8}J. S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," \textit{Yale French Studies}, No. 23 (Summer, 1959), 8.
\end{itemize}
La Cantatrice to Scène à quatre, every conceivable degree of thick-headedness is lovingly and caressingly analysed and lingered over.\textsuperscript{10} This is the main subject of La Cantatrice chauve, as the characters seem to be created by the language they use; and since they say the same things as the others, they become nothing more than persons without personalities. This repetition of the same ideas from one person to another results in a kind of aplatissement and dulls the intellect.\textsuperscript{11}

Note, in this play, how the conversation of Mrs. Smith reflects the banality of her mind. Following is a résumé of a part of this: It is nine o'clock. Husband and wife have just eaten soup, fish, potatoes, and salad. They have drunk water. They live in the suburbs of London. Their name is Smith. Potatoes are very good with bacon. The salad oil was not rancid. The salad oil from the grocery on the corner is better than the oil from the grocery across the street, even better than the oil from the grocer down the hill, although their oil is not bad; but still the fact remains that the oil from the grocer on the corner is the best of all. Mrs. Smith ate more than her husband did, even though ordinarily he eats more than she does. Their son takes after his father. Their daughter takes after her mother. And so it goes.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 74.

\textsuperscript{11}Henri Gouhier, "Un humanisme tragique," Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, No. 42 (February, 1963), 81.

After their guests, the Martins, arrive, Mr. and Mrs. Smith greet them (since they must, after all, pay them the honor to which they have a right). They all sit down and try to make conversation, for it is their social obligation. At first it is rather difficult:

M. Smith: Hm.  
Mme Smith: Hm, hm.  
Mme Martin: Hm, hm, hm.  
M. Martin: Hm, hm, hm, hm.  
Mme Martin: Oh, décidément.  
M. Martin: Hm, hm, hm, hm.  
Mme Martin: Silence.

Then they speak of the weather and mouth popular sayings. Finally Mme Martin is talked into telling about an extraordinary event she saw: a man tying his shoelaces. M. Martin, in turn, tells them of an amazing event that he witnessed: a man reading a newspaper in the metro. Then they receive a brief visit from the fire chief, and they tell each other anecdotes, all of which are rather pointless. One of them, in fact, was simply mimed in actual performance; the actor went through the gestures of talking without any sound emerging from his mouth. This was perhaps to get across more effectively to the audience the hollowness of the amusements of such people. The high point of this scene comes when the fire chief tells the famous one, "le Rhume," in which, after about two hundred words of introduction, he comes to the point: a certain person sometimes catches a cold in

---

13 Ibid., p. 33.
14 Ibid., p. 44.
the winter. The others find this a curious and almost unbelievable story. This type of conversation continues for the rest of the play, the characters letting words and formulas take possession of their thought until they become such victims of verbal inertia that they end by making sounds without any intellectual content whatsoever.

Similar use of language can be seen in \textit{L'Avenir est dans les œufs}, when the Robert family pays its condolences (which Ionesco changes to "cordoléances") to the Jacques family on learning of the death of Jacques grand'père. All of them say to Jacques mère: "Nous vous présentons nos chaleureuses cordoléances, cordoléances, cordoléances!" Then they say to Jacques grand'mère: "Cordoléances! Cordoléances! Cordoléances! Cordoléances! Chaleureuses cordoléances!" And then to Jacqueline: "Nos chaleureuses cordoléances! Cordoléances! Cordoléances! Chaleureuses cordoléances!" 16 Of course all this calls for thanks, which are rendered many times over. First Jacques mère: "Merci, merci, très heureuse, merci." Then Jacques grand'mère: "Mille fois merci! Merci! Merci! Je n'y manquerai pas, merci! Enchantée, merci!" And, finally, Jacqueline: "Merci! Merci! Merci! Merci! A vous aussi!" 17 Then all of them in unison say "cordoléances" many more times to one another. By the time they have finished, they have said this a total of forty-one

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 46-47.

\textsuperscript{16}This play is also discussed in Chapter I, pp. 23-27, and in Chapter II, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{17}Ionesco, \textit{Théâtre}, I, 215-216.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
times. Here again Ionesco pushes to the absurd the mechanisation of speech.

Dullness of mind is frequently indicated in Ionesco's plays by the conversation of concierges, who seem to be for him a symbol of bourgeois narrow-mindedness and insanity. Witness the song by the concierge at the beginning of Act II of *Tueur sans gages*:

```
Quand il fait froid, il fait pas chaud,
Quand il fait chaud, c'est qu'il fait froid;
Quand il fait froid, il fait pas chaud,
Quand il fait chaud, c'est qu'il fait froid;
Quand il fait froid, est-ce qu'il fait chaud?
Quand il fait chaud, fait-il donc froid?
Que fait-il donc quand il fait froid?
```

While she sings this, she sweeps. There is snow and soot on the sidewalk and front steps, and as fast as she sweeps it away, there falls still more. This does not have any effect on her, however, as she continues to sweep, while grumbling, talking to passers-by, striking a dog with her broom, threatening a drunkard. The latter, in fact, describes her well when he tells her, on backing off, "Vous êtes bien banale, Madame."^21

Her philosophy of life could be described at best as shallow. She has a ready answer for everything. About education she has this to say: "Aujourd'hui, il y a trop d'instruction, c'est pour cela que ça va mal." For her it is always someone else who has the easiest kind of work: "Le meilleur métier c'est d'être ministre. Ceux-là, ils payent pas leurs impôts, ils les touchent." About the rich?

---

"Ma foi, les riches, ils sont peut-être aussi pauvres que nous, s'il en reste, de ces temps-ci." About philosophers? "Ne m'en parlez pas des philosophes. ... Ils m'ont rien appris, pas même Marc-Aurèle. Ça ne sert à rien, finalement. ... Il faut trouver chacun sa solution. S'il y en avait, mais y en a pas."\(^{22}\)

Such mundane conversation and use of popular sayings is only one kind of danger against which an active mind must be on guard. Another danger is what Ionesco terms "le dirigisme actif ou doctrinaire, apparemment mobile, déjà automatique."\(^{23}\) In a lecture given at the Sorbonne in 1960 Ionesco named more precisely these two great dangers to mental activity: "la sclérose mentale bourgeoise d'une part, les tyrannies des régimes et directions politiques d'autre part."\(^{24}\) The preceding part of this chapter has dealt with the first danger. Let us now take up the second.

In an essay entitled "Propos sur mon théâtre," which appeared for the first time in print in Notes et contre-notes, Ionesco writes of the danger especially to young people of all kinds of propaganda and ideology. Leaders of schools of thought are always on the quest for disciples; they wish to act upon others, to be followed in their opinions, even though sometimes (as in a totalitarian state) this has to be accomplished through force. They try to impose their ideas, passions, or personality, instead

\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 102.

\(^{23}\)Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 207.

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 63.
of allowing the personality of the others to develop.\textsuperscript{25} But any kind of directed thought is dead and limits the mind.\textsuperscript{26}

A lesson is just one such kind of mental tyranny. To Ionesco lessons are a form of subjection of the mind to hide truth from it: "Les leçons sont faites pour nous mener par le bout du nez et nous cacher la vérité complexe, dans ses contradictions."\textsuperscript{27} Marcel Brion writes of Ionesco's theatre: "Ionesco dénonce la grande misère et le vice intellectuel majeur de notre temps qui est l'agressivité de l'esprit de système et la tyrannie de la démonstration logique qui se substitue à la vie, et qui s'efforce de l'éliminer."\textsuperscript{28} It is this which Ionesco demonstrates in \textit{La Leçon}.

In the beginning of the play a young student of eighteen comes to a professor's house for a lesson. She is neatly dressed, has good manners, and seems very eager. The professor, a little old man with a feeble voice, awaits her. The stage directions at this point are quite revealing, for they forecast what the end of the play will be. First of all the young pupil is described: "Elle a l'air d'une fille polie, bien élevée, mais bien vivante, gaie, dynamique; un sourire frais sur les lèvres." The professor is dressed somberly and is "excessivement poli, très timide, voix assourdie par la timidité,

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 106-107.
\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 275.
très correct, très professeur." The student is full of life; she is good raw material. The professor is anything but lively; he is old-fashioned in both his appearance and in his actions.

But the stage directions go still farther, as they describe not only the appearance of the characters at the beginning of the play, but also how each of them will change as the play progresses.

As for the student:

Au cours du drame qui va se jouer, elle ralentira progressivement le rythme vif de ses mouvements; de son allure, elle devra se refouler; de gaie et souriante, elle deviendra progressivement triste, morose; très vivante au début, elle sera de plus en plus fatiguée, somnolente; vers la fin du drame sa figure devra exprimer nettement une dépression nerveuse; sa façon de parler s'en ressentira, sa langue se fera pâteuse, les mots reviendront difficilement dans sa mémoire et sortiront, tout aussi difficilement, de sa bouche; elle aura l'air vaguement paralysée, début d'aphasie; volontaire au début, jusqu'à en paraître presque agressive, elle se fera de plus en plus passive, jusqu'à ne plus être qu'un objet mou et inerte, semblant inanimée, entre les mains du Professeur.

As for the professor:

Sa timidité disparaîtra progressivement, insensiblement; les lueurs lubriques de ses yeux finiront par devenir une flamme dévorant, interrompue; d'apparence plus qu'inoffensive au début de l'action, le Professeur deviendra de plus en plus sûr de lui, nerveux, agressif, dominateur, jusqu'à se jouer comme il lui plaira de son élève, devenue, entre ses mains, une pauvre chose.

The professor excuses himself for being a bit late, and he asks the student to sit down. She tells him that she wants to prepare for the doctorat total and that the first competition will be in three

29 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 61.
30 Ibid., p. 60.
31 Ibid., p. 61.
weeks. When she tells him that she will be at his disposition, there is a glimmer in his eyes, which he quickly suppresses. He is all politeness and smiles as he says, "Je ne suis que votre serviteur."32 He begins by making a summary examination of her past studies. He is amazed to find out that she knows that one and one make two: "Oh, mais c'est très bien. Vous me paraissez très avancée dans vos études. Vous aurez facilement votre doctoral total, Mademoiselle."33 He congratulates her on her mental prowess and says that there is no need to continue with addition.

He turns to subtraction. She is bewildered when he asks her the result of four minus three. She guesses seven, but is told that she must not add in this case. She then guesses four, and then three. The professor tells her, "Mais il ne s'agit pas de deviner, il faut raisonner."34 He tries to explain this to her visually by holding up matches and also by drawing on the blackboard. Still, she does not understand; she still wants to add rather than subtract. He tells her: "Vous avez toujours tendance à additionner. Mais il faut aussi soustraire. Il ne faut pas uniquement intégrer. Il faut aussi désintégrer. C'est ça la vie. C'est ça la philosophie. C'est ça la science. C'est ça le progrès, la civilisation."35

He tries again, this time becoming less indulgent. The

32Ibid., p. 64.
33Ibid., p. 66.
34Ibid., p. 68.
35Ibid., pp. 69-70.
exam pes th a t  he u ses a re  fr ig h te n in g , such as te a r in g  o f a nose or
eating an ear. She still does not learn, and the professor becomes
exasperated, although he manages to continue giving her more examples.
After one of his explanations, he asks her what he has just said.
She repeats it word for word. If she cannot reason, at least she can
recite. She then goes over a portion of his lesson and repeats it as
if to implant it in her memory.

She wonders if one can subtract three from one, and the
professor tells her that it is not possible. When she asks why, he
tells her, "Ça ne s'explique pas. Ça se comprend par un raisonnement
mathématique intérieur."  36  He tells her that she must understand the
principles, the arithmetical archetypes, or else she will never be
able to handle the large numbers which today's scientists are
expected to handle. As an example, he asks her how much is
3,755,998,251 multiplied by 5,162,303,508. Without a moment's
hesitation she tells him: 19,390,002,644,219,164,508. He is
astonished at her swiftness, but he is not so sure that she is right.
He tells her that it should be 19,390,002,644,219,164,509. When she
tells him that he is wrong, he tries it again, adding in his head,
mumbling aloud. Finally he admits that she is right. He asks her
how she managed to give such a correct answer without knowing the
principles of mathematical reasoning. She answers: "C'est simple.

_____

36  Ibid., p. 72.
les résultats possibles de toutes les multiplications possibles."\(^{37}\)

But this does not satisfy him, for she should have found her answer by reasoning. She must learn how to reason, but, of course, in the manner in which he dictates.

Next he goes to linguistics and comparative philology. At this point he is interrupted by the maid, who warns him not to:

"Monsieur, surtout pas de philologie, la philologie mène au pire."\(^{38}\)

He orders the maid out and insists that he knows what he is doing. Then he tells his pupil to listen with the greatest attention to his course, "tout préparé." She claps her hands with delight as if she really looks forward to it. The professor immediately silences her as he becomes more authoritarian. He begins to pace back and forth, perorating, with elaborate gestures of the hands and arms. The student, now "d'une voix étendue," respectfully says, "Oui, Monsieur!"

He goes into a long lecture which is full of technical words, but is nonetheless vague, and definitely out of the reach of the student's understanding.

He tells her that all languages are in reality one language, and that they are necessarily composed of phonemes; but before he can finish his sentence, she goes ahead of him and says "phonemes" before he does. This angers him and he tells her not to display her own knowledge, but instead to listen to him. She again obediently says, "Oui, Monsieur!" He proceeds once more, and she interrupts

\(^{37}\)Ibid., p. 73.

\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 75.
just long enough to say "Oui, Monsieur," but he tells her to be quiet. He gives her more of his prepared lecture, but later she interrupts him again to say something, and again he tells her to be silent.

At this point the student's attitude changes. She seems not to be allowed to participate in this process of learning, and apparently does not like to be held back. The stage directions at this point are revealing: "L'Elève a soudain l'air de souffrir."39 She now says, for the first time, what she will repeat many times over until the end of the lesson: "J'ai mal aux dents, Monsieur."40 The professor merely replies, "Ça n'a pas d'importance. Nous n'allons pas nous arrêter pour si peu de chose."41 The student agrees, at least on the surface, but this does not stop her toothache. More and more she appears to be suffering, but the professor seems oblivious to this. He continues the lesson, and his voice becomes harsher.

At times she seems to be genuinely absorbing what he is talking about, but then it becomes evident by her remarks that she is not. Note, for instance, the following example, in which she takes what he says literally:

Le Professeur: ... pour vous donner un exemple qui n'est guère qu'une illustration, prenez le mot front. ...

L'Elève: Avec quoi le prendre?42

39 Ibid., p. 77.
40 Ibid., p. 78.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p. 80.
But her interest is only fleeting, and her questions usually beside the point. All the while she keeps complaining about her teeth.

The professor's lecture becomes more and more obtuse, and she simply can not comprehend the subtleties of it. She finally tells him, "Vous m'embêtez, Monsieur!" and then she makes grimaces at him. He seems to have more and more difficulty keeping her obedient. When she says once more, "J'ai mal aux dents," he lashes out, "Je vais vous les arracher, moi!" But even this does not stop her, and she continues to complain. This time he threatens to crack her skull. She dares him to, and he twists her wrist. This subdues her for a time, but still does not stop her toothache. When he asks her what he has just said, she repeats it duly. Then she again becomes a bit insolent, taps her feet, moves her legs, and looks at the flies on the ceiling—all of which enrages the professor.

Now even he seems discouraged, and he mutters, "Mais ça n'ira pas comme ça, pas comme ça, pas comme ça, pas comme ça..." He tries a different approach, telling her that he is going to teach her all the translations of the word "couteau." He goes out to find a knife, and while he is gone, the student sits there with a kind of stunned expression. The maid once more enters and tries to give a warning. When the student says once more that her teeth ache, the maid says that this is "le symptôme final! Le grand symptôme!"

\[43\textit{Ibid.}, p. 84.\]

\[44\textit{Ibid.}, p. 86.\]

\[45\textit{Ibid.}, p. 87.\]
The professor orders her back out, and he prepares to teach his student how to pronounce the word "knife" in all languages. He chants in an almost hypnotizing manner, first "cou," then "teau." She asks him which language he is using, and he replies that it is of no importance, adding, "Ça ne vous regarde pas."

He brandishes the knife under the eyes of the pupil, who repeats after him, almost in a hypnotic trance, "Cou ... teau ..." He orders her to say it again, while looking at the knife. There is a momentary rebellion, as she tells him that she has had enough. Furthermore, her pain is spreading. Not only do her teeth ache, but also her feet and her head. His voice seems strident to her, and she tells him that it is making her ears hurt. He tells her that he will tear them off so that they will not bother her any longer. She says that it is he who is causing her this pain. He only continues, "Regardez, allons, vite, répétés: cou ..." She again comes under his spell and repeats as ordered. From this point on she seems to be in a sort of stupor and is somewhat strangely ecstatic. Even though she plainly realized that it is the professor who is causing her pain, she lets herself be carried away with the proceedings. This unusual state is described by Ionesco in the stage directions as follows: "L'Elève ... doit être de plus en plus fatiguée, pleurante, désespérée, à la fois extasiée et exaspérée." She keeps

---

46 Ibid., p. 88.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
repeating "couteau," all the while complaining of the pain which is
invading her body more and more:

Ah, j'ai mal ... ma tête ... (Elle effleure de la main, comme
pour une caresse, les parties du corps qu'elle nomme.) ... mes
yeux. ... J'ai mal ... ma gorge, cou ... ah ... mes épaules ...
mes seins ... couteau. ... Mes hanches ... couteau ... mes
cuisses ... cou ... Couteau ... ma gorge ... Couteau ... mes
épaules ... mes bras, mes seins, mes hanches ... couteau ...
couteau ... Couteau ... mes seins ... mon ventre ... 49

The professor goes around her in the manner of an Indian scalp dance.
Finally, after saying "le couteau tue," he kills her with a
spectacular stroke of the knife. She falls back into a chair and he
strikes her again, this time "de bas en haut," as both murdered and
victim say, "Aaah!" at the same time. 50

After this, the professor is visibly shaken. He tells her
that the lesson is over, that she can go. But when he realizes that
she is quite dead, he calls for the maid. She upbraids him for
killing yet another student, the fortieth that day--"et tous les jours
c'est la même chose!" 51 He claims that it was not his fault, but that
of the student, for she did not wish to learn. When she calls him a
liar, he tries to kill her too, but she makes him drop the knife. She
tells him that she is not one of his pupils. She then explains to
him that they must once again get rid of the body by taking it out of
the house in a coffin. (The people of the town are never suspicious,
because they are accustomed to seeing coffins being taken from the

49 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
50 Ibid., p. 89.
51 Ibid., p. 91.
professor's house.) They lift the body of the student and take her off the stage, and in the distance are heard hammer blows as they seal her in the coffin. Then there is a ring at the door, and the maid goes to open it for another student as the curtain falls.

The matter of ritual in Ionesco has been analyzed by two critics, and mentioned by others. In *La Leçon* it is especially noticeable. John T. Daniel sees *La Leçon* as a kind of religious ceremony in which there is a sacrifice of the living by the dead. At the end the same "ceremony" begins all over again. Mr. Daniel states: "The continuity of death is complete, the sterile and impotent spirit survives and begins another round of destruction." George G. Strem describes this ritual further: "The second syllable [of "couteau"] is very close to "tue," the lethal verb that brings the ritual to the culminating point. [At the words] "le couteau tue," the knife strikes the girl with enormous force as the High Priest immolates the sacrificial victim. The result was not calculated, though it could be foreseen; the professor acted in an intoxicated state as if under the effect of a drug." This ceremonial sacrifice has also been noticed by Albert Schulze Vellinghausen, who writes:

Es sollte uns doch zu denken geben, dass der Lehrer, der zum Mörder wird, geradezu ein Modell (ein streckenweis ausserordentlich komisches Modell) eines hanebuchen Pseudo-Wissens ist. Er vertritt in seiner ganzen Diktion

---


so sehr den zerstorerischen Charakter der sinn-entleert-
wertigen Formal-logik, dass er schliesslich wie ein Moloch
wirken muss!"54

The interpretation of La Leçon as a rape of the student has
been mentioned by several critics, notably by Martin Esslin, who
writes: "The pupil comes under his dominance, which finds its
concrete, theatrical expression in her rape and murder."55 John
T. Daniel also mentions this aspect of the play: "The final act of
the ritual is the sexual rape of the living by the dead, a silent
violation of the flesh whose spirit has already been violated by the
ceaseless verbiage of pedagogy."56 Ionesco himself, in an interview,
revealed that erotic possession is the hidden meaning of the play.57
The sexual connotation of the stabbing of the pupil is evident in
the text. In the stage directions Ionesco has the pupil fall in
"une attitude impudique sur une chaise," while her legs, "très
écartées, pendent des deux côtés de la chaise." The professor stands
in front of her, with his back to the audience, as he plunges his
knife into her body.58 The late Professor Calvin H. Evans so
interpreted the sense of the plot, using the term "intellectual rape"

51Albert Schulze Vellinghausen, "Eugène Ionesco," Das
Abenteuer Ionesco: Beiträge zum Theater von heute (Zurich: Verlag

52Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York:

53Daniel, op. cit., p. 57.

54Rosette Lamont, "The Outrageous Ionesco," Horizon, III
(May, 1961), 97.

55Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 89.
to characterize it, defining the term as a means of taking possession of a person's identity.\textsuperscript{59}

This rape, then, serves to point up the domination of one person by another, the main proposition of which Martin Esslin sees as hinging on "the sexual nature of all power and the relationship between language and power as the basis of all human ties."\textsuperscript{60} The professor derives his power from his role as an arbitrary giver of meanings of words.\textsuperscript{61} The words take on such tremendous power that the student is even killed by the word "knife."\textsuperscript{62}

The meaning, according to Marianne Kesting, is quite clear: "Eine entleerte, zum Selbstzweck herabgesunkene Pädagogik 'tötet' die Schüler."\textsuperscript{63} The professor has been overcome by the power of words; the repetition of his lesson "toute préparée" intoxicated him, unleashing murderous and evil instincts in him. The student, almost against her will, succumbs to his hypnotic powers and is then brought into a somnolent state in which she is obedient to his wishes. The professor does all that he can to keep her in the confines of his educational system. Every time that she tries to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{59}From a seminar lecture on the avant-garde drama, Louisiana State University, 1963.
  \item \textsuperscript{60}Esslin, op. cit., p. 96.
  \item \textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 95.
  \item \textsuperscript{63}Marianne Kesting, Das Epische Theater: zur struktur des modernen dramas (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1959), p. 137.
\end{itemize}
assert herself, he becomes angry and prevents her. Her mind is not allowed to stray. She is controlled just as closely as was Choubert in *Victimes du devoir*, when the detective ordered him to do only as directed and to stop straying off into paths of his own.

Because of their limitations—the professor limited to following his prepared lesson, and the student to repeating it—the characters are incapable of development in any other direction. They do not try to understand one another, nor is there an interaction of their respective bodies of knowledge for the sake of mutual enlightenment. It is a matter of the power of one winning out. The only result possible is that one being takes over the other.64 It is not really reason that wins, but passion. A so-called learned man becomes a murderer when he is intoxicated by words.65 This harks back to Ionesco's idea that ideologies are merely excuses to cover up murderous instincts.66 The real lesson from this "lesson" is a warning: "Warnung, in welche Todesgefahr uns ein perfektes Pseudo-Wissen hineinführt."67

Taking possession of another's identity can also be attempted on a creative level, and Ionesco, as a writer, is especially sensitive to this. In an article on the crisis in the theatre, he

writes of what he calls the "dirigisme doctrinaire" of which the author must beware. In his short farce L'Impromptu de l'Alma he is concerned with just this issue. Here he depicts himself as struggling against the "dirigisme doctrinaire" of three of his critics who would impose a system upon his artistic output. Ionesco has written that his plays originate from a mood or an impulse, not from an ideology or a programme. As pointed out by Richard M. Eastman, the main issue here is one of "soul versus reason, inner necessity versus logic of construction." Ionesco's idea that true art must be unplanned and improvisatory is brought out, not only in the play itself, but also in the title by the use of the word "impromptu." To him, artistic creation must not be planned; it must not have the straight jacket of form imposed on it, nor should it adhere to any ideology. What is most important is that the imagination be given free rein.

L'Impromptu de l'Alma begins as Ionesco is in his study, sleeping, with his ball point pen in his hand. Before him appears a man dressed in the robe of a doctor. This man is Bartholomew I, and he wakes Ionesco and asks him if his new play is ready. Ionesco says that it is not yet ready—at least not completely—and that he can not let anyone read it in the state in which it is in.

---

68 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 207.


Bartholoméus I states his purpose for the visit: A theatre has put him in charge of the mise en scène of this new play, "selon les principes les plus modernes, ceux d'un théâtre digne de l'ère ultra-scientifique et, à la fois, ultrapopulaire, que nous vivons." Of course there must be only four or five actors, and decors which are not too expensive.

Bartholoméus I wants to know the title and the subject of the play. Ionesco says that he can never go over his plays in such a manner, and he explains his way of composing:

Tout est dans les répliques, dans le jeu, dans les images scéniques, c'est très visuel, comme toujours. ... C'est une image, une première réplique, qui déclenche toujours, chez moi, le mécanisme de la création, ensuite, je me laisse porter par mes propres personnages, je ne sais jamais où je vais exactement. ... Toute pièce est, pour moi, une aventure, une chasse, une découverte d'un univers qui se révèle à moi-même, de la présence duquel je suis le premier à être étonné.

Bartholoméus I tells him that he has already read articles in which Ionesco writes of his "mécanisme créateur" and that, while he does not like the word "créateur," he does like the word "mécanisme."

Right away we see the difference between the two men—one in favor of creation, and the other in favor of mechanization. Bartholoméus I looks upon the process of writing from the scientific viewpoint rather than from the artistic one.

When Ionesco says that he is calling his new play "une farce tragique," he is told that this is scientifically valid. Ionesco

---

71 Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 12.
72 Ibid., p. 13.
tells him that the play, which is called Le Caméléon du berger, is actually only a point of departure in which he will expound his ideas. Bartholoméus I is indignant over this, and he tells Ionesco that "n'étant pas docteur, vous n'avez pas le droit d'avoir des idées." Ionesco is also told that his experiences have no value, "n'étant pas scientifiques," and that his beliefs are only provisory, that the critics will rectify them for him. Ionesco says that in this play he will speak of the theatre, dramatic criticism, and the public. He is informed that he is not enough of a sociologist for that. When Ionesco says that he will expose his own points of view, Bartholoméus I, in a grand gesture, says, "Des points de vue sans instrument d'optique!" Even so, he asks Ionesco to read him what he has written: "Je vous écoute. Je suis ici pour vous juger. Et rectifier."

While Ionesco is reading his text, a second Bartholoméus, who is a friend of the first, enters; then a third Bartholoméus—all three of them in doctor's robes. The three Bartholoméus dispute among themselves, using much logic and much contradiction, all resulting in confusion. Then they get back to the subject at hand: Ionesco. Bartholoméus II says to Bartholoméus I: "Les auteurs ne sont pas là pour penser. Ils sont là pour écrire ce qu'on leur

---

74 Ibid., p. 15.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
The three Bartholoméus again become involved in a contradictory discussion, which ends as follows: "Pour résumer: le faux vrai, c'est le vrai faux, ou le vrai vrai, c'est le faux faux." When Ionesco tries to tell them what he thinks about the subject, Bartholoméus replies, "Quel insolent! Il pense...."

When Ionesco speaks of poetry, they tell him: "Silence! Pas de poésie. La poésie est contre notre science!" They discuss him among themselves, deciding that "son esprit n'a pas été convenablement dirigé." They tell him, in a manner reminiscent of the detective in *Victimes du devoir* telling Choubert that it was necessary to fill the gaps of his memory, that his mind has been deformed and that "il faut le redresser." This is what they intend to do, but according to their own ideas.

They go about this, with much double-talk, until they get Ionesco totally confused. They make him admit his past "errors." He tries to protest, but can get nowhere with them. He finally gives up and agrees with them, even though they are not consistent among themselves, and he certainly can not always follow their reasoning. Here the similarity with *La leçon* is quite noticeable—Ionesco, of course, being the student, and the three critics-dressed-as-doctors taking the part of the professor. They tell him

77 Ibid., p. 20.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., p. 24.
80 Ibid.
that they will teach him how to write. They even try to tell him how

to be Ionesco:

Bartholoméus II: Ne vous identifiez pas à vous-même. Vous
aviez toujours eu le tort d'être vous-même.

Ionesco: Qui pourrais-je être d'autre?

Bartholoméus II: Distancez-vous.

Ionesco, brailant presque: Mais comment faire?

Bartholoméus III: C'est tout à fait simple. ...

Bartholoméus I: Observez-vous, tout en jouant. ... Soyez Ionesco
en n'étant plus Ionesco\textsuperscript{81}

After this, they put him through several paces, making him march
backward and forward, all the while dancing, singing, speaking, and
writing. In the end they reduce him to something resembling a jackass:

Bartholoméus I, à Ionesco: Maintenant ... dansez ...

Bartholoméus II: ... chantez ... parlez ...

Ionesco gambade sur place et brait: Hi ... haan ... hi ... haan ...
hi ... haan ...

Bartholoméus I: Écrivez!

Ionesco: Hi ... haan ...

Bartholoméus III: Écrivez plus fort!!

Ionesco: Hi ... haan ...

Bartholoméus II: Et savamment!!!

Ionesco, modulant ses braiments: Hi ... haan ... hi ... haan ...

Bartholoméus I, Bartholoméus II, Bartholoméus III, ensemble:
Écrivez! écrivez!! écrivez!!! écrivez!!!!

\textsuperscript{81}Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 49.
Ionesco: Hi ... haan ... hi ... haan ... hi ... haan ...

Bartholoméus I, Bartholoméus II, Bartholoméus III, Ionesco, ensemble: Hi! haan! Hi! haan! Hi! haan!82

This scene is quite similar to the ending of *Victimes du devoir*, when Choubert was reduced to the state of a blubbering child by all the people around him who were trying to bring him up as they wanted. Here, of course, it is not so much a matter of social conduct, as it is of controlling one's mind. But since *L'Impromptu de l'Alma* is a comedy, fortunately there is a kind of *deus ex machina* ending to rescue Ionesco from his predicament. Ionesco's maid, Marie, pushes out all three of the Bartholoméus with her broom.

Now Ionesco, once all the confusion has been cleared up, begins to give his theories about the author's freedom. At first, he is moderate and gives advice seriously, but then he becomes intoxicated by what he is saying, and, just like the professor in *La Lecon*, he becomes dogmatic. But the sensible Marie, in a manner reminiscent of the maids in Molière's plays, puts an academic robe on him. He is told that even though he does not like to be given lessons, he wants to give them to others. He admits this and apologizes, saying that he will be careful not to do so again.

Si, Ionesco shows that he is aware of this danger even in himself. Martin Esslin, among others, has pointed out the fact that sometimes Ionesco's critical and polemical side spills over into his creative work, thereby usurping the place of inspiration as a motive

---

82Ibid., p. 51.
for his writing. In an interview Ionesco revealed that he does indeed have this tendency, and he added, "Ma vie est une lutte perpétuelle contre ce péril." Still, this is difficult to avoid for any controversial writer, and especially one who has been the subject of as much controversy as Ionesco has been. His disdains taking sides and committing himself to any political party. Yet, he can not avoid combats, and he has had to take up his pen to express his own ideas and to answer his critics. So, in spite of himself, he finds himself becoming a champion of the liberty of the writer. This is what Pierre-Aimé Touchard sees as Ionesco's second stage in his evolution as a writer. But, fundamentally, Ionesco does not believe in any system, and he takes a stand against playwrights who think that they can reform the world. He is hostile to any ideology which could develop into a force of oppression.

He sees ideologies as another force exerting control over the individual, for they canalize one's passions and blind one's understanding. Ionesco explains what he means by ideology:

"J'entends par idéologie un système de pensées fermé, un système

---

83 Martin Esslin, "Ionesco and the Creative Dilemma," Tulane Drama Review, VII (Spring, 1963), 178.
87 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, pp. 184, 223.
de slogans médiocres ou supérieurs, hors de toute vie, qu'il ne parvient plus à intégrer mais qui continue de vouloir s'imposer comme s'il était expression même de la vie." He goes on to warn of what lurks beneath them: "Les idéologies qui offrent des solutions toutes faites ... sont les alibis provisoires des partis parvenus au pouvoir." But the worst danger of all is that ideologies become idolatries.

The guignolesque scene at the beginning of Act III of Tueur sans gages is a comic, but at the same time frightening, example of people en masse giving up that part of their identity that Ionesco holds so dear--freedom of thought--to follow popular ideologies. Here they are led by a political leader called "la mère Pipe" and her geese (perhaps an allusion to the goose-stepping of the National Socialist army during the Hitler regime) in a kind of Ubuesque pep rally. The crowd waves flags and cries out: "Vive la mère Pipe! Vive les oies de la mère Pipe!" Mother Pipe herself tells the people that they have been mystified and that now they are going to be demystified: "J'ai élevé pour vous tout un troupeau de démystificateurs. Ils vous démystifieront. Mais il faut mystifier pour démystifier. Il nous faut une mystification nouvelle." The crowd cheers: "Vive la mystification des démystificateurs! ...
Vive la nouvelle mystification!91

Mother Pipe gives the crowd her platform:

Je vous promets de tout changer. Pour tout changer il ne faut rien changer. ... Nous perfectionnerons le mensonge. Nous allons désaliéner l'humanité! ... Pour désaliéner l'humanité il faut aliéner chaque homme en particulier. ... Nous n'exploiterons pas les hommes, nous les ferons produire. Le travail obligatoire s'appellera travail volontaire. La guerre s'appellera la paix et tout sera changé, grâce à moi et à mes oies. ... La tyrannie restaurée s'appellera discipline et liberté. Le malheur de tous les hommes c'est le bonheur de l'humanité.92

The crowd answers: "Vive la mère Pipe! Vive les oies! Vive les oies!" She goes on:

En démystifiant les mystifications depuis longtemps démystifiées, les intellectuels nous foudront la paix. ... Ils seront maïs, donc intelligents. Ils seront courageux, c'est-à-dire lâches; lucides, c'est-à-dire aveugles.93

The crowd again answers: "Vive la mère Pipe! Vive les oies de la mère Pipe! Elle change tout, ne change pas, change tout, ne change pas!"94 La mère Pipe explains how the intellectuals will be put to work for the state:

Quant aux intellectuels. ... Nous les mettrons au pas de l'oie! ... Si l'idéologie ne colle pas avec la réalité, nous prouverons qu'elle colle et ce sera parfait. Les bons intellectuels nous appuieront. Contre les vieux mythes ils vous feront des antmythes. Nous remplacerons les mythes ... par des slogans! Et par les nouvelles idées recueues!95

---

91Tomesco, Théâtre, II, 138.
92Ibid., p. 138.
93Ibid., p. 141.
94Ibid., p. 140.
95Ibid., p. 142.
Even though the majority of those present are part of the cheerers, there is at least one man who does not share Mother Pipe's opinions and ideas. This man (who, however, is intoxicated) says, "Je suis pour la réhabilitation du héraut." When he is asked what he means by hero, he answers: "Héraut? C'est celui qui ose penser contre l'histoire et qui s'élève contre son temps. ... Le héraut combat son temps, il crée un autre temps."\(^{96}\) When he speaks out for the advancement of the human mind, he incurs the wrath of Mother Pipe, who calls him "Ennemi de l'histoire!" The man now becomes bolder, saying, "Je ne pense pas comme tout le monde! Je vais leur dire!"\(^{97}\) He is cautioned by Edouard, the friend of Bérenger: "N'y allez pas. Penser contre son temps c'est de l'héroïsme. Mais le dire, c'est de la folie. Le sage se tait."\(^{98}\) Nevertheless, he goes up to argue with Mother Pipe, who says that they will discuss the whole matter over "freely." But this outspoken individual is no match for La mère Pipe's geese, who come to her aid. In the end, the poor man is beaten by the mob, and la mère Pipe emerges victorious, saying, "Mes oies l'ont liquidé."\(^{99}\)

Thus Ionesco vividly shows how far ideology can go in crushing the individual. The intoxicated man, of course, has been so imprudent as to express openly his own opinions and even to fight for them.

\(^{96}\)Ibid., p. 141.

\(^{97}\)Ibid., p. 145.

\(^{98}\)Ibid.

\(^{99}\)Ibid., p. 146.
Another Ionesco character who has opinions of his own is Jacques in *Jacques, ou la soumission*. However, in this play, as one may divine from the subtitle, the character submits. He is forced to make what is in reality a very trivial admission, but one which is nevertheless required of him to be fully accepted by the group of which he is a member.

The play begins with a "tableau silencieux," perhaps of the type recommended by Diderot for the "drame bourgeois." The main issue is not immediately evident. Jacques' mother is weeping, accusing her son of ungratefulness. She exclaims that he no longer loves his parents, his sister, his grandparents. She has her daughter, Jacqueline, support her point of view. Jacqueline, being another member of the bourgeois clan, naturally agrees. His mother continues her remonstrances, recounting all the things she did for him while bringing him up. This long list is recounted in absurd terms, in which the avant-garde theatre abounds, but beneath this list one has the impression of the many typical actions a mother performs for her child as he grows from childhood to manhood, all of which are calculated to endear him and oblige him to his family. She can finally say no more. She calls him "un mononstre" and then has the next member of the clan take over.

This time it is grandmother Jacques. She rambles along, in her octogenarian way, but says nothing which really touches upon the subject. Then it is grandfather Jacques' turn, but since he is too old to speak, he sings. All to no avail. Jacques is still obstinately silent. His sister enters again, calling him "un
vilenain," because he makes his mother cry and makes his grandparents blush with shame. She says that even though she loves him greatly, she detests him. She says that he is not well brought up.

Jacques père renounces him, saying that he is not worthy of his race. He makes it seem as if there is something fundamentally wrong with Jacques, even though he came of good stock. He can not understand why someone with such a good upbringing, "dans une famille de véritables sangsues, de torpilles authentiques," turns out to be so unworthy. There now follows a dispute between the two parents about whose fault it was. Finally Jacques père begins to leave, calling Jacques "fils de porc," even though he knows that he is insulting himself by saying this. Jacqueline wonders how Jacques can stand such an insult. His mother, now employing a sugary tone of voice, tries to get him to speak, but Jacques obstinately remains silent. She goes out crying, but first, in a big dramatic outburst, she hurls this statement at him: "On parlera de toi dans les journaux, actographe!"

Mother and daughter spy on Jacques from the door to see what the effect of all this family disapproval will be, while Jacques wonders why all this matters so much to them. Jacqueline returns, and they have a brotherly-sisterly chat. She tells him that he is chronométrable (perhaps meaning that he is subject to the action of time), something which he finds frightful. He is now very disturbed,

100 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 100.
101 Ibid., p. 102.
and he has a mighty struggle with his conscience: "C'est dur, mais c'est le jeu de la règle." Finally, his resistance at an end, he says aloud, "Eh bien oui, oui, na, j'adore les pommes de terre au lard!"102

Immediately his whole family, which has been waiting only for that, comes rushing in. There is a touching reconciliation as they embrace him warmly. Jacques is unmoved by their display of family affection. He merely says, without conviction, that he does indeed like potatoes with bacon. His mother, however, does not care whether this is said with conviction or not. She is happy that he conforms, at least on the surface. She asks Jacques to repeat the all-important words, which he does like an automaton. His father is told the happy news, and he expresses his satisfaction to Jacques, adding, "Je te réintègre à ta race. À la tradition. Au lardement. À tout... Je vais te récupérer au bénéfice de nos œuvres familiales et nationales." But this is only a beginning, for now "il faudra encore qu'il croie aux aspirations régionales."103 So, one thing leads to another. What starts in the family continues outside the family. Jacques can not escape conformity.

This is the end of the first episode of Jacques, ou la soumission.104 Here one sees how a youth tries to withstand all the vehemence piled on him in order to force him to enter the "Ordre

102 Ibid., p. 104.
103 Ibid., p. 105.
104 The second episode of this play has been discussed in Chapter I, pp. 16-23.
Classique" of bourgeois tradition. The precise object of his revolt does not matter, or rather is not the question here. In fact, it would seem that Ionesco has chosen a hollow issue so that the spectator can apply it by analogy to any other. Another advantage of using an issue without real content is that it leads the spectator to focus his attention not on the issue itself, but on the characters' psychological reaction to it. What is important is the way they try to bring him round. They employ psychological warfare until they finally bring about what Ionesco calls an "aveu forcé." 

The particular issue, therefore, is unimportant; its importance lies in what it stands for: "an acceptance of society and all that it imposes upon us." Jacques has been brow-beaten into submission by the pressure of public opinion. His struggle is futile, and in the end he accepts all "the paraphernalia of the mass man." But this is only part of the submission. It is not only to the family viewpoint and to getting married and following in the tradition of the other bourgeois; it is also a surrender of his power to think. The others are not interested in hearing him say

106 Eastman, op. cit., p. 8.
107 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 207.
108 Pronko, op. cit., p. 33.
109 Strem, op. cit., p. 152.
110 Juan Guerrero Zamora, Historia del teatro contemporáneo (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1961), II, 255.
anything which is spontaneous or true, or anything that comes from his uniqueness as a human being. They prefer to hear the "average response," the "aveu forcé," which shows abdication of one's own ideas to those of the majority. Implicit in this is the "submission of a superior consciousness to an inferior pattern of life."[111]

Conformity is therefore another means by which a person gives up part of his identity. Ionesco writes of the alienation of the conformist: "C'est précisément le conformiste, le petit-bourgeois, l'idéologue de n'importe quelle 'société' qui est perdu et déshumanisé."[112] An extreme case of such dehumanization in Ionesco's theatre is seen in Rhinocéros, in which he expresses on an allegorical level the giving up of one's human characteristics to take on those of a dull, unthinking creature. Ionesco has always shown himself to be hostile to any form of alienation which social life involves. In this play he condemns the totalitarian state, which he sees as the most perilous and alienating menace for man.[113] In the totalitarian state the individual gives up his free thinking and supports the doctrine of the masses.

Rhinocéros, as most critics have remarked, is of a great simplicity. Ionesco has symbolized in the rhinoceros, according to Pierre-Aimé Touchard, "cette humanité moutonnière et lâche qui nous


112Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 74.

entoure et dont la peur voudrait nous contraindre à nous plier comme elle à l'asservissement, cette humanité des époques totalitaires où seul compte le nombre, où le collectif écrase l'individuel."\(^{114}\)

This symbol Ionesco preserves throughout the play, as he shows how men lose their freedom of will and their individuality in order to follow the crowd. They let themselves be cast into the common mold, all happy to have the same appearance, the same desires, and the same thoughts as the next person.

In his introduction to the American student edition of this play, Ionesco indicates what was perhaps the point of departure for Rhinocéros: In 1936 the writer and philosopher Denis de Rougemont, who was in Germany, was present at a National Socialist political demonstration. M. de Rougemont described the hysteria which overcame the crowd and admits that even he felt electrified by the emotionalism surrounding him. But he managed to keep his lucidity, and then he felt that he was the only one in the crowd who resisted what he called this "orage collectif." From this experience he knew what "Horreur Sacrée" meant. What was the real reason for his resistance? In Ionesco's words it is this: "À ce moment-là ce n'était pas sa pensée qui résistait, ce n'était pas des arguments qui lui venaient à l'esprit mais c'était tout son être, tout ce qu'il était lui-même qui se rebiffait."\(^{115}\)


However, it is not just National Socialism that Ionesco writes of in this play, but any kind of totalitarianism, which has also had other forms. It can just as easily be interpreted as a satire on Communism or any other movement in which a collective hysteria breaks down the resistance of the individual. This collective hysteria takes the form of "rhinoceritis" in Ionesco's play. He explains what is behind this particular illness: "Rhinocéros est sans doute une pièce anti-nazie mais elle est aussi, surtout, une pièce contre les hystéries collectives et les épidémies qui se cachent sous le couvert de la raison et des idées mais qui n'en sont pas moins de graves maladies collectives dont les idéologies ne sont que les alibis."

I have divided my discussion of Rhinocéros into two parts, the first dealing with conformity and the second with the rationalization of conformity by recourse to slogans and ideology.

Even in the first scene, Bérenger is being reproached by his friend, Jean, for not being like other people, for not establishing a routine and sticking to it. But poor Bérenger just cannot fit into this way of life. Nor can be force his mind into the confines of what Jean considers "un homme d'esprit." Jean, ever the helpful friend, tells Bérenger what he needs to do to conform, and even makes out a whole program for him to follow.


117Ionesco, Rhinocéros, ed. Ellison and Goding, p. x.

118Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 26-31.
In the midst of their discussion, a rhinoceros comes charging down the street, much to everyone's amazement. There ensue a few remarks about where such a beast could have come from, what reason it might have to come here, why the town authorities let such a creature run loose, etc., but their initial surprise soon wears off. They settle down to their usual activities and all but forget about the rhinoceros. A few minutes later another rhinoceros comes from the opposite direction, running over a cat and killing it. People are somewhat angrier this time, and they say that something must be done about it. But still, after a few minutes, their surprise again wears off, and they almost forget about the danger as they argue whether the rhinoceros was the same one as before or a different one, whether he had one or two horns, and whether he was of African or Asian origin. A logician tries to settle everything by saying that it can not be proved either way conclusively.

Act II takes place in Bérenger's office, as his colleagues are all discussing the newspaper account of the incident. So far, there are only a few rhinoceroses about, so the danger is not too great. They are still in the minority, and most people express either their amazement or their disbelief over such a phenomenon. At first they are primarily concerned about whether there is a rhinoceros problem. Botard, a former school master, does not believe that there is, and he says that he will not believe it until he has scientific proof. Other arguments follow, and they bandy the issue about until their employer orders them all to work.

Then an unusual thing happens. The wife of M. Boeuf, who
is absent that day, comes rushing in to say that she is being pursued by a rhinoceros. Everyone wonders how such a thing could happen in a civilized country. From the background is heard the sound of a rhinoceros trying to come up the stairs, which give way under the weight. Mme Boeuf recognizes the sounds made by the rhinoceros, and she says that it is her husband. Thus more information has come to light. A citizen has changed into one of these creatures. This seems to explain their origin. Mme Boeuf says that this rhinoceros-husband is calling to her, and she jumps on his back and rides off, presumably to become a rhinoceros also.

The employer, M. Papillon, is not so much concerned with this metamorphosis as he is with the work in his office. He says that Boeuf is fired, and that he will try to replace him. The other employees, also not greatly concerned with the basic issue, show sympathy for Mme Boeuf and her husband. They find it understandable, even admirable, that she should do such a thing. Botard even tries to intercede on behalf of Boeuf so that he will not be fired without an investigation and proper notice. The main problem of the moment is to get the office force safely out of the office, now that there is no stairway. The fire department is called, and everyone is taken out through the window. They are all told that they do not need to come back to work that afternoon, for this is an exceptional case.

In the second scene of Act II, Bérenger pays a visit to Jean, who is in an ill humor. Bérenger hardly knows what to make of him, for his voice sounds strange and his manner is gruff. When Bérenger brings up the issue of the rhinoceroses, Jean is very touchy and
defends them. Jean changes visibly as the scene proceeds, and his voice becomes harsher and rougher. Also, his skin becomes greener and harder. He becomes more and more irascible and disagrees with almost everything that Bérenger says. Jean continues to defend the rhinoceroses and, as the scene progresses, starts talking as if he himself were one. He does indeed turn into a rhinoceros and attempts to run Bérenger underfoot. Bérenger leaves in a panic, shouting for help. On his way down the stairs outside of Jean's apartment he discovers that the other tenants of the building have also changed into rhinoceroses. None of them pay any attention to his calls for help; in fact, they wonder what he is so upset about. He runs into the street, where he is almost run over by a passing herd of the beasts. He keeps screaming for help, but he can find no one to aid him.

Act III begins as Bérenger is back safely in his own apartment, waking up as from a bad dream. He believes that he sees the horns of rhinoceroses everywhere. He hears a knock at the door, and he ushers in Dudard, his friend from the office. Bérenger expresses his concern over the rhinoceros danger, but Dudard tells him that he is exaggerating the issue. Then, just as Jean had done, Dudard gives a counter retort to every remark that Bérenger makes concerning the danger. Dudard becomes more and more sympathetic to the rhinoceroses and tries to seek a rationale to explain their motives. He makes it seem as if Bérenger is the abnormal one.

As they argue, Bérenger looks out the window and notices
that the logician has turned into a rhinoceros. He wonders just whom one can rely on, especially since he had had such a high regard for the logician as a man who really thought lucidly. Bérenger is clearly upset by this particular transformation. Meanwhile Dudard looks admiringly at the rhinoceroses, saying how much they seem like happy children. A knock is heard, and this time it is Daisy, the office secretary with whom Bérenger is in love, who comes to pay a visit. She brings the alarming news that Botard has become a rhinoceros. This is the biggest surprise of all to Bérenger, because Botard had been so much against them. Dudard merely replies that Botard must have changed his mind, that he has perhaps thought it better to "evolve." In fact, his last human words were, "Il faut suivre son temps!"119

This is certainly one of the keys to the problem of rhinoceritis—a matter of people feeling that they must keep up with their own time by doing what others are doing. Dudard tries to explain Botard's conversion to Bérenger by saying, "C'est l'esprit communautaire qui l'a emporté sur ses impulsions anarchiques."120 This seems to imply that when one follows his own reasoning he is going by what Dudard calls his "impulsions anarchiques," but that when he does like everyone else, he is being reasonable and doing it through "l'esprit communautaire." This is very much in line with the reasoning seen in Jacques ou la soumission, when Jacques,

119Ibid., p. 98.
120Ibid., p. 99.
after he finally gives in and agrees with the group, is told that his "sentiments distingués finissent toujours par prendre le dessus." Bérenger tries to protest that the rhinoceroses are the anarchical ones, and furthermore, they are in the minority. Dudard's reply is that they are the minority only for the moment, that they are steadily increasing.

It seems that one fourth of the city has capitulated. Bérenger tries to summon the others to rally, to do something before it is too late. But all he meets with is excuses and protests. Even though they suffer from this situation, they refuse to do anything about it. (The shops have been closed, because they have been broken in and demolished, and the streets are dangerous to walk in, because one might be trampled underfoot.) Bérenger makes the suggestion that all these rhinoceroses be sent to a sort of enclosure. But his suggestion is disapproved of by the others, who claim that the Protective Society for Animals will never allow such an action. Furthermore, almost everyone has a close relative among the rhinoceroses. It seems as if everyone is involved.

Outside there is a great noise, as the fire station crumbles and all the firemen come running out in the form of rhinoceroses. Dudard and Daisy report that rhinoceroses are also running out of all the houses. Dudard now says that he is getting the urge to become a rhinoceros. He does indeed metamorphose; he runs out into the street to become one of the herd. Bérenger wonders which one

---

121 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 109.
he is, but this is impossible to establish, for they are all so alike.

By this time there are no more people on the street, not a single human being. It appears that the only two human beings left are Daisy and Bérenger. At first, Daisy tells him that she will not desert him, that he can count on her. She seems more and more sympathetic to the rhinoceroses, however, and tells him to be reasonable and to try to find a modus vivendi. They should try to get along with them and learn to understand their psychology. Her feelings about the herd turn to admiration and praise, as she expresses how pretty they look. It is indicative of the whole issue of conformity that she says, "C'est nous, peut-être, les anormaux." 122

Soon, she can resist no longer; the attraction of the herd is too great. She leaves him and goes out to metamorphose.

Bérenger is left entirely alone. He says that he will never follow the others. But he is nevertheless greatly disturbed over being completely alone. He says that he is the only human being left who speaks French; in fact, who speaks any language. He looks at himself in the mirror and remarks that he is a funny-looking thing. He looks at some old photographs of his former friends, and he can no longer remember who they are. He finally decides that the rhinoceroses look better than he does. Now he too wishes that he were a rhinoceros, and he tries to become one, but can not. He says that he is ugly and that he can not stand the sight of himself; and he adds that people who try to hang on to their individuality always

---

122 Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 112.
come to a bad end. He bemoans the fact that he can not become a rhinoceros, that he must remain a human being. He is even ashamed of his human ugliness, and he feels that he is a monster. Then he has a change of heart. He decides that he will make the best of things and stand his ground. The rhinoceroses have surrounded his building, but he will fight them to the end. His last words are:

"Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu'au bout! Je ne capitule pas!"

Actually, it seems as if he is trying to make the best of his situation, when he finds that he can not change. He regrets his individuality, and he wishes to give this up in order to become like the others. He comes to feel that it is the majority, after all, which is right. This is his dilemma. He does not feel inclined to follow the herd, but he can not bear being alone. Thus, Ionesco shows just how far-reaching the power of public opinion and conformity really is. It is perhaps this element of the play that has led Oreste Pucciani to remark: "M. Ionesco n'a pas écrit le Rhinocéros pour recuser le conformisme social. Il a écrit sa pièce pour en faire clandestinement l'apologie."

123 Note that in Jacques ou la soumission, Jacques is called a "mononstre" by his mother; and in the stage directions, in the scene in which Jacques has just said that he can not bear potatoes with bacon and that he is simply what he is, Ionesco writes: "La dernière réplique de Jacques fils a créé une atmosphère d'horreur contenue. Jacques est vraiment un monstre." (Théâtre, I, 118.)

124 Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 117.

One important reason why so many people have capitulated is that they have no inner strength. This aspect of the play has been well treated by Edwin T. Williams, who writes that the invasion of the rhinoceroses is actually a "symbolic challenge to the perception and inner strength of the people." They fail to perceive the significance of the crisis, because they pay little attention to the world other than what is immediately connected with their lives. Thus, "having no perspective, they can not recognize themselves and they end by becoming the evil they can not discern." 126

In an address for a meeting of French and German writers in 1961, Ionesco speaks of people such as those of Rhinocéros, who are always hurried, always prisoners of necessity, who can understand only what is immediately useful to them. These people do not have the full lives which come from culture, art, and meditation. They have no time to think, so absorbed are they in the cares of their daily life. They are like robots, who can easily be controlled by popular doctrine:

Ces gens affairés, anxieux, courant vers un but qui n'est pas un but humain ou qui n'est qu'un mirage, peuvent tout d'un coup, aux sons de je ne sais quels clairons, à l'appel de n'importe quel fou ou démon se laisser gagner par un fanatisme délirant, une rage collective quelconque, une hystérie populaire.

He goes on to speak of the dangers which lie in wait for such people:

Les rhinocérites, à droite, à gauche, les plus diverses, constituent les menaces qui pèsent sur l'humanité qui n'a pas le temps de réfléchir, de reprendre ses esprits ou son

esprit, elles guettent les hommes d'aujourd'hui qui ont perdu le sens et le goût de la solitude. ... La conscience individuelle est, en fait, envahie, détruite par la pression du monde accablant et impersonnel des slogans: supérieurs ou inférieurs, politiques ou publicitaires, c'est l'odieuse propagande, la maladie de notre temps. L'intelligence est à tel point corrompue que l'on ne comprend pas qu'un auteur refuse de s'engager sous la bannière de telle ou telle idéologie courante—c'est-à-dire de se soumettre.127

One reason why people let themselves be a prey to propaganda, feels Ionesco, is that so few people really think. Most people are content to repeat what they have been given by maîtres à penser, or at the most they only paraphrase it. These masters, in choosing their problems and their terminology, set artificial limits. Thus, they touch upon only part of a matter, overlooking other possibilities: "Il y a aussi d'autres problèmes, d'autres aspects de la réalité, du monde: et le moins qu'on puisse dire des maîtres à penser c'est qu'ils nous enferment dans leur doctorale ou moins doctorale subjectivité qui nous cache, comme un écran, l'innombrable variété des perspectives possibles de l'esprit."128

Ionesco realizes how easy it is to let others do the thinking for us. In this respect we are all students of one professor or another—a professor who has not only instructed us, but has made us undergo his influence, his own viewpoint, his doctrine, his own subjective truth. But if another professor, with different ideas, had formed us intellectually, then we would have thought in a different manner. Ionesco suggests that we examine the formulas and

127Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 131.
128Ibid., p. 45.
solutions that are given us, that we try to see what there is of the subjective in them and adopt a point of view only after careful consideration. He believes that "il est préférable de penser maladroitement, courtement, comme on peut, que de répéter les slogans inférieurs, moyens ou supérieurs qui courent les rues." A real individual, even a foolish one, is worth more than an intelligent man who is directed by others (in Ionesco's words, "un âne intelligent et savant").

Willingness to accept predigested opinions well serves totalitarian ideology. The task Ionesco set for himself in Rhinocéros was to show the danger of ideology: "J'ai pensé avoir tout simplement à montrer l'inanité de ces bizarres systèmes, ce à quoi ils mènent, comment ils inflamment les gens, les abrutissent, puis les réduisent en esclavage." Ionesco paints the weakness of people before what he calls "la puissance mystificatrice des idéologies," of the hollowness of which he is well aware. At the première of Tueur sans gages in March 1959 he said: "Il me semble que de notre temps et de tous les temps, les religions ou les idéologies ne sont et n'ont jamais été que les alibis, les masques, les prétextes." And in an article in the Revue de Métaphysique

129 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
130 Ionesco, Rhinocéros, ed. Ellison and Goding, p. x.
131 Marcel Cornu, Review of Notes et contre-notes, by Ionesco, La Pensée, No. 105 (nouvelle série) (October, 1952), 118.
132 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 136.
Tous les dogmatisme sont provisoires. Non seulement ils me semblent provisoires, mais j'ai l'impression aussi qu'ils ne sont qu'un système d'hypothèses, de suppositions, de façons de voir, de vues de l'esprit, pouvant être remplacés par d'autres idéologies ou vues de l'esprit. On s'explique les choses comme on peut. [Italics mine.] Les idéologies, avec un peu d'auto-suggestion, sont toutes confirmées par les faits, bien que les idéologies opposées démontrent que les premières sont infirmées par les faits. Chacun devrait faire son petit Discours de la Méthode pour son propre compte.133

The sentence, "On s'explique les choses comme on peut," is especially significant in connection with Rhinocéros, for as each person turns into one of these beasts, his mind tries to justify the change. All during the play the characters try to conceal their desire to be part of the herd by some kind of rationale. They appeal to slogans, idées reçues, and ideology. Although conformity is the main subject of the play, the hollowness of ideology is certainly a secondary theme. In fact, it is the ease with which people adopt the prevailing ideology that is one of the factors of conformity.

As early as the first act, Ionesco makes fun of logic when he has the logician demonstrate syllogistically that Socrates was a cat. In the second and third acts he shows many examples of specious reasoning, as the characters support what they have already decided upon. Note particularly the second scene of Act II, in which Jean pulls out one argument after another to justify his position. He begins with clichés: "Melez-vous de ce qui vous regarde," "Chacun fait ce qu'il veut," "J'en ai bien le droit. Je suis chez moi," and

133 Ionesco, "L'Auteur et ses problèmes," Revue de Métaphysique et de morale, LXVIII (October-December, 1963), 412.
"Eh bien, ça le regarde." Then he goes on making broad statements and generalities, which he does not bother to prove: "L'amitié n'existe pas," "Les médecins inventent des maladies qui n'existent pas," "L'humanisme est périmé," and "La morale est antinaturelle." He continues, getting to the issue of rhinoceritis, which he refuses to see as a problem: "Après tout, les rhinocéros sont des créatures comme nous, qui ont droit à la vie au même titre que nous!"

From then on, Bérenger does his best to defend the values of civilization against the onslaught of rhinoceritis, and the argument takes on greater proportions. He reminds Jean of the difference in mentality, and Jean responds: "Pensez-vous que la notre soit préférable?" When Bérenger brings up ethics, Jean says: "Il faut dépasser la morale." Bérenger asks what he would put in its place, and Jean answers, "Nature! ... Il faut reconstituer les fondements de notre vie. Il faut retourner à l'intégrité primordiale." When Bérenger reminds him of the system of values built up in the course of centuries of human civilization, Jean says, "Démolissons tout cela, on s'en portera mieux." It is ironic that, when Bérenger speaks about humanism and the importance of a free mind, Jean tells him that he is using only clichés and that he is speaking from the standpoint of his prejudices. Bérenger continues to try to defend

---

134 Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 72-74.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., p. 75.
137 Ibid., p. 76.
humanism, until finally Jean does not even bother to give him any more reasons. He becomes more direct and calls upon force. All that is lacking is a statement in the Hobbesian vein that "might makes right," as he heads toward Bérenger with the intent to crush him underfoot.

Similar appeals to ideology follow, as first Dudard and then Daisy give their reasons for converting. Bérenger very neatly sums up the reason why nobody really does anything about it: "Mais si on ne veut vraiment pas, n'est-ce pas, si on ne veut vraiment pas attraper ce mal ... on ne l'attrape pas." He says that even though he sees people on all sides capitulating, he will never do so. Dudard believes that Bérenger is attaching too much importance to the issue, that perhaps he is in the wrong. He is told that he should learn to become accustomed to the situation: "Alors, assimilez la chose et dépassez-la. Puisqu'il en est ainsi, c'est qu'il ne peut en être autrement." Dudard then remarks that Bérenger simply does not have the "vocation" to be a rhinoceros, that he is a Don Quixote.

Bérenger, however, can not escape what he calls "la réalité brutale des faits," and he refuses to try to cover them over with theory. Dudard tells him that he must make an honest intellectual effort to understand the situation, that every phenomenon is logical after all, that to understand is to justify. Bérenger accuses him

\[138\text{Ibid., p. 85.}\]
\[139\text{Ibid., pp. 88-89.}\]
of being sympathetic to the rhinoceroses; but Dudard, claiming that
the metamorphoses are natural, responds that he does not see anything
wrong with this phenomenon. Bérenger does not believe that it is
natural; on the contrary he feels that it is abnormal. Dudard tells
him that normality and abnormality are not things that can be
demonstrated scientifically. But Bérenger is not one to be taken in
by "scientific" discussions; he still prefers to rely on the facts.
He hears people all around him saying that the movement does not
exist, yet he sees evidence to the contrary.

When Dudard finally gets the desire to metamorphose, he tries
to rationalize it by saying, "Mon devoir m'impose de suivre mes chefs
et mes camarades."140 Bérenger tells him that on the contrary his
duty is to oppose them, lucidly and firmly. Dudard maintains that he
will retain his lucidity, and that perhaps he can better criticize
them from within than from without. After this, Dudard runs out into
street, and Bérenger can no longer distinguish him from the others.

Actually the only one who manages to hold on to his lucidity
is Bérenger, who remains the last human being. It has been said that
he survives by a "hopeless goodwill," which has put him apart from
all causes.141 Another quite valid reason is that he is not
influenced, as are the others, by words and speeches. Wallace Fowlie
remarks: "In an almost pitiful way, he struggles against the
exaltation of all the others, against an overwhelming force which

---

140 Ibid., p. 103.
141 A. Alvarez, "Olivier Among the Rhinos," The Times Literary
isolates him. As he sees the others dehumanizing themselves, he fights against it; he tries to dissuade them by preaching humanism, but to no avail. Little by little he is forced into solitude. As Henri Gouhier has put it, "La solitude est le prix de la fidélité à l'humain." Indeed, in the opinion of Jacques Lemarchand, this solitude is the center of Ionesco's theatre, of which Rhinocéros is probably the finest example.

The solitary hero Bérenger is seen also in Tueur sans gages, which bears a resemblance to Rhinocéros. The Bérenger of Tueur sans gages is also struggling against an evil which invades society, and here, too, he is forced into solitude. He tries to call everyone's attention to a killer who has been destroying the happiness in human life. But everyone is accustomed to this killer; they feel that it is not in the general scheme of things to protest, and they accept the status quo. All this is expressed on an allegorical level. What the killer represents is difficult to ascertain; suffice it to say that it is some evil force in life. It seems to be more than just the killing force of conformity or any one kind of intellectual tyranny; it is a general symbol for any evil which opposes the happiness of man.

In the first scene of Tueur sans gages Bérenger is being

---

142 Fowlie, op. cit., p. 44.

143 Henri Gouhier, "Un théâtre humain de la cruauté," La Table Ronde, No. 147 (March, 1960), 180.

shown around an ultra-modern cité radieuse by the architect, a cold, inexpressive public functionary. But there seems to be something wrong in this radiant city. There is a killer lurking in it, and every day several people are found dead in the city's swimming pool. The architect admits that the city is indeed not perfect. In fact, all its inhabitants wish to leave. He is always the same killer; the Administration knows about this assassin, but can not capture him. Bérenger wants to flee this city, which to him is now a horror. He feels as if his spirit has been killed.

The architect invites him into a café, and while there, he explains to Bérenger how the killer operates. The police are well aware of his activities, but they can never catch him in the act. If only there were proof, the killer could be arrested. The architect explains all this in a matter-of-fact way. To him it is just routine. Everyone expects the killer to kill at least three or four people a day. He tells Bérenger to calm himself and to stop worrying so much about it. Bérenger is too concerned, however, to pass over such a matter. He feels responsible for his fellow man, and he feels that something must be done: "Ça n'ira pas comme ça! Il faut faire quelque chose! Il faut, il faut, il faut!" 145

He goes to his apartment, where his friend Edouard is waiting for him. Bérenger tells Edouard about the killer, but Edouard is not surprised. He knows all about it, as does everyone else. It is a known fact, accepted by everyone: "La chose est sue, assimilée,

\[145^{\text{Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 98}}\]
cataloguée. Même les enfants des écoles savent. ... C'est regrettable, certes, [mais] que voulez-vous qu'on y fasse?

Bérenger replies that he did not know it and that he is extremely surprised. He simply can not understand Edouard's indifference.

During this scene, Edouard accidentally drops his briefcase, and several objects fall out. These objects could belong to no one other than the killer. Both men appear astonished. Edouard claims that he does not know how they could have got there. There is a calling card with the killer's name and address on it, a book with names and addresses of all his victims, a private diary, maps, and even a time table. Bérenger has found just what is needed to bring the killer to justice. It is simply a matter of taking the proof to the police station. Edouard, however, is still so unconcerned that he forgets to take along the briefcase as they leave to go. Even Bérenger's closest friend is not on his side.

In the next scene, Bérenger is hurrying to get to the police station before it closes. When he discovers that Edouard has forgotten the briefcase, he sends him back for it. Then he is held up by a political demonstration and a traffic jam. All this increases his anxiety. He tries to explain to the policemen who are directing traffic that he has a very important mission— that of saving mankind from the killer—but the policemen are also unconcerned, and they direct him just as they direct the traffic. Even the forces of law and order do not help him.

\[146\] Ibid., pp. 122-123.
Finally he gets through the traffic jam, and he finds the road which leads directly to the police station. He has been able to interest no one in his mission. Now he is completely alone, but here he is not surrounded by galloping rhinoceroses. He is not surrounded even by enemies. He is simply all alone. He proceeds down a long, desolate street (doubtless symbolizing the loneliness of the individual when he is apart from the crowd), becoming more nervous and frightened as he goes. He almost changes his mind and goes back, thinking that it might be better if he postpones his mission. He feels that he will arrive too late, anyway. After all, only a few more people will be killed that day, and really it is the fault of the others who have not helped him. He becomes almost as resigned to the evil done by the killer as the others are.

Then he encounters the killer face to face, and it is too late to turn back. The killer appears to be an idiot, and there is no expression of humanity on his face. The amazing thing is that he is small and weak. Bérenger could easily kill him, but he prefers to question him in order to better understand him. There follows a long monologue in which Bérenger tries to fathom what is behind the killer's crimes. He tells him that he should not kill people just because they have an opinion different from his own and that he should not destroy mankind, for after all he is himself a human being. During this harangue the killer does not say a word; he only

---

147 Ionesco suggests an alternate possibility in the stage directions: that there be no actual killer portrayed. Bérenger simply speaks alone. (Théâtre, II, 162.)
sneers. Bérenger flares up with anger and calls him an ignorant, mean creature. He takes two pistols from his pocket and aims at him. The killer sneers again, confidently, obstinately. Bérenger takes aim, but does not fire. He says that he is weak before the killer's cold determination and ruthlessness. Even bullets are no good against the resistance of an infinitely stubborn will. He then gives up and lays down his two pistols, hanging his head and saying, "Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire! ... Que peut-on faire ... Que peut-on faire ..."\footnote{Ibid., p. 172.}

The combined evil in life is too much for Bérenger. He has tried to call attention to the danger, but he is not heeded. In Rhinocéros Ionesco pointed out that element in political life which tends to alienate man. In Tueur sans gages he calls our attention to any evil which opposes itself to man's happiness. The others have given in to this evil, but Bérenger remains the lone individual who resists. There is quite a difference between the endings of these two plays. In Rhinocéros Bérenger fights back, determined not to yield. In Tueur sans gages he yields more quickly, after less resistance.

However, in both plays, Bérenger does hold on to his basic nature. He does not put blinkers on his mind like the others, nor does he try to take the easy way out. He keeps his lucidity when the others have given up theirs. He is more concerned with reality, with the facts, with truth; he does not try to cover this over with
theory. He has not adopted the outlook of all the rest, who refuse to see the evil, who accept the status quo and turn a deaf ear to any plea to change it. He is very much like the intoxicated man in Act III of Tuer sans gages, who speaks out against la mère Pipe. He, too, thinks for himself, and he has the courage to speak against the general opinions of his time, to express his views and to fight for them. There is something within him, as there was within M. de Rougemont watching the National Socialist demonstration, which resists following the multitude.

But the liberty to be an individual carries with it grave consequences. Bérenger's concern for his fellow man, for the human element in life, places him in a position apart from his fellows. He does not accept the attitude of the crowd, and he is forced into solitude because of it. He is the only one who tries to eliminate the evil in life, but he is no match for the rest of the world. He does not show allegiance to the slogans of the others, nor to their goals in life. He is afraid that he may lose his identity as a man and become hardened into a robot-like creature. But the crowd has given in to that "mindless, gregarious animalism," which has rendered them insensitive. They have been affected by the sclérose bourgeoise, which has hardened their minds into set attitudes. As a result, they have overlooked the dangerous forces around them. Worst of all, they have given up their conscience, something which Bérenger retains.

\footnote{[Anonymous], "Away from the Absurd," loc. cit.}
In the character of Bérénger, Ionesco has created a type in the tradition of the commedia dell'arte and similar to that of Charlie Chaplin. He does not show Bérénger as being a superman, but rather an individual who is surrounded by millions of men of less sensitivity. Philippe Sénart calls Bérénger "le dernier des Hommes de Bonne Volonté." Ionesco, in an interview, says that Bérénger is a true intellectual, unlike many people who are called intellectuals, but who are not real ones. It has been suggested that Bérénger represents Ionesco himself; he is the author's creation of an individual who asserts his will while everyone else yields to intellectual terrorism. The characters of Ionesco's early plays had no particular psychological identity, either positive or negative. With Bérénger, however, he has created a type. To date, Bérénger has appeared in four of his plays, of which Tueur sans gages is the first and Rhinocéros the second. He is seen by Jacques Lemarchand as the common denominator of Ionesco's dramatic work. Bérénger is a man who wishes to exalt the human condition, to make it rise above itself.

150 Gouhier, "Un humanisme tragique," p. 82.
Ionesco's plays, and especially these two, are somewhat autobiographical in that he expresses his own anxieties in them. Shortly before the premiere of *Tueur sans gages* he said: "Dans le fond cette pièce est l'expression d'une angoisse et d'une interrogation dont j'attends moi-même la réponse." He himself is like Bérenger, trying to expose every kind of rhinoceritis: "les tyranniques lieux communs du langage, les rhinocéros fanatiques dans les idées, les rhinocéros familiaux, rhinocéros-objets, rhinocéros-littérature." He wishes above all to show the dehumanization to which they lead.

What Ionesco is really concerned with is the basic man, the archetype, who has been lost beneath the stereotype. The stereotype, he says, is formed from routine and cliché, and this is what separates man from himself; but the archetype is universal, truth, a source. The man who has become lost in the stereotype is the petit bourgeois. He is narrow-minded and shortsighted; he conforms, because he does not feel himself so much a part of mankind as he does of the men of his own time. Ionesco writes: "Le petit-bourgeois est celui qui a oublié l'archétype pour se perdre dans le stéréotype. L'archétype est toujours jeune."

---


159 Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes*, p. 110.
So, if man gives up his true nature to become a stereotype, what can he be but a kind of robot? And if society is reduced to a system in which men are only part of a ballet mécanique, what happens to man's inner life, that rich creative life of the mind? Unrestricted mental activity is what Ionesco defends against mechanization and systematization. He warns that even culture can be dangerous when it is concerned with only a part of man's nature, when it is systematized into what he calls "les pseudo-humanismes déshumanisés, les régimes politiques totalitaires retranchés de la totalité, les tyrannies asphyxiantes aussi bien que les libéralismes figés qui ne sont plus la liberté, les engagements 'librement consentis,' auxquels notre nature véritable ne consent absolument pas." Ionesco places himself on the side of man's true nature, which he feels is apart from all systems.

---

160 Sénart, op. cit., p. 69.

CHAPTER IV
ALIENATION, MALAISE, AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The épaisseur sociale is what Ionesco holds responsible for the alienation of man. His conduct is regulated within and outside family life. His mind is controlled by popular doctrines, slogans, idées reçues, and systems which limit free mental activity. Physically and mentally his destiny is directed by outside forces. Every occupation, in fact, all existence, writes Ionesco, is alienation, and we are all alienated.1 Man, in being rendered fit for society, loses what is essential of his basic nature.2 Men are prisoners of social reality, and being only social, they have become "appauvris, aliénés, vidés."3

This leaves a void in the individual, a feeling of being unreal, of not developing all his potential. His frustration gives way to anguish, which in Ionesco's theatre usually takes the form of an individual searching for what Ionesco calls "une dimension perdue." The anguish over being alienated from one's real nature is what Ionesco tries to bring out in his plays: "J'ai essayé ..."

---

3Ibid., p. 74.
d'extérioriser l'angoisse ... de mes personnages, ... de donner des images concrètes ... de l'aliénation." His characters, even though they are in anguish, find it difficult to express. It is perhaps this difficulty of his characters to express their malaise which gives rise to some of the absurd dialogue of his plays. A propos of this Wallace Fowlie remarks: "The dialogue of Ionesco often resembles the monotonous whining of an animal unable to articulate the cause of its suffering, unable to make its suffering understood."

The conflict between the inner world and the outer is one of the symptoms of this alienation. As Bérenger says in *Tueur sans gages*: "Lorsqu'il n'y a pas un accord total entre moi du dedans et moi du dehors, c'est la catastrophe, la contradiction universelle, la cassure." Man is not really connected to the fullness of life, to the objects around him, or even to his fellows; he is only surrounded by them. He can understand neither the things of the world nor himself.

The attempts of these earth-bound prisoners to account for their earthly condition are not effective. In fact, most of them

---


are so absorbed in their daily activities that they do not even try to explain their raison d'être.\(^8\) They speak a great deal, and sometimes they express their states of mind in long monologues, but they do this with awkwardness, because they do not really understand themselves. They do not speak to express their thought or even to disguise it. They speak largely in an attempt to attain something which is always escaping them. Their arguments are an attempt to convince, either themselves or others, that they exist.\(^9\)

Life's banal existence creates of them a shell, and the characters are threatened by extinction from the inside. Their shells are like something mechanical, and even their minds partake of this mechanical quality.\(^{10}\) They are merely pawns of outside forces; they are like puppets in a vast ballet mécanique.\(^{11}\)

Perhaps the special quality of Ionesco's theatre comes from the fact that he is dealing with both the outer, mechanical element of his characters--usually from a comical standpoint--and the inner human element, which he gives as a real dimension.\(^{12}\)

---

\(^8\) Charles I. Glicksberg, "Ionesco and the Aesthetic of the Absurd," The Arizona Quarterly, XVIII, 293.


\(^{10}\) Schechner, op. cit., p. 199.

\(^{11}\) Jack Murray, "Ionesco and the Mechanics of Memory," Yale French Studies, No. 29 (Spring-Summer, 1962), 82.

and effects, he has created fantastic worlds (which, however, have
their basis in reality) in which he shows people who are, in the
words of Jacques Guicharnaud, "unsuccessful in transcending the
anguished consciousness of an inferior existence."\(^\text{13}\) He employs his
skill as a dramatist to make us feel the incapacity of his characters
to express their fundamental thoughts. His plays, according to
Wallace Fowlie, often give the impression of being autopsies of our
unacknowledged, invisible manias.\(^\text{14}\)

Actually, Ionesco's plays are exorcisms of his own anxiety.\(^\text{15}\)
Through himself, he sees other men and their anxieties. He does not
claim to be unique; in fact, he sees his own dreams and obsessions
as part of the subconscious of all men, as part of man's heritage.
The feeling of human anguish which he himself has, he feels as part
of the human condition.\(^\text{16}\) Ionesco wonders if we all have the
impression, as he does, that we were meant for some other kind of
life, another world: "N'avons-nous pas l'impression que le réel
est faux, qu'il ne nous convient pas? que ce monde n'est pas notre
vrai monde?"\(^\text{17}\) This world, in which he feels a prisoner, which is
like some kind of bad dream, has killed his astonishment when

\(^{13}\text{Ibid.}^\)

\(^{14}\text{Wallace Fowlie, "New Plays of Ionesco and Genet," Tulane Drama Review, V (September, 1960), p. 45.}^\)

\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}^\)

\(^{16}\text{Ibid., pp. 44-45.}^\)

\(^{17}\text{Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, pp. 91-92.}^\)
confronted with existence and left in its place fatigue and boredom. This is what he would like to escape from: "Je voudrais me débarrasser, une fois, de ce monde de rêve, de ce rêve d'un monde qui fait que finalement mon étonnement se fatigue, s'évanouit dans l'habituel et que j'atteins l'ennui, l'inquiétude, l'accablement."\(^{18}\)

In a short essay entitled "Mes pièces et moi," he writes of two basic states of consciousness of which he is aware: "celles de l'évanescence [et] de la lourdeur; du vide et du trop de présence; de la transparence irréelle du monde et de son opacité; de la lumière et des ténèbres épaisses." The evanescent state results in a feeling of euphoria, of refound liberty, of lightness. But this state of consciousness, this happiness, "cet émerveillement d'être," is very rare. Most often the opposite feeling takes hold of him:

La légèreté se mue en lourdeur; la transparence en épaisseur; le monde pèse; l'univers m'écrase. Un rideau, un mur infranchissable s'interpose entre moi et le monde, entre moi et moi-même, la matière remplit tout, prend toute la place, anéantit toute liberté sous son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient un cachot étouffant.\(^{19}\)

He feels that he is living in a world of ugliness, while his soul longs for beauty: "J'attends que la beauté vienne un jour illuminer, rendre transparents les murs sordides de ma prison quotidienne. Mes chaînes sont la laideur, la tristesse, la misère, la vieillesse et la mort."\(^{20}\) He is dissatisfied with his state, and

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 194.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 140-141.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., pp. 200-201.
he looks for some other. He has a vague nostalgia of some other world ('un ailleurs'), from which he feels separated and which he misses.

This state of being ill at ease in life he has expressed very well in a lengthy article for the Journal de Métaphysique et de morale, from which I give the following passage:

Je ne me sens pas tout à fait appartenir au monde. Je ne sais pas à qui le monde doit appartenir, et cependant je ne me vendrai ni ne vendrai le monde à personne. Si je me sens tout de même un peu d'ici, c'est simplement parce que, à force d'exister, j'en ai pris l'habitude. J'ai plutôt l'impression que je suis d'ailleurs. Si je savais quel est cet ailleurs, ça irait bien mieux. Je ne vois pas comment on peut répondre à la question. Le fait d'être habité par une nostalgie incompréhensible serait tout de même le signe qu'il y a un ailleurs. Cet ailleurs est, peut-être, si je puis dire, un "ici" que je ne retrouve pas; peut-être ce que je cherche n'est pas ici. Certains ont répondu ou ont cru pouvoir répondre et donner la solution. J'en suis heureux pour eux et je les félicite. Je constate donc tout simplement que je suis là, ce "je" difficile à définir, et c'est bien pour exprimer, pour faire part de mon étonnement et de ma nostalgie que j'écris.21

Ionesco endows some of his characters with his own malaise. These are the exceptional ones, however, for he sees most people as being too insensitive to be aware of any malaise. Most of his characters are resigned to the world as it is. They make no compliant; they are, like the Smiths and the Martins, quite at home in their routine world, where they believe themselves fulfilled. Not all, however. There are some who are not resigned, who realize that something is wrong, even though they can not grasp exactly what it is. These are the most memorable personages created by

21Ionesco, "L'auteur et ses problèmes," Revue de Métaphysique et de morale, LXVIII (October-December, 1963), 441.
Ionesco. This anguish and suffering, which Marcel Brion refers to as "la résignation désespérée," is seen by some to be the heart of his theatre.22

The earliest appearance of an Ionescan character who openly expressed his malaise was Amédée in Ionesco's first full-length play, *Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser*, which was first performed in 1954. The inner life of Amédée has been almost killed by the humdrum activities of his uneventful life. This has resulted in a state of consciousness very similar to Ionesco's one of feeling heavy and imprisoned in the world. Note, in Act I, how Amédée expresses this feeling: "Je me sens fatigué, fatigué. Je suis rompu, lourd, je digère mal, j'ai l'estomac ballonné, j'ai sommeil tout le temps."23 This feeling of fatigue, of being broken by the world, is expressed at other points in the play by Amédée. In the dream sequence in Act II Amédée sees himself as he once was, when the world was all lightness to him, and compares this to the heaviness he now feels: "Le temps est lourd. Le monde épais. Les années brèves. Les secondes lentes."24 He feels that he has become a different person, and he says, "Je ne suis plus moi-même."25

Amédée's wife, Madeleine, drives herself all the time in her work, and she expects Amédée to do the same. Since he is a writer,


she tells him, "Vas-y, travaille, écris tes chefs-d'œuvre!"26
Amédée does his best, complaining of the difficulty of writing in such a stifling atmosphere, but saying that nevertheless he will try. When he sits down at his writing table, he can not write. His wife calls him a fainéant, because she can see him doing nothing. She is not concerned with his inner life; to her it is only the exterior world that counts.

Amédée can not keep up with the daily routine, he can never remember where things are kept, he can not organize and act efficiently. His wife tells him:

Tu ne sais jamais où tu mets tes affaires. Tu perds les trois quarts de ton temps à les chercher, à fouiller dans les tiroirs, je te les trouve sous les lits, n'importe où. Tu entreprends toujours un tas de choses que tu n'achèves jamais. Tu abandonnes tes projets. Tu lâches tout.27

He simply can not summon any will power to perform the tasks of daily living. He is a sensitive being in a mechanical environment which is not in keeping with his nature, so he suffers.

Amédée is an embryonic Bérenger, a later creation, who has been called Ionesco's finest. Charles I. Glicksberg has written: "In the character of Bérenger ... the weary, the bored, but the unreconciled, we get the major symptoms of the modern malady of alienation."28 Through Bérenger, Ionesco gives voice to his own

26Ibid., p. 243.
27Ibid., p. 273.
28Glicksberg, op. cit., p. 302.
awareness of the sickness of life. Bérenger has learned from experience that we are certainly not living in a golden age. He has given up his illusions and has done his best to adjust to his mediocre existence.

This is the way Bérenger is in his first appearance in an Ionesco play, *Tueur sans gages*, first performed in 1959. When he is being shown around the radiant city in Act I, he compares this beautiful city of light with the city where he lives:

Je savais qu'il existait dans notre ville sombre, au milieu de ses quartiers de deuil, de poussière, de boue, ce beau quartier clair, cet arrondissement hors classe, avec des rues ensoleillées, des avenues ruisseulantes de lumière ...

cette cité radieuse dans la cité.

He compares this with his gloomy apartment: "Dans mon quartier, chez moi plus particulièrement, tout est humide: le charbon, le pain, le vent, le vin, les murs, l'air, et même le feu." He is dissatisfied with his life, and he yearns for another: "J'ai tellement besoin d'une autre vie, d'une nouvelle vie ... d'un autre cadre ... d'un autre décor, d'une ambiance qui correspondrait à une nécessité intérieure, qui serait, en quelque sorte ... le

---


31 This play is also discussed in Chapter III, pp. 81-82, and pp. 103-105.

32 Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 65.

33 Ibid., p. 68.
jaillissement, le prolongement de l'univers du dedans."\textsuperscript{34}

He tells the architect that he is different from the others, because he is aware of the sickness of life:

Depuis des années et des années, de la neige sale, un vent aigre, un climat sans égard pour les créatures . . . des rues, des maisons, des quartiers entiers, des gens pas vraiment malheureux, c'est pire, des gens ni beaux ni malheureux, laids, parce qu'ils ne sont ni laids ni beaux, des êtres tristement neutres, nostalgiques sans nostalgies, comme inconscients, souffrant inconsciemment d'exister. Mais moi j'avais conscience du malaise de l'existence. Peut-être parce que je suis plus intelligent, ou moins intelligent au contraire, moins sage, moins résigné, moins patient. Est-ce un défaut? Est-ce une qualité?\textsuperscript{35}

He then speaks of a warmth which once pervaded his life, an "élan vital," an "état lumineux," which he has somehow lost through the years. He is not sure just what this was, his memory of it is so dim, and it was so long ago that he felt it: "C'est tellement ancien que j'ai presque oublié, qu'il me semble qu'il s'agit d'une illusion; pourtant ce ne peut être une illusion puisque j'en ressens terriblement l'absence."\textsuperscript{36} But since that happy time, "c'est le perpétuel novembre, crépuscule perpétuel, crépuscule du matin, crépuscule de minuit, crépuscule de midi."\textsuperscript{37} The only thing which has kept him going all these years is the souvenir of this happy state, but by now this is only the memory of a memory. The original memory was not strong enough to resist time.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 74.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., pp. 75-76.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 79.
The architect, however, can see nothing wrong with Bérenger, at least not physically: "Vous avez l'air bien portant, quoi que vous en disiez, et malgré votre mine déconfite! Vous êtes sain d'esprit et de corps."

But Bérenger tells him that he does not really touch upon the real trouble: "Les maux dont je souffre ne sont pas apparents, ils sont théoriques, spirituels."

The architect is the average man, who does not see beyond what is immediately apprehensible. He does not go beyond a mere surface reality.

Bérenger reappears in Rhinocéros, which was performed the following year. He is, like the first Bérenger and like Amédée, a man who can never keep himself together. He is unkempt; his hair is not combed, his shoes are not shined, and he lacks a tie. He complains to his friend Jean that he is bored, and that he is not made for his work. In fact, he is not accustomed to life, which he feels has separated him from himself. He remarks, "C'est une chose anormale de vivre." He seeks escape in alcohol and daydreams. He says that he drinks because of his anguish: "Si je ne bois pas, ça ne va pas. C'est comme si j'avais peur ... des angoisses difficiles à définir. Je me sens mal à l'aise dans l'existence, parmi les gens, alors je prends un verre. Cela me calme, cela me détend, j'oublie." He goes on to say that he has been tired for years, that he has difficulty

---

38Ibid., p. 92.
39Ibid.
40Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 24.
41Ibid., p. 23.
just carrying the weight of his own body, that he no longer feels like himself: "Je sens à chaque instant mon corps, comme s’il était de plomb, ou comme si je portais un autre homme sur le dos. Je ne me suis pas habitué à moi-même. Je ne sais pas si je suis moi."42

However, drinking liberates him from his heavy existence: "Dès que je bois un peu, le fardeau disparaît, et je me reconnais, je deviens moi."43 He does not feel at home in his social identity; he is himself only when he escapes from it. But where is his real self? It is not in the facet of his personality that he shows to others, but somewhere else.

Just as Ionesco’s sensitive characters are not successful in accustoming themselves to their earthly condition, so are they unsuccessful in accounting for their identity. Their real nature does not conform to their outer self. They wander about as if in a dream and search for identity—in their memories of childhood, in their wishes and dream worlds, in their worries, their mistakes.

They do not know for certain who they are. Sometimes, even in the course of a scene, they change their character and their behavior.44 But the identity for which they are looking is only a myth, for one day is like another. Daily life offers only a rebeginning in a pre-set pattern of life. So, as Roger Kempf has expressed it,

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
"on demeure suspendu entre le vide et la profusion, le défaut et la pureté, tandis que le langage se révèle impuissant à exprimer cette tension.\footnote{45}

The difficulty in pinning down identity is one reason why Ionesco has chosen to write as he does. He has no definite plots which can come to a neat conclusion, and his characters have no definite identity. As he says in an article in \textit{Arts} in 1953:

\begin{quote}
Pas d’intrigue, alors, pas d’architecture, pas d’énigmes à résoudre mais de l’inconnu insoluble, pas de caractères, des personnages sans identité (ils deviennent, à tout instant, le contraire d’eux-mêmes, ils prennent la place des autres et vice versa): simplement une suite sans suite, un enchaînement fortuit, sans relation de cause à effet, d’aventures inexplicables ou d’états émotifs, ou un enchevêtrement indescriptible, mais vivant, d’intentions, de mouvements, de passions sans unité, plongeant dans la contradiction: cela peut paraître tragique, cela peut paraître comique, ou les deux à la fois, car je ne suis pas en mesure de distinguer le dernier du premier. Je ne veux que traduire l’invraisemblable et l’insolite, mon univers.\footnote{46}
\end{quote}

Richard Schechner makes the statement, "Who am I? is the central question of Ionesco’s dramaturgy."\footnote{47} This is the theme which runs through his every play. Ionesco endows his characters with personalities which are so fragmented that there is no persistent sense of identity.\footnote{48} They are made up of a series of memories, of a multitude of selves, both inner and outer—different for everyone.

\footnote{45}{Roger Kempf, "L’homme et la femme dans l’espace d’Eugène Ionesco," \textit{Romanische Forschungen}, LXXII (1960), 96.}
\footnote{46}{Ionesco, \textit{Notes et contre-notes}, pp. 136-137.}
\footnote{47}{Schechner, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 202.}
\footnote{48}{Glicksberg, "Ionesco and the Aesthetic of the Absurd," p. 296.}
who looks at them, and still different to themselves—and they are all changing. Yet each of his characters is trying to establish an identity. They try to relate themselves to the things of the material world, to their possessions, to their way of life, and to the ideas of their particular society. But each attempt fails to give them the lost dimension that they are looking for. They fill their lives with activity, but they are unable to resolve the conflict between the emptiness of their inner lives and the fullness which the world outside offers them.49

What causes so much of the anxiety of Ionesco's characters, according to Richard Schechner, is ontological insecurity. This is the individual's realization that he does not know who he is; and because he lacks a firm central sense of identity, "the world around him crumbles, becomes insolite."50 This tenuousness of identity is expressed perhaps best of all in Ionesco's dramaturgy in *Victimes du devoir* and *Les Chaises*, two of his earliest plays.

In *Victimes du devoir* Ionesco shows just how difficult—if not impossible—it is to locate the real self. The main character, Choubert, is forced by a detective–psychoanalyst to look for his identity by going back into his past. He is given the duty of finding a certain Mallot, who represents what the detective conceives to be Choubert's identity. Choubert returns to childhood and looks for Mallot as far back as the womb, but he can not find him. All he

---

49 Schechner, op. cit., p. 192.
can find are fragments of the many selves that he has been.

The detective represents the school of thought which assumes that each person has a distinct personality, but he does not realize that this personality is something seen from an imperfect notion of reality. Choubert does not see himself as the others do. He has his memories, his dreams, his desires, and fears, which the others can not see. Nevertheless, the detective is determined that Choubert shall find a definite identity, and he dominates him in order to make him find Mallot. He insists that there are trows in Choubert's memory and that Mallot is hiding somewhere in these holes. As pointed out by Mr. Schechner, "the net result of [this particular kind of] psychoanalysis is tyranny. The patient is tortured because he can not find what the doctor is looking for."^{51}

Even though several aspects of this play (which Ionesco holds to be his favorite) have already been discussed,^{52} let us here briefly review it in the light of the notion of a static identity.

Even near the beginning of the play, just after the detective enters and orders Choubert to tell him about Mallot, Madeleine, trying to explain her husband's nervousness and surprise, tells the detective, "Vous ne le connaissez pas sous cet aspect."^{53} The detective shows Choubert a portrait of Mallot—a man of middle age,

---

^{51}Ibid., p. 203.

^{52}Victimes du devoir is also treated in Chapter II, pp. 64-69, and in Chapter IV, pp. 119-154.

^{53}Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 190.
not too different from Choubert, a man who has been neatly catalogued in the general scheme of things, a being who has even been given a number (58,614). Choubert does not recognize himself in this light, so the detective takes more direct measures. He forces Choubert to descend into his past to try to find Mallot. He then directs Choubert in the forced search, but Choubert does not always find it easy to do as directed. He finds it difficult to stay on the narrow track which the detective lays out for him; he much prefers to go off on all sorts of side paths of his own—into little hidden parts of his memory, where bits of his true nature are, but where his social side is not. The detective, however, is concerned only with this social self, which he conceives to be the complete man. He does not care for Choubert's inner nature: "Tes histoires personnelles, on s'en balance! Il n'y a que Mallot d'intéressant dans toute l'affaire. T'en fais pas pour le reste, je te dis." 54

The result of this session of psychoanalysis is that Choubert does not find Mallot, although he does find parts of his real nature. The detective is disappointed with Choubert's efforts, and tells him that he did not really try, that he has not been well brought up, that he has not stuck to his duty. His wife tells him that he simply does not have a sense of reality. But this, of course, is their conception of reality, which Ionesco cautions must not be interpreted too narrowly, for it may become another limiting force over man.55

54 Ibid., p. 207.
55 Ionesco sees realism as another alienating force: "Ce réalisme aliène l'homme de sa profondeur qui est la troisième
Choubert is forced to eat huge crusts of bread which are designed to make him grow up according to their image of him and to fill the holes in his memory as they wish to do. But actually this process will serve to eliminate the little parts of his real self which still remain hidden.

At this point in the play, it seems as if Choubert is to be rescued, for a new character enters: Nicolas d'Eu. Nicolas argues with the detective about identity and its place in the theatre. (In the meantime, Choubert is still trying to eat the huge crusts of bread, which the detective does not stop trying to force down his throat.) Nicolas tells the detective that he dreams of an irrationalist theatre, one which is not Aristotelian. He states that the theatre of today is a prisoner of its old forms and that it has not gone past a shallow psychology: "Le théâtre actuel... ne correspond pas au style culturel de notre époque, il n'est pas en accord avec l'ensemble des manifestations de l'esprit de notre temps." Nicolas goes on to say what he would do to improve it:

Nous abandonnerons le principe de l'identité et de l'unité des caractères, au profit du mouvement, d'une psychologie dynamique. ... Nous ne sommes pas nous-mêmes. ... La personnalité n'existe pas. Il n'y a en nous que des forces contradictoires ou non contradictoires. ... Les caractères perdent leur forme dans l'informe du devenir. Chaque personnage est moins lui-même que l'autre. 57

---

56 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 226.
57 Ibid., pp. 226-227.
The detective, though, remains a firm Aristotelian: "Je demeure, quant à moi, aristotéliquement logique, fidèle avec moi-même, fidèle à mon devoir, respectueux de mes chefs. Je ne crois pas à l'absurde, tout est cohérent, tout devient compréhensible ... grâce à l'effort de la pensée humaine et de la science." These are the conditions under which he pursues Mallot, and under which he will pursue him until the end. "Je dois tout de même bien savoir où se cache Mallot ... Il n'y a pas d'autre méthode."

Nicolas tells the detective that he is a fool, and a quarrel ensues, which becomes heated to such a point that an electrifying tension is created on the stage. The detective fears for his life, and well he may, for in the end Nicolas strikes him dead with a knife. The detective dies a victim of duty, at least as he saw it. It would seem that now poor Choubert's troubles are at an end, but this is not the case, for Nicolas has his ideas about identity, and now he wishes to take over the situation. He begins where the detective left off and orders Choubert to eat the crust again, to fill what he conceives to be the holes in Choubert's memory.

So, Choubert suffers because he can not find a distinct Mallot, as the detective wanted him to, nor can he find a dynamic Mallot, as Nicolas d'Eu wants him to. The elusive real self still can not be found. There is more of one's nature to be discovered.

That Ionesco calls this play a pseudo-drame is worthy of note.

\[58\] Ibid., p. 227.
\[59\] Ibid., p. 230.
In the beginning of the play, before the entrance of the detective, Choubert discusses with Madeleine the state of the theatre and says that he thinks that every play ever written is a falsification of reality, since they all present a problem and neatly solve it in the end:

Toutes les pièces qui ont été écrites, depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours, n'ont jamais été que policières. Le théâtre n'a jamais été que réaliste et policier. Toute pièce est une enquête menée à bonne fin. Il y a une énigme, qui nous est révélée à la dernière scène. Quelquefois, ayant. On cherche, on trouve. Autant tout révéler dès le début. 60

The detective, of course, represents the policier of the pièces policières. He is looking for a neat solution to the problem of identity, the fallacy of which Ionesco reveals in the course of the play. As Ross Chambers points out, the detective's inquiry is unsuccessful because this Mallot is entirely irrelevant in Choubert's inner world. So, this really is a pseudo drama; it seems to be a detective drama, but actually is not, since there are no solutions presented. Mr. Chambers writes: "Thus police-theatre is explicitly denied by Ionesco, in favour of a drama concerned with the unsolvable riddles of inner life." 61 Social reality does not explain the whole man. There are gaps in this which have still not been filled.

In Les Chaises Ionesco is also concerned with what he calls "les trous de la réalité." He shows to what a great extent people's lives are based on the unreal, so that, when their lives are over,

60 Ibid., p. 185.
everything that they have been vanishes into the trou noir of existence. In a note about Les Chaises, dated June 23, 1951, Ionesco tells what he set out to do in this play:

Par les moyens du langage, des gestes, du jeu, des accessoires, exprimer le vide.

Exprimer l'absence.

Exprimer les regrets, les remords.

Irréalité du réel. Chaos originaire.62

He writes that much of the dialogue of Les Chaises is written precisely to "exprimer le non-sens, l'arbitraire, une vacuité de la réalité, du langage, de la pensée humaine."63 What he wished to do was to use dialogue to "encombrer le plateau de plus en plus avec ce vide, à envelopper sans cesse, comme de vêtements de paroles, les absences de personnes, les trous de la réalité."64

The characters in Les Chaises express their anxiety over living in a world of unreality, "suspendu entre le vide et la profusion." An old couple, who live at the top of a tower in the middle of the sea (representing symbolically their alienation and their isolation from the world), have invited many important people to their dwelling to hear a message which the old man wishes to give them. There are actually no guests present; the chairs

62Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 170.
63Ibid., p. 167.
64Ibid.
brought onto the stage represent the world of fantasy of the old couple. The imaginary visitors represent much of what the elderly pair has looked for in their lives—their buried hopes and fears, their ambitions, their regrets. They people these chairs with visitors who are their dreams and memories, no matter how badly worn out they are. They have been altered hundreds of times, and are so deformed that the original memories have been all but obliterated.

At the beginning of Les Chaises an old man of ninety-five years, called simply Le Vieux, remarks how early the sun sets nowadays, that in his youth it was still daylight late into the evening: "Tu te rappelles, jadis, ce n'était pas ainsi; il faisait encore jour à 9 heures du soir, à 10 heures, à minuit." But, unfortunately, everything has changed. The time of his youth is no more; his life is almost over. He has never managed to be anything more in life than a concierge, a position which he calls maréchal des logis. But he feels that he is worth more than this, that there is a part of him which has never been given a chance to develop. He wonders why everything has changed—and for the worse—and he tries to explain it: "Peut-être, parce que plus on va, plus on s'enfonce. C'est à cause de la terre qui tourne, tourne, tourne ..." 


68. Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 132.

69. Ibid.
His wife congratulates him on his wisdom and tells him that he is very gifted. There are so many things that he could have been. But, he claims, he does have a position in life; at least he is a concierge. The only trouble is that he is very bored. To while away this boredom, he and his wife entertain each other with little stories and recount events of their past life. On this particular evening she suggests that, to distract themselves, they pretend. He imitates the month of February by scratching his head in the manner of Stan Laurel, and his wife is delighted. Then she suggests that he tell her a story, but to him this is just a monotonous routine. She always wants him to tell the same stories every evening, and this has been going on ever since they were married, seventy-five years ago. He insists that she knows them all already, but she says that it is as if she has forgotten: "J'ai l'esprit neuf tous les soirs. ... Mais oui, mon chou, je le fais exprès, je prends des purges ... je redeviens neuve, pour toi, mon chou, tous les soirs."\(^70\)

He tells a ridiculous story, which he does not even finish, and she helps him out with little phrases here and there. The old man mentions a place called Paris, but his wife says that Paris never existed. He assures her that it did, because there still exists a song about it, called, ironically, "Paris sera toujours Paris." He wonders where everything has gone, not only Paris, but the song, his career, his whole life. "Dans le trou, tout ceci hélas ... dans le grand trou tout noir. ... Dans le trou noir, je

\(^{70}\text{Ibid., p. 133.}\)
te dis," says his wife.\textsuperscript{71}

She mentions that perhaps his career has been ruined, and he suddenly breaks down and sobs; not only about his ruined life and career, but also for his mother, for he feels lost and in need of comfort: "Je l'ai brisée? Je l'ai cassée? Ah! où es-tu, maman, maman, où es-tu, maman? ... hi, hi, hi, je suis orphelin."\textsuperscript{72} His wife tries to console him, by telling him that she is his mother now, but this does not calm him: "Hi, hi, laisse-moi; hi, hi, je me sens tout brisé, J'ai mal, ma vocation me fait mal, elle s'est cassée."\textsuperscript{73} She tries to pacify him by singing a lullaby and calling him her little orphan, but he still insists, "Je suis orphelin dans la vie, tu n'es pas ma maman."\textsuperscript{74}

She reminds him that all is not lost after all, that there is his message. There are visitors coming this very evening, and all for the sake of hearing his message: "Ils doivent venir ce soir, les invités, il ne faut pas qu'ils te voient ainsi ... tout n'est pas brisé, tout n'est pas perdu, tu leur diras tout, tu expliqueras, tu as un message ... tu dis toujours que tu le diras. ... il faut vivre, il faut lutter pour ton message."\textsuperscript{75} The old man agrees; after all, he does indeed have "quelque chose dans le

\textsuperscript{71}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{72}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{73}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{74}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{75}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 137.
ventre" to communicate to humanity, something to explain and justify
his life. He feels superior to the ordinary run of men: "Je ne
suis pas comme les autres, j'ai un idéal dans la vie. Je suis peut-
être doué, comme tu dis, j'ai du talent, mais je n'ai pas de
facilité." 76

For a while there is silence, as the old man is lost in a
kind of reverie. He seems to be trying to recall something. Then he
says, as in a dream: "C'était au bout du bout du jardin ... là
était ... là était ... là était ... était quoi, ma chérie?" And
then, as if to answer his own question, he says, "C'était un lieu,
un temps exquis. ... C'est trop loin, je ne peux plus ... le
rattraper ... où était-ce?" When his wife asks, "Mais quoi?" he
can not answer. He does not really know what he is looking for,
but it has something to do with himself: "Ce que je ... ce que j'i
... où était-ce? et qui? ... Ah! j'ai tant de mal à m'exprimer." 77

But still he wishes to tell all. His wife reassures him:
"C'est un devoir sacré. Tu n'as pas le droit de taire ton message;
il faut que tu le révèles aux hommes, ils l'attendent ... l'univers
n'attend plus que toi." 78 When he again says that he does not have
the facility to express himself, his wife assures him that this
facility will come, once he begins: "C'est en parlant qu'on trouve
les idées, les mots, et puis nous, dans nos propres mots, la ville

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p. 138.
78 Ibid.
aussi, le jardin, on retrouve peut-être tout, on n'est plus orphelin." This seems to be exactly what they do during the play, as they conjure up bits and pieces of their past selves, seen through their conversation with their imaginary guests.

The old man tells her that since he realizes his inadequacy to cope with the delivery of his message he has engaged an orator to speak in his place. His wife wonders if he has invited everyone, and he assures her that he has. As he contemplates the importance of the occasion, he remarks, "Toute ma vie, je sentais que j'étouffais." But this no longer matters, for finally, they will know all, thanks to the orator. However, the old man is somewhat afraid. He thinks of backing out; but his wife tells him that it is too late, that the guests are already on their way.

After this, the guests begin arriving, and the old couple greets them, all the while bringing in more chairs. They make conversation, consisting mostly of light banter, but, upon the arrival of "La Belle" and "Le Photograveur," their talk takes on more importance, for it reveals another side of the nature of both the old man and the old woman. As for the old man, he tells "La Belle" that he used to love her and that he still loves her. He wonders what has happened to former times, as he repeats Villon's famous words, "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" While he and "La Belle" are thus engaged, the old woman brazenly flirts with the photographer,

---

79 Ibid., p. 139.
80 Ibid., p. 140.
revealing a hidden side of her personality.

The old man tells "La Belle" that the one thing that has made life bearable for him has been the inner life: "C'est bien ce qui m'a sauvé: la vie intérieure, un intérieur calme, l'austérité, mes recherches scientifiques, la philosophie, mon message, ... des préoccupations d'un ordre supérieur." But now there remains of his life only "de la douleur, des regrets, des remords, il n'y a que ça ... il ne nous reste que ça." However, life is like that. He suffers from it, but he feels that others do not.

The room eventually becomes so crowded with guests that there is hardly any place in which to stand. The old woman wonders who all these people are. The old man tries to sum up his life and philosophy to the people gathered. He mentions progress, logic, humanity, and the dignity of man. Then he tells them that they have been invited so that he can tell them this fact: "L'individu et la personne, c'est une seule et même personne." He goes on to say that he is not himself, but rather another. That is, he is one within the other. But he tells them that they must wait for the orator, who will really get down to the heart of the matter.

His wife tells the crowd that no one has ever understood her husband, but that finally his hour has come. The meaning of this hour has more importance than one might at first realize, for a great

---

81 Ibid., p. 152.
82 Ibid., p. 153.
83 Ibid., p. 165.
deal about the old man is understood during the course of the play, although it seems as if he himself does not understand as much as the audience. He feels that his long life, full of experience, "dans tous les domaines de la vie, de la pensée," entitles him to leave others his perfect system so that humanity will profit from it. If people will just follow his system the world will be saved. He tells everyone to obey him, for he has absolute certitude. 84

At this point the emperor enters, although, like the other guests, he too is invisible. It is amazing to note how the old man debases himself, as he grovels at the emperor's feet. He is so excited that he even calls him "Ma majesté" instead of "Sa majesté." He tells the emperor: "Je suis là, votre plus fidèle serviteur! ... Votre serviteur, votre esclave, votre chien." 85 He goes from one extreme to the other--from feeling that there is within him something so superior that he can leave a message which will save humanity, to the conviction that he is only a dog in the emperor's presence. (This scene is particularly effective on the stage, as both the old man and his wife bark like dogs.)

He tries to make his way through the crowd to pay his respects to the emperor, but he cannot, for the crowd will not let him pass. He does, however, get a glimpse of him, which makes him deliriously

84 It is interesting to compare this scene with the one in which la mère Pipe tells everyone to obey her, because she has a perfect system. There are also Ionesco's many references to systems which are proposed from time to time as perfect, but which are actually defective, for they do not take into consideration all of reality.

85 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 168.
happy. He feels that at last he has someone who will understand him, who will give him the support that he has never had in his lifetime:

Sire, daignez tourner votre illustre face de mon côté, vers votre serviteur humble ... si humble ... oh! j'aperçois nettement cette fois ... j'aperçois ... Je suis au comble de la joie ... je n'ai pas de parole pour exprimer la démesure de ma gratitude ... dans mon modeste logis, oh! Majesté! oh! soleil! ici ... ici ... J'en suis fier ... fier et humble, à la fois ... comme il se doit. ... Oh! sauveur, dans ma vie, j'ai été humilié. ... J'aurais pu être quelque chose, si j'avais pu être sûr de l'appui de votre Majesté ... je n'ai aucun appui ... si vous n'étiez pas venu, tout aurait été trop tard ... vous êtes, Sire, mon dernier recours. 86

The old man tells him that everything that he has done in life has turned out wrong. He has brought misfortune to all his friends, to all those who aided him. People have always found good reasons to dislike him. All his enemies have been recompensed, and all his friends have betrayed him. He has been treated badly and persecuted, but whenever he complained about it, it was always the others who were said to be in the right. There were times when he sought to avenge himself, but he could not, because he pitied others too much, he was always too goodhearted. It is pity which has been his undoing. But the others had no pity, and they mistreated him:

"On prenait ma place, on me volait, on m'assassinait. ... J'étais le collectionneur de désastres, le paratonnerre des catastrophes." 87

He tried to escape, but in vain; he was deprived of all means of

86 Ibid., p. 169.

87 Ibid., p. 171.
escape. No one took him into consideration, even though he alone
could have saved humanity ("qui est bien malade"), or at least he
could have spared it all the troubles it has gone through in this
last quarter of a century. If only he had had the occasion to
communicate his message! But he has not given up, there is still
time. He has the plan, which the orator will deliver shortly.

The orator does finally arrive, and the old people are at
the height of joy. The old man says: "Majesté, ma femme et moi-
même n'avons plus rien à demander à la vie. Notre existence peut
s'achever dans cette apothèose ... merci au ciel qui nous a accordé
de si longues et si paisibles années. ... Ma vie a été bien remplie.
Ma mission est accomplie. Je n'aurai pas vécu en vain, puisque mon
message sera révélé au monde."88 He tells the orator: "Je te
laisse, à toi, mon cher Orateur et ami ... le soin de faire rayonner
sur la postérité, la lumière de mon esprit. ... Fais donc connaître
à l'univers ma philosophie."89

There is nothing more for him and his faithful wife to do.
Now everything is up to the orator, who will justify his whole
existence before the world. He and his wife are going to retire
from the scene, "afin de faire le sacrifice suprême que personne
ne nous demande mais que nous accomplirons quand même."90 They
will die in their full glory, in order to enter into legend. At

88 Ibid., p. 176.
89 Ibid., pp. 176-177.
90 Ibid., p. 177.
least they will have a street named after them; they will leave traces, for they are people, not cities. They throw confetti and long colored streamers at the emperor. There are fanfares from a distance, and a very vivid light resembling the light of fireworks. To the words, "Vive l'Empereur!" the two old people leap to their deaths through the windows. The fireworks cease abruptly, and one can hear their bodies falling into the water below. All the brightness on the stage disappears, and there remains only a dull, yellowish light. Outside the open windows there is only darkness; the curtains flutter in the wind.

There is no one left on the stage but the orator. He starts to deliver the old man's message, but he cannot make himself understood. Then he tries to write it on a blackboard, but what he writes is not clear. In desperation, he gives up and leaves, and one hears, for the first time, the noise of the invisible guests. According to the stage directions: "Ce sont des éclats de rire, des murmures, des 'chut,' des toussotements ironiques; faibles au début, ces bruits vont grandissant; puis, de nouveau, progressivement, s'affaiblissent."  

The importance of this ending is not to be overlooked, for

---

91 The orator is actually as non-existent as everyone else, although his part is played by a flesh and blood actor. But it is necessary that one see and hear him, since he is the last one to remain on the stage. Ionesco writes: "Sa visibilité n'est qu'une simple convention arbitraire, née d'une difficulté technique insurmontable autrement." (Notes et contre-notes, p. 168.)

92 Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 180.
it was precisely this for which the play was written: "C'est
d'ailleurs cette fin que j'ai eue dans l'esprit en écrivant la pièce,
c'est pour cette fin qu'elle fut écrite, une fin que j'ai vue avant
le commencement." 93 A propos of this ending, Ionesco writes in a
letter to the first metteur en scène (Sylvain Dhomme):

Il faut qu'à la fin cela devienne parfaitement "choquant."
La toute dernière scène, après la disparition des vieux, après
le départ de l'orateur doit être longue, on doit entendre
pendant longtemps les murmures, les bruits de l'eau et du vent,
comme venant de rien, venant du rien. ... La foule compacte des
inexistants doit acquérir une existence tout à fait objective. 94

This moment when the nonexistent guests take on an objective existence,
when subjectivity becomes objectivity, is the moment toward which all
the movement of the play has been proceeding:

A ce moment, les spectateurs auraient sous les yeux, dans une
lumière redevenue pauvre, blafarde, comme au début de la
pièce ... les chaises vides dans le vide du décor ornées de
serpents, pleines de confetti inutiles ce qui donnerait
l'impression de tristesse, de désordre et du vide d'une salle
de bal après le bal; et c'est après cela que les chaises, les
décor, le rien se mettraient à vivre inexplicablement. 95

Les Chaises is concerned not only with the various subjective
views of the two main figures, but also with their subjective view of
the world. Ionesco agrees with a friend of his who told him, à
propos of the meaning behind this play: "C'est bien simple; vous
voulez dire que le monde est la création subjective et arbitraire de
notre esprit?" 96 He writes that one can say of this play things

93 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 170
94 Ibid., p. 168.
95 Ibid., p. 169.
96 Ibid., p. 171.
which are contradictory but equally true. Actually, if only the substance of the play could have been gotten across to the audience in any other way, there would be no one on the stage at all, not even the two old people or the orator:

Les vieux et l'orateur ne sont pas plus là que les personnages invisibles. ... Ils n'ont pas plus d'existence que ces derniers et que nos rêves. ... On aurait très bien pu prendre la pièce par un autre bout et faire apparaître quelques-uns des invités seulement, sans l'orateur, sans les hôtes. ... Mais les deux ou trois personnages qu'on voit dans Les Chaises ne sont en quelque sorte que les pivots d'une architecture mouvante, en grande partie invisible, évanescente, précaire, destinée à disparaître, comme le monde, les personnages étant eux-mêmes irréels, et cependant les points d'appui indispensables de cette construction.97

Ionesco himself, to explain the ending of this play, quotes from Gérard de Nerval's Promenades et Souvenirs: "Le monde est désert. Peuplé de fantômes aux voix plaintives, il murmure des chants d'amour sur les débris de mon néant! Revenez pourtant, douces images." This is perhaps what the ending signifies—only, as Ionesco remarks, without the douceur.98

What is the old couple really like? There can be no one answer, for at different times in their lives they have been different, and even at any one time they have had more than one facet, and the inner life has not always been in harmony with the outer life. As expressed by the old man, he is one within the other. His true self was not in his career, which he feels was

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
not worthy of his talents; nor was it in his being a husband, nor
the sweetheart of "La Belle," nor an old man with his memories. He
feels that it is really somewhere else.

Again Ionesco has written a play which has no neat solutions.
It is perhaps his own view of the world that he has put into Les
Chaises. In conclusion of my discussion of this play, I give
Ionesco's statement from the theatre programme for this play in
1952:

Le monde m'apparaît à certains moments comme vidé de
signification, la réalité: irréelle. C'est ce sentiment
d'irréalité, la recherche d'une réalité essentielle, oubliée,
innommée—hors de laquelle je ne me sens pas être—que j'ai
voulu exprimer à travers mes personnages qui errent dans
l'incohérent, n'ayant rien en propre en dehors de leurs
angoisses, leurs remords, leurs échecs, la vacuité de leur
vie. Des êtres noyés dans l'absence de sens ne peuvent être
que grotesques, leur souffrance ne peut être que dérisoirement
tragique.
Le monde m'étant incompréhensible, j'attends que l'on
m'explique.99

99Ibid., p. 165.
CHAPTER V

MAN'S BASIC NATURE AND THE INNER LIFE

Ionesco's theatre shows how the individual's identity is formed to such an extent by forces outside himself that he is never really given an opportunity to see what his real self might be. Just as a person's physical actions are planned, even before he is born, by set patterns of social behavior, so are his mental actions, by fossilized systems of thought, or else by dogma, propaganda, or any other kind of limited mental endeavor. By surrendering his mind and body to the world outside, the individual is left with a feeling of losing some part of himself and of being unfulfilled.

But what is this "lost dimension," the absence of which he realizes and the need for which he feels? What would one be like if he were not formed by social living? Of course, since man is a social animal, the idea of not being so formed is out of the question. As Ionesco expresses it: "L'homme ... est ... social, ce n'est pas possible autrement."¹ Still, Ionesco believes, or perhaps would like to believe, that man--at least in a sort of Utopia--does not have to be a social animal: "Je pense ... que l'homme peut ne pas être un animal social."² The child is not really born for society, but

²Ibid., p. 93.

169
society takes hold of him anyway: "L'enfant ne naît pas pour la société bien que la société s'en empare. Il naît pour naître." 3

The child adapts himself to society because he must, but he does so with difficulty: "L'enfant a bien du mal à se socialiser, il lutte contre la société, il s'y adapte difficilement. ... Et une fois que l'homme est socialisé, il ne s'en tire toujours pas très bien." 4

Thus, society is something that must be endured. Ionesco agrees with Sartre that other people are a kind of hell, and that one would like very much to do without them: "C'est un enfer, le social, un enfer, les autres. On voudrait bien pouvoir s'en passer." 5

There is indeed "no exit," as Choubert found out only too well in Victimes du devoir. He was not allowed to escape even into his memory, or into a world of fantasy. Choubert, like the child who struggles against adapting himself to society (and one remembers that at the end of Victimes du devoir Choubert was reduced to a very young child by the therapy of the detective-psychoanalyst), tried to resist the attempts of the others to fatten him up so that he would become the kind of person they wanted to create. This heaviness, of course, was designed to keep him from flying away from his social duty. But he had to submit; he could not escape—nor, for that matter, could the others.

Society does not replace the "lost dimension"; it merely

---

3 Ibid., p. 126.
4 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
5 Ibid., p. 89.
leaves this void in the individual. The feeling of emptiness is never satisfactorily filled by social activity. A propos of this, John T. Daniel states that "more savagely and powerfully than any other contemporary playwright he (Ionesco) has shown man going through the motions of living," and by so doing has exposed the void within.6 Marcel Brion remarks that Ionesco's theatre is not only the image of our time, but our time itself. His theatre, in its "terrible lucidity," cuts across the flesh to the very bone, and then into the bone—not to get to the marrow inside, but to show that the bone is empty.7

As pointed out earlier, most of Ionesco's characters, representing the vast majority of men, do not seem to be aware of this void. They keep busy all the time in their little closed-in worlds. But there are some who are more sensitive than the others. They are aware of something lacking in their lives, and they try to explain it. They also retain the memory of earlier happiness, of vague desires, and of dream worlds in which their inner self once found fulfillment. Here and there in Ionesco's "tragic farce" there are brief outbursts of anguish, desires, and dreams, which are for the most part stifled or ill articulated, but are nevertheless there. Although this is not true about the characters of his earliest plays, it is certainly noticeable in the plays from

---

his middle period on, beginning with Les Chaises and Victimes du devoir. As Robert Abirached, speaking of the plays of this second period, stated: "Pour la première fois, on voit apparaître chez Ionesco la nostalgie d'une enfance perdue, la curiosité du monde obscur qui constitue le fond de l'âme humaine, et une certaine pitié pour l'homme solitaire et abandonné qui se souvient d'un rêve de bonheur."8

In poetic outbursts some of his characters try to revert to their childhood, or else to some fantasy world of their imagination. Richard M. Eastman remarks that Ionesco's power as playwright in the poetic sense is that he can "reawaken in modern man the candid child who treasures life simply because he is alive."9 Ionesco himself, according to Jacques Brenner, preserves on his countenance some traits of infancy: "Ionesco possède un visage très expressif qui conserve des reflets d'enfance. Personne ne mime mieux que Ionesco l'étonnement, l'émerveillement, la joie, l'enm, la consternation."10 What Ionesco especially values is the capacity for wonder which a young child has. In an interview for the magazine Réalités, he states:

"Ce que je cherche, c'est à retrouver la capacité d'émerveillement qu'avait ma fille quand elle avait trois ans: je lui disais

---


This youthful naïveté is found in several characters of Ionesco's plays. In fact, according to Muriel Reed, "chacune de ses pièces est en quelque sorte un hymne à la naïveté, à la joie de vivre, à la fraîcheur, à l'émerveillement. Mais un hymne à rebours." 

There is especially noticeable a nostalgia for a paradise lost, or perhaps for a paradise which could have been. Like Rousseau, Ionesco seems to believe in the natural man and, like Pascal, in one who has fallen from his state of innocence—a deposed king, looking back and measuring the distance between his original dignity and his present fallen state. In either case, Ionesco shows the opposition of our nature and our condition.

Luc Norin remarks that several of Ionesco's plays touch on the same myth: that of Paradise Lost. One recalls that the old people in Les Chaises referred to a happier state in their past; the old man, in particular, still had a rosy picture of his youth, when there was

---

11 Muriel Reed, "Eugène Ionesco, l'auteur le plus discuté du théâtre contemporain," Réalités, No. 142 (November, 1957), 118.
12 Ibid., p. 88.
14 Ibid., p. 84.
light even at midnight. He also spoke of a state of bliss in an earlier part of his life, even though he did not know exactly what it was: "C'était un lieu, un temps exquis." But this "temps si beau" was so far back in his life that he could no longer retrieve it. Choubert, in looking for Mallot, found bits of his real self by going back in his memory to a few happy moments in his early life. And Amédée, in the midst of a frustrating domestic life, felt that in his youth he was happier and more fulfilled. Richard Eastman points out that actually Ionesco deals with little people—not with adults, but with little people who have grown up. These people are isolated, frightened, and anguished. They are living in a universe which is hostile to them, and they want to escape.

Rosette Lamont notes that whenever Ionesco wishes to express "a temporary reprieve from the human situation," he uses the symbols of flight, open space, light, and airiness. Let us examine the most notable instances of these. Choubert, when he strays away, contrary to the orders of the detective, comes upon "une miraculeuse cité," almost as in a dream, surrounded by storms, but still there, "lumineuse dans les ténèbres." This is to him "un miraculeux jardin, une fontaine jaillissante, des jeux d'eaux, des fleurs de feu dans la nuit ... un palais de flammes glacées, des statues lumineuses,

17 Eastman, op. cit., p. 10.
des mers incandescentes, des continents qui flamment dans les nuits, dans des océans de neige! Both the detective and Madeleine do their best to bring Choubert back to "reality." But he keeps slipping away, into little corners of his mind, where his interior self is still alive. At one point he remembers a very beautiful June morning which makes him so lighthearted that he feels that he can fly:

C'est un matin de juin. Je respire un air plus léger que l'air. Je suis plus léger que l'air. Le soleil se dissout dans une lumière plus grande que le soleil. Je passe à travers tout. ... Je monte ... Je monte. ... Une lumière qui ruisselle. ... Je monte. ... Je baigne dans la lumière. ... La lumière me pénètre. Je suis étonné d'être, étonné d'être ... étonné d'être. ... Je suis lumière! Je vole!

After this, of course, his wife ridicules him, and he loses confidence and falls. Jacques, in L'Avenir est dans les œufs, tries to break out of the narrow confines of his domestic existence into a world of light: "Je veux une fontaine de lumière, de l'eau incandescente, un feu de glace, des neiges de feu." But he, too, is recalled to reality and told not to neglect his duty to society. In the dream sequence of Amédée ou Comment s'en débarrasser youthful happiness is stated in terms of lightness. The young Amédée tries to call the attention of his bride Madeleine to the dawn of spring, to the warmth and sunshine, and to the flowers blooming. He is so happy that he feels as if he has no weight: "Univers aérien ... Liberté ... Puissance transparente ... Equilibre ... Légère plénitude. ...
Le monde n'a pas de poids." His feeling of lightness, however, is eventually stifled by his domestic life. Later in the play, when he looks out the window of his apartment (where the whole atmosphere is so decayed that there are mushrooms growing) up at the night sky and sees the stars, he speaks of the brightness which he sees there: the incandescent milky way, comets and meteors like rivers of liquid silver, ponds, lakes, oceans of palpable light. He is overwhelmed by the beauty of this infinite space, in which there are "des bouquets de neige fleurie, des arbres dans le ciel, des jardins, des prairies... des toits, des chapiteaux... des colonnes, des temples... Et de l'espace, de l'espace, un espace infini!"23

Ionesco, through his characters, is actually expressing his own yearnings for infinite space filled with beauty. He writes of his feeling of euphoria when in an "extra-social" state where he is most alone, where there is no longer any society, where he is confronted with the sheer fact of existence: "... lorsque, par exemple, je me réveille, à moi-même et au monde et que je prends ou que je reprends conscience, soudainement, que je suis, que j'existe, qu'il y a quelque chose qui m'entoure, des sortes de choses, une sorte de monde et que tout m'apparaît insolite, incompréhensible, et que m'envahit l'étonnement d'être. Je plonge dans cet étonnement. L'univers me paraît alors infiniment étrange, étrange et étranger. A ce moment, je le contemple, avec un mélange

22Ionesco, Théâtre, I, 288.
23Ibid., p. 298.
d'angoisse et d'euphorie."24 So, in spite of feeling imprisoned in a workaday world, he still has not lost his faculty of wonder. As stated by Simone Benmussa: "Ionesco décrit la dérision de la réalité qui s'effrite entre les doigts comme une poignée de terre: dans le même temps il s'étonne et s'émerveille de chaque grain de poussière qui l'enterre. Il y a une espèce de nostalgie de la lumière dans cette asphyxie."25

Ionesco believes that man has a pure nature from which social living has alienated him. If he recaptures this state, he will be himself again. He will thus find his original purity and freedom, and he will look at the world in a new light. Ionesco treasures the simple, the pure, the natural man beneath social conduct, beneath all systems. He calls for a "coup de matraque" to wake people up from their "paresse mentale," which hides the strangeness and marvelous qualities of the world from us. He feels that it is necessary first for a sort of dislocation from the real, which is to precede its reintegration.26 He would like to see "une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit ... une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle."27 He claims that the world lacks audacity, which is the reason why we suffer.28 Modern man,

26Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 13.
27Ibid.
28Ibid., p. 128.
he feels, is lost "dans le labyrinthe ténébreux du monde" and has, consequently, forgotten the goal of life.  

His own astonishment over the fact of existence he assigns to his creation, Bérenger. Bérenger is an "illuminé"; that is to say, during his youth, and perhaps even before his birth, a light crossed his soul, liberating it from any kind of earthly heaviness, inundating it with a joy without cause and a love without object.

It is the souvenir of this delightful state of soul which has kept him going in his dull life. In the first act of Tueur sans gages, when he is being shown around the cité radieuse by the architect, his former happiness is rekindled, and he tries to explain it to the architect.

He tells him that he had once hoped for a beautiful city like this, but had finally given up hoping. He had almost become reconciled to his drab existence, when all at once, and quite by accident, he chanced upon the radiant city, and now he feels himself to be in the middle of springtime, in full April, "en cet avril de mes rêves ... de mes plus anciens rêves." This beautiful (if artificial) world causes him to become himself again, to find a part of himself which he had thought dead. During all his life he has been looking for such a place, either consciously or

__________________________


31Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 68.
subconsciously, and now he believes that he has actually found it—this other universe, this transfigured world. The architect tells him that it was all due to scientific technology, there is nothing at all miraculous about it. But this does not matter to Bérenger; he believes that the city is like a beautiful mirage—one of those mirages which are more real than reality itself: "Les mirages ... il n'y a rien de plus réel. Les fleurs de feu, les arbres de flamme, les étangs de lumière, il n'y a que cela de vrai, au fond." 32

He again congratulates the architect on the exquisitely beautiful city, the exterior equivalent of his universe of the imagination. Bérenger says that what he has been needing in life is something like this to reawaken his inner self: "Des jardins, du ciel bleu, un printemps qui correspondent à l'univers intérieur, dans lequel celui-ci puisse se reconnaître, qui soit comme sa traduction ou comme son anticipation, ou ses miroirs dans lesquels son propre sourire pourrait se réfléchir ... dans lesquels il puisse se reconnaître, dire: voilà ce que je suis en vérité et que j'avais oublié, un être souriant, dans un monde souriant." 33

He unashamedly admits that he is exalted over the city, that it reminds him of a lost happiness which he has felt several times during his life, if only infrequently. When the architect asks him to tell about his feeling, Bérenger says that it is something that is not easy to communicate:

32 Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 72.
33 Ibid., II, 73.
Je ne puis analyser cet état, je ne sais même pas si l'expérience que j'ai vécue est communicable. Ce n'était pas une expérience fréquente. Elle s'est répétée cinq ou six fois, dix fois, peut-être, dans ma vie. Assez, cependant, pour combler de joie, de certitude, je ne sais quels réservoirs de l'esprit. Lorsque j'étais enclin à la mélancolie, le souvenir de ce rayonnement éblouissant, de cet état lumineux faisait renaitre en moi la force, les raisons sans raison de vivre, d'aimer. ... d'aimer quoi? ... D'aimer tout, éperdument.34

The last time that he felt such a state of elation was when he was seventeen or eighteen, as he was strolling through a little country village, somewhere in the south. He was all alone, the weather was beautiful, and the sun was overhead, high up in the blue of the sky. He was walking, but without a definite goal in mind; it did not even matter because he was so happy just to be alive: "Je sentis profondément le bonheur unique de vivre. J'avais tout oublié, je ne pensais plus à rien, sauf à ces maisons-là, ce ciel profond, ce soleil qui semblait s'être rapproché, à portée de la main dans ce monde construit à ma mesure."35 This astonishment over simply existing became greater and greater, until he was in the most wonderful state of euphoria:

Brusquement la joie se fit plus grande encore, rompant toutes les frontières! Oh, l'indicible euphorie m'envahit, la lumière se fit encore plus éclatante, sans rien perdre de sa douceur, elle était tellement dense qu'elle en était respirable, elle était devenue l'air lui-même ou buvable, comme une eau transparente. ... Comment vous dire l'éclat incomparable? ... C'était comme s'il y avait quatre soleils dans le ciel.36

---

34Ibid., p. 76.
35Ibid., p. 77.
36Ibid.
Not only did the universe react on him, but he reacted on the universe, each one re-enforcing the other: "Ma paix, ma propre lumière à leur tour s'épanchaient dans le monde, je combrais l'univers d'une sorte d'énergie aérienne. Pas une parcelle vide, tout était un mélange de plénitude et de légèreté, un parfait équilibre." The familiar world seemed new to him, and he felt a great astonishment in regarding it through his new-found happiness: "Tout était vierge, purifié, retrouvé, je ressentais à la fois un étonnement sans nom, mêlé à un sentiment d'extrême familiarité." He can not explain what this astonishment was, but it made him feel as if he were the center of the universe: "Je me sentais là, aux portes de l'univers, au centre de l'univers." He walked, he ran, he cried out, "Je suis, je suis, tout est, tout est!" He even felt that he could have flown: "Oh, j'aurais certainement pu m'envoyer, tellement j'étais devenu léger, plus léger que ce ciel bleu que je respirais. ... Un effort de rien, un tout petit bond aurait suffi. ... Je me serais enveloplé ... j'en suis sûr."

But somehow his happy feeling left him, and he has never had it since. Now there is an emptiness inside of him left by the memory of his lost paradise: "Il se fit en moi une sorte de vide tumultueux,

37 Ibid., p. 78.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
une tristesse profonde s'empara de moi, comme au moment d'une séparation tragique, intolérable. Since then, he has had only a feeling of heaviness. Even though he has never been able to recapture his joyous state, he still has the hunger for it.

This lost paradise actually is found by two characters in Ionesco's theatre: by Amédée, who is reunited with his real self and becomes so happy that he drifts off into space, and by the Bérenger of Le Piéton de l'air, who flies into the air without even the aid of wings. The joy over having refound their true natures makes these two fortunate beings so lighthearted that they are lifted right out of the commonplace of the world into the universe of infinite space. This joy, "sans cause et sans limites," gives to the characters, as it were, invisible wings.

Le Piéton de l'air is one of those mellow plays written when a playwright is at the peak of his powers. In this respect it has been compared to the later plays of Shakespeare, in particular to The Tempest. There is in the play a mellowness and a gentle humor which are quite in contrast to the sharpness of Ionesco's earlier ones. Le Piéton de l'air takes on added depth in relation to the rest of his theatrical output, and also to his essays, for one

---

42 Ibid., p. 79.
43 Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser is also treated in Chapter I, pp. 27-39, and in Chapter IV, pp. 142-143.
44 Gouhier, "Un humanisme tragique," p. 84.
45 Jean-Louis Barrault, "Un vrai 'Piéton de l'air'," Biblio, XXXI (October, 1963), 2.
notices several recurring themes in all of them: that people have
lost part of their true selves on growing up and that they are
suffering because of it, that one has the desire to escape from the
prison of social existence, and that happiness comes with refinding
one's true nature. One also notices Ionesco's preference for the
natural over the artificial, a love of the simple things in life,
and a feeling that there is innate in man a creative instinct, which
must be given an outlet. And finally, there is a pessimism counter-
balanced with optimism.

The scenery of the play is described by Ionesco in the stage
directions as something that might have been painted by le Douanier
Rousseau, or Utrillo, or perhaps Chagall. There is a cottage in the
background, in the midst of a beautiful English countryside, which
must give the scene "une ambiance de rêve." The whole stage is in
"pleine lumière, sans pénombre." In the background one can see
some houses, "toutes blanches et très ensoleillées, d'un soleil
d'avril, de la petite ville de province anglaise." The sky is very
blue and very pure. There are several orchards on the stage—cherry
trees and pear trees—all in flowers. As it begins, two typical
elderly English women are out walking, indulging in the usual hollow
talk which Ionesco assigns to ordinary mortals:

Ire V. ANGLAISE: Oh, yes ...
IIe V. ANGLAISE: Yes, nous sommes en Angleterre.
Ire V. ANGLAISE: Dans le comté de Gloucester.
IIe V. ANGLAISE: Quel beau dimanche nous avons.

46. Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 122.
In the middle of this "beau dimanche," a newspaper reporter comes to Bérenger's peaceful country retreat to ask him some questions. (Bérenger, in this play, is a successful playwright, who is actually a thin disguise for Ionesco himself.) He tells the reporter that it was precisely to escape such things that he fled to England. Nevertheless, he does consent to be interviewed. During the course of the interview, Bérenger tells him that formerly there was "une force inexplicable" in him which enabled him to write in spite of "un nihilisme fondamental." But he can no longer continue. Literary activity is no longer a game with him. At one time it was "un passage vers autre chose"—exactly what he did not know—but now it is no longer that.47

He feels that everything has already been said. So, at least for the time being, he has abandoned the theatre. The reporter states that he believes that it is fear of rivals that has caused his retirement, but Bérenger says that it is rather a "nécessité de renouvellement intérieur." Right now he is tired; everything fatigues him, all the more when he wonders if literature can ever truly take into account "l'énorme complexité du réel ... du merveilleux réel." Most literature can not measure up to life, since it is frequently only cliché—"c'est-à-dire, elle se fait cliché, elle fige immédiatement, l'expression est en retard au lieu de devancer."48 He wonders what can be done to make literature

47Ibid., p. 125.
48Ibid., p. 128.
"une exploration intéressante." Even imagination is insufficient:
"Réalité dépasse la fiction; elle ne peut même plus être saisie par la conscience."49

The reporter, now satisfied because he has an interview that will please the readers of the Sunday section, goes off. Then Bérenger, his wife Joséphine, and his daughter Marthe go for a walk. Along the way they encounter several English people, among them one John Bull, a bourgeois Englishman—very much like the John Bell of Alfred de Vigny's Chatterton. His first remark gives one a good insight into his character:

Il paraît qu'il faut faire très attention à ce que disent les poètes. Ils ont souvent raison. C'est ce que l'on m'a dit. Ils prévoient et cela se vérifie. Je préfère les saucisses. Je préfère mon chien.50

While walking and enjoying the exceedingly lovely day, in the company of his family, Bérenger finds that he is extremely happy. When his daughter picks some flowers to put on his wife's hat, Bérenger is moved by such a tender gesture: "Ah! si tout le monde était comme toi! On vivrait dans la douceur. La vie serait possible et l'on pourrait aussi mourir sans chagrin, paisiblement. Quand on vit joyeusement, on peut mourir joyeusement. On devrait s'aimer toujours."51 His daughter agrees with him, saying that she feels a love which is without object, but which is there nevertheless,

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 141.
51 Ibid., p. 155.
because everything that she sees is so beautiful. He tells his
daughter that she is right to love everything and that she should
remind him of this if ever he should forget. At the moment, however,
he is so happy that he feels very light: "Jamais je n'ai été si
heureux. Jamais je ne me suis senti si léger." It must be the
healthy fresh air and the beautiful countryside, suggests his wife.
He agrees, adding, "C'est comme si c'était la première fois que je
voyais. Je viens de naître." This is perhaps the "virginité d'esprit" that Ionesco calls
for. Bérenger manages to recapture this ideal, and he tries to
explain it: "C'est ... une de ces joies oubliées, oubliées et
pourtant bien connues, comme une chose qui m'appartient de toute
éternité, que l'on perd tous les jours et qui cependant ne se perd
jamais. La preuve, c'est qu'on la retrouve, qu'on la reconnaît." This happiness is more than just a figment of his imagination:
"Cet allégresse est physique. Je la sens là. Mes poumons se
gonflent d'un air plus subtil que l'air. Ses vapeurs me montent
à la tête. Divine grisaille! Divine grisaille! ... En ce moment ... je n'ai plus d'inquiétudes." He does not understand the reason
for such a joyous state, but feels that perhaps it is better that
way, for he might be less happy if he knew the reason why.

---

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 156.
55 Ibid.
He eventually becomes so happy that he can not contain his joy. It gets out of hand: "Cela déborde, cela m'emporte, cela me transporte, cela me soulève de terre." In fact, his feet do actually leave the ground a few centimeters. This lightness of his becomes contagious, and some nearby English children begin skipping as they walk. Their elders, however, find this improper and tell them to stop. Joséphine thinks that her husband has gone far enough in his buoyancy—after all, it is embarrassing to have a husband who walks several centimeters above the ground—and she tells him to stop. John Bull comments that, even though there are many ways for one to express his joy, it is better not to express it. The reporter remarks that foreigners should be quarantined. Bérenger's wife then says that he is making a spectacle of himself, and she warns him that he will be attacked in the newspapers, and that perhaps even his English visa will be revoked. The other onlookers say that he is not well brought up. Bérenger nevertheless continues expressing his happiness in his own way, and he adds, "Je me sens soulevé et submergé par la joie."57

He begins not only to walk above the surface of the ground, but to make little jumps into the air. He is aglow with wonder: "Je m'envole. ... J'ai retrouvé le moyen, le moyen oublié."58 The English onlookers tell him that this is not natural, but he assures

---

56 Ibid., p. 161.
57 Ibid., p. 164.
58 Ibid., p. 165.
them that it is: "Je le fais tout spontanément. Ca vient tout seul."\textsuperscript{59} He goes on to say: "Volera est un besoin indispensable à l'homme. ... C'est une faculté innée. Tout le monde oublie. ... C'est simple, pourtant, lumineux, enfantin. Quand on ne voit pas, c'est pire que si nous étions privés de nourriture. C'est pour cela sans doute que nous nous sentons malheureux."\textsuperscript{60} The onlookers, however, are satisfied not to fly, and John Bull even says: "M'asseoir suffit à mon bonheur. J'aime aussi rester debout. Ou me coucher sur le ventre avec pour couverture mon cul."\textsuperscript{61}

The others tell him that, even if he should be right in saying that flying is a faculty which human beings have forgotten, it is too late to relearn it. Bérenger says that one must try to remember it. He admits that most of the time he himself does not know how to fly, but just the same he feels that it is necessary to learn it in order to be a more complete being: "Je sais de l'absence de quelle chose je souffre. C'est une affaire de santé. Si nous ne volons pas, c'est que nous sommes infirmes."\textsuperscript{62} He maintains that one can fly just as one can breathe. John Bull remarks that, even if one could fly, one should not, for, as he says, "Il faut dominer

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., p. 166. This statement is very similar to one which Ionesco made in an interview in 1960, reprinted in Notes et contre-notes, pp. 97-98, and to a statement in his article in the Journal de Métaphysique et de morale, p. 409, both of which are mentioned in Chapter V, p. 193.

\textsuperscript{61}Ionesco, Théâtre, III, 166.

\textsuperscript{62}Ibid., p. 167.
Bérenger, however, insists that flying is a habit which can be taken up again; after all, if we are not careful, we might even forget how to walk. This could lead to our losing all of our powers. The others admit that he is right in this, for pedestrians are indeed becoming rarer. Bérenger insists that he will remain a pedestrian, both of the earth and of the air.

He attempts to fly higher, but his wife tells him that this cannot be done. He tells her that one must have confidence, or else one will not be able to do it. When one has this confidence—when he finds himself in full flight, over the highest trees, or a lake, or the countryside—he is not at all afraid. But if he thinks that it is abnormal to fly, then he can not do it. Bérenger has a desire to fly even higher—to rise up over the valley which is there in front of him, to see what there is in the other valleys beyond the hills. This, of course, he will do without the aid of any mechanical device. He prefers to do it naturally, for even though "l'engin remplace l'homme et ses fonctions," he prefers to find again "la fonction authentique à travers ses déformations." He succeeds in flying higher, and he asks if the others want to try also. The children say yes, but the grownups say no. Bérenger does it alone; he flies so high that he goes out of sight.

Joséphine is afraid that he will fly away and leave her permanently. Eventually, after many anxious moments on the part of

---

63 Ibid., p. 168.
64 Ibid., p. 171.
his wife, Bérenger returns to earth, visibly shaken by his flight into space. He has seen things too horrible to describe, and he has lost his feeling of lightness. However, no one wishes to believe him, except his family, who would like to fly away with him. He says that he can not take them, for there is nothing in outer space, but "les abîmes illimités." The three of them walk back to town, saddened. Bérenger's daughter, however, is still optimistic: "Peut-être les abîmes se rempliront ... peut-être que ... les jardins ... les jardins ..." On this note the play ends, as the three walk off into the sunset, on this sort of "quatorze juillet anglais."

The act of flying in Le Piéton de l'air is, of course, symbolic of something else: to regain all of one's self—all of the undeveloped faculties which have been all but lost—to break away from the limiting confines of one's earthly existence into the infinite freedom and opportunity which the universe holds out for us.

The explanation has been offered that this levitation is a sign of "metaphysical yearnings." It has been suggested by Richard Schechner that it is "a metaphor for the creative act itself." It is perhaps also symbolic of all the obscure longings of the soul and of the desire for the fulfillment of dreams, or perhaps of the

---

65 I b i d . , p . 198.
exercising of the imagination, or, in fact, of any act of breaking out of the confines of one's limited intelligence to grasp things which are outside the realm of the reason.\textsuperscript{69}

It would seem as if all of these interpretations have their validity, for Ionesco has suggested creation (especially artistic creation), dreaming, and imagination as some of the means to break away from life's limitations and develop oneself more fully. Let us take up these suggestions, beginning with imagination, which Ionesco sees as more important than "la réalité concrète, matérielle, appauvrie, vidée, limitée."\textsuperscript{70} He believes that it is not by a limited notion of reality that the authentic nature of things is discovered: "La nature authentique des choses, la vérité ne peut nous être révélée que par la fantaisie plus réaliste que tous les réalismes."\textsuperscript{71} Dreaming can reveal to the mind many things which are not noticed when one is awake. Ionesco writes: "Lorsque je rêve je n'ai pas le sentiment d'abdiquer la pensée. J'ai au contraire l'impression que je vois, en rêvant, des vérités, qui m'apparaissent, des évidences, dans une lumière plus éclatante, avec une acuité plus impitoyable qu'à l'état de veille."\textsuperscript{72}

Ionesco sees imagination as a kind of power; it is "la force

\textsuperscript{69}George G. Strem, "Ritual and Poetry in Eugène Ionesco's Theatre," \textit{The Texas Quarterly}, V (1962), 158.

\textsuperscript{70}Ionesco, \textit{Notes et contre-notes}, pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{71}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 123.

\textsuperscript{72}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 93.
Imagination is a source of the joy of existence; it is part of man's true nature. The world that is within needs further exploration: "L'espace est immense à l'intérieur de nous-même. Qui ose s'y aventurer? Il nous faut des explorateurs, des découvreurs de mondes inconnus qui sont en nous, qui sont à découvrir en nous." One simply needs the solitude, the daringness to seek it, and the desire to let his mind leave the grooves it has been pushed into by systems of any kind.

Freedom of the imagination is perhaps the audacity which Ionesco feels that the world lacks: "La liberté d'imagination n'est pas une fuite dans l'irréel, elle n'est pas une évasion, elle est audace, invention. Inventer n'est pas démissionner, n'est pas s'évader. Les routes de l'imagination sont innombrables, les puissances de l'invention n'ont pas de bornes." Using our power to think is one way to deliver ourselves from our condition. The work of Ionesco has been called "une préméditation d'une liberté à nous promise et que nous ne connaissons pas encore." Ionesco wonders if art might not be the means to this liberty: "Je me demande si l'art ne pourrait pas être la libération, le réapprentissage d'une liberté dont nous sommes désabitués, que nous avons oubliée, dont

---

73 Ibid., p. 130.
74 Ibid., p. 207.
75 Ibid., p. 64.
76 Jean Duvignaud, "La Dérision," Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, No. 29 (February, 1960), 22.
l'absence fait souffrir aussi bien ceux qui se croient libres que ceux qui pensent ne pas pouvoir l'être; mais un apprentissage 'indirect.'"

Artistic creation is an important and indispensable part of man's nature: "La création est une nécessité instinctive, extra-consciente; parce que imaginer, inventer, découvrir, créer, est une fonction aussi naturelle que la respiration." It is being deprived of a creative outlet which causes some of man's malaise: "Les gens qui en sont privés, à qui on refuse la liberté d'inventer, du jeu, de créer des œuvres d'art, au-delà de tout 'engagement' souffrent profondément. Même s'ils ne s'en aperçoivent pas clairement tout de suite."  

Ionesco believes that the need to invent, to express oneself by creating something is what raises man above the animals. All of us, at one time or another, have written, or at least tried to write, or else have tried to paint, to act, to compose music, or to build something, if only a rabbit cage. There is not always any practical utility to this, or, if so, it is only a pretext to let our creative nature express itself. The act of creating, in fact, is what characterizes man:

---


78 Ionesco, "L'Auteur et ses problèmes," Revue de Métaphysique et de morale, LXVIII (October-December, 1963), 409.

79 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, pp. 97-98.

80 Ibid., pp. 103-104.
Ce qui caractérise l'homme, a-t-on dit, c'est qu'il est l'animal qui rit; il est surtout l'animal créateur. Il introduit dans l'univers des choses qui n'existent pas dans l'univers: temples ou cabanes à lapins, brochettes, locomotives, symphonies, poèmes, cathédrales, cigarettes. L'utilité de la création de toutes ces choses n'en est très souvent que le prétexte. A quoi sert d'exister? à exister. A quoi sert une fleur? à être une fleur. A quoi servent un temple, une cathédrale? A abriter les fidèles? Il me semble que non, puisque les temples sont désaffectés et que l'on continue de les admirer. Ils servent à nous révéler les lois de l'architecture et peut-être celles de la construction universelle que vraisemblablement notre esprit reflète, puisque l'esprit les retrouve en lui-même.81

The creative power of the imagination, which some people see as evasion, but which Ionesco sees as an essential part of our nature, must not be limited, or channeled into narrow paths:

Il ne faut pas empêcher le déploiement libre des forces imaginatives. Pas de canalisations, pas de dirigisme, pas d'idées préconçues, pas de limites. Je pense qu'une œuvre d'art en est une dans la mesure où l'intention première est dépassée; dans la mesure où le flot imaginatif est allé au-delà des limites ou des voies étroites que voulait s'imposer, au départ, le créateur: messages, idéologies, désir de prouver ou d'enseigner. Cette liberté absolue d'imager, les esprits tristes de notre temps la nomment fuite, évasion alors qu'elle est création.82

Absolute liberty of thought is what Ionesco calls for, since certain realities and basic truths reveal themselves only "dans le cheminement de cette pensée créatrice." This signifies to Ionesco that "l'imagination est révélatrice, qu'elle est chargée de multiples significations que le 'réalisme' étroit et quotidien ou l'idéologie limitative ne peuvent plus révéler."83

---

81Ibid., p. 32.
82Ibid., p. 104.
83Ibid., p. 62.
When Ionesco writes, he does not always have in mind a specific intention or plan, but rather he has many ideas, some only partly formed, some perhaps only in his sub-conscious: "En effet, pour moi, c'est dans et grâce à la création artistique que l'intention ou les intentions se précisent. La construction n'est que le surgissement de l'édifice intérieur se laissant ainsi découvrir."\(^84\)

So, in the beginning there is the creative urge, which must be allowed to develop on its own. As he says in his Notes et contre-notes: "Il faut laisser l'imagination courir librement, bien au delà des considérations extérieures, secondaires, comme sont celles du destin de l'œuvre, de sa popularité, ou du besoin d'illustrer une idéologie."\(^85\) The author owes allegiance only to his creation, to which he must give birth naturally:

La création ne ressemble pas à la dictature, pas même à une dictature idéologique. Elle est vie, liberté, elle peut même être contre les idéaux connus et se tourner contre l'auteur. L'auteur n'a qu'un devoir, ne pas intervenir, vivre et laisser vivre, libérer ses obsessions, ses phantasmes, ses personnages, son univers, les laisser naître, prendre forme, exister.\(^86\)

The means to creative mental activity requires solitude, something difficult to come by in our time. Ionesco defends solitude against those who think of it as a form of escape or as anti-social behavior. In fact, to him, society is made up of solitary beings:

"La solitude n'est pas séparation mais recueillement, alors que les

\(^{84} \text{Ibid., p. 143.}\)

\(^{85} \text{Ibid., p. 30.}\)

\(^{86} \text{Ibid., p. 175.}\)
groupements, les sociétés ne sont, le plus souvent, comme on l'a déjà dit, que des solitaires réunis." 87 It is in his solitude that the poet discovers realities. The philosopher, too, discovers his truths in the silence of his library, truths which are not readily communicated. 88 Ionesco believes that it is in our solitude that we find our real selves: "Dans notre solitude fondamentale ... nous nous retrouvons." 89

Ionesco is a man who enjoys solitude. He bemoans the fact that today, with our socialistic, nationalistic, and bourgeois societies, the individual has little in the way of a private life. He feels that he is more truly himself when he is alone and that often society alienates him from himself and from others. 90 He writes that his social self does not fully reveal him: "Lorsque je suis à la surface sociale de moi-même je suis impersonnel. Ou je suis très peu moi-même." 91 He remarks that one always feels a bit uncomfortable in the company of other people, in whose presence one can be very lonely. He believes that it is indispensable to have some secrecy and privacy in one's life. 92

87 Ibid., p. 129.
89 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 60.
90 Ibid., p. 94.
91 Ibid., p. 95.
Solitude, he feels, is what characterizes the human condition, which is, in the final analysis, what Ionesco is most concerned with:

"Ce qui, personnellement, m'obsède, ce qui m'intéresse profondément, ce qui m'engage c'est le problème de la condition humaine, dans son ensemble, social ou extra-social. L'extra-social: c'est là où l'homme est profondément seul." 93 He goes farther:

Si je peux m'exprimer en paradoxe, je dirai que la société véritable, l'authehtique communauté humaine, est extra-sociale,—c'est une société plus vaste et plus profonde, celle qui se révèle par des angoisses communes, des désirs, des nostalgies secrètes qui sont le fait de tous. L'histoire du monde est gouvernée par ces nostalgies et ces angoisses que l'activité politique ne fait que refléter, et qu'elle interprète très imperfectement. Aucune société n'a pu abolir la tristesse humaine, aucun système politique ne peut nous libérer de la douleur de vivre, de la peur de mourir, de notre soif de l'absolu. C'est la condition humaine qui gouverne la condition sociale, non le contraire. 94

Ionesco claims that his plays try to show simply that man is not only a social animal who is a prisoner of his time, but that he is also, and especially, "dans tous les temps, différent historiquement, dans ses accidents, identique dans son essence." 95 He wonders what the term "social" really means, and he believes that there are many misunderstandings in connection with this word. Too often, he feels, things which are said to have a social interest in reality have more of a political or practical value. He prefers the word "communauté" to "société." He refers to a "communauté extra-historique," which he says is a more fundamental one going beyond

---

93 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 114.
94 Ibid., p. 73.
95 Ibid., p. 60.
any barrier of caste or class. He finds that "l'homme 'en général' est plus vrai que l'homme limité à son époque, mutilé." Ionesco tries to get to the very source of the human situation, which is why he asserts the primacy of the basic nature of man. He penetrates the complex structure of society to rediscover "the root of mankind": man himself.

All of Ionesco's plays, in one way or another, tend toward the "reconstitution of an honourable image of human nature, and of that nature in its relation with other natures." This human nature is not to be found entirely in man's social self—that limited part of him that is on the surface—but also in his inner life. The universe which lies within us needs to be explored further, for it can be as important as the outside one, of which it is, after all, a part: "Le monde intérieur peut être aussi riche que le monde du dehors. L'un et l'autre ne sont, d'ailleurs, que les deux aspects d'une même réalité."  

Ionesco's theatre, in the words of Henri Gouhier, "représente aujourd'hui ce retour à l'homme intérieur." This interiority

---

96 Ibid., p. 93.
97 Ibid., p. 60.
100 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 111.
gives man back his lost dimension and restores him to his original dignity. What Ionesco would like to see is a world reformed in accordance with everyone's inner nature, a world in which one can be, in the words of Bérenger, "un être souriant dans un monde souriant." Any kind of revolt which is to better the world must take into consideration not just the exterior life of man, but also the inner life: "Dans cet univers totalitaire où les gens ne sont que des camarades et non plus des amis, surgira la révolte qui restaurera, je l'espère, l'homme dans son intériorité, dans son humanité réelle, dans sa liberté et son équilibre."  

---

102 Ionesco, Théâtre, II, 73.

103 Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, p. 109.
A study of the concept of identity in the theatre of Ionesco shows a major preoccupation with this concept and with the various problems that arise in relation to it. He points out how the individual is beleaguered all his life and in almost every way by alienating forces. This alienation begins in the family environment, where there is little private life and where each member of the family is restricted by the other members. The person becomes less of an individual than a part of a group. The family is the agent of society's pressure to decrease individuality. It metes out reward or punishment in accordance with its ideas and values. The individual is quick to realize this and he either falls into the common pattern, or else is made to submit.

Society at large continues the work begun by the family, as it, too, takes control of the individual. Ionesco shows that social living, with its routines, duties, ceremonies, and formulas for talking is very much like a ritual. The individual is separated from himself by the obligations of society—by its demands on his time, energies, and attention. One's social identity becomes the whole man, and the inner self suffers. As a result, the individual loses sight of the goals of life and does not examine his reasons for existing.

The forces of social authority are embodied for Ionesco in what he refers to as the Administration. The architect in
gages is seen to be an example of a member of the Administration who has been completely dehumanized. He is presented by Ionesco as the man of the future in a perfectly regulated society. This Kafkaesque creature is a man who does not think for himself, but simply does his duty, wherever it may lead. By so doing, he has given up his conscience and his responsibility. He can see his fellow beings suffering and even killed without any twinge of his conscience. He never worries about his future, for he feels safe within the Administration, to which he unquestioningly gives his allegiance.

Ionesco also shows how the spirit of the individual, like his body, is seized upon by alienating forces. The mind becomes directed by a ready acceptance of clichés and borrowed systems of thought, especially when these are accepted without examination. The means to the tyranny of the mind are both passive and active. On a passive level, one simply repeats what the rest of his fellows say, like a kind of parrot. Ionesco shows that people who live thus can become someone else and vice versa, because they all have the same identity and there is nothing underneath to establish anything more stable. Such people are seen to excellent advantage in La Cantatrice chauve.

Active domination on a mental level is also demonstrated by Ionesco, especially in La Leçon and Rhinocéros. He is aware that leaders of schools of thought are ever on the quest for new disciples and wish to form other people in their own image. Such is the professor of La Leçon, who might be looked upon as the personification of a closed system of thought. Ionesco opposes any pre-formed system which substitutes itself for thought and by so doing kills it. On a
creative level one sees how Ionesco resists having an identity forced on him by critics who try to tell him how and what to write. He sees ideologies as the most dangerous form of closed systems of thought, for they often lead to idolatries or totalitarian regimes which channel individual thought for their own purposes, or else crush it. He shows how people adopt the prevailing ideologies because of a desire to conform and how they try to justify their conformity intellectually.

In the character of Bérenger, Ionesco has created a personage who does not conform and who stands up for the rights of the individual. He is a man of good will, whose mind can still recognize truth and who refuses to cover it over with any false or incomplete ideology. He retains his individuality, as well as his conscience and a feeling of responsibility to humanity. He is a person who feels that he is a part of all mankind of all times rather than only a part of the men of his own time. He is forced into solitude because of his fidelity to such an ideal, and this is what makes of him a kind of tragic hero.

Bérenger, as several critics have remarked, is Ionesco himself. It has also been noted that Ionesco's plays are exorcisms of his own anxieties. He has expressed, in his articles as well as through some of the characters in his plays, his own desire to escape from this world and his yearning for a world of infinite beauty and truth. His more sensitive characters express similar desires; they do not feel at one with their social identities and they look for their real selves elsewhere. They are unsuccessful when they try to relate themselves to the material world, to their way of life, to the
ideas and outlooks of their society, or to their possessions. Their identity, being only their outer shell, does not give them the lost dimension that they are looking for.

Of special interest is Ionesco's idea, expressed in *Victimes du devoir* and *Les Chaises*—two of his plays in which he is most directly concerned with the problem of identity—that the real self is too complex to be neatly categorized or comprehended. In the former play one sees a person who is forced to find for himself a definite social identity, but who is unsuccessful because he is actually a multitude of selves, all of them in a state of flux. One also sees, in the final scene of the play, the tyranny of a society which tries to force an identity on a person without taking into account his inner life.

In *Les Chaises* Ionesco shows us people who have built for themselves identities based on hopes, aspirations, fears, and distorted memories. Such are the two old people of this play, who bolster each other up in their illusions. As an extension of their subjective view of themselves, they have also built up a subjective view of the world, which is just as insubstantial as the identities they assign to themselves. The tragic element of the play is that, in brief moments of lucidity, the old man does realize the flimsiness of his life, but he then conceals it again with his illusions, largely by insisting that there is something of importance in him in spite of everything. But this something, which he terms his message to humanity, turns out to be founded on the same unreality as his conception of himself. It is, in fact, the unreality beneath
one's identity which Ionesco exposes in this play.

There is the implication in Ionesco's theatre that one does not know what his true self might be because of having to adopt a social identity. Ionesco expresses his desire that man might be other than a social animal and his conviction that man would be happier if his inner self were given more freedom. He is not content only to expose the problem of the loss of the self; he also suggests several means to regain it, or at least to allow it a more satisfying development. Perhaps the most important of these is a new outlook, the ability to see the familiar world in a new light rather than from crystallized attitudes. Exercising one's mental faculties is another way, and one which can be achieved through imagination, reverie, and recourse to a world of fantasy. Artistic creation is yet another means, and one which Ionesco feels is innate in man. And, finally, a productive solitude gives to one the necessary atmosphere he needs in order to fulfill himself.

Ionesco expresses his belief that the individual can achieve a more authentic self, and therefore a more satisfying balance between the inner and the outer worlds. He offers as relief from the malaise of existence the development of this inner life, and he calls for a return to the basic self beneath the social identity. It is by coming to terms with the inner life, he feels, that the individual realizes his full potential as a human being.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


Cornu, Marcel. [Review of Ionesco's Notes et contre-notes], La Pensée, No. 105 (October, 1962), 147-149.


Doubrovsky, J. S. "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," Yale French Studies, No. 23 (Summer, 1959), 3-10.


Esslin, Martin, "Ionesco and the Creative Dilemma," Tulane Drama Review, VII (Spring, 1963), 169-179.


______. "Eugène Ionesco répond au questionnaire Marcel Proust," Biblio, XXXI (October, 1963), 14.


______. "There is no avant-garde Theater," Evergreen Review, I (1957), 101-105.


Newspapers


VITA

George Edward Craddock, Jr. was born in Cary, North Carolina on March 20, 1932, the first son of George Edward and Daisy Batts Craddock. He was educated in the public schools of Cary, graduating from the Cary High School in June, 1950. George Edward Craddock, Jr. was employed for five years in the Auditor's Office of the Seaboard Railroad Company in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina for four years, where he was graduated with honors in French in January, 1960. He entered the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina in February, 1960, and transferred to the Graduate School of Louisiana State University in September, 1960, as a National Defense Graduate Fellow. He received the Master of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in August, 1962. In September, 1963, he joined the Modern Language Department of Greensboro College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he holds the position of Assistant Professor of French. During the Summer of 1965 he did research on the avant-garde theatre in Paris with the aid of a grant from the Ford Foundation, administered through the Piedmont University Center in North Carolina. He is presently a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Foreign Languages of Louisiana State University.
EXAMINATION AND THESIS REPORT

Candidate:  George Edward Craddock, Jr.

Major Field:  French

Title of Thesis:  The Concept of Identity in the Theatre of Eugène Ionesco

Approved:

Elliott D. Healy
Major Professor and Chairman

May Goodrich
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Helen W. McDonald
Frederick Killerman
George Rossbridge

Date of Examination:

December 17, 1966