1970

Aspects of Tragedy in the Theatre of Eugene Ionesco.

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JONES, Jimmy Ray, 1932-
ASPECTS OF TRAGEDY IN THE THEATRE OF
EUGÈNE IONESCO. [Portions of Text in
French].

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural
and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1970
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan

71-3419
Aspects of Tragedy in the Theatre of Eugène 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

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M.A., North Texas State University, 1962
May, 1970
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Abstract

The entire dramatic production of Eugène Ionesco, from 1950 to 1970, stands as illustrative proof of the playwright's achievement of the goals for a renewal of the theatre, which he proclaimed in the manifesto, *Notes et Contre-notes*: the renunciation of the dramatic portrayal of man as a philosophical abstraction, and the return to the classical and mythical conception of human tragedy. His theatre, so conceived, follows the Pascalian apprehension of man in an anguished state of consciousness resulting from his inability to perceive ontological absolutes.

Intellectual and spiritual faculties permit man to conceive of his mortality as tragic, rendering him superior to the incomprehensible powers which gratuitously grant him a moment of existence before plunging him into eternal nothingness. Ionesco's dramatic creation depicts man in a universal and mythical sense, heroic in his tragic fall, which is played out in the framework of a theatre of the absurd, a context compatible with mid-twentieth century modes of philosophical thought and aesthetic expression.

Ionesco's theatre is tragic in that it expresses the recognition of a conflict of basic physical and metaphysical principles affecting human existence and behavior. The
conflict demands reconciliation and solution, which are impossible in the light of the fortuitous nature of existence and the absence of any tangible absolutes.

The tragedy of the human condition is exteriorized by Ionesco in a form which rejects traditional personality portrayal and the development of individual characters and plot. Inspired by symbolist theatre and psycho-drama, it is a form which transposes experience to a psychological plane through a ritualistic visualization of images, creating a new mythology, born of the scientific imagination, which projects man's rage at the absurdity of existence.

Like primitive tragedy, Ionesco's theatre is religious in that it compells the spectator to see himself as he is in relation to that which is more than man. It exalts the human spirit, shakes off the inertia of matter, and invites one to share heroically in the natural magic of his own mystery.

As the tragic vision in drama may be observed at different periods of history to manifest itself in very different shapes of subject matter and tone, it now emerges with Ionesco in a form consistent with the climate of our time and with the contemporary state of literature and the theatre.
Chapter One

The Essence of Tragedy

Modern sociological and philosophical associations have obscured the original meaning of the words "tragic" and "tragedy" until they have commonly acquired connotations of mere disaster or calamity which bring about unwarranted suffering and anguish. Karl Jaspers states that "tragedy is distinct from misfortune, suffering, and destruction, from sickness or death, and from evil. It is so distinct by virtue of the nature of its knowledge; this knowledge is general, not special; it is a question, not acceptance--accusation, not lament."¹

This "knowledge" Jaspers speaks of is in effect the same humanistic awareness of the nobility in the human soul posited by Pascal in the third article of the Pensées:

L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature; mais c'est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l'univers s'arme pour l'écraser: une vapeur, une goutte d'eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l'univers l'écraserait, l'homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, parce qu'il sait qu'il meurt, et l'avantage que l'univers a sur lui, l'univers n'en sait rien.²

This concept lies at the heart of all tragedy and expresses its essence. It is a concept which speaks for all men in all times, ancient as well as modern. Tragedy


depicts man in his greatness, transcending good and evil, not necessarily triumphant over his condition or over obstacles placed in his path by fate.

The question of whether or not real tragedy has ever been conceived by a modern dramatist, or if real tragedy is even possible in the Christian era, has frequently been a subject of scholarly hypotheses, arguments and refutations of arguments. The question does not preclude a discussion of tragic aspects as they appear in the theatre of Eugène Ionesco.

To demonstrate that the latter manifests such aspects, that indeed tragedy is its essential expression, will be the objective of this study. To accomplish this goal, two important questions must be answered: what is tragedy, and in what way is Ionesco's theatre tragic?

The essence of tragedy lies in man's recognition of a conflict of basic moral and physical principles affecting his existence and behavior, and demanding some kind of reconciliation. This does not mean that poetic justice is required; that is, that reward should be adjusted to merit and that wickedness and vice should always receive a "just" punishment. On the contrary, the truly tragic concept of drama is one in which the action directs the spectator's attention away from the mere outward appearance of things and situations, and toward a more profound and transcendent

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reality, "from external action to moral forces involved, and to the inner lives of characters."^4

It is impossible to talk about tragedy without talking about the Greeks and Aristotle. Since mankind first began to wonder and reason about the order of the universe and his position in it, he has been preoccupied with seeking an answer to the question of whether the ultimate power of that universe is good or evil. The Greeks sought their solution in three different directions.\textsuperscript{5} They might take a totally pessimistic ontological view, avoiding risks, seeking moderation in all things, and retreating into abnegation and stoic endurance. On the other hand, they might adopt a temporal concept of divine providence. Convinced that the present life cannot be all, that it must have some undefined supernatural extension, they might weigh the value of their present existence in the light of what was known or suspected of their own history, exalting a mythical and primitive Golden Age preceding man's fall from perfection, while at the same time looking with hope to the future, believing in the religious mysteries, the immortal soul, and the rewards of a divine justice. The third view was one of humanism, a concept of life being ordered by custom and established law, of happiness based on mental and physical excellence, moral courage, skill and intelligence, never failing to recognize and respect one's moral limitation, or moira, which is

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 5.
dictated by a blind, though harmonious and just system of cosmic laws, or dikē. "The Greeks subordinated humanism to the conception of divine providence (pronoia), within which man may seek by his own free choice the good that is gradually unfolded to his reason." On the basis of these concepts the Greek poet constructed his tragic drama, tracing the inevitable consequence of man's error (hamartia), that "tragic flaw" by which he steps beyond the prescribed limits of his moira, commits an act of excess (hybris), and suffers the inevitable retribution (nemesis) or ruin (atē).

Of all those who have attempted to enrich our appreciation of art by investigating aesthetic problems, probably none has exerted so enormous an influence on subsequent thought as has Aristotle. Even those who disagree with what he had to say about the form and substance of dramatic art witness to his importance by constructing their theories in opposition to his. Consequently, any discussion of tragedy must take Aristotle's definition as a starting point: "Tragedy is imitation of worthy and complete action having magnitude, in speech made pleasing ... performed and not produced through narration, achieving through pity and fear a catharsis of such affections."  

Aristotle had much to say about form and plot in the

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6Ibid., p. 9.


8William C. Greene, p. 92.
making of tragedy, but gave little attention to character development, to the workings of fate, and to tragic irony. Considering this, it is curious to note that his favorite play was Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, the one most deeply saturated with fatalism and irony.  

Immeasurable effort has been devoted to interpretations of Aristotle's meaning of catharsis. Whether the effects of pity and terror on the modern theatre audience can be interpreted as the same as those experienced by fifth century Athenian spectators can only remain a matter of conjecture. Judging from our own knowledge of human nature, we must assume that the respective reactions could not be too dissimilar, granting the religious and philosophical gaps separating the two cultures.

The spectacle of pain must be more than painful. In order for an audience to derive pleasure from viewing undeserved suffering, the suffering must be explained, though not necessarily justified. There must be a collective sympathy between spectator and spectacle. The suffering must be an ideal which is shared. The experience, then, becomes one of religious communion, in which the emotions are aroused, the moral sense enlarged and to some degree satisfied. The experience of the hero is felt to be a universal experience,

> Whether in the ordinary business of mortal life, Or in the encounters of man with more than man.

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8William C. Greene, p. 92.

The distress we view in the misfortune of others, in a situation which we may imagine as possibly our own, becomes the measure of our own security. "The spectator cannot view with detached calm the spectacle of Oedipus marching to his destruction, moving heaven and earth in order to bring to light precisely what as a matter of fact he most dreads; we feel pity for the victim of circumstance, and fear of the power that so marvellously trips him up, together with some tendency to surmise how far the fall was deserved." In this realm of fear and pity, of pathetic contrast, of irony in the inevitable outcome of blind endeavor, the conflict of moral principles is resolved, and the spectator may leave with a feeling of sympathy and relief in the assurance that he is not alone in the world and that his mortal weakness is a thing shared and understood.

Doubtlessly there are very real obstacles to the production by modern playwrights of tragedy conceived in the same sense as that of the Greeks. Our judgment of art is often clouded by an intensely dutiful regard for particular philosophies as well as for aesthetic terms of criticism which have become fixed by centuries of traditional interpretation. There persists a mistaken idea, especially among certain critics, of what scientific method is. "Our thought and our myths must be related, not to Newtonian, but to quantum physics." The naturalistic and idealistic theatre

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10 William C. Greene, p. 102.

is too self-conscious to be tragic. It is serious and important, but it is not tragedy. The dramas of Ibsen, Sartre, Tennessee Williams and Brecht, though powerful and moving statements of human problems, all fail to capture the cosmic aspects of universal myth in their self-conscious efforts to dislodge man from his moral and psychological turpitude and force him to an awareness of social necessity.

There are still large-scale misunderstandings of Greek drama, less significant perhaps for Anglo-Saxons than for the French, who have never completely recovered from seventeenth-century classicism. "Since the seventeenth century the French concentrated on the hero, not the chorus,"\(^\text{12}\) whose function, or what they believed to be its function, was relegated to the *raisonneur*. The audience, the people, were no longer permitted an identifying rôle in the development of the situation and its conflict. Living theatre was banished from the stage. Classical French drama dealt with invention, not fact. Plot situations only tenuously based on historical event were manufactured to conform to the tastes of a restricted minority of privileged aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois anxious to imitate the ruling class. Cornelian, and most Racinian heroes (with the exception of Phèdre and perhaps a few others), overcoming obstacles or destroyed by "destiny," are reflections of contemporary seventeenth-century religious and political thought, and have little if anything to do with *moira*, *hamartia*, and

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 219.}\)
The modern concept of the theatre as bourgeois entertainment has posed serious economic difficulties for the effective presentation of tragedy. Most people now pay high prices for theatre seats expecting to be amused. Production costs and contract legalities have too often separated the writer from technicians and actors. Fortunately, attitudes responsible for these difficulties have been changing during the decades since the Second World War. The holocaust of the war itself helped bring about significant changes in attitudes concerning the moral responsibility and purpose of theatre in general.

Some of these obstacles are being overcome by playwrights who write with a conviction of the necessity to expose and discredit the deficiencies of naturalistic convention. Once the writer has been able to infuse director and actors with his purpose and his conviction, it becomes apparent to the discriminating public that serious theatre is better entertainment, that the serious play gives greater pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction than the play designed purely to give pleasure or to flatter the prejudices of an audience. One again recognizes that theatre "must emphasize the interrelation of all human activities, and that moral decision and artistic experience must illuminate each other."13 Since "naturalism is a way for the writer to avoid showing what he thinks the decision means,"14 naturalistic theatre can never

13 Ibid., p. 229.
14 Ibid., p. 230.
fulfill the requirements of truly tragic dramatic imitation.

The gateway to a renewal of tragedy was opened by Maurice Maeterlinck in 1890 with the publication of *La Princesse Maleine*. The play was assailed by a London critic as "the most appalling plagiarism of Shakespeare he had ever seen," a charge which was admitted by Maeterlinck himself. If it is in fact a plagiarism, it is not one in the sense of a stolen plot or stolen characters, not in the sense of Corneille's plagiary of Guillén de Castro, but the honest borrowing and adaptation of Shakespearean fatality and terror in their most sinister and dreadful aspects, an adaptation which had been the unrealized dream of the early French romanticists, of whom not a single one, least of all Hugo himself, had been able to discover and translate to the French stage the essence of English tragedy in a manner and form acceptable to the French mentality, imbued as it was with the aesthetic restrictions of classicism's brain-with-soul conflict, confined in the vacuum of Cartesian logic.

It is interesting to note that this creative innovation in French theatre was accomplished not by a Frenchman, but by a Fleming, whose control of the French language permitted him to capitalize on its recognized purity and lyrical possibilities while unhindered by certain confining traditional and "classical" aesthetic attitudes. The coincidental parallel with Ionesco, Rumanian-born but French-speaking, cannot

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escape unmentioned.

Influenced by the adventures and discoveries of the symbolist poets, the maker of *La Princesse Maleine* introduced the idea of a new theatre whose genius revealed the very essence of Celtic and medieval folk legend, marking a return to truly mythical sources of inspiration, and expressing faith in the existence of "d'énormes puissances, invisibles et fatales, dont nul ne sait les intentions, mais que l'esprit du drame suppose malveillantes, attentives à toutes nos actions, hostiles au sourire, à la vie, à la paix, au bonheur." This statement very sharply indicates the tenor of an atmosphere in which the terror of unseen and unknowable forces captures the imagination and paralyzes the mind with the presentiment of impending and inescapable doom. *La Princesse Maleine* is a play about love and death, and although it is not a tragedy, it moves very near the stuff of which tragedy is made.

The Senecan blood tragedies of the Italian Renaissance and the carnages of the Elizabethan stage left little to the imagination. In those days the horror of medieval violence and intrigue was still a very real and common thing, with scarcely any mystique involved. Even Shakespeare's supernatural elements do not instill the paralyzing terror of the Celtic unknown. Hamlet fearlessly urges his ghostly father to speak, and the spectral visitor at the banquet hall causes less terror in the heart of Macbeth than the remorse he feels.

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for his own guilt. Maeterlinck's terror is an invisible presence, an abstract and somber power whose shadow alone is perceptible. His characters and the action of the play are immersed in a permeating atmosphere, heavy with the menace of the invisible, attaining, in his own words "une certaine harmonie, épouvantée et sombre."17 It is this idea which animates the whole drama.

All this is suggested by symbols rather than described or indicated by direct statement. The technique makes use of sentence fragments, unanswered questions, hollow repetitions, stammering phrases and startled exclamations, with a background of special effects that today would perhaps have greater impact in the cinema than in live theatre. In 1890, these innovations in form had as much importance for the liberation of theatre from confining naturalism as did those of Ionesco in 1950. Unfortunately, the bourgeois audiences were not disposed to accept a mythical theatre. The gap of understanding was far too vast to be breached so early.

*La Princesse Maleine*, though never produced on the stage, brought a new mode of expression to the ancient belief that men are the puppets of Fate. The old enigma of classical tragedy was now to be suggested in its context of unfathomable mystery, rather than stated in concrete terms. The treatment of the theme in this case is also innovative. Love is pursued by hostile supernatural powers. The forces of destiny are irresistible, and love eventually must succumb

to inevitable death. The whole of theme and method constitutes a reaction against the trite and banal *tranches de vie* of the naturalistic tradition in drama which had taken root around Emile Augier and Henri Becque. The play cannot be regarded as successful theatre, but it is important as a beginning of a new orientation. The one-act play which followed *La Princesse Maleine* brings us closer to the essence of modern tragedy where man, on a surrealist plane, comes face to face with the realization of his mortal condition and his conflict with cosmic forces.

*Les Aveugles* is a tragedy of listening and waiting. No question is answered. The action is a symbol of the pathos of humanity, expanded to the universal, but expressed with the tension and economy of the particular. There are very distinct implications of existential anguish, of a blind and abandoned humanity banished to an irredeemable state of unmitigated *Angst*, awaiting death's ineluctible approach. There are unmistakable parallels here with Samuel Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* and *Fin de Partie*: the immense futility, the uncertainty even of one's own existence, the fear of the unknown, the fear of separation, of abandonment and death. Also similar is the theme of blind humanity unable to know itself, to understand its own nature, and to communicate with each other:

*LE PLUS VIEIL AVEUGLE*: Voilà des années et des années que nous sommes ensemble, et nous ne nous sommes jamais aperçus: On dirait que nous sommes toujours seuls!... Il faut voir pour aimer...
Ionesco says the same thing in his exposition of the failure of rational language as an instrument of communication.

A parallel to one of Jean Genet's favorite themes is apparent in the following exchange:

LA PLUS VIEILLE AVEUGLE i  Je rêve parfois que je vois...
LE PLUS VIEIL AVEUGLE : Moi, je ne vois que quand je rêve.

The idea that truth may be more profoundly perceived by the subconscious, that the dream is perhaps the true reality, goes back to Calderón de la Barca (La Vida es Sueño); it is an important aspect of Maeterlinck's transcendentalist conception of the meaning of life, and looks directly forward to Genet's theories of the fantasy rôle and the inverted or distorted image as effective instruments for expressing the despair and loneliness of man caught in a tragic mortal condition.

The magic wedding of theme and symbolist technique was the secret of Maeterlinck's art, the power to surround the invisible presence with an atmosphere which is not merely an effect, but an emanation, the ability to see not only the sleeper, but the dream as well. He was convinced that the dramatist "est obligé de faire descendre dans la vie réelle, dans la vie de tous les jours, l'idée qu'il se fait de l'inconnu."18 Gustave Lanson said of him: "Maeterlinck a voulu créer une tragédie symboliste, exprimer le mystère

18 Ibid., p. xvii.
This is the vocation of the modern tragic poet. Maeterlinck's "disincarnation" of characters seems a particularly relevant point of departure for the work of Ionesco.

Following the tradition established by Maeterlinck, Jarry, Cocteau and Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh further developed the notion of theatrical artificiality, perfecting a style which makes it easier for tragedy to be shown on the contemporary stage. Though his plays reflect certain current philosophical ideas, the result is more instinctive than philosophical, with the philosophy being expressed more in terms of mood and temperament than in abstract ideas. Since his writing is not based on a system like that of Giraudoux, it is more readily acceptable to a generation which does not tolerate philosophical systems.

The pièces noires are often called tragedies of sensitive people crushed by an insensitive environment. The outlook on life is one of instinctive revolt against materialistic conformity and oppressive institutions. The plays are not, however, tragedies in the classical sense. The characters concerned are unusual rather than normal or universal. They do not reflect universal aspects of the human condition. The ordinary spectator may be overwhelmed with


\[20\] Leo Ayleen, p. 278.
sympathy and admiration for Jeanne's courage and sense of mission, but he cannot personally identify with the character, does not imagine himself in her situation. Moreover, the play involves no ontological, political or social issues of universal magnitude, and the audience is asked to make no decision regarding what it has seen. Political decisions are not called for since all the heroes of Anouilh are politically irresponsible. The example of Antigone shows that "tragedy for Anouilh is to shout at the top of your voice when hope is lost."\textsuperscript{21} Beckett says \textit{non} to the King; Antigone says \textit{non} to Créon; and Jeanne says \textit{non} to her judges, so that the Inquisitor can reply that the real evil is not the Devil, but the man "who will say 'no' without lowering his eyes."\textsuperscript{22}

If \textit{L'Alouette} seems more like a tragedy than Shaw's \textit{St. Joan}, it is because of the French play's poetic intensity. In Anouilh's play all the action in concentrated within the framework of the trial itself. In order to do this, the author took certain liberties in confusing the boundaries of logical time and space, employing devices which later became associated with the technique of the "Theatre of the Absurd." The situation thus created makes it necessary to look at life from the viewpoint of death. "Despite a great difference in form, both Anouilh and Ionesco are dealing with reality in ways which make us aware of our situation rather than allowing

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 279.
us to escape it."^23

The issues presented by Anouilh are those of the Christian myth. He attempts to show the paradox that sometimes the will of God seems to run contrary to the law of God. The motives of the gods appeared equally paradoxical to the Greeks. The story of St. Joan is that of someone led by God to contradict the natural order of things established by God himself. The myth concerns a catastrophe set in motion by a good action (Joan's obedience to the voices of the saints), but the fact that the good action achieves the results at which it was aimed (the coronation of the Dauphin and the defeat of the English) destroys the real tragedy. With or without the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, the story of Joan of Arc is one of triumph. Because of the Christian belief in redemption through divine grace, "there is a basic incompatibility between the tragic and the Christian view."^24

In Beckett, ou l'Honneur de Dieu, Anouilh abandons the Christian myth as the pivot for a tragic action, and achieves the purely tragic tension of hamartia and hybris. The Archbishop is a man like any other, who through a tragic flaw—his pride in upholding "God's honor"—brings about his own destruction. The framework, however, is naturalistic, and


there is no overwhelming sense of fate. We know what the outcome will be because we know the history, not because we sense the influence of powers that are more than man.

Jean-Paul Sartre "has made an enormously important contribution to that complex of activity which is necessary before tragedy can be written, but he is important even if we do not read his philosophy, assimilate his religion or his attitude to politics, or even think his plays are good."

In his article entitled "Forgers of Myths," Sartre says that we should return to a theatre of "situation," meaning a kind of drama which would involve issues and illuminate people's lives rather than merely stimulate their emotions or entertain them. He points out that theatre could compete with cinema only by reasserting its greatness as a religious or ritual function. As was the unfortunate case with Denis Diderot, but certainly not to such an aesthetically deplorable extent, the practical application of his theory to his stage has at times been less than satisfying.

The plays Morts sans Sûpulture, Les Mains sales and Les Sûquestrés d'Altona have something of the tragic atmosphere, while cast in naturalistic form. The first two plays, however, give a very unsatisfying notion of the nature of evil. Though characters are placed in a situation of moral crisis, which is resolved in the course of action, there is no catharsis in the sense of a spiritual transcendence

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25 Leo Aylen, p. 295.
through and beyond the human experience. *Morts sans Sépulture*, aside from demonstrating that we are what we choose ourselves to be, is merely a situation of torture, unheroic even by Cornelian or Senecan standards, with no conflict of cosmic dimensions. In *Les Mains sales*, which scarcely rises above the level of a detective or gangster play, the interest is concentrated on the dilemma of the protagonist rather than on the issue, which would have to be interpreted as the compromise of principles in following a political cause. The final effect emerging from these two plays is one of melodramatic propaganda for the Sartrian dialectic.

*Les Séquestrés d'Altona* is potentially tragic. The central action is the betrayal of humanitarian principles and the consequent destruction of the protagonists, reflecting the guilt of Germany in submitting to the Nazis. The course of the play does not show a clear structural development of the original act of betrayal. Gerlach, the father, betrays a young Jew. Franz, his son, betrays captured Russian peasants. Though both protagonists exchange their freedom for guilt as a result of a wrong action in the past, the son's act is not clearly the direct consequence of the father's. The actions are rather coincidental, and constitute a complication unnecessary for tragedy.

The double suicide at the end is melodramatic. Suicide is seldom tragic. One might refer for contrast to Racine's *Phèdre* for a case of tragic suicide. *Phèdre* is already in *hybris* as the play begins. The poison is no more than a
device to end the guilt—and the play—and is acceptable as the instrument of divine retribution. There is no sense of retribution in the death of the Gerlachs. They can no longer live with themselves, so they die. Les Séquestrés d'Altona conveys a strong atmosphere of evil and guilt, but its success as serious theatre lies in things which have little to do with tragedy.

Les Mouches, a play of commitment and resistance, is based on classical myth, and as such has definite advantages over the others. Oreste, becoming an existentialist hero who can kill his mother without flinching, as well becomes a representation of man liberated from the oppressive bonds of religion and conformity. The dialectic is clear: men are free already, but have only to be convinced of it. The whole play is a representation of Orestes' slow conversion from en-soi to pour-soi being, in which he becomes a savior through a criminal act. In this perversion of the Christian concept of redemption, Sartre's play differs essentially from its Greek models. By making his choice, Orestes "comes to embody a statement of the tragedy of the human condition. He has taken upon himself by choice the guilt and the remorse of all of Argos and for his crimes he will suffer in eternity."27 He thus exercises ultimate freedom by creating for himself his own values.

Huis clos is the most deeply and purely tragic of all.

Sartre's plays, for it captures within the framework of a modern mythical situation, and in a rarified atmosphere of dramatic tension and economy of dialogue, the apprehension of tragedy in human life. The hell in which the three characters find themselves may be accepted as a state of *hybris*, merited by the guilt of their existence. Within a compact and flawless dramatic form, Sartre has illustrated many of his existentialist tenets without subjecting his audience to pure propaganda.

The preceding comments on Sartre's theatre are not in any way intended to detract from the author's importance as a maker of serious plays. On the contrary, it is hoped that by pointing out certain fallacies in the efforts of various playwrights to produce tragedy at different moments in the development of modern theatre, one may more readily ascertain those obstructive elements which Ionesco felt had to be overcome in order to return theatre to its proper function as mythic ritual in a mode of expression consistent with contemporary thought. It is possible to review, in the same examination, certain innovations of a progressive nature which have helped make Ionesco's theatre possible.

Ionesco's theatre, unlike Sartre's, is not limited to "situations." It is metaphysically abstract without dealing in abstract philosophical ideas. The greatness of his vision is in recognizing that loneliness and anguish characterize the human condition, while the greatness of his art lies

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in the method he has discovered for presenting his ideas on a plane which one might call "supra-real," because the meaning transcends normally recognized moral reality and the means of communicating it.

Consistent with the traditional function of the tragic poet, Ionesco's purpose has been to make man painfully aware of the authenticity of his existence, making him face the brutal realities of the human condition, first by causing him to laugh at the absurdity of a theatrical contrivance, then to fear as he comes to the realization that the absurdity is his own, and real. Answering a certain critic's accusation that he was trying to escape the social framework, to escape the responsibility of depicting man as the victim of a civilization which nourishes him without answering his questions about life, Ionesco wrote:

Mes pièces n'ont jamais voulu dire autre chose. Mais simplement que l'homme n'est pas seulement un animal social prisonnier de son temps, mais qu'il est aussi, et surtout, dans tous les temps, différent historiquement, dans ses accidents, identique dans son essence. Ainsi si nous dialoguons avec Shakespeare, avec Molière, avec Sophocle, si nous les comprenons, c'est parce qu'ils sont, profondément, en leur essence, comme nous. Je trouve que l'homme universel n'est pas celui d'une humanité générale abstraite mais vraie, concrète; et l'homme "en général" est plus vrai que l'homme limité à son époque, mutilé. Et j'ai dit, plusieurs fois, que c'est dans notre solitude fondamentale que nous nous retrouvons et que plus je suis seul, plus je suis en communion avec les autres, alors que dans l'organisation sociale, qui est organisation des fonctions, l'homme ne se réduit qu'à sa fonction aliénante.29

Liberation from pessimism and despair is the object of

29 Ibid., p. 60.
catharsis in Ionesco's metaphysical tragedy. "The very statement of the desperate situation, the ability it gives the spectator to face it with open eyes, constitutes a catharsis, a liberation. Are not Oedipus and Lear confronted with the full despair of their human condition? Yet their tragedies are liberating experiences."\(^{30}\)

Leo Aylen has stated: "I do not know if there could ever be anything like Greek tragedy in theatres whose function is said to be entertainment, and in fact is to make a profit for someone. The temptation to avoid unsettling the audience is too strong."\(^{31}\) Ionesco and the other great play-makers of our time have not flinched from convicting their audiences. In fact, unsettling the audience has become somewhat fashionable, and people are willing to pay well for a good jolt of conviction now and then.

"L'homme n'est solitaire et angoissé qu'à certaines époques, la nôtre, par exemple..."\(^{32}\) when humanity is shattered into factions, divided into hostile camps, and acutely aware of the presence of death, not only of the individual and of armies, but of the entire species, condemned as it seems to be to live in the ever-present shadow of its own annihilation. With this awareness comes the realization of a growing need to reach a clearer idea of right and wrong within the conditions of society and to

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\(^{31}\)Leo Aylen, p. 342.

\(^{32}\)Eugène Ionesco, p. 60.
define the limits of understanding, responsibility and freedom. There is a desperate need for clear decisions, a desperate need for dramatic illustration of how society is affected by wrong decisions. To do this it is necessary to resort to myth and to imagination, for these have proved to better describe the nature of the world. Since imagination is the most important activity of the mind and the source of all man's creativity, the mind must be reached and persuaded analogically rather than empirically. Given the conditions of our society and culture, it is less unreasonable to hope for tragic drama than for some other form of poetry.

Tragedy must give people not only an insight into the nature of life as it is, but a new vision as well of what is transcendent in man. In Ionesco's theatre, and especially in the later plays, which might be called the "Beuenger Cycle" after the name of their hero, one may recognize a return to the classical conception of tragedy, if not to its strict form. Here is the mythic drama of anguished man at the mercy of his conscience and the realization that he must die, in spite of his scientific progress and his intellectual struggle. What makes him heroic is that he does resist, knowing in advance that he will lose, that failure lies implicit in the effort. But there also is the greatness of man who has resisted, who has dared say "no" to the order of things. It is the Pascalian conception of man who knows he is dying, and therefore is superior to the insensitive forces of the universe which destroy him. Renouncing the
representation of man through philosophical abstraction, Ionesco recovers and enlarges the expression of man as myth.
The function of the tragic poet is to translate into form and substance his particular vision of the dichotomy of truth and reality, the division between what he knows as real from experience, and what he feels to be true intuitively. Tragic knowledge, or awareness, sees the conflict of man against man, of man against himself, and of man against the invisible. The relatively new sciences of psychology and sociology, through their analyses of actions and reactions, seem to make these human conflicts understandable in terms of fact, but the poet sees farther and deeper. "It is his task to render tragic knowledge visible, and all these limited realities serve him merely as raw material."¹ He must contrive to give a visible shape to his sense of the infinite vastness that is beyond our grasp, to his compelling vision of the depths of existence.

This vision entails a comprehension of the duality of man's nature, that is, his existence as both animal and god. It is this vision of man revealed in the works of Pascal which allows us to regard that seventeenth-century mathematician justifiably as the only real lyric poet of French classicism. Rooted in the ambiguity of the human condition, the tragic vision is an affirmation of the greatness of man

as he confronts the ultimate meaning of existence, which for Ionesco and many of his contemporaries may be the utter absence of meaning. It is this mad persistence in the impossible quest for meaning that is the vital and enduring element in the tragic vision. It is explicit in the character Bérenger, who defiantly watches the world transform itself into bestiality in an orgy of meaninglessness (Rhino-céros), who desperately searches for reason in the gloom of the radiant city and in the inscrutable perversity of the Killer (Tueur sans cages), who ascends into a kind of fourth dimension in an effort to find an alternative to the dehumanized elements of life (Le Piéton de l'air), but returns with only a vision of cataclysm, or who assumes the form of a mythical king, representative of every man and all that man has accomplished on earth, forced to face the shattering and ineluctible reality of the end of his existence (Le Roi se meurt).

Ionesco's hero is always blinded and astonished by the vision with which he is confronted in his persistent search. Intensely poetic images of light and darkness, of evanescence and weightiness, reveal to him the dual nature of his mortal condition with excruciating spiritual pain. Ionesco's theatre is above all a poetic one in its effort to liberate the means of communicating this revelation, means which have become calcified into senseless cliché through centuries of rhetoric and philosophical exposition. The astonishment of Bérenger must be captured and transmitted to the spectator.
A tout moment nous participons à cet étonnement à deux visages : la stupeur émerveillée d'être, la stupeur angoissée d'être, entremêlées, cette part de clarté et cette part de nuit qui lui font voir le monde dans l'éblouissement ou dans la dérision. Qu'est-ce d'autre sinon un état de toujours naître et toujours mourir?

The bewilderment and anguish of existence are as inseparable from the human experience as are love and death. It is this insight, this intuition, which must be communicated; but is incommunicable through ordinary language and traditional theatre of plot and character. "Chaque temps demande l'introduction d'un 'hors temps' incommunicable, dans le temps, dans le communicable." The tragic is that which cannot be resolved. "On ne peut trouver de solution à l'insoutenable, et seul ce qui est insoutenable est profondément tragique, profondément comique, essentiellement théâtre."

Undeniable differences will be pointed out between the tragic forms of the past and those of the present. This could not be otherwise. The most essential of those differences lies in "what the tragic hero sees as he is about to suffer calamity." Sophocles' Oedipus can do nothing to change his fate. Neither can the modern hero. But Oedipus, who never ceases to be governed by the omnipotent gods, on

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4Ibid., p. 7.

learning the truth about himself, resigns himself to the will of those gods. The modern hero, not recognizing the existence of gods, or at least not convinced of any proof of such existence, goes down to defeat before a world that seems cruel and totally lacking in purpose. As he apprehends his approaching annihilation, the modern hero envisions instinctively the gigantic irony of a life that is without meaning and quite beyond redemption. The agonizing apprehension of the ironic contradiction between man's soul, which promises him infinity, and his experience, which impresses upon him the awful example of his finitude, marks the starting point of the tragic vision: "the recognition of the meaninglessness of life, counterbalanced by the ever-present need to affirm the greatness of human spirit that can face up to its destiny." The ancient and modern views are really not dissimilar, if we remove from the former its numinous belief, or interpret that belief as a psychological attempt to explain the unexplainable. The Greeks saw no meaning in the fickle attitudes of the gods with regard to the human condition; they were merely resigned to them. Their myths of divinity were symbols, representative of a simplistic effort to find meaning where meaning did not impose itself. Comedies of the third century, B.C., give ample evidence that many educated Greeks no longer held their ancestors' faith in the gods, though they continued to maintain the traditional forms, either from habit or social and

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6Ibid., p. 4.
political pressures.

The essence of tragic irony is that man, unknowingly and unconsciously, falls prey to the very powers that he wanted to escape. The best example of this in antique tragedy is unquestionably Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. Another illustration is apparent in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. The hero scornfully flees Aphrodite, who in turn destroys him. Artemis, whom he serves, cannot save him. The goddesses are symbols of a psychological conflict within the hero, a conflict which he does not understand, but for which some reasonable explanation must be found. Consequently, with his dying breath, he accuses ancestral guilt:

"O ill-starred curse of my father! The evil of bloodguilty kinsmen, ancestors of old, finds its issue in me and tarries not; it comes upon me—why, when I am in no way guilty of evil?"

Artemis, his protectrice, is powerless to aid him. She understands his predicament, but can do nothing against another deity. "I see, but gods may not weep." The only comfort she may give him is a promise to destroy a favorite mortal protegé of Aphrodite. Thus are mortals no more than playthings of the gods. While the promised revenge can give little comfort to the dying Hippolytus, the audience may experience a kind of subliminal apprehension that though justice does not triumph, the hero is given a mysteriously

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transcendent victory. What conquers in tragedy is the transcendent. "In victory and defeat, in the very process of achieving a solution, a new historical order is born, transitory in its turn." In reality nothing conquers on the physical level. As in war, there is much suffering, sacrifice and heroism, but nobody wins.

Ionesco's tragic view of life is at once deeply pessimistic and transcendentally optimistic. It is pessimistic in its apprehension of the unremitting evil in the universe, of the overwhelming proportion of evil to good, and of the mystery of why this should be. Evil here must be understood, not in a conventional sense of immoral action, but as that which limits man to his historical condition of suffering, which prevents him not only from attaining a state of perfection, but condemns him eternally not to know what his existence means. On the other hand, the view is suggestively optimistic in "what might be called its vitalism, which is in some sense mystical, not earth-bound," and in its vision, however fleeting, of a world in which all questions might be answered.

Ionesco's plays, along with all the so-called "new theatre," have been condemned for their formlessness and for their rejection of traditional concepts of plot and character. Many critics feel that this rejection leads to moral

9Karl Jaspers, p. 21.

stagnation, showing man as insignificant in a grotesquely imaginary impasse. "It is difficult to see how such an outlook can lead to moral stagnation, since it points the way to a vital, meaningful morality based on self-discovery and lucidity. Such a faith in the human potential reveals Ionesco as profoundly optimistic." 11

A morality based thus on self-discovery and self-knowledge, recalling that of Montaigne, seems within the context of contemporary ideas, to be the only justifiable and workable morality, consistent with the contention of present-day thinkers that the old moralities based on religious dogma and philosophical systems have proved ineffective and bankrupt.

Tragedy embraces both pessimism and optimism. It illuminates both, goes beyond both, but does not presume to arrive at any conclusion or provide systematic solutions.

Like the cosmos which the tragic vision implies, tragic man is a paradox and a mystery. He cannot believe he comes from God, since there is no proof of God's existence, yet he feels affinities for something beyond the terrestrial. He is plagued by the ambiguities of his own nature and the world he lives in and suffers from the knowledge of his inability to reconcile these ambiguities. He is sustained by the pride he feels in his own humanity, but suffers from the awareness that this same pride often trips him up and

causes his downfall. Tragic pride, like everything else about tragedy, is ambiguous and paradoxical.

Tragic man suffers because he is uncommonly sensitive to the disproportion and disorder he sees about him and experiences in himself. He is tortured by the vast inequalities in his existence, by the gulf between desire and fulfilment, by the disparity of what is and what should be.

"This kind of suffering is suffering on a high level, beyond the reach of the immature or the brutish, and forever closed to the extreme optimist, the extreme pessimist, or the merely indifferent. . . Above all, the source of tragic suffering is the sense, in the consciousness of tragic man, of simultaneous guilt and guiltlessness."12

Ionesco's hero is very much aware of guilt, as one may see exemplified in the appearance of Tante Adélaïde in the first act of La Soif et la Paim. Tante Adélaïde, a "ghost," if one wishes to call her that, represents to Jean the remembrance of some guilty action of his in the past. The nature of the guilt is very vague and ill-defined, as for Ionesco all emotions must be. The strength of the emotion is magnified, however, by the indirectness of its representation. The problem of guilt with respect to the nature of Ionesco's plays as religious theatre will be discussed with greater detail in a later chapter.

If contemporary man could accept his suffering as punishment for his own guilt, or like Hippolytus, suppose

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12Richard B. Sewall, pp. 124-125.
that he is being punished for the guilt of some other, whether god or man, his problem would be resolved and his ontological suffering would be removed. "If he felt himself entirely free or entirely determined, he would cease to be tragic. But he is neither—he is, in short a paradox and a mystery," the greatest enigma of an enigmatic universe.

Tragic suffering is distinguished from the pathetic and the sentimental by its element of inexplicable guilt, the undefinable feeling or intuition that the tragic hero is somehow responsible for his imperfectibility. The Christian may confess total guilt and construct his rule of life in the promise of redemption through grace. The tragic man knows nothing of grace and can never, as the martyr, glory in his suffering. Ionesco's Bérenger, typical of tragic man, may acquiesce and learn something of the stoic's patience, but his characteristic mood is resentment. He is restless, intense, probing and questioning the universe. From Greek tragedy to tragedy written in the Christian era, emphasis shifts from the universe to the soul, from the cosmic to the psychological, as in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Anouilh's Beckett. With Ionesco, the emphasis shifts back to the cosmic, without neglecting the soul.

Laurence Michel illustrates lucidly three alternatives open to man as he is faced with the dreadful reality of his mortal condition. The analogy describes man as a prehistoric amphibian seeking to escape his amphibious environment and

\[13\text{Ibid.}, p. 125.\]
become what his soul tells him he is destined to become. Like Sartre's "man of bad faith" he may refuse the challenge and return to the murky, astigmatic fish-life. This is what most people do. Since cosmic reality is too painful to admit, they refuse to recognize it as a reality. As a second alternative, he may choose the long and arduous path of evolution, develop lungs, legs and binocular vision, thus avoiding the painfully distorted appearance of a fish-out-of-water creature. This alternative may be taken to represent the religious view of man's nature and destiny. The evolutionary process is slow and requires unrestricted faith in a pre-ordained order of the universe. Finally, he may try to grow up too fast, "and in his radical effort suffocate, or be crippled for life, or go blind with overmuch sunlight."\(^{14}\) This is the tragic view. To take the second alternative, to comply with the Greek concept of the moïra, the due portion or share assigned by fate, is to be responsible, to fulfill one's destiny. If a man strays outside the limits, anything may happen, and perhaps he may not be so responsible after all, at least not to anything but himself. If he is Greek he may be blinded by atê, or if he is Bérenger, he may be left the only human in a rhinoceros world, wishing to become a rhinoceros like everyone else, but faced with the moral impossibility of conforming. Or, as in Tuer sans gages, he

may find himself submitting to the caprice of a senseless murderer who can give him no reason for his death. At the end of *Tueur sans gages*, the hero Bérenger and the audience are "brought to the apprehension of tragedy, for this is the suffering contradiction of Kierkegaard, where the suffering consists in the despair of knowing that the contradiction so overwhelmingly perceived admits of no way out."\(^{15}\)

Bérenger, at the end of *Tueur sans gages*, finally submits to the agent of his destruction, and to the full acceptance of there being "no way out." At the close of his monologue he says, "Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire..."\(^{16}\) Because of this acquiescence, many critics see the play as building up to a tragic climax, but ending as un-tragic. Leonard Pronko cites the metaphysical proportions of Bérenger's mythical adventure to conquer death, but says that "while his naïveté and unawareness refuse him the stature of tragic hero, his desire to destroy the Killer and restore happiness to mankind... certainly makes of him a great humanitarian."\(^{17}\)

If Bérenger here does not seem to conform to the pattern of classical tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense, it is because criticism is clouded by traditional aesthetic values, which Leo Aylen condemns as futile and no longer valid for

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\(^{17}\)Leonard C. Pronko, p. 31.
the appreciation of existential drama.\textsuperscript{18} To view this action of Bérenger as no more than humanitarian seems superficial and does not take fully into account the profundity and scope of the author’s tragic vision.

The final scene of \textit{Tueur sans gages} illustrates metaphorically, and with the dramatic tension proper to tragedy, how the language of rational argument collapses in the presence of death, and how the fact of death makes life derisory. The tragedy is not only that of Bérenger-man, but that of language as well, which Ionesco began to express with \textit{La Cantatrice chauve}. In \textit{Les Chaises} the audience is prepared for an eloquent statement on the meaning of a man’s life, but when the Orator appears, he is speechless. Rational language cannot express the failure of rational language.

Ionesco’s effort to accommodate to the stage a double image of the human condition represents the tragic view of man subject to two conflicting states of consciousness, which the author describes as "an awareness of evanescence and of solidity, of emptiness and of too much presence, of the unreal transparency of the world and its opacity, of light and of thick darkness."\textsuperscript{19} The technique by which this effect of contradictory essence will be achieved on the stage is explicit in Ionesco’s statements of his dramatic


theory in Notes et Contre-notes. Simone Benmussa summarizes the theory thus: "Par l’utilisation des contradictions apparentes du texte, il illustre les conflits, la poussée des contraires. Par l’insignifiance des dialogues, il illustre l’équivalence et la dérision de ces contraires."20

The dual halves of the image are contradictory. The ascendance of either makes the other equivocal, and "man’s state is incongruously divided, fitfully imbued with a liberating radiance, but more regularly oppressed with the weight of matter, ... a contradiction that is felt when the awareness of man’s mortality collides with his intimations of immortality."21

Communication has broken down between Ionesco’s protagonist and the world around him. Bérenger’s appeals to reason, justice and beauty are doomed to fall on deaf ears (Tueur sans gages). His apocalyptic vision is scorned (Le Piéton de l’air). Where Amédée sees fountains, flowers, doves and sparkling radiance, his wife Madeleine sees only mud, desert sands, toads, and shades of night (Amédée, ou comment s’en débarrasser). In mouldy spots on the walls of their dank apartment, Marie-Madeleine sees images of islands, friendly faces, outstretched hands and trees, while Jean sees grisly, mutilated bodies and open wounds (La Soif et la Faim).

Ionesco’s plays all revolve around the eternal question

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20Simone Benmussa, p. 60.
21Cyrus Hoy, p. 247.
of how to convey adequately to the senses that which is unseen, but is felt intuitively to exist. Words are manifestly incapable of communicating the inner vision, for no two individuals respond identically in their emotional reactions to a given stimulus of word-image. Each individual responds according to his own degree of sensitivity within a totally different context of experience and association. The "tragedy of language" is a mundane reflection of the greater tragedy of man, isolated in his condemned quest for an answer to the dilemma of his mortal condition.

The stultifying complacency, whether bourgeois or marxist, which Ionesco sees as a sticky, cloying substance into which society sinks ever more deeply, is grounded in rationalization. This complacency serves to cover humanity's retreat into animality. "The spirit," whose domain is imagination and dream, "has been banished from the world, where materiality flourishes and proliferates alarmingly, and where the automata are in control, fiercely regulating experience according to their own stereotyped dictates."22

When matter gains control over the mind, when passion is no longer tempered by reason, and when the spirit is no longer assured of victory over death, the ideals to which poets aspire suffer inevitable eclipse. This does not necessarily mean that intellect and spirit will be banished ultimately. "They will remain... to bear sad witness to the defeat they have suffered; as often as not they will be

22Ibid., p. 254.
pressed into the service of their adversaries. There is even the suggestion that intellect, bent on investigating matter and exploring the darker regions of animal nature, may have opened the gates to the forces that end by unseating it. Having been a party to its own overthrow, it revenges itself on itself."\(^{23}\)

These are the spiritual and intellectual problems with which Ionesco comes to grips in his theatre. The contradictions in the nature of man and his experience, which Kierkegaard held to be the common denominator for both comedy and tragedy, form the basis for Ionesco's tragic vision. It is the eternal vision which sees man's hunger for life overshadowed by the knowledge that suffering and death are inevitable. Death, by rendering life absurd, forces man to question whether life is worth having. The contention of Camus was that the absurd must be borne, even as one rebels against it. Since there can be no knowledge of anything beyond life, life's immediate and present vitality must be confirmed in art and love. Underlying the tragic vision is the conviction that the meaning of life is to be found in life itself. This is the discovery asserted by the character Bérenger, by Jacques and Amédée, and by Jean in *La Soif et la Faim*.

Not even the tragic poets of the so-called "theatre of the absurd" are able to resolve with utter finality the barriers which separate art from anarchy. The paradox still

\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 236.
remains: how to achieve the revelation of formlessness in the strict artistic forms. Ionesco comes closer even than Beckett. "Une oeuvre d'art est l'expression d'une réalité incommunicable que l'on essaie de communiquer,—et qui, parfois, peut être communiquée. C'est là son paradoxe,—et sa vérité." 24
Chapter Three
The Tragic Form

"The medium in which the poet as teacher will function best is a theater similar to the Greek."¹ In order to better understand both the implications of Aylen’s statement and to what extent Ionesco’s theatre conforms to the suggested similarity, one may consider various aspects of the form of Greek tragedy with reference to the expression of contemporary ideas.

Since we grow in awareness and capacity for judgment by understanding our processes of decision, our reasons for making one choice rather than another, and since we are often intimidated by the difficulty of putting into words what we feel and do when we make decisions, the artist who prepares to confront us with a representation of that process becomes acutely aware of the need to make the representation more articulate than the real life process itself.

The naturalistic representation omits the state of mind and fails to show actions in proper relief and perspective to their importance as results of psychic phenomena. It may be ascertained that since the year 1950, the cinema has become the proper domain of naturalistic representation, with the exception of the work of Bunuel, Bergman and Fellini, while the legitimate stage, under the influence and leadership of the so-called "avant-garde," has sought to expose

before live audiences the interior workings of the mind and spirit, with more emphasis on philosophical and metaphysical problems than on social ones. In support of his contention that man's true condition is mortal rather than social, and that the imaginative is truer than everyday reality where human intellect is concerned, Ionesco states:

Pour s'arracher au quotidien, à l'habitude, à la paresse mentale qui nous cache l'étrangeté du monde, il faut recevoir comme un véritable coup de matraque. Sans une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit, sans une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée de la réalité existentielle, il n'y a pas de théâtre, il n'y a pas d'art non plus; il faut réaliser une sorte de dislocation du réel, qui doit précéder sa réintégration.  

And again he says: "Notre vérité est dans nos rêves, dans l'imagination... Il n'y a de vrai que le mythe." The idea is identical to that demonstrated by Maeterlinck in his efforts to create a theatre of symbolism.

The term "myth," as used by Leo Aylen, and as understood by the Greek poets, refers to a story or fable of ancient history or folklore, typifying the way wrong actions must inevitably meet with retribution. According to this definition, if a modern writer wants to do for a modern audience what the Greek poets did for their audience, he should take a story from European or American history (the more remote and primitive the better), which shows some important action, clearly wrong, and analogous to an aspect

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3 Ibid., p. 4.
4 Leo Aylen, p. 191.
of modern society which is similarly wrong.

In order to judge an action as wrong, one must have some idea of what is right. In other words, one must have a religion. There is a need for a common point of view in this respect if there is to be myth in the Greek sense. Most people in the twentieth century agree on the virtues of scientific method and the fact of individual responsibility. But the Greeks had not read Descartes or Sartre, nor had they heard about Freudian psychology. Their religion, or concept of a natural order, was still founded on belief in capricious intervention of gods in the lives of men.

The questions now arise whether or not our contemporary concepts of method and responsibility can be applied with sufficient precision to individual cases, and whether or not they can excite people as did religions of the past. A more specific "religion" is needed to capture the imagination and to produce a greater clarity of judgment.

Though Ionesco's religion is without redemption or salvation, it nevertheless supposes that the unremitting search for \textit{la cité radieuse}, the utopian existence, is proof of man's need to believe in something beyond his reach, even though the belief may be illusory. In this light we perhaps may understand that when Ionesco calls for a return to a mythical theatre, he does not regard myth in precisely the same context as did the Greeks, as historical fable, but in the sense that man's inner vision can only be expressed in mythical symbol. This is apparent in the statement concerning the conflicting states of consciousness:
Deux états de conscience fondamentaux sont à l'origine de toutes mes pièces : tantôt l'un, tantôt l'autre prédomine, tantôt ils s'entremêlent. Ces deux prises de conscience originelles sont celles de l'évanescence ou 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 épaisse.\(^5\)

Ionesco rejects historical myth as being manifestly incapable of expressing such a dichotomy of the psyche. A new kind of myth is necessary to show the metaphysical anguish of the soul, to measure and define the inconsistencies of perception with regard to the interior distance. From Le Nouveau Locataire to Jeux de Massacre, the new myth emerges and spreads before us like a medieval mystery play. However, the images we see taking shape are far more than mere allegorical representations of moral qualities. They are incarnate aspirations of the soul struggling to free itself from the moral turpitude of physical existence.

Le théâtre est, évidemment, un reflet de l'inquiétude de notre époque. Rien ne peut l'empêcher d'être aussi l'expression des inquiétudes de toujours. On mourait d'amour il y a cent ans; on mourait aussi de la peur de mourir; comme aujourd'hui.\(^6\)

If we agree that the traditional philosophical systems have been a mistake and so much time wasted in vain cerebral effort, "what is required is a mental attitude of imaginative synthesis, not of logical analysis. That is the mental attitude of a tragic poet, not a philosopher."\(^7\)

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\(^5\)Eugène Ionesco, p. 140.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 106.

\(^7\)Leo Aylen, p. 185.
are no certain systems, there is only the individual and his experience, together with the experience of others in so far as he can understand it by analogy with his own. To arrive at any meaningful conclusions concerning the relationship of these experiences, the tragic poet must resort to terms of analogies and images. Analogy and image are the best ways of understanding the world and man's position in it, philosophy having failed.

Aristotle lists diction and the making of melody, together with plot, characters, thought and spectacle, as the six essential parts of tragic drama. He defines diction as "the interpretation of things through language," and notes that "melody is the most important of the pleasing accessories." Prose is the language of information, while poetry is the language of emotion. Ionesco's first attempt at writing for the stage (La Cantatrice chauve) was to show in a convulsive manner that "under the strain of an emotion the ordinary prose of our stage breaks down into inarticulateness, just as it does in life."

The language of Ionesco's plays is not ordinary, everyday language, certainly not in those instances where the author wishes to achieve a particularly transcendental effect. Obviously Ionesco does not use traditional verse

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9Ibid.
forms, but his language may be equated with verse, not in the sense of scansion and rhyme, nor even of mere flowery language, but in the sense that it is arranged in units other than those of ordinary discourse.

If prose sentences tend to repeat themselves rhythmically, then they may be heard as verse. There is a kind of writing used by Ionesco, in which sentences are organized, but conceived in a very isolated way, without connections of sense that prose demands. The effect is incantatory, and similar to verse, as in Lucky's speech in Beckett's *En attendant Godot*. There are abundant instances of this type of verse writing in all of Ionesco's plays, from the "poem" recited by the maid in *La Cantatrice chauve* to the mystical visions "sung" by Jean and the monks in *La Soif et la Faim*. The following examples from a few of the plays will serve to illustrate the extraordinary incantatory quality of this language:

**VOIX DU POLICIER**: Oui, à peine avais-tu surgi du néant, que je me sentis désarmé, pantelant, heureux et malheureux, mon cœur de pierre se fit sponge, torchon, je fus saisi de vertige, d'un remords sans nom à la pensée que je n'avais pas voulu avoir de descendant et que j'avais essayé d'empêcher ta venue au monde. Tu aurais pu ne pas être, tu aurais pu ne pas être!.... Mais, en même temps, une joie débordante m'enivrait, car tu existais, mon cher enfant, toi, tremblante étoile dans un océan de ténèbres, île d'être entourée de rien, toi, dont l'existence annulait le néant. Je baisais tes yeux en pleurant...

**AMEDEE**: Regarde, Madeleine... tous les acacias brillent. Leurs fleurs explosent. Elles

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montent. La lune s'est épanouie au milieu du ciel, elle est devenue un astre vivant. La voie lactée, du lait épais, incandescent. Du miel, des nébuleuses à profusion, des chevelures, des routes dans le ciel, des ruisseaux d'argent liquide, des rivières, des étangs, des fleuves, des lacs, des océans, de la lumière palpable... J'en ai sur la main, regarde, on dirait du velours, des broderies... La lumière c'est de la soie...12

BERENGER : Non. Non. J'ai vu, j'ai cru atteindre quelque chose... quelque chose comme un autre univers. Oui, seule la beauté peut faire s'épanouir les fleurs du printemps sans fin... les fleurs immortelles... hélas, ce n'était qu'une lumière mensongère!... De nouveau, cela s'est écroulé dans les abîmes... en une seconde, en une seconde! La même chute, qui se répète.13

BERENGER : Et puis, et puis, la glace succédant au feu infini, le feu succédant à la glace. Des déserts de glace, des déserts de feu s'acharnant les uns contre les autres et venant vers nous... venant vers nous.14

LE ROI : L'empire... A-t-on jamais connu un tel empire : deux soleils, deux lunes, deux voûtes célestes l'éclairent, un autre soleil se lève, un autre encore. Un troisième firmament surgit, jaillit, se déploie! Tandis qu'un soleil se couche, d'autres se lèvent... À la fois, l'aube et le crépuscule... C'est un domaine qui s'étend par-delà les océans engloutissent les océans.15

MARIE-MADELEINE : As-tu vraiment pu arracher les racines, mon amour? Peux-tu vraiment arracher les racines d'amour, l'amour que tu portes, l'amour que tu as pour nous, pourrais-tu l'arracher sans blessure, pourrais-tu arracher, de ton cœur l'amour, l'amour de ton cœur... Quel jardin veux-tu chercher? Tu ne peux vraiment partir, tu sais bien que nous sommes là, tu sais bien que je suis là, n'est-ce pas que tu plaisantes, n'est-ce pas que tu restes, n'est-ce pas que tu joues? De ton cœur tu ne peux l'amour arracher, la plaie serait

12Ibid., p. 298.
13Ibid., II, p. 121.
14Ibid., III, p. 197.
15Ibid., IV, p. 72.
trop grande, personne ne pourrait guérir cette
blessure, tu ne peux arracher les racines d'amour,
de ton coeur l'amour, tu ne peux arracher, de ton
coeur l'amour, de ton coeur l'amour. 16

It is apparent that the incantatory and poetic effect
of these speeches will depend largely on the "poetry-
speaking voice" of the actor and actress. "Good verse speak­
ing will be the discovery of a tune hidden in the words which
will most clearly express the meaning." 17 The "tune" will
not always be the same for all voices, but must be discovered
and learned. The effect achieved in any particular case will
depend on the extent of understanding and cooperation between
author and stage director. Nevertheless, the poetic vein is
rich in Ionesco's plays, and has only to be exploited by
skillful interpreters to bring the magic of its melody to the
spectator's ear.

Opposed to the effect of prose, the effect of verse is
something part speech and part song. It is more universal
than ordinary speech in that the events and emotions de­
scribed are felt as part of a wider whole. Thus, some form
of verse is needed in the theatre to express a sense of all
people and all things moving in a rhythm of which they are a
part, and which in itself is felt to be good.

The arts which express this common rhythm are verse,
music, and dance. Verse, being less ecstatic than singing
and less abandoned than dancing, is the most articulate,
hence the most proper to serious drama. Those who disapprove

16 Ibid., p. 98.
17 Leo Aylen, p. 197.
of verse in the theatre are those who never feel this sense of rhythm, as tone-deaf people cannot appreciate the esthetic values of singing and orchestral harmony.

The religious outlook is also involved with the use of verse in the theatre. A sense of people and things moving together in a rhythm goes naturally with a belief in an order behind the universe. In primitive societies, poet, priest and magician were all one. The history of theatre from its presumed beginnings in Dionysian rite teaches the obvious connections between poetry and ritual.

Some kind of poetic diction, then, is necessary to the tragic form in order to fulfill the need for synthesis in thought by means of analogy, rather than by means of analytical logic. Ionesco satisfies the need for rhythm, and at the same time presents thought-provoking and mood-setting images, as may be observed in the speeches quoted above. Words in themselves are relatively unimportant. Fundamental to poetry is the synthesis of sound and content, as in the following exchange from *La Soif et la Faim*. Jean, after an incredibly long journey, has taken refuge in a kind of monastery, where he must repay the Brothers by recounting his experiences along the way. His senses have been inadequate to perceive beyond the dull and trivial.

**FRERE TARABAS**: Quelle sorte de jour?

**JEAN**: Morne et gris, à perte de vue... 

**DEUXIEME FRERE**: Avant la plaine, quand vous étiez dans la prairie, vous avez dû voir le chevalier d'un autre temps, qui dort debout dans son armure, comme une statue?
JEAN : Je vous ai dit : une morne plaine, vide.

TROISIÈME FRÈRE : Avant la plaine?

JEAN : Il y avait des plages.

DEUXIÈME FRÈRE : Vous avez vu, sans doute, l'océan de pourpre et les lacs de sang et les trous dans l'azur, le viol des étoiles et les engins qui tourbillonnent dans le ciel, ruisselant de toutes les couleurs.

JEAN : J'ai vu des campagnes, des hommes, des femmes qui se querellaient, des noces, oui, beaucoup de mariés.

TROISIÈME FRÈRE : Dans les prairies et dans les bois, avant la plaine et les plages, est-ce que vous avez aperçu les sources lumineuses, les loups de cristal, la vieille femme pétrifiée, les temples aériens? Les temples avec les piliers sur terre?

JEAN : J'ai vu des gens qui marchaient.18

The poetry here exemplifies the process of thinking in image and analogy, conveying more than prose. To impart an idea of the vast gulf separating those who are able to see past reality with imaginative insight, from those who see only the harsh banalities of a monotonous existence to which they allow themselves to be shackled, Ionesco does not rely on high-sounding abstractions, which the audience would recognize only as abstractions, referring to nothing. The analogies here are expressive of the harmony of which Shakespeare was aware:

... Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.19

18 Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre, IV, p. 129.

19 William Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice, V, i., Lorenzo to Jessica, quoted by Leo Aylen in Greek Tragedy and the Modern World, p. 197.
Since today's fluid stage techniques involve continual changing of viewpoint, it must not be considered inconsistent to change from verse to prose and back again in one play. Moreover, the variety of verse forms possible allows different effects of perspective, focus, and distance between subject and object. "On the whole, the stricter the verse and the nearer to song, the greater the distance. This would be similar to the different effects of dialogue and the lyrics of Greek tragedy."^{20}

The aesthetic and moral values of tragic drama do not necessarily demand strict adherence to the form used by Sophocles and Euripides. Job is a tragic hero, though the book has no action. Consequently it cannot be considered a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. Aristotle's plan, or rather subsequent interpretations of it, has proved in the long run to produce what modern man considers the finest dramatic tragedy. Modern adaptations are curiously more faithful to the ancient models than are those of Racine or Goethe. In the Greek theatre, the tragic hero, Orestes, for example, must choose between opposing moral values and face the consequences of his choice. "When a contemporary playwright represents his modernized Greeks as torn between the claims of their own psyche and of society (physi s and nomos—nature and convention), he is expressing in rational language what the Greeks expressed in the language of myth."^{21}

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^{20}Leo Aylen, pp. 201-202.

Ionesco has, of course, abandoned rational language to return to the language of symbol and myth.

Each age has its own language and its own forms, which are often no more than creative adaptations of what has come before. An examination of Ionesco's theatre in this light could reveal that the form he has "created" may not be so far removed in its essential character from established models as one might expect.

On March 7, 1966, at the Odéon-Théatre de France, Jean-Louis Barrault presented a short one-act play by Ionesco entitled La Lacune. The setting is described as "un salon grand-bourgeois et aussi un peu 'artiste."

The walls are covered with doctoral diplomas, the words docteur and doctorat clearly visible everywhere. The Wife, clothed in a dressing gown and apparently just out of bed, is speaking with the Friend, who is dressed in formal diplomatic attire, with the striped trousers of an ambassador. The beginning dialogue indicates that the friend has arrived to announce some catastrophic news concerning the Husband, who is generally referred to as the Academician.

The most dire calamity has occurred: the professor, who holds degrees and honors from all the most famous universities in the world, has just failed the second part of the baccalauréat, which is a prerequisite for admission to the University. His licence is therefore invalid; his career is ruined.

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22 Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre, IV, p. 182 ff.
He enters, wearing the academician's uniform and sword, his chest covered with ribbons and decorations. He is incredulous at the news, and insists that there must have been some insignificant clerical error. But there is no mistake. The Friend has seen the examiners and spoken to them. They gave him the test results: zero in math, zero in Greek, zero in Latin. The Wife, who takes an accusing and disparaging attitude toward her husband throughout, chides: "Vous, un humaniste, porte-parole attitré de l'humanisme, auteur de Défense et illustration de l'humanisme!"

Attempting to dissociate his work from that of DuBellay, but carrying on the pun, he protests that "modern" humanism was the subject of his book.

The Academician has failed also in French composition. Without his being informed, the rules have been changed so that even his nine hundred points constitute less than the necessary fifty per cent. The Wife, always antagonistic, declares that the committee cannot possibly have changed the rules for the express purpose of discrediting her husband: "Vous vous imaginez toujours que l'on vous persécuter." She then reproaches him for taking the examination at all. There was no necessity for it, there was no need for another diploma, no one ever suspected the deficiency. "Tu n'étais pas obligé du tout. Pourquoi es-tu allé farfouiller dans les archives? Dans ta situation, tu n'avais pas besoin de ce diplôme. Personne ne te demandait rien."

The Friend makes a feeble attempt to defend the hero: "Votre mari, chère amie, voulait boucher un trou. Il est
consciencieux." The woman replies that her husband is not at all conscientious, but seeks only glory and honors. She accuses him of stealing silently into the room at night to count the diplomas that decorate the walls and to indulge in self-congratulation.

The argument continues as the Friend produces a photocopy of the composition in French. It has nothing at all to do with the announced subject, not even indirectly. It is illegible nonsense.

On learning that the judge in French composition was only a female editing-secretary of a popular magazine, and convinced that the woman rejected his composition from base motives, the Academician telephones an appeal to the President of the Republic, who is a personal friend. After a moment's pause, he hangs up the receiver and incredulously announces the President's reply: "Je ne veux plus vous parler. Ma maman m'a défendu de fréquenter les derniers de la classe." The Academician then breaks his sword of office across his knee, tears off his decorations and treads them underfoot.

This little play, so typical of the Ionesco comic style, is a striking parody of what is traditionally regarded as the Aristotelian tragic form. The Academician, the hero, is the "sort of man who does not differ in virtue or justice, and who changes to misfortune, not because of badness or wickedness; but because of some mistake, he being a man held in high opinion and of good fortune..."23 The tragic flaw

23Aristotle, p. 23.
in this case, though possibly stemming from a flaw in character, is not in itself a flaw in character, but an action, specifically the attempt to correct an omission in the university records. The unfolding of the play, however, casts doubt on the virtue of the motives for the action. According to Aristotle, ruin is most highly tragic if the hero makes the wrong choice unwittingly. If we believe the Wife, the motives for the choice in this case are selfish and egotistical. In any interpretation, however, the emotion is very human and "similar," in Aristotle's words, to a universal emotion. Outrageous fortune may befall anyone. A nightmare of suffering may result from a seemingly insignificant turn in the wrong direction. The circumstances of La Lacune may appear "absurd," but as the action is played out seriously, we become subconsciously aware of our own vulnerability in unexpected real life situations which may seem to us just as incredible because of their incongruity. We thus experience Aristotelian fear, while sympathizing with the suffering of the victims of these circumstances.

The best way of learning to make decisions which will be right for us in our society is to enter into the decisions of other people, which can be used as analogies of our own moral problems. The Greeks and other great makers of plays have recognized the value of this proposition and exploited it in their art.

It must be pointed out that pity and fear are functional properties of the dramatic action, transferred as emotional effects to an audience. Aristotle's definition of catharsis
is now generally understood to mean "that tragedy purges or relieves an excess of pity and fear (considered as burdensome emotions) in the spectators. It evidently does so by exciting those emotions and bringing them to the surface of the psyche whence they are discharged." Aristotle, in formulating his definition, was concerned with an attempt to discover and exteriorize what there is about tragedy that gives pleasure to the audience. It is also an attempt to define the nature of that pleasure. He was not, at this point, considering any moral or didactic qualities which might be inherent and exploitable in catharsis.

Martin Esslin defines catharsis as "the liberation that springs from the recognition of reality." The reality recognized in La Lacune, and in all of Ionesco's plays, is the psychological reality that goes beyond the apparent. With Ionesco, the so-called purgation of the emotions of pity and fear is simultaneously tempered and intensified by the comic elements of the absurd. The spectator's natural first impulse is to laugh, but the underlying irony leaves its imprint even more indelibly because one is not quite sure whether he has witnessed comedy wearing the mask of tragedy, or tragedy transvested in the guise of comedy. The


linking of opposites and the non sequitur of language, basic characteristics of Ionesco's method, arouse conflicting sensations, playing the comic and the dreadful against each other.

Nicolas Bataille ascribes the term incidente\(^{26}\) to Ionesco's use of the non sequitur to express the effect of insinuating the strange. The incidentes function as harbingers of catastrophe. In the middle of an utterly anodyne statement, something unforeseen and disquieting is suddenly introduced. The resulting incongruity causes a rupture in the normal order of discourse. These incidentes are abundant in Ionesco's plays. In La Cantatrice chauve, for example, they build up to a final catastrophe in the disintegration of language. Mme Smith, in her beginning monologue, comments on daily life, then she says:

"...Le yaourth est excellent pour l'estomac, les reins, l'appendicite et l'apothéose."\(^{27}\)

Yoghurt is quite normally considered a health food beneficial to digestion. That it should have any affect on appendicitis is absurd, but that it should in any context be construed to have a connection with apotheosis is stunning and disequilibrating. We are totally unprepared to make any connection between mundane yoghurt and a path toward deification. The juxtaposition of the two therefore produces an

\(^{26}\)Simone Benmussa, Eugène Ionesco (Paris, Seghers, 1966), p. 84.

\(^{27}\)Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre, I, p. 21.
unsetting effect, with intimations of fragmented order and disastrous mental collapse.

Essential to the Aristotelian concept of tragic drama is the point in a play where the principle character makes a discovery about himself or his condition, affecting him emotionally and altering his direction in the play. "The mainspring in the mechanism of a modern play is almost invariably a discovery by the hero of some element in his environment or in his own soul of which he has not been aware, or which he has not taken sufficiently into account."²⁸ Aristotle says that this recognition, or what might also be called the moment of truth, is most beautiful when it arises at the same time as reversal, or change to the contrary of previous actions. He cites the Oedipus Tyrannus for his example:

"Thus in the Oedipus the messenger, coming to gladden Oedipus and rid him of his fear concerning his mother, produces the contrary by making it evident who Oedipus is."²⁹

Anagnorisis for Ionesco's heroes rests on this principle, for the central motive of his plays is the progressive disclosure of the truth which has brought about the protagonist's fall. Just as Oedipus must repeatedly be told the truth about himself before finally accepting it, recognition must also be forced upon Ionesco's hero. In La Lacune, the Professor persistently refuses to accept the truth about himself until the very last, when he makes the call to the

²⁸Maxwell Anderson, p. 6.
²⁹Aristotle, p. 20.
President. The news brought by the messenger in this case precipitates a moral crisis, serving to confirm what is already feared.

In all the plays of the Bërenger cycle, Bërenger works tediously toward a final recognition and acceptance of his finitude. We may conclude that for Ionesco's mythical representation of the modern hero of tragedy, self-realization is a protracted and painful process, one into which the hero enters reluctantly, sometimes blindly, as in the cases of Amédée, Choubert and Jean, but always with a sense of compulsion. In every instance, the recognition is that of his mortality and his own anguished helplessness in the face of that mortality, whether the circumstances dictate that he end as a non-rhinoceros, a victim of duty or of evil, or of incredulous indifference, or of dishonor, or of a disintegrating universe.

We may now review those special qualities necessary to tragedy in the Greek sense, with an eye for determining to what extent, of any, Ionesco's theatre is consistent with those qualities.

The character affected in a tragedy must possess stature. His suffering must not be an "act of God," but somehow related to himself, preferably a consequence of a defensible moral choice he has made. "The fact that reasonably motivated actions result in disaster is the essential of the tragic view."30 There are no villains in Greek tragedy. Even

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30 Moses Hadas, p. 56.
Aegisthus and Medea have a degree of justification. Evil characters, in any case, are not central to the drama, but are only there as a part of the machinery necessary to bring on disaster. "To present an issue between an acknowledged wrong and an acknowledged right, with right triumphing in the end, is not tragedy, but melodrama."\textsuperscript{31}

Tragic action must have a certain magnitude. It is not individuals that tragedy is concerned with, but universal types which can serve as models. Consequently, tragedy must serve to educate the audience through the suffering of the personage involved. The primary lesson will always be that good men are subject to misfortunes, but master them by maintaining their own integrity. The price may be death, but every spectator feels that Oedipus, though destroyed, is really the victor. The process of tragedy must be realized by laborious stages, with light first from one angle, then from another. It cannot be blurted out, but must be gradually unfolded and illuminated by the resources of poetic language.

With the possible exceptions of the Professor in La Lacune and the King in Le Roi se meurt, it can scarcely be said that Ionesco's protagonists possess stature in the sense of royalty or nobility as in the classic Greek, French, or English tragedies. Bérenger is usually depicted as a middle class functionary. For Rhinocéros, he is shabbily dressed and appears indolent and uncouth. For Le Piétton de l'air, 

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.
however, we must assume that since he is sought for a press interview, he occupies a position of some renown in the literary world.

Ours is an era when societies, whether Marxist or capitalist, are self-conscious and embarrassed, at least outwardly, where class distinctions are concerned. Moreover, the ages of humanism, scientific advances and exploration of space have taught us that man, by dint of being *homo sapiens*, possesses a natural nobility, bounded only by individual limitations in his development toward superiority. Consequently, most of Ionesco's heroes, exemplified by the Bérenger of *Tueur sans gages* and *Rhinocéros*, are representative of what is average in humanity, their nobility or superiority being precipitated by the catalyst of conditions demanding a series of moral decisions. Even the King of *Le Roi se meurt* does not impress us as being truly a king, since he is an obviously intended allegorical representation, not only of mankind in general, but of the sum of all mankind's technical and intellectual accomplishments.

Since Ionesco's heroes are mythical representations of human aspirations, it becomes extremely difficult to describe precisely the nature of the tragic flaw which brings about their destruction. Only in *La Lacune*, the parody of classical tragedy, can we clearly see the cause-and-effect chain of *hamartia*, *hubris* and *até*.

Though the suffering brought to bear in the Bérenger cycle and other plays cannot be considered an "act of God," especially since Ionesco does not presume the existence of
God, it is a first premise of the Ionesco theatre that man is by nature doomed, perhaps by something the Greeks might have called fate or nemesis. Within this context the only moral choice for the hero is an existential one: whether to remain in a state of viscosity and bad faith, or to rebel, as Anouilh's heroes do, against an inequitable order, thereby bringing about a destruction which is tragic because of the anguished recognition imposed on the hero.

Ionesco's theatre harbors no villains, nor is there any trace of melodrama. Evil characters like the Killer in Tueur sans gages, or characters which might possibly be construed as evil, such as the policeman in Victimes du devoir, John Bull in Le Piéton de l'air or Frère Tarabas in La Soif et la Faim, are not really "characters" at all in the conventional sense, but mythical and allegorical representations of those aspects of life which tyrannize and torture man's soul as part of his retribution for being human. One is led to believe by this inference that Ionesco shares the lament of Calderón's Segismundo:

...pues el delito mayor del hombre, es haber nacido.  

Thus merely being born becomes man's essential hamartia.

We have seen, both from Ionesco's own claims in Notes et Contre-notes, and by the example of his theatre, that his plays are not concerned with individuals, but with man as a

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universal type, evidenced not only by the symbol of Bérenger-man, but as well by such devices as having characters function in overlapping rôles, as the "architecte-commissaire" in *Tueur sans gages*, or superimposing alter-rôles on characters, as with Madeleine and the inspector of *Victimes du devoir*, Amédée and Madeleine of *Amédée, ou comment s'en débarrasser*, or the monks and the two prisoners in *La Soif et la Faim*. The identity of the individual becomes subordinate to and enmeshed in the collective psychology of humanity.

It has already been shown above by illustration and example how Ionesco makes use of a special language as a proper vehicle for tragedy, first by destroying language, then reconstituting it to create a new means of communicating, through analogy and symbol, conflicting states of mind and being, which otherwise remain uncommunicable through logical and rational terms.

Rejecting the obsession of "ordinary" modern drama with personality and individual character development, Ionesco, like the Greeks, idealizes his protagonists into types, whose experience can be transposed on a psychological plane to the experience, not only of individuals, or even of whole societies, but of the entire species. As with the Greek, his stylized mode of presentation avoids, through the use of dramatic symbols, any touch of naturalism or realism.

We now come to the difficult problem of considering Ionesco as educator, for if tragic theatre does not enlighten and edify, it cannot be called tragedy. Ionesco's lesson--
and it may strain the point of credibility to use the word "lesson"--is the recognition of the disparateness in the dual nature of man, of man's isolation and consequent freedom, despite unexplainable obstructions, to achieve the excellence of which he is capable. This concept underlies all tragedies, and sets them apart from, and above, other dramatic expressions. "It is irrelevant for man to inquire into why the gods have no sorrow, but visit it on mortals; the only sphere where man can act is the human."33 It is just as irrelevant for Bérenger to ask why? as it was for Hippolytus, for each finds in the end that no answer is to be given. Nevertheless, it is in the nature of the tragic hero to ask. This is part of the tragedy.

The long detour taken by serious drama at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with its preoccupations of social reform and psychological analysis, turns back into the mainstream of universal tragedy, where the preoccupation is not primarily man's relationship to his fellow man, but to the tensions between man and external forces impossible for him to comprehend, but whose tyranny he compulsively must oppose, knowing in advance that he will lose, but sensing that in the struggle he may at least achieve a glimpse, however fleeting, of that Appolonian excellence for which his instinct tells him he is destined.

33 Moses Hadas, p. 60.
Chapter Four
The Tragic Hero

The Homeric concept of the hero was based on individual pride and accomplishment and a ruthless drive for self-assertion. A hero, according to this view, was "a man who by doing or suffering significantly, not necessarily with the motive of serving others, enriched the lives of all."¹ The Greek tragic writers affirmed the indomitable greatness and nobility of the human spirit, showing in their tragedies their belief that no transgression against the moral order of the universe as they conceived it could go unpunished.

Modern philosophical thought, as reflected in avant-garde theatre, conceives of man, not as a machine, but passionate, though not fully rational, always in a state of becoming, of achieving his essence, therefore perpetually in crisis. "Modern man, his unity of self fragmented, seeks to understand himself, his purpose on earth, the secret of being human. He has lost the sense of his inner reality. The tragic vision must present a hero who fights against this inner death."²

The absurd tragic hero, influenced by the recognition that the moral and spiritual safeguards which mankind fought


so painfully through the ages to establish have been swept away or seemingly nullified by the holocaust of world conflict, by scientific discoveries promising to reveal the secret of life, and by the actual navigation of solar space, finds himself compelled to seek "in his very loneliness and suffering, the only values which he can still have and which will be enough to make him great." Though he rejects moral compromise, the absurd hero is never thoroughly and absolutely ethically aware, as is the hero of existentialist drama. Bérenger, the most lucid of absurd heroes, is always a little confused, never totally cognizant of what his ethical demands really are. Avant-garde theatre does not presume the existence of any absolutes.

In light of the diminution of the tragic concept in the modern world and the reduction of our aesthetic view of the function of the hero to a measured psychology of the protagonist, the term "tragic visionary" might be now more appropriate than "tragic hero." However, since it is maintained here that Ionesco's drama represents a return to the mythical concept of man pitted against the universe, the latter term will be used consistently.

Our modern tragic vision, that which appears in the theatre of Ionesco, is still that which Nietzsche exposed in The Birth of Tragedy in 1872. He defined tragedy as the final synthesis of the naive dream-like aspiration toward

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"that measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions, that calm of the sculptor god"⁴ (Apollinian), and the "intoxicated reality which . . . seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness"⁵ (Dionysian), Nietzsche proposed that Attic tragedy "presents itself as the common goal of both these tendencies whose mysterious union after many and long precursory struggles, found glorious consummation in this child— at once Antigone and Cassandra."⁶ We can only interpret his meaning here as being that Sophocles' Antigone represents the Apollinian, while Aeschylus' Cassandra in Agamemnon is associated with the Dionysian, both together representing the dual nature of a homogeneous art form.

Analogous to Nietzsche's concept of a dual nature of the tragic inspiration is Ionesco's obsession with the paradox of sinking heaviness and transcending evanescence in his poetic images. The contrasting states of depression and euphoria in Ionesco's psychology--in his characters as well as in the author himself, for he tells us that his creations are but imagistic extensions of his own psyche--may be interpreted as exteriorization of the static Apollinian dream and the soaring Dionysian intoxication. The paradox of a simultaneous eternal dichotomy and fusion of the opposing


⁵Ibid., p. 38.

⁶Ibid., p. 47.
states constitutes the tragic qualm. It is the sudden apprehension, naive and astonishing, of an ontological truth.

Though the contemporary vision is essentially the same as that described by Nietzsche, the visionary, or hero, is now utterly lost, since there is no recognizable cosmic moral order to allow a return to the world, for him who has dared stray beyond. Consequently, the spirit of this tragic vision, as seen through the optic of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, is one of pessimism and despair. It is concerned with the efforts to discover universal principles of order in apparent disorder. "Ethical man, confronted by a moral contradiction, finds the neatly ordered and easily enacted worldly rights and wrongs of his ethical assumptions utterly inadequate to the data of his moral experience." In the face of such a contradiction he must make a choice. He may either yield in blind resignation, sacrificing himself to the demands of ethical absolutism, and drift hopelessly and aimlessly away from tragic heroism. On the other hand, he may choose to rebel, to reject the ethical system which he sees as equivocal and hollow.

It is the second alternative which Ionesco's Bérenger chooses in every case. In Tueur sans gages, shocked by the Commissioner's casuistic and indifferent tolerance of the corruption and evil in the cité radieuse—

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L'ARCHITECTE : ...Ne vous en faites donc pas comme cela! Si on pensait à tous les malheurs de l'humanité, on ne vivrait pas. Il faut vivre! Tout le temps il y a des enfants égorgés, des vieillards affamés, des veuves lugubres, des orphelines, des moribonds, des erreurs judiciaires, des maisons qui s'effondrent sur les gens qui les habitent... des montagnes qui s'écroulent... et des massacres, et des déluges, et des chiens écrasés... De cette façon, les journalistes peuvent gagner leur pain. Toute chose a son bon côté. Finalement, c'est le bon côté qu'il faut retenir.

BERENGER : Oui, Monsieur le Commissaire, oui... mais avoir vu cela de près, de mes yeux vu... je ne puis demeurer indifférent...8

--Bérenger, having seen the evil with his own eyes, cannot remain indifferent to it. He must act; he must rebel. In the second act of the play, he is seen becoming an homme d'action during the course of his conversation with Edouard, who symbolizes a humanity sick unto death with the seeds of its own destruction.

The efforts of Bérenger to penetrate the obstacles thrown in his way by society's impassive resistance to change must naturally fail. It is vain to struggle, to attempt to clear a path toward salvation, and the hero, duped and exhausted, finds himself alone, face to face with the Killer. One can scarcely help believing that this filthy little monster is in reality Edouard metamorphosed, or rather stripped of his Edouard masque, for the friend Edouard has mysteriously disappeared from the scene along with the multitude which had formed the nightmarish traffic jam. Bérenger tries to communicate with the Killer, for above all he

wishes to understand. In the face of threats, analytical reasonings and even prayers, the Killer only giggles, and Bérenger ends by kneeling helplessly before the assassin's knife.

With this play, Ionesco returns the stage to the classical conception of human tragedy. Here is the myth of anguished man at grips with his conscience and with the realization that he must die, in spite of his intellectual and spiritual struggle with the evil of his mortality. What makes him heroic is his refusal to accept his mortal condition without questioning, and his determination to resist, in spite of the fact that he is made increasingly aware of the futility of resistance. The ultimate recognition that he has a philosophy, and the affirmation of that philosophy as his fate becomes imminent, is the tragic anagnorisis. At the end he cries, "...Et que peuvent les balles elles-mêmes contre l'énergie infinie de ton obstination?... Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire!..."

In the final scene of Rhinocéros, after having demonstrated his contempt for all the possible rationalizations in favor of inauthenticity and abdication of moral responsibility, Bérenger assumes a clearly heroic stance, suffering, yet defiant to the end: "Malheur à celui qui veut conserver son originalité!... Je ne capitule pas!"

Le Piéton de l'air reveals Bérenger "enivré de certitude" in the face of disbelief and ridicule. This play takes the shape, structurally, of the idea it seeks to represent, which is, in effect, the prise de conscience, the tragic recognition,
the awakening to the inexplicable but certain knowledge of the transcendency of the human spirit. This is the meaning of the certitude of which he speaks. It is not an affirmation of the existence of an absolute order. The Anguish resulting from the tragic knowledge is expressed by one of the two old ladies:

Ire VIEILLE ANGLAISE : J'étais dans un pays d'où je ne pouvais sortir. J'y habitais depuis longtemps. Je n'avais jamais eu envie de sortir, j'ai eu tellement peur. Lorsque j'ai appris qu'on y était enfermés, que je ne pouvais pas en sortir, j'ai eu tellement peur. Je ne voyais plus que les murs partout autour de moi. J'ai fait une dépression nerveuse : de la claustrophobie. Ce n'est pas de ne pas sortir qui est grave, c'est de savoir qu'on ne peut pas. 9

Ionesco's hero sees beyond society and its laws, its necessary universals, which he finds neither necessary nor universal. "If his end, as tragic, must be condemned even as it is pitied by the trim categories of worldly morality, he may take pride in the fact that he has defiantly looked upon those insoluble cosmic antinomies which have dictated his fall."10 This is Pascal's view of man as the thinking reed.

Struck with the realization of the complete futility of human existence, unable to discover a palpable relationship with anything beyond that existence from which his apprehension has excommunicated him, and overwhelmed by the shocking anguish of his tragic vision, which is Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death," despair, the hero may either break

through to transcendence, or live in the contemplation of nothingness. Ionesco's hero, like Heidegger, "constantly and unblinkingly dares encounter the nothingness that has capriciously hurled him into momentary existence. But he can never again rest in the self-deception of the John Deweys—naively optimistic believers in structured social morality and in social progress. These are Kierkegaard's 'men of little heart,' Sartre's 'men of bad faith'—those who, evading the atheist's existential obligation to confront nothingness and its frighteningly empty consequences, construct elaborate rational structures based on nothing else: who whistle in the dark as if all were light."\textsuperscript{11}

While Ionesco's vision owes much to Heidegger and the Existentialists, it presents an alternative, which is a conception of man that is of the world without being restricted to social ethics. It is a universal conception, "conducive to order without optimistically thinning moral reality as the superficially ethical man would. It is the all-embracing vision . . . the formal and thematic triumph of \textit{tragedy} over the errant tragic vision it contained within it."\textsuperscript{12}

The hero's vision is destructive of moral unity. His action disturbs a balance which sooner or later must right itself. "The righting of the balance is what the Greeks called \textit{nemesis}. The agent or instrument of \textit{nemesis} may be human vengeance, ghostly vengeance, divine vengeance, divine

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 16.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
justice, accident, fate or the logic of events, but the essential thing is that nemesis happens, impersonally, unaffected by the moral quality of human motivation involved."¹³

By having the rebellion incarnate in Bérenger succumb to a higher order which absorbs without denying or condemning the destructive intent in the nature of the revolt, and by the purification of catharsis, Ionesco's tragedy asserts the affirmation of humanistic values, therefore making it possible for the contemporary viewer to identify psychologically with the hero and his defeat, without having to let go entirely of his conditioned attachments to ethical morality, in spite of the promise of explosive terrors revealed to him in the hero's fall.

The purpose of tragedy is not, after all, to lose man, but to help save him. Murry Krieger has pointed to the necessity for a balance between the ethical and the tragic, demonstrating on the one hand the need for insights provided by the tragic to advance human understanding beyond caution for social necessity, and on the other hand the need to strike out at the Dionysian visionary, to cling to the props society provides, at whatever cost to insight, since man, being a social animal, must continue to live in the world. His struggle through the tedium of daily existence demands a system, an order, which is crucial to his sanity and must not be threatened too severely. To sustain a balance and an

aesthetic tension between these opposing realities, it becomes clear that man requires some level of judgment which would include the tragic insight, but would pass from the rage of rebellion against a condition where "tout respire l'horreur de mourir dans un pays qui invite à la vie,"\textsuperscript{14} to an otherworldly or transcendant affirmation. This calls for the transformations that only tragic drama can perform.

"The balance of necessities between tragic and ethical must continue as the primary mode of dramatic conflict, with the inherent weaknesses of each—the moral failing of the one and visionary failing of the other—poised against each other to create the unresolvable tension that must now replace tragedy's more sublime catharsis as the principle of aesthetic control."\textsuperscript{15} Ionesco achieves this balance in a successful juxtaposition and blending of elements which simultaneously provoke laughter and the tragic qualm.

The "sublime catharsis" referred to by Krieger above is that of the \textit{Oedipus} type, entailing the "ultimate illumination which shall turn a painful story into a profound and moving experience... representing the forces of righteousness and beneficence."\textsuperscript{16} The Ionescoan catharsis is of a different nature. The "story" is turned into a profound and


\textsuperscript{15}Murray Krieger, p. 20.

moving experience, but there is never any affirmation of righteousness and beneficence, of the logos in which Sophocles believed.

It has been pointed out that the tragic qualm is a sudden and appalling recognition of our desperate plight in a universe apparently indiscriminate of good and evil, happiness and misery. It is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which seeks to conquer it. In whatever inexplicable way this victory of the spirit is achieved in tragedy, it is shared by the audience. "If the tragic vision is to impress us with a sense of profound loss, it must at the same time bring home to us an equally profound sense of the values without which the loss would not be real."17

As our sympathy is drawn into participation with the Bergerenger-hero playing out his tragic rôle, we grow more and more acutely aware of the preciousness of the human values of love, understanding, and the dignity of individual and intellectual liberty revealed to us by the action of the drama. These values appear to us concretely in visual symbols as Ionesco breathes life into the very objects of his stage décor, transforming the accessories into characters.

A stage is crowded with chairs occupied by invisible people who are none the less present, because they can be heard making the sounds that ordinary theatre audiences make.

A clock strikes seventeen times in derision of the chronometric conventions which rule our lives. Mushrooms proliferate in a living room and a glowing corpse grows to immense proportions to remind us of how we nurture our guilt until it becomes a monstrous living thing, separating us from those we once loved unreservedly. Heavy pieces of furniture move unaided into a room until there is no space left for life. The portrait of a deceased grandfather sings and mocks his surviving family as they stupidly abandon themselves to a ritualistic travesty of procreation.

People surrender their individuality and become rhinoceroses, gamboling about the proscenium like creatures in an animated cartoon. An un-married couple torture each other in the manner of Edward Albee's George and Martha, while civil war rages outside and their apartment comes crashing down about them. The palace of a king crumbles into dust as an entire universe fades visibly into nothingness. A branch of dogweed pulled from a man's chest, dripping drops of blood, not only symbolizes, but is love deliberately abandoned and destroyed.

Special lighting and sound effects go far beyond the conventional stage demands for descriptive background and atmosphere. They are not at all descriptive in any naturalistic sense, but serve to transport the stage and audience, projecting the point of view into other states of consciousness, other planes of time and space.

M. Ionesco himself explains the nature of this enterprise in the following terms:
The illumination and mise en relief of human values by such unorthodox devices operate a certain redemptive power that may now be identified with catharsis. No longer does catharsis depend uniquely on the nobility of the hero, but draws its strength from the whole spectacle. The resulting impact of self-knowledge is a terrible thing. For Ionesco as well as for Sophocles, "to know oneself is to know man's powerlessness; but it is also to know the indestructible and conquering majesty of suffering humanity." 

The Greek tragic poets exalted the power and pride of man, but at the same time they pointed out his insignificance in relation to the complete pattern of an ordered universe. Set against the incomprehensible immensity of nature he was only an atom, impotent before the mighty and implacable forces which stood ready to destroy him. To balance this dark view of human nature, they showed that man was endowed with imagination and intellect, which could make it possible for him to rise above his earthly limitations. They developed the conception of man as both pitiable and heroic, bound to  


strive for the perfection allowed him within his moira.

In Greek tragedy, suffering must come to the hero as a result of some direct cause. "He must be the responsible agent for his own undoing or he must toward the end of his ordeal be sufficiently enlightened to understand the truth about himself and therefore to accept the conditions that life imposes on mortal man." 20 In his defeat or death, the tragic hero "becomes a citizen of a larger city, still defiant but in a new mood, a 'calm of mind,' a partial acquiescence." 21 This attitude of acceptance has been missing in existentialist drama until Ionesco.

It is also this attitude of acceptance, often misinterpreted as surrender, which has earned for Ionesco some very derisory criticism. Marta Piwinska writes that "the first Bérenger is killed to the accompaniment of the Killer's giggle, which makes the 'tragicness' suspect and suggests that perhaps these endings are a caricature of tragedy . . . What is tragic about comprehending and accepting one's fate without resisting, revolt eroding to resignation, putting one's head on the block? . . . Having all the makings of a tragic hero, Bérenger argues away his chance." 22 Leonard Pronko argues that Bérenger's "naiveté and unawareness

20 Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 71.
refuse him the stature of tragic hero."23 In a criticism of *Les Chaises*, Wallace Fowlie interprets the play as a "picture of man's enisled fate describing his frustration over trying to communicate and to be remembered, but it does not depict any tragic dimension."24

The failure to recognize the real tragic dimension of Ionesco's heroes, or even to sense in them no more than a hint of the tragic, that "there is tragedy somewhere near the characters, not in them,"25 can only be a result of continuing to apply stereotyped definitions and aesthetic criteria, of trying to make the pieces of the puzzle fit a preconceived pattern. There persists the tendency to confuse heroism and tragedy.

Conceding that Ionesco is a "remarkable playwright with some five or six masterpieces to his credit," Lionel Abel maintains that the last one could say about his plays is that they are new. "One typically 'new' idea of Ionesco's is that there are no new ideas, even in the construction of plays. Here he is quite wrong. He has written some plays that are really novel as structures. It is the ideas expressed in them that are all too familiar and which spring from the prevailing climate of political and metaphysical


pessimism.\textsuperscript{26}

It is true that death, suffering, frustration and loneliness are not new; but attitudes toward these problems, points of view and perspectives constantly change. Medieval man regarded the ending of his existence, not as an anguishing injustice, but as a surcease to earthly suffering and as a gateway to a larger life. Even the Renaissance exhuberant joy of living did not alter this promise. The attitude persists into the twentieth century with the staunchly puritanical belief in a divine Providence. William Faulkner reminds us that "people took funerals seriously in those days. Not death: death was our constant familiar."\textsuperscript{27} Death was regarded with fear and dread, but it caused no metaphysical anguish.

In the controversial final scene of \textit{Tueur sans gages}, Bérenger seems, at first sight of the Killer, to have a real opportunity for visual and definite triumph. He is not afraid, for the Killer is very small: "Je pourrais vous écraser comme un ver de terre. Je ne le ferai pas. Je veux comprendre. Vous allez répondre à mes questions." It is at this point that Bérenger makes his fatal mistake, from the point of view of the play's action. Here is his tragic flaw: being human, he must ask the question, he must understand. We know that the answer to the question, as Ionesco will reiterate throughout the Bérenger cycle and in \textit{La Soif}

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., pp. 142-143.

\textsuperscript{27}William Faulkner, \textit{The Reivers} (New York, Random House, 1962), p. 44.
et La Faim, is that there is no answer.

Doctor Piwinska sees Bérenger's humanism lapsing into whining entreaty. "At the end, there is no trace of dignity. Bérenger looses a hail of abuse, makes incoherent threats, tries to shoot, can't, and with a wail that 'nothing can be done' offers his neck to the knife."28 She sees him betraying humanity in the cause of Humanism, ensnared in his own reasoning. Ionesco's point is precisely that philosophical reasonings do not avail, do not produce answers, do not give any real understanding in the face of man's mortal dilemma. There is no possibility of accommodating Death to human emotions and laws, of lending meaning to existence without the fatal resignation of tragic acceptance. Bérenger does not "offer his neck to the knife." It is very important to note this fact in the author's stage directions: "(Puis de nouveau, devant l'assassin qui tient le couteau levé, sans bouger et en ricanant, Bérenger baisse lentement ses deux vieux pistolets démodes, les pose à terre, incline la tête, puis, à genoux, tête basse, les bras ballant, il répète, balbutie:) Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire! . . ."29 The attitude of Bérenger here is one of supplication rather than of submission.

As Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed to the Father to relieve Him of the terrible responsibility for humanity—"Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

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28 Marta Piwinska, p. 169.

Bérenger, kneeling in total attrition and abnegation before the implacable, ineluctible reality of his mortal condition, cries out to the void (Ionesco suggests that the scene may be played with no visible Killer): "Et que peuvent les balles elles-mêmes contre l'énergie infinie de ton obstination?" Thus, the hero is destroyed by an exterior force, and his destruction is brought about by a flaw in his own character. The flaw is of a double nature: he is first of all mortal, and he has the temerity to attempt to transcend his mortality. Ionesco fuses dramatic tragedy with morality play and psychodrama.

It is curious coincidence that no one ever questions the authentic "tragicness" in the death of Rostand's Cyrano. By recalling the final scene, some interesting similarities may become apparent between the stance of the A.D. 1897 hero and that of the composite Bérenger:

**CYRANO**

Elle vient. Je me sens déjà botté de marbre,  
—Ganté de plomb!  
Oh! mais!...puisqu'elle est en chemin,  
Je l'attendrai debout, et l'épée à la main!  
. . . . . . 

Je crois qu'elle regarde...  
Qu'elle ose regarder mon nez, cette camarade!  
Que dites-vous?...C'est inutile?...Je le sais!  
Mais on ne se bat pas dans l'espoir du succès!  
Non! non! c'est bien plus beau lorsque c'est inutile!  
—Qu'est-ce que c'est que tous ceux-là?—  
Vous êtes mille?  
Ah! je vous reconnais, tous mes vieux ennemis!  
Le Mensonge?  
Tiens, tiens! —Ha! ha! les Compromis,  
Les Préjugés, les Lâchetés!...  
Que je practise?  
Jamais, jamais! —Ah! te voilà, toi, la Sottise!  
—Je sais bien qu'à la fin vous me mettrez à bas;  
N'importe: je me bats! je me bats! je me bats!
Oui, vous m'arrachez tout, le laurier et la rose!
Arrachez! Il y a malgré vous quelque chose
Que j'emporte, et ce soir, quand j'entrerai chez Dieu,
Mon salut balaiera largement le seuil bleu,
Quelque chose que sans un pli, sans une tache,
J'emporte malgré vous, et c'est... c'est...
Mon panache! 30

One may hope that it is not mere wishful thinking to see here reflections of the pathos of *Tueur sans gages*, the bravado of *Rhinocéros*, the resignation of *Le Piéton de l'air*, the fatal majesty of *Le Roi se meurt*. But *Cyrano* is, of course, a Romantic tragedy, and Bérenger wears no panache.

The "absurd" hero, who is absurd even when he rebels, struggles painfully but resolutely toward the goal of self-disclosure. There is no categorical imperative to be obeyed, no ultimate meaning to be pieced together, no cure for his dread. If he feels guilt, it is not because he has transgressed against cosmic laws, but because he has violated his inner self, or because he has failed to keep faith with his fellow men, all of whom share his fate as victims of death. "The existentialist hero, a man without a self he can call his own, stands apart from Nature, and yet it is Nature which springs the trap in which he is caught and shuts him off from the possibilities of transcendence." 31

The hero of Ionesco's tragedy demands too much of life and too much of himself. He will not be satisfied with the meager portions of love, happiness or well-being that his brief existence chooses so penuriously to feed him, nor can

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31 Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 71.
he be satisfied with his own failure to reconcile his
spiritual longings with his Sisyphean predicament. He can-
not have all and he refuses to settle for less. Life is his
only assured value, but even that may at any instant be
taken away from him. "He transcends nihilism and becomes a
truly tragic figure when he comes to realize that it is not
life itself he cherishes, but life on terms that conform to
his conception of what is honorable and just, even if these
'ideals' are freely chosen, not supported by the physical
universe he inhabits." 32

Illustrating Ionesco's adherence to this principle,
the Bérenger of Tueur sans gages, speaking of the Killer,
dresses the shadows: "Une fois qu'il sera arrêté, ligoté,
mis hors d'état de nuire, le printemps reviendra pour tou-
jours, toutes les cités seront radieuses... Je serai récom-
pensé. Ce n'est pas cela que je cherche. Avoir fait mon
devoir suffit." As engagé, he recognizes the achievement of
well-being, peace of mind for toutes les cités, to be his
duty. He first thinks, naturally enough, for he is human,
that victory will be his reward. Then he catches himself in
the realization that, as a human being, he must not think of
personal reward, but must follow on to the end because it is
his duty. "...Cela nous concerne tous, nous sommes tous
responsables des crimes qui... Enfin, je suis un vrai
citoyen." For Ionesco, to be a true citizen has nothing to
do with the social structure. It means to be a responsible

32 Ibid., p. 74.
member of the human race.

In *Rhinocéros*, when all around him refuse to recognize the danger threatening them, and continue to offer one rationalization after another to mask their indifference, Bérenger finds it impossible to remain indifferent. "Mais quand vous êtes pris vous-mêmes dans l'événement, quand vous êtes mis tout à coup devant la réalité brutale des faits, on ne peut pas ne pas se sentir concerné directement." He is moved by the same urgency of *engagement* as his predecessor in *Tueur sans gages*. "Il faut faire quelque chose avant d'être submergés!" Again, nothing can be done. The center of tragedy is in the hero's isolation. Here he is utterly alone, feeling himself ugly in a world of monsters which suddenly appear beautiful, because he is not like them. Nevertheless the affirmation of the human value persists at the end as he exclaims, "Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu'au bout! Je ne capitule pas!"

"Et vivre, c'est ne pas se résigner," declares Camus in *Noces*. But the resignation he has in mind is not that of the first Bérenger, which is an acceptance of the inalterable reality of death. It is rather the capitulation which the second Bérenger resists as he affirms his resolution to live as an authentic conscience. Resignation for Camus also entails falling victim to the self-deceptive hope for a way out after death. "S'il y a un péché contre la vie, ce n'est peut-être pas tant d'en désespérer que d'espérer une autre vie, et se dérober à l'impassable grandeur de celle-ci."33

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33Albert Camus, p. 49.
He reminds us that the last and most terrible of all the evils to escape from Pandora's box was hope. For the hope of redemption, his only conceivable remedy is delectation in the immediate and palpable beauty of the universe. "Entre ce ciel et ces visages tournés vers lui, rien où accrocher une mythologie, une littérature, une éthique ou une religion, mais des pierres, la chair, des étoiles et ces vérités que la main peut toucher."  

The sensuous beauty of the earth, the pleasures of immediacy, these alone cannot hold Bérenger. It is true that as does the existentialist hero, he strives to become an authentic self, but he also insists on asking for the light of meaning by which he can guide his life. If there is no absolute meaning to be discovered in his epic quest, he must accept, stoically or not, whatever meaning he is able to salvage from the wreck of his spirit, crushed by the conditions imposed upon him. Choubert, in Victimes du devoir, plumbs the depths and scales the altitudes of every level of consciousness, memory, space and time. He discovers many things about himself, but he does not find the elusive absolute answer. He returns to begin again the dreadful torture of existence.

Bérenger, in Piéton de l'air, makes a similar journey beyond the recognizable dimensions of reality to witness a cataclysmic, apocalyptic fusion of the universe, beyond whose hells there is endless void. When he returns to take

34Ibid.
up his existence again, there is a flicker of hope. As they exit the stage, his daughter, Marthe, says, "...peut-être les abîmes se rempliront... peut-être que... les jardins... les jardins..." There is only a child's half-articulated "perhaps." The implication is that it will not be, and the glowing, exploding fireworks in the distance seem to presage the inescapable doom of Bérenger's apocalyptic vision.

Jean makes the supreme journey beyond life in La Soif et la Faim, where, in the cold nightmare of hell, he finds, not the answer he seeks, but a chilling projection of the terror of the existence he knew before. Impenetrable iron bars separate him from his vision of beatitude as he begins to pay his debt with an endless servitude. He ends as he began, forever cut off from the concept of being for which his intuition tells him he was meant, which he feels the spiritual capacity of attaining, but which is denied to him by an irreversible reality.

Though he finds no absolute meaning, it is this unre­lenting will to truth which is one of the distinctive char­acteristics of Ionesco's hero, as it is with the heroes possessing the modern tragic vision in any contemporary play. When the modern hero lacks the rebellious freedom to affirm his being, he is only a victim of cruel circum­stances; he ceases to be tragic. "If the odds against him, as in Beckett's world, are so overwhelming that he does not stand a chance, then all we get is an intolerably heightened feeling of nihilistic futility."35 Bérenger does not cease

35Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 74.
to be tragic in this sense, for he never loses his humanity, though his fate is ineluctible. Beckett's characters in Fin de Partie, for example, are not identifiably human, not even as myth. They represent decay and death of the spirit as well as of the body. Bérenger, on the other hand, fittingly embodies the tragic vision because he possesses, or at least acts as if he possesses, a freedom of choice. He chooses to "do something," to intercept the Killer, to resist the rhinoceros hysteria; he chooses to turn his back on John Bull and the "establishment." He even chooses to die. Jean chooses to "arracher de son coeur l'amour," and must accept the inevitable consequences.

According to standard definitions, the hero of tragedy "has equal capacities for good and for evil; he is free to choose between a good deed and a wrong-doing, and is responsible for his choice." The freedom of choice is one which the hero finds supremely difficult to sustain in a scientific universe.

Ionesco portrays the tragic vision in man's persistent, if unavailing struggle to impose meaning on life. His tragic hero knows, or suspects, that there is no justification for his commitment, act of sacrifice, no reason why he should endanger or yield his life for a given cause in a universe that is indifferent to his needs, to his quest for meaning. The only justification Bérenger can have for making his choice is that he is following his own intuition

to uphold the virtue of human values. Since through his act he discovers there is no absolute value to defend him, to justify him, he depends entirely on his own powers, which must prove in the end to be totally ineffective. Nevertheless, as a result of this dependence on free decision, life becomes its own meaning. Here are the prescribed limits within which the Ionescoan tragic conflict must be worked out. There is no universal order that the tragic hero can recognize and embrace as his own. The only order discernible is alien, contingent, and incomprehensible. The implacable laws of Nature are not the laws of the heart of man. The world is meaningless, and yet he must somehow affirm life and, if possible, justify it.

"If all art, whatever its subjective intention, celebrates the indestructible continuity of existence and represents a spiritual victory, however temporary, over the forces of darkness, the writer must determine the dialectical relation that obtains between his nihilistic Weltanschauung and the tragic vision. That is the heart of the matter."37 Ionesco, having encountered the vision of the absurd, of necessity became rooted in uncertainty. The questions he poses in his work are more revealing than the answers he gives, if he gives any at all; but the questions point to the irrepressible need to rebel against the fate of the absurd. One may believe that he would wish to preserve standard finite values, even if in the end they do not

37Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 155.
prevail.

Goodness does not triumph. Justice is not the ruling principle in life. Man does not know. Unknowingly he falls prey to the very powers that he wanted to escape. The modern tragic hero—man intensified, depicted in greatness beyond good and evil—however, does come to realize the nature of the free choice open to him and to recognize his place in the order of things. The power of darkness that is so conspicuous an element in the literature of the tragic vision paradoxically illuminates the human passion for truth, no matter where it may lead. It must lead the hero to live authentically, which means, in existentialist terms, to live in the full knowledge that each moment of life moves one irresistibly toward the death that will end forever all the possibilities of his becoming.

Consequently, by daring to face the truth of being, whatever it may disclose, the hero has already gone some distance beyond the spectre of the absurd. By insisting that there is nothing beyond man, Ionesco prepares the foundation for a tragic counter-affirmation. Although the hero must come to grips with the fact of his mortality, he will still endeavor, in the brief interval before his light of life is extinguished, to assert his humanity and his freedom, and to live in accordance with the ideal he has chosen.

Having rejected once and for all any illusions of an after-life, "he is ready to affirm what man alone can affirm: there is only this life, here and now. The only
effective antidote against the vision of the absurd is to intensify the revolt of consciousness, to unite against the common enemy—death. The tragic hero rebels, always, as we have seen, in the name of life. As tragic hero, he must engage in a conflict against powers which, though overwhelming, must nevertheless be opposed. Here is the reiteration of his Pascalian greatness of soul. Even if he is not able, like Pascal, to give voice to a heartening affirmation of cosmic order and harmony relating to his own spiritual needs and aspirations, he shares the same nobility.

Ionesco's theatre is proof that nihilism in literature does not represent a defeat of the human spirit. On the contrary, its incorporation into art may be indicative of a reaching out toward a goal of transcendence. However, when the possibility of transcendence is totally denied, as in the theatre of Beckett, the writer falls short of the tragic vision.

Ionesco's primary objective has been to establish, through the medium of a new mythology, and without the crutch of a theology, some order of meaning in the chaos of modern life. The scientific and social traditions have been assimilated into a larger view of man which goes beyond the old necessity to define the universe in terms of man's relationship to divine power. The old myths, whether of Greek or Christian origin, have been emptied of meaning. Originally, the myths were "structures of human imagination,

38 Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 155.
which then were projected for certain reasons on the heavens."\(^{39}\) The new mythology is born of the scientific imagination and is projected on the conscience of man. Among all the uncertainties, one thing is clear: "man cannot hope to dominate reality except through the art of tragedy, in which human consciousness protests against the absurdity of existence."\(^{40}\) This has been the accomplishment of Ionesco. Whether or not his tragic works will rival those of the past in endurance remains to be seen.


\(^{40}\) Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 157.
Chapter Five
The Tragedy of Religion Without God

Man's fundamental attitude toward life, and the application of this attitude toward the formulation of a personal morality, must be viewed as "religion" in the broadest and most universal sense of the word. Part of the essential function of the tragic poet is to help people understand their own fundamental attitude toward life. Indeed, where many people are concerned, the task involves revealing to them the fact that they have such an attitude at all. It must be conceded that the term "religion," allowing even the free definition given it here, is going to mean something different to each individual. In Greek Tragedy and the Modern World, Leo Aylen delineates three possible communal religions,\(^1\) i.e. religions which may be shared, believed, or practiced by man in a social context. Each religion aims toward the self-awareness of man in a rational universe, and each places a different interpretation on that self-awareness. Every rational individual must adopt one of the three positions.

Deism, whose manifestations include Christianity, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, to name but a few, seeks to prepare the self to become a member of a utopia believed to exist on a different temporal dimension. Atheistic Marxism, while sharing Deism's ascetic renunciation of self for an altruistic

cause, anticipates, on the other hand, a special utopian society which will eventually be established for its mortal descendants on this Earth.

Finally, atheistic Existentialism, confronted with the absurdity, the gratuity of existence, and abandoning any attempt to make sense of it, either gives up altogether, or seeing man as his own ultimate raison d'être, adopts a kind of Epicurean position.

In ancient times, Epicurean philosophy was a "belief which released men, endowed them with individual responsibility and the incentive to realize such excellence as they were capable of, and did not deprive the world of gods whom men might even love if they did not expect to be loved in return." The chief characteristic of Epicureanism was the denial of Platonic otherworldliness. Although the only criterion for conduct was pleasure, defined as the absence of pain, sensible man would necessarily avoid any indulgence which would lead to pain outweighing the pleasure it might give. Consequently, the Epicureans were far from being debauched libertines. They believed in a soul, but one which was indivisible from the body, and which ceased to exist along with the body. Though gods existed, there was no question of divine retribution, since the gods were indifferent and there was no afterlife. Therefore, the soul had "no separate loyalty, no obligation to follow a code different from the body's. In an absolute sense, man is the

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measure, and the sole measure." Recognizing no sacred authority, man's only obligation was concerned with the development of his own excellence.

The absolute humanistic attitude of the Epicurean view of man is deeply reflected in the modern absurd hero. Literary nihilists now perceive the absurd as a pervasive presence, almost numinous, but which they will not recognize as God. They voice a tragic humanism that upholds the courage and dignity of man in his impossible quest for meaning. The fact that there is a quest at all implies religion.

In Sartre's Les Mouches, for example, the hero Orestes, who is neither villain nor saint, sees himself as a victim who has chosen to revolt. "He exists, therefore he rebels; that is the mark of his humanity. This, though negative, is essentially religious."4 Rebelling against the tyranny of time, the absurd gratuity of existence, and the ignominy of death, the modern hero, as a victim, achieves no culminating moment of redemption, although he may in certain cases, as may be observed in both Camus and Ionesco, move forward in his development toward a kind of mystical transcendence. With Ionesco, it is the sudden revelation of the possibility of transfiguration, or transcendence, followed by its fateful denial which constitutes the real tragedy.

Camus, who perhaps best represents the modern Existentialist-Epicurean ideal, defined, in Le Mythe de Sisyphe,

3Ibid., p. 95.

the man of the absurd, "celui qui n'abandonne pas ses exigences, mais garde sa lucidité, ne cherchant pas à échapper à la conscience qu'il a de la gratuité totale de sa conduite."\(^5\)

Sisyphus, having rebelled against the gods' decision for his death, was consequently condemned forever to push a giant boulder to the top of a hill, from which it inevitably rolled back down. The image from Greek mythology characterizes clearly the "absurdity" of the human condition.\(^6\) On this point Camus at first constructed a morality according to which man must live each instant in the fullness of life, while clearly recognizing the final defeat which awaits him. His novel, La Peste, among other later works, expands the duty of man in rebellion against the absurd to combat relentlessly any totalitarian system of ideas which imposes moral disorder and deprives man of his freedom. "C'est un déséquilibre mortel pour l'homme, une maladie latente devenue virulente à notre époque et qu'il s'agit de combattre collectivement comme, dans La Peste, les 'équipes sanitaires' combattent le fléau."\(^7\)

With L'Exil et le Royaume, Camus apparently reached a


\(^6\) Robert Merle, in a one-act play entitled Sisyphe et la Mort (1950), used the Sisyphus theme to demonstrate society's selfish dependence on its own mortality. Sisyphus, having stolen the pen with which Death must register the names of those who are to die, is besieged by complaints of the citizenry, who finally conspire to restore the mortal balance, since it is good for business. (Robert Merle, Les Oeuvres libres, 15 juin 1950, no. 49, Paris, Gallimard.)

\(^7\) Germaine Brée, p. 518.
broader and more philosophical view of life. The six stories in this collection reveal a powerful lyricism, inspired by the author's love of the brilliance and purity of the North African landscape. The first of the stories, "La Femme adultère," represents the revelation of a dual state of a being. First there is the apprehension of an alienation, or "exile," from the narrowly sheltered world of banal existence, which then leads to the discovery of a "kingdom," or a sense of identification with a cosmic and serene beauty, which must have been at some distant time in the past man's proper state, but which since has become lost to him, perhaps through preoccupation with the trivialities of civilization.

The experience is a mystical one and allows a spiritual transcendence which is properly religious. Noting that Camus, having early in his career paraphrased the words of Christ—"Mon royaume est de ce monde,"—Germaine Brée concludes: "Exile et royaume, simultanément, ce sont les deux symboles qui, ensemble, définissent la condition humaine aux yeux de Camus."8

Analogous to Sartre's Nausée, to Camus' Peste, and to Antonin Artaud's idea of "a malady that would be a kind of psychic entity and would not be carried by a virus,"9 is Ionesco's conception of the human condition as a mal mortel. In a program note for the première performance of his

8Ibid.

Jeux de massacre, Ionesco asserts that "while Camus went to the plague to give moral and even political meaning to the absurd, he himself has the diametrical aim of taking meaning away. 'Death is the ultimate threat . . . but in fact even those who think they know this, know it not.'"10

For Ionesco, man is just as much a prisoner of himself as he is a prisoner of the world. The Bérenger hero-composite illustrates this clearly, and Jean of La Soif et la Faim presents an even more penetrating reflection of man's powerlessness to escape the overwhelming evil sickness which originates with his own being. It is when Ionesco's characters attempt to give meaning to the world by committing their own lives to it that they find their only reward to be claustrophobic entrapment, vertigo, nausea, and the plague of death. The moment they become cognizant of the life-gift they have given they experience their mortal limitations and are overcome with a spiritual malady. "Victime, en définitive, de lui seul, par le mauvais usage qu'il a fait de sa liberté, l'homme qui donnait l'existence, comme un cadeau, à tout ce qu'il touchait, la sent en lui, désormais, comme un mal mortel."11

The mortal illness manifests itself physically as a syndrome, the insidious growth of its effects becoming more and more marked as the victim progressively realizes what is

10"Heartland of the Absurd," *Time*, vol. 95, no. 7 (Feb. 16, 1970), p. 64.

happening to him. He finds it increasingly more difficult to maintain a resistance, to marshall the strength necessary to affirm his existence. Ionesco describes the symptoms:

J'étais dans la force de l'âge, avais bonne mine, beaucoup de prestance, haute taille, de beaux costumes, traits réguliers, expression énergique, tout l'air d'un homme plein de vigueur et de santé, lorsque je ressentis les premiers symptômes du Mal. Cela commença par de très légères, à peine perceptibles fatigues, tout à fait passagères, mais se répétant... le mal était descendu partout, en aucun endroit précis; cela n'était localisé en aucun organe; cela rayonnait de façon diffuse, dans tout le corps qui, objet énorme, terriblement encombrant, ne m'appartenait plus, ne m'écoulait plus du tout. Les membres n'obéissaient qu'en rechignant, ou de travers, ou pas du tout, à mes commandes d'ailleurs désordonnées, confuses elles-mêmes. Les articulations étaient rouillées; une paresse sans bornes, une passive anarchie biologique s'était emparée des organes qui se bouclaient aussi, se sabotaient réciproquement comme des ennemis irréductibles. Les mâchoires refusaient de mastiquer les rares denrées que, de temps à autre, je leur confiais tout de même; elles laissaient tout le travail à la charge de l'estomac qui, se démettant à son tour de ses fonctions, expédiait les aliments non digérés aux intestins qui en constituaient, déraisonnablement, des stocks, des pyramides, des montagnes pétrifiées. A mesure que mes organes s'engourdissaient, mon esprit se débattait dans une sorte de chaos pâteux...

Amédée, Bérenger, Jean—all experience the inescapable terror of sinking heavily while water and mud rise to engulf them in an ineluctible descent into hell. However, they are simultaneously subject to an opposing sensation of floating ascent: "Une lucidité étrange émergeait, une pensée sans objet saisissable, la clarté d'un ciel vide... La moitié de ma tête était de plomb, plus lourde encore; l'autre

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The dual disposition of lightness and heaviness, of being drawn downward and swept upward at the same time, represents the anguished spirit at an impasse with the reality of a universe both weighted down by matter and empty of presence, the brutal confrontation of "too much" on the one hand and "not enough" on the other. It is the perception of existence as a neutral state in which opposite poles of meaning cancel each other out. It is what "the other" is for Sartre. It is hell. Ionesco explains it in an address made at Lausanne in November, 1954:

Deux états de conscience fondamentaux sont à l'origine de toutes mes pièces : tantôt l'un, tantôt l'autre prédomine, tantôt ils s'entremêlent. Ces deux prises de conscience originelles sont celles de l'évanescence ou 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. Chacun de nous a pu sentir, à certains moments, que le monde a une substance de rêve, que les murs n'ont plus d'épaisseur, qu'il nous semble voir à travers tout, dans un univers sans espace, uniquement fait de clartés et de couleurs; toute l'existence, toute l'histoire du monde devient, à ce moment, inutile, insensée, impossible. Lorsqu'on ne parvient pas à dépasser cette première étape du dépaysement (car on a bien l'impression de se réveiller dans un monde inconnu) la sensation de l'évanescence vous donne une angoisse, une sorte de vertige. Mais tout cela peut, tout aussi bien, devenir euphorique : l'angoisse se transforme soudain en liberté; plus rien n'a de l'importance en dehors de l'émerveillement d'être, de la nouvelle, surprenante conscience de notre existence dans une lumière d'aurore, dans la liberté retrouvée; nous sommes étonnés d'être, dans ce monde qui apparaît illusoire, fictif et le comportement humain révèle son ridicule, toute histoire, son inutilité absolue; toute réalité, tout langage semble se désarticuler, se désagréger, se

13Ibid.
vider, si bien que tout étant dénué d'importance,
ge peut-on faire d'autre que d'en rire? Pour moi,
à un de ces instants, je me suis senti tellement
libre, ou libéré, que j'avais le sentiment de pou-
voir faire ce que je voulais avec les mots, avec
les personnages d'un monde qui ne me paraissait
plus être qu'une apparence dérisoire, sans fonde-
ment.

Certainement, cet état de conscience est très
rare, ce bonheur, cet émerveillement d'être dans un
univers qui ne me gêne plus, qui n'est plus, ne
tient sentiment opposé : la légereté se mue en
lourdeur; la transparence en épaisseur; le monde
pèse; l'univers m'écrase. Un rideau, un mur in-
franchissable s'interpose entre moi et le monde,
entre moi et moi-même, la matière remplit tout,
prend toute la place, anéanti toute liberté sous
son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient
un cachot étouffant. La parole se brise, mais d'une
autre façon, les mots retombent, comme des pierres,
comme des cadavres; je me sens envahi par des
forces pesantes contre lesquelles je mène un combat
où je ne puis avoir que le dessous.14

From this state of mind, or state of being, has sprung
the inspiration for dramatic situations such as Amédée,
Victimes du Devoir and La Soif et la Faim, where the con-
sciousness of crisis becomes so intense that words lose
their power and give way to a vitalization of stage objects
and accessories.

It has almost become a commonplace to interpret the
corpse of Amédée as an incarnation of guilt. Some critics
have seen this corpse as the image of a dead love between
Madeleine and Amédée. Whether it is that, or whether it is
intended to represent some neglected relative, a dead child,
the impossibility of having a child, or a murdered lover—
the possibilities become infinite—the image remains one of
festering guilt.

14 Eugène Ionesco, Notes et Contre-notes (Paris, Galli-
The conviction of guilt, reflected in bitter accusation and denial as well as in saprophytic image, is frequently evident in Ionesco's theatre. In *Les Chaises*, the Old Man laments:

Je suis un fils ingrat... Ah!... De la douleur, des regrets, des remords, il n'y a que ça... Il ne nous reste que ça... J'ai laissé ma mère mourir toute seule dans un fossé. Elle m'appelait, gémmissait faiblement : Mon petit enfant, mon fils bien aimé, ne me laisse pas mourir toute seule... Reste avec moi. Je n'en ai pas pour long-temps. Ne t'en fais pas, maman, oui dis-je, je reviendrai dans un instant... j'étais pressé... j'allais au bal, danser. Je reviendrai dans un instant. A mon retour elle était morte déjà, et enterrée profondément... J'ai creusé la terre, je l'ai cherchée... je n'ai pas pu la trouver... Je sais, je sais, les fils, toujours, abandonnent leur mère, tuent plus ou moins leur père... La vie est comme cela... mais moi, j'en souffre... les autres, pas...15

Instances of poignant remorse and guilt in Ionesco's plays are always concerned with some sin of omission, of neglect, or of abandonment. The hero, himself left in a state of unredeemed loss, seems to imply that the reason for his predicament is somehow mysteriously related to his own sense of irresponsibility and failure to recognize the need of others.

In *La Soif et la Faim*, the dreadful apartment of Jean and Marie-Madeleine is haunted by spectres of remorse. The ghost of the mad Tante Adélaïde, who had perished in the flames of her burned apartment, reminds them of some unspecified guilt. As her departing image is caught for a moment

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in a mirror, Jean sighs, "Hélas, ce n'est pourtant pas moi qui ai tué tante Adélaïde!" His denial sounds like a guilty defense, for neither the ghost nor his wife accuses him. Later, he is horrified by the image of a woman in the flames of the fireplace. "Eteins vite que je ne voie plus cette femme qui brûle dans les flammes... elle me tend les bras dans son supplice... elle renaît de ses cendres comme un reproche. Je n'ai pas eu le courage de me jeter dans les flammes... J'aurais bien voulu; je n'ai pas pu. Pardonne." The tortured image in the flames is a symbol of something in his past, which for him is unbearable to contemplate. His remorse for having lacked the courage necessary to save the woman from the fire is an oneiric suggestion that man could have perhaps been redeemed from his state of absurd anguish if God had had the courage to exist and act. The failure of God to prove His existence to man is a betrayal of man's need to believe in God.

"Neither death nor any other mischance, but only his fall into guilt constitutes the tragic fate of the hero." Since tragedy must never exhibit character development, but only character revelation; that is, the strength and weakness of human nature, the question of upon whom the responsibility and guilt directly lie must never be answered. The power of this aspect of tragedy rests upon the fact that the guilt

16 Ibid., IV, p. 93.

cannot be localized. It must be pervasive, all-encompassing, shrouding all concerned in its terrible net.

Returning to *Tueur sans gages* for an illustration of this fact and its consequences, we shall attempt to ascertain in what manner the pervasiveness of guilt is made apparent by Ionesco. After his visit to the *cité radieuse*, the disheartened Bérenger returns to his wretched apartment and becomes engaged in a conversation with his ailing friend, Edouard. The atmosphere is dismal.

BERENGER : Après tout, ce sont peut-être ces crimes affreux qui sont à l'origine de votre maladie. Cela a dû vous toucher, consciemment ou non. Oui, c'est cela, sans doute, qui vous ronge. On ne doit pas juger à la légère, je le confesse. On ne peut connaître le cœur des gens...

It is at this moment that the enormous bulging brief-case carried by Edouard falls open by accident, spilling its contents before them: photographs of the "Colonel," artificial flowers, obscene pictures, candy, money-boxes, Mickey Mouse watches, pins, all sorts of incongruous objects which seem to leap out of the bag and fly about the room. It is the opening of Pandora's Box, this time not from curiosity, but by accident. The myth is re-created. The boxes multiply:

BERENGER : Boîte à boîtes... boîte à boîtes... Boîte à boîtes... boîte à boîtes... EDOUARD : Rien que des boîtes... BÉRÉNGER : Les objets du monstre! Ce sont les objets du monstre! C'est extraordinaire...

Here are the objects left by the killer as calling cards, proofs of his crimes, even his name, address, identity card, diary and timetable outlining projects for
The fulfillment of the crime is indeed dependent upon the intent; but the question which imposes itself here is whose intent?

Following the principle stated earlier on the determination of guilt in tragedy, it would be a mistake and a grave over-simplification to attempt to label Edouard as the repository of guilt and Bérenger as the symbol of total innocence. The reader must be reminded that Ionesco's theatre is neither one of realistic representation, nor one of simple allegory, but must be considered rather to lie in the realm of what Lionel Abel defines as "metatheatre,"

mental and emotional conflicts in much the same manner that dreams are believed to reflect a hidden relation between the conscious and the subconscious.

The concept may be regarded as neo-Platonic: reality is in relation to that which is ideal; and the body, which is in effect immaterial, must yield to the ethereal reality of the soul.

With this definition in mind, and recalling that Ionesco's characters are not characters in any traditional sense, Bérenger and Edouard may be accepted as two faces of the same coin, each reflecting the other, somewhat in the same manner in which the Christian conceives of God as a "trinity-unity." Consequently, the guilt lies neither with one nor the other, but with both, with humanity. The tragic irony emerges in their simultaneous discovery of a guilt which had been there all along, and to which each had been blind for different reasons. "Tragic guilt is of a kind for which no one can be blamed and for which no conceivable 'judge' can be found."\(^\text{19}\) In *Victimes du Devoir*, Choubert implores the Father-image, "C'est mon mépris qui t'a tué. N'est-ce pas?... J'ai tous tes défauts... Qui aura pitié de moi, l'impitoyable! Même si tu me pardonnais, jamais je ne pourrais me pardonner moi-même!"\(^\text{20}\)

Guilt here is original. Though not attributable to any Fall from grace in the Biblical sense, it is nevertheless

\[^{19}\text{Max Scheler, p. 39.}\]

\[^{20}\text{Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre, I, p. 204.}\]
inherent. As part of the source of man's anguish, the guilt must be exorcised, expiated, redeemed; and the hero's quest becomes a search for grace. "Il y a deux sortes de soupe," says Ionesco, "la soupe grasse et la soupe maigre; c'est la grâce que je vous souhaite." 

Ionesco's theatre takes on the characteristics of religious ritual, supplication and confession; and the hero assumes the attitude of the anguished penitent. *Victimes du Devoir, Le Roi se meurt, Tueur sans gages* and *La Soif et la Faim* are the richest plays in terms of the significance of the penitential rite. The spiritual agony of Bérenger as he pleads with the Killer, the "Grand Rien," evokes the image of Jesus in the wilderness and of Flaubert's Saint Anthony. Choubert, under interrogation by the police inspector, is forced to descend into the depths of his past under the pretext of searching for a certain fugitive named Mallot. What he encounters instead, deep in the muddy recesses of his mind, past the holes in his memory, is guilt and remorse for some forgotten crime. The inspector functions as priest-confessor, probing the conscience of the unfortunate Choubert, 

King Bérenger 1er seeks in terror and dread the answer to how he can die, while the Guard, the Physician and the two Queens, priests and priestesses, join in a litany resplendent with the pure poetry of religious incantation, at the end of which the god who is finally named is Nothing.

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JULIETTE : Vous les statues, vous les lumineux, ou les ténébreux, vous les anciens, vous les ombres, vous les souvenirs...
MARIE : Apprenez-lui la sérénité.
LE GARDE : Apprenez-lui l'indifférence.
LE MEDECIN : Apprenez-lui la résignation.
MARGUERITE : Faites-lui entendre raison et qu'il se calme.
JULIETTE : Vous, les souvenirs...
LE GARDE : Vous, les vieilles images...
LE ROI : Vous, les vieilles images...
JULIETTE : ...Qui n'existez plus que dans les mémoires...
LE GARDE : Souvenirs de souvenirs de souvenirs...
MARGUERITE : Ce qu'il doit apprendre, c'est de céder un peu, puis de s'abandonner carrément.
LE GARDE : ...Nous vous invoquons.
MARIE : Vous, les brumes, vous, les rosées...
JULIETTE : Vous, les fumées, vous, les nuages...
MARIE : Vous, les saintes, vous les sages, vous les folles, aidez-le puisque je ne peux l'aider.
JULIETTE : Aidez-le.
LE ROI : Vous, qui êtes morts dans la joie, qui avez regardé en face, qui avez assisté à votre propre fin...
JULIETTE : Aidez le Roi.
MARIE : Aidez-le vous tous, aidez-le, je vous en supplie.
LE ROI : Vous, les morts heureux, vous avez vu quel visage près du vôtre? Quel sourire vous a détendu et fait sourire? Quelle est la lumière dernière qui vous a éclairés?
JULIETTE : Aidez-le, vous, les milliards de défunt.
LE GARDE : Oh, Grand Rien, aidez le Roi.22

The only voice which does not blend into the counterpoint of the litany is that of Marguerite, as she stands apart, implacable, punctuating the poem with a dissonant note of obdurate doom.

In the second episode of La Soif et la Faim, entitled "Le Rendez-vous," the two museum guards, innocuous yet somehow sinister symbols of authority, priestly guardians of a

22 Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre, IV, pp. 44-45.
hidden faith, a forbidden sanctuary, intone a litany of accusing interrogation around Jean, who pleads for pity:

JEAN: ...Hélas, je ne suis qu'un homme.
On ne peut avoir pitié d'un homme, la douleur de l'homme est ridicule pour l'homme.

PREMIER GARDIEN: A-t-il eu pitié lui-même des autres?

DEUXIEME GARDIEN: Ils sont tous là à solliciter la pitié. Chacun la demande pour soi, personne n'est capable de la donner aux autres.

JEAN: Pourquoi m'a-t-elle tiré de ma cave, de mon tombeau?

PREMIER GARDIEN: N'a-t-il pas dit lui-même qu'il est bête de souffrir?

DEUXIEME GARDIEN: N'a-t-il pas dit lui-même qu'il fallait avoir pour les autres de l'indifférence ou, tout au plus, une certaine sympathie?

PREMIER GARDIEN: N'a-t-il pas dit qu'on ne devait se faire une idole de personne? Qu'aucun être au monde n'était adorable?

DEUXIEME GARDIEN: Ne prétendait-il pas qu'il fallait être libre, délié de toutes attache?

PREMIER GARDIEN: N'a-t-il pas dit que personne et rien ne nous appartenait?

DEUXIEME GARDIEN: Quel divorce entre sa tête et son coeur!

PREMIER GARDIEN: Quelle contradiction! 23

Ionesco's religious hero must also suffer the martyrdom of an "Inquisition." From the supercilious "doctors of theatrology" in L'Impromptu de l'Alma, the tyrannical Jacques family, the ruthless Inspector and the variable Nicholas d'Eu of Victimes du Devoir, as well as from the sinister Brothers of La Soif et la Faim in the third episode, the hero is subject to the most rigorous spiritual tortures, as if he must be put to the Question as a test of his becoming the ultimate Question for which there is no answer. "Tu es, maintenant, tu es. Ne sois plus qu'une interrogation infinie : qu'est-ce que c'est, qu'est-ce que... l'impossibilité de répondre est la réponse même, elle est ton être

23 Ibid., p. 115.
même qui éclate, qui se répand."24 The "burning nostalgia" from which Bérenger-Jean suffers is the desire for grace and redemption. The thing he wants and needs cannot be defined, but whatever it is, every experience indicates that he will not find it, that it probably does not even exist. "Il n'en a que le désir mais il sait d'avance qu'il sera insatisfait."25

To illustrate that the religious crisis depicted in Ionesco’s theatre is valid and universal in terms of time and the history of the tragic view of the human condition, it does not seem inappropriate to refer in comparison to the case of Pascal, particularly because of "the frequency with which the 'tragic vision' is attributed to him by modern commentators."26 It may be assumed that prior to his so-called conversion of 1654, Blaise Pascal entertained notions of a "tragic conflict" with regard to his own ontological position; but after the confession of the Mémoire, which he wore sewn into the lining of his coat after that November night until his death, no deviation from a position of unalterable adherence to the spiritual values of certainty in Christian faith and doctrine may be considered.

The voluminous notes and jottings which his friends published after his death under the title of Les Pensees

24 Ibid., p. 41.
were evidently intended originally to serve as the groundwork for a polemic magnum opus to persuade the unbeliever and the apathetic Christian, in a manner that the non-religious libertin of the times could accept as reasonable, of the vital necessity of a positive faith. "In pursuance of this design, his analysis of 'man without God,' or human nature in its 'natural' state, is concerned almost exclusively with human weakness, instability, vanity, and self-deception, the whole building up to an overpowering impression of man's inadequacy in his material and conceptual environment." 27

Certain of Pascal's points of view expressed here and there in the Pensees are astonishingly analogous to the absurd point of view of the gratuity of existence. They may stand as proof, if of nothing else, that Pascal was at least acutely aware, if not subject, to the same tragic apprehensions about being as Ionesco. Some examples are worth citing here:

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Comme je ne sais d'où je viens, aussi je ne sais où je vais; et je sais seulement qu'en sortant de ce monde, je tombe pour jamais ou dans le néant, ou dans les mains d'un Dieu irrité, sans savoir à laquelle de ces deux conditions je dois être éternellement en partage. Voilà mon état, plein de faiblesses et d'incertitude. 28

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Qu'on s'imagine un nombre d'hommes dans les

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27 Ibid., p. 153.

chaînes, et tous condamnés à la mort, dont les uns étant chaque jour égorgés à la vue des autres, ceux qui restent voient leur propre condition dans celle de leurs semblables, et, se regardant les uns et les autres avec douleur et sans espérance, attendent à leur tour. C'est l'image de la condition des hommes. 29

Quand je considère la petite durée de ma vie, absorbée dans l'éternité précédant et suivant, le petit espace que je remplis et même que je vois, abîmé dans l'infinie immensité des espaces que j'ignore et qui m'ignorent, je m'effraie et m'étonne de me voir ici plutôt que là, car il n'y a point de raison pourquoi ici plutôt que là, pourquoi à présent plutôt que lors. Qui m'y a mis? Par l'ordre et la conduite de qui ce lieu et ce temps a-t-il été destiné à moi? 30

Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie. 31

S'il y a un Dieu, il est infiniment incompréhensible, puisque, n'ayant ni partie ni bornes, il n'a nul rapport à nous. Nous sommes donc incapables de connaître ni ce qu'il est, ni s'il est. 32

Tous les hommes recherchent d'être heureux; cela est sans exception... C'est le motif de toutes les actions de tous les hommes, jusqu'à ceux qui vont se pendre...
Qu'est-ce donc que nous crie cette avidité et cette impuissance, sinon qu'il y a eu autrefois dans l'homme un véritable bonheur, dont il ne lui reste maintenant que la marque et la trace toute vide, et qu'il essaye inutilement de remplir de

29 Ibid., p. 426.
30 Ibid., p. 427.
31 Ibid., p. 428.
32 Ibid., p. 436.
Here is a seventeenth century counterpart to Ionesco's uncertainty about the origin and purpose of existence, his conviction that man's true condition is mortal rather than social, the anguish and fear of death and incomprehensible infinity, the unquenchable thirst for happiness and the utter inefficacy of matter to fill the emotional emptiness. There is only one difference between the two views: for Pascal, the infinite gulf between nothingness and being is bridged by the living God, while Ionesco's shimmering silver bridge stops at the edge of the endless abyss. The tragedy of Ionesco's religion is that it offers no redemption, no Saviour.

As it is for Camus' hero, the only possible salvation for Ionesco's hero is the accession to a state of purity and love. "Aime les gens," says Bérenger in Le Pliéton de l'Air, "si tu les aimes, ils ne seront plus des étrangers, et il n'y aura plus d'enfer." Since there is no Christ, man must become his own Redeemer. "Ainsi, Amédée, en extrayant péniblement le cadavre de l'appartement où il s'est enraciné, en exhumant la Faute, accomplit-il peut-être la passion de l'Homme." Amédée drags the body like a cross through the

33 Ibid., p. 519.
34 Philippe Sénart, p. 113.
streets, pursued by police and encouraged by foreign soldiers and whores. The corpse inflates like a balloon or parachute and carries Amédée into the sky, though uncomprehending, saved in spite of himself.

The salvation of King Bérénger I is worked out against his will. In this case, it is the peace of non-being; but in order to attain it, he must be taught, led step by step to accept it, to embrace it. Bérénger-Fiéton follows a path where a new generation whispers "perhaps"... Jean finds himself in hell for having rejected love, the only possible hope for salvation. His love for Marie-Madeleine was a communion, a Eucharist, which he denied. He would have been unable to recognize her at the rendezvous even if she had come; and it is because of his old guilt that she did not come. Choubert cries out in his blind ascent, "Il est dur d'être seul au monde! Ah, si j'avais eu un fils!" His call for a Son is a call for help, for salvation. It is a plea in which one can almost hear an echo of

Agnus Dei
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Miserere nobis;
Dona nobis pacem.

Pointing out that Ionesco's theatre is neither psychological, nor social, nor surrealist in the sense of aesthetic criticism, M. Sénart suggests that it is one of religion. "Il est, peut-être, simplement, un théâtre théologique, le théâtre où l'Homme est entraîné aux Enfers par le poids du péché originel et où il essaie de retrouver la lumière, la

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grâce, le paradis perdu. Mais, à la théologie de M. Ionesco, il manque Dieu. "Grace and faith would be Pascal's only possible answer to Ionesco's call for help to the light emanating from an inconceivable "elsewhere."

A statement of Ionesco's in an article for the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale would indicate an optimism for a light of hope from somewhere, "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." Suggesting as evidence of God's existence the "idea" of God and the need for Him to exist reminds strongly of Descartes and Pascal.

Regardless of the metaphysical answers to be found or not to be found in Ionesco's plays, whether or not they are intended to cleanse man of original sin, of his fear of death and his great question of what lies beyond death, the playwright's work, true to the principles claimed by Artaud, is in itself a religious act. The spectacle of man groping toward an excellence only dimly apprehended is evidence of an ageless ritual, affirming man's belief in himself and his ultimate hope.

More than three decades past, Maxwell Anderson wrote of the permanence of theatre as ritual:

For the stage is still a cathedral... An age of reason will be followed once more by an age of

36 Philippe Sénart, p. 114.
37 Simone Benmussa, p. 39.
faith in things unseen. The cathedral will then house the mysteries again, along with the jugglers and the vendors of rose-colored spectacles. What faith men will then have, when they have lost their certainty of salvation through laboratory work, I don't know, having myself only a faith that men will have a faith. But that it will involve a desire for poetry after our starvation diet of prose I have no doubt. Men have not been altered by the invention of airplanes and the radio. They are still alone and frightened, holding their chance tenure of life in utter isolation in this desolate region of revolving fires. Science may answer a few necessary questions for them, but in the end science itself is obliged to say that the fact is created by the spirit, not spirit by the fact... It is incumbent on the dramatist to be a poet, and incumbent on the poet to be a prophet, dreamer and interpreter of the racial dream... We shall not always be as we are—but what we are to become depends on what we dream and desire. The theatre, more than any other art, has the power to weld and determine what the race dreams into what the race will become.\(^{38}\)

If man was not essentially changed by the development of flight, neither was he much changed by walking on the Moon, nor will he be that much more changed by whatever else his technology has in store for him. Unless he learns to conquer death in the laboratory, he will remain subject to the same age-old despairs and hopes. The religious theatre impells him to see himself as he is, causes his mask to fall, reveals the lie, shakes off the inertia of matter, and invites him to share heroically in the natural magic of his own mystery.

Judging by his dramatic production and by his theory of the theatre exposed in *Notes et Contre-notes*, for Ionesco there is no clear distinction between comedy and tragedy. "Laughter at our own tragic situation gives a certain objectivity, and is perhaps the only reaction possible in view of destroyed faith in absolutes."¹ Under the old absolute systems of belief, the proper function of comedy was commonly considered to be revelatory of man's moral weakness, while tragedy, neatly separated from it, was held to expose man's greatness and strength. The separation of two as distinct "genres" is essentially responsible for the fact that the French, Classics and Romantics alike, were never really able to understand Shakespeare.

Constant, Stendhal and Hugo used Shakespeare as a propaganda weapon to help break the chains of the classical rules; but it is doubtful that Hugo either completely understood what he hailed as the "grotesque" as being essential to character development, or the force of tragic irony underlying Shakespeare's comic elements. Benjamin Constant perhaps came closest to apprehending the latter concept in his preface to *Wallenstein*, as he called for stage characters depicted with "leurs faiblesses, leurs inconéquences et cette mobilité ondoyante qui appartient à la nature

humaine et qui forme les êtres réels." Though the reference to inconsciences and mobilité ondoyante may suggest a glimpse into what Ionesco sees as "notre être secret," the nineteenth century polemic remains essentially interwoven with the problem of outwardly realistic character portrayal, which Ionesco of course disclaims as irrelevant to the objectives of true theatre.

Modern tragedy, or whatever name we choose to give to the contemporary form of serious drama which seeks to arouse the emotions commonly recognized as tragic, and associated with tragedy, seems to have incorporated into itself the old functions of comedy. "Whereas tragedy has in earlier eras looked at man in 'boundary situations,' it is now the comédies of Beckett and Ionesco which show man in extremity." Ionesco is clearly conscious of the interpenetration of tragedy and comedy, and deliberately exploits its disturbing effect on the imagination, employing devices of caricature and farce to intensify the prise de conscience necessary for the tragic awareness to emerge through a naïveté lucide.

"J'entends une naïveté lucide, jaillissant des sources profondes de l'être, les révélant, nous les révélant à nous-mêmes, nous restituant notre naïveté, notre être secret."  

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Only this naïveté lucide will allow man to see in himself, as a child sees through the magic of the circus, with innocent astonishment, the reality of his own being and the world of being around him.

It is the function of theatre to free man from the mental laziness of daily habit which conceals from him life's magic. The only way the real may be clearly represented in its full vitality, freed from the stifling presence of matter, is first to stultify it, to destroy it with ridicule. Then the real can be "re-integrated."

A cet effet, on peut employer parfois un procédé : jouer contre le texte. Sur un texte insensé, absurde, comique, on peut greffer une mise en scène, une interprétation grave, solennelle, cérémonieuse. Par contre, pour éviter le ridicule des larmes faciles, de la sensiblerie, on peut, sur un texte dramatique, greffer une interprétation clownesque, souligner par la farce, le sens tragique d'une pièce.

What Ionesco meant by "playing against the text" may become clearer with an examination of two of his shorter plays. In the first, La Cantatrice chauve, it is obvious that what is said by the characters is utterly devoid of any logical meaning. Yet this compilation of absurd inanities is played with all the seriousness of bourgeois melodrama. In fact, the serious tone is exaggerated to the point of ceremonious solemnity. The effect on the audience is one of shock. It is the "véritable coup de marteau" with which Ionesco shatters the dull complacency and mental lassitude of his spectators. The disequilibrium of seriousness and

5Ibid., p. 13.
farce builds with crescendo to a final explosion. The calm reprise of the action from the beginning fades, leaving the spectator aghast with the vision of the utter inconsequential nature of his own day-to-day preoccupation with trivialities and the useless banality of his colorless existence. He has witnessed the tragedy, not only of language, but of the failure of his whole social pattern. It is a tragedy which would have been impossible without the paradox achieved through laughter.

The situation for the second play, Délire à Deux, presents from the start all the possibilities of a tearful boudoir melodrama with stock characters, who converse intelligibly, at least on the surface, and an illicit love affair which has tarnished and worn thin with the passing years. The man and his mistress are arguing about turtles and snails being the same thing. She insists that they are, and he holds out for the logical view. Of course his logic is incompatible with hers.

Any audience has learned from a long experience of play-watching that couples whose love has turned to hatred do not argue about turtles and snails; but the comic implication is that it does not really matter what people fight about, that fighting is absurd, no matter what the excuse.

Nevertheless, the mood of disequilibrium is set. As a real war rages in the streets outside their room, as live grenades explode and the walls come crashing down about them, revealing the movements of soldiers in battle dress, the couple continue to lash out at each other savagely,
seemingly oblivious to what the spectator views as the real danger of their predicament. The two are not unaware of the exploding bombs and falling walls, and although they talk about getting out, there is no place to go, so they stay and continue to play out farcically their own personal tragedy in a disintegrating world, which in effect accompanies and complements their own disintegration. As they work to block the shattered window with a mattress, they take up once more their desultory turtle-snail battle, and the play is over.

The tragic sense of loss and futility is here underscored by the clownish interpretation, which has avoided the psychological approach to human problems and given a metaphysical dimension to the emotional conflict.

Even when Ionesco's comedy is flippantly based on pun and ridiculous word play, it is never light, but always hints at something dark and vaguely ominous. "... Un comique dur, sans finesse, excessif... insoutenable. Pousser tout au paroxysme, là où sont les sources du tragique. Faire un théâtre de violence : violemment comique, violemment tragique."^6

In past centuries, tragedy may be seen to have had, paradoxically, a comforting effect. In its effort to show man powerless in the crush of fate, it thereby affirmed the reality of a destiny and of certain laws governing the universe, which, though immutable and incomprehensible, were nevertheless predictable. Man's vulnerability to these

^6Ibid., p. 13.
laws, according to Ionesco, is at once tragic and comic, comedy and tragedy being two aspects of the same thing. "Je n'ai jamais compris, pour ma part, la différence que l'on fait entre comique et tragique. Le comique étant intuition de l'absurde, il me semble plus désespérant que le tragique." 7

According to the traditional conception of comedy, that is "old" comedy, the hero is placed in a position of compromise analogous to that of tragedy, but from which he is afforded an exit. The movement is circular, with the balance restored at the end, and all is well, since all ends well. Ionesco has a quite different view. For him, the comic, being an intuition of the absurd, has no issue, and is consequently inextricable from the linear movement of tragedy, which goes beyond both despair and hope.

The human condition for Ionesco is unbearable and insoluble. "On ne peut trouver de solution à l'insoutenable, et seul ce qui est insoutenable est profondément tragique, profondément comique, essentiellement théâtre." 8 As a true disciple of Antonin Artaud, Ionesco has filled the empty stage and given it a voice which is more seen than heard. The thing that fills Ionesco's stage is not tragi-comedy, but comic tragedy, and its voice is the absurdity of life itself. He evokes laughter and uses it exactly to sharpen the terror.

7Ibid., pp. 13-14.
8Ibid., p. 7.
The comic enhances the terrible drama of man's loss of dignity. Tragedy once aimed to show man first exalted to a high position from which he was then brought down and crushed by some supernatural or inescapable force. Ionesco's tragic laughter reveals man's predicament in an even sadder light, for it "shows man's dignity to vanish not merely at the hands of the gods or the hands of fellow man, but also because of an unnatural attraction to subhuman matter." Ionesco's puppet heroes become so identified with the proliferating matter which engulfs them that they are no longer distinguishable from it. Since man's tragedy is derisory, it must also be comic.

The comic incongruity is raised to such tragic proportions that the audience, while laughing, feels itself being cut loose from its safe moorings and sent helplessly adrift on a dark sea of pity and terror. "Because of the intense reality of these dramas and because they do raise more fundamental questions, the mixture of feelings they produce is nearer to the old tragic emotion than that of contemporary plays of solely tragic intention." ¹⁰

Les Chaises is a tragedy of man pushed to the limits of his being, to a paroxysm of hysteria in the loss of his identity. Yet, to the very end, it remains a tragic struggle to affirm an identity. In their absurd effort to bequeath some message to a world they must leave, the two

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¹⁰Ellen D. Leyburn, p. 560.
old people compel the audience to join them in an alliance of complicity. Their pathetic and hysterical attempts to establish contact with the invisible guests and with each other as they find themselves separated by the encroaching mass of chairs, together with their own progressive loss of articulate speech and the inane babblings of the orator whom they have engaged to transmit their "message," present a visual image of pity and terror which would become impossible to convey in rational language. The laughter which Ionesco evokes by the farcical movement and by the ridiculous echoing in certain speeches, "Mon mignon, mon orphelin, orpheli, orphelon, orphelaine, orphelin... Votre serviteur, votre esclave, votre chien, haouh, haouh, votre chien Majesté... C'est ma pitié qui m'a vaincu... Ma pitié... pitié... pitié," and the insistence upon word plays such as "concierge" and "Maréchal du logis," makes the tragic effect much deeper than could a direct and logical appeal to the emotions of pity and terror in which the tragic loss of identity and humanity involves us. "Though we laugh, our hearts are wrung with pity and anguish. Thus we are purged, as was the audience which participated in the Dionysian ritual of antique tragedy."

Our lives are bound up in a real nightmare, which is our existence, and the only way out is through laughter. Ionesco maintains that "l'humour est l'unique possibilité

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que nous ayons de nous détacher de notre condition humaine comico-tragique, du malaise de l'existence. Prendre conscience de ce qui est atroce et en rire, c'est devenir maître de ce qui est atroce. . . ."12

Believing at first to have attained a synthesis of the comic with the tragic in plays like Les Chaises, Ionesco came later to realize that it was not a true synthesis at all, for the two elements, rather than fusing into each other, continue to exist side by side, each reenforcing, illuminating, maintaining the other, producing a greater poetic tension than might be obtained by synthesis.

The black humor of tragic laughter alone can break the mystifying taboos of logic and give man the strength to bear the tragedy of existence. "On rit pour ne pas pleurer. . . c'est une autre face du tragique."13

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12 Eugène Ionesco, p. 122.
13 Ibid., p. 98.
Certain critics have rather condescendingly dismissed Ionesco as a clever contriver of theatrical effects, seeing in his work little more than an intellectual word game whose object is antihuman and antitheatre. This is an unfortunate view, for Ionesco is much more than this. His theatrical techniques derive from his particularly tragic view of the world. His unique treatment of character, plot, language and spectacle suggest, on the one hand, the disintegration of man and human values in an absurd universe, and on the other hand, the affirmation of man's spiritual greatness in the face of his own hopeless destruction. It is a view that is essentially tragic.

The value of Ionesco's real contribution to the growth and development of dramatic theory may be revealed in a clearer perspective by a careful examination of one of his own statements. The following analysis attempts to ascertain to what extent the playwright has achieved the incorporation of his theory into stage practice. Having rejected the dramatic portrayal of man in an abstract ideological context as being anti-classical and anti-humanistic, Ionesco maintains that:

Un autre genre de théâtre est encore possible. D'une force, d'une richesse plus grandes. Un théâtre non pas symboliste, mais symbolique; non pas allégorique, mais mythique; ayant sa source dans nos angoisses éternelles; un théâtre où l'invisible devient visible, où l'idée se fait image.
concrète, réalité, où le problème prend chair; où l'angoisse est là, évidence vivante, énorme; théâtre qui aveuglerait les sociologues, mais qui donnerait à penser, à vivre au savant dans ce qui n'est pas savant en lui; à l'homme commun, par delà son ignorance.¹

Ionesco criticizes the conventional theatre for its lack of force and for its insistence on ideological content, protesting that modern theatre up to this point has not kept pace with the cultural style of our times. While admiring certain aspects of their dramatic technique, he disclaims the plays of Brecht and Sartre as patent ideological propaganda, inconsistent with the responsibility of the theatre to depict man in universal situations. Nor does he accept the vein of psychological drama going back to Ibsen, convinced that it also fails to reveal the true human condition. He dismisses the value of drawing room and bedroom comedy as frivolous and irrelevant—"Pas de comédies dramatiques, non plus."

Searching for a fresh medium to express forcefully and unequivocally the tragi-comic nature of man's absurd position in a meaningless universe, Ionesco has created an irrationalist theatre in which everything is exaggerated to the maximum degree possible, and in which the violent shock of emotional conflict is often obscene in its effort to dislodge the intellect from the suffocating vise of diurnal reality. Every familiar point de repère must be dislocated, including the language of communication, in order to show

the absurdity of man in the social structure with his inane conversation, which is only a symptom of his abdicated freedom and his sycophantic dependence on the myth of rational logic and idées reçues. Ionesco's characters play their comic rôles with a derisive seriousness, whose effect is tragic irony. "Fousser tout au paroxysme, là où sont les sources du tragique."

With their conception inspired by the puppets of the guignol, Ionesco's characters are devoid of individual psychology. They are universal representations of every aspect of the human creature who awakens with horror to find himself caught in the machinery of a relentless, inhuman society, and thwarted by metaphysical anguish—"Éviter la psychologie, ou plutôt lui donner une dimension métaphysique." The gross enlargement and caricaturization of emotional force, the creation of fantastasmagorical situations, the invention of mythical images—all have enriched the auditive and visual language of the theatre.

"Un théâtre non pas symboliste, mais symbolique. . ."
The dramatic symbolism of Maeterlinck and Claudel fares little better than the naturalistic tranche de vie under the impact of Ionesco's coup de matraque. Like any classicist, Ionesco takes his inspiration from whichever source promises to serve his original purpose. He is no less indebted to Maeterlinck than to Jarry; but the images of the Symbolists as well as of the Surrealists, are too abstract, too subtly cloaked in mystery, too hermetic for Ionesco, whose symbols must represent human desires, emotions, aspirations. Very
often his symbolic characters represent multiple qualities, conflicting states of a dual consciousness. A single concept may as readily be represented by more than one symbol, as in *Le Roi se meurt*, where the two queens, Marie and Marguerite, illustrate a dichotomy in the nature of man, with one part forging resolutely toward the unknowable mystery of an extra-corporeal destiny, while the other side clings tenaciously to the comfort and pleasure of temporal existence.

Similarly, Ionesco combines the diverse aspects of authoritarianism in the architect-commissioner-executive of *Tueur sans Gages* and the functions of mother-wife-paramour-goddess in the Marie Madeleine of *La Soif et la Faim*. Incidentally, the Biblical significance of the latter character composite is not without importance with respect to a clearer understanding of the myth. "Marie" suggests the aspiration toward the celestial or Apollinian, while "Madeleine" evokes the immediate or Dionysian necessity of the corporeal and terrestrial.

Stage objects become characters. The doorbell rings to signify that there is no one there and a clock strikes seventeen times in derision of the natural human inclination to anticipate events and his desire for order and stability. The endless proliferation of matter and the multiplication of identities—Bobby Watsons, student victims, Jacques and Robert families, rhinoceroses, Bartholomeuses, Bérengers, etc.—establish the nightmare vision of a universe out of control. All is multiple and all is the same. The two monks who play the torture scene in *La Soif et la Faim* have
learned both rôles, hence are interchangeable.

"... Non pas allégorique, mais mythique ..." Aware that a great proportion of the pleasure and effect of tragic drama is accounted for by its impact upon certain unconscious activities of the mind, and that these activities are best stimulated by images or symbols which the mind intuitively relates to an otherwise inexpressible truth, Ionesco recognized the need to create a new mythology which would be compatible with contemporary thought and mores. The characters and anti-characters which move and speak on Ionesco’s stage are integers in a mythical conception of humanity. Each represents in a unique way some aspect of the human epic, revealing to each viewer something about himself he had not known before. An automatic complicity between the imagination of the creator and that of the spectator makes the image exist as fact.

"... Ayant sa source dans nos angoisses éternelles..." Ionesco’s theatre is the visual representation of the anguishing contradictions in the nature of man, of his frustrating thirst for absolute answers, of his fear of death, of the incomprehensible and inexpressible dread of an inevitable unknown. "Le théâtre est, pour moi, la projection sur scène du monde du dedans; c’est dans mes rêves, dans mes angoisses, dans mes désirs obscurs, dans mes contradictions intérieurs que, pour ma part, je me réserve le droit de prendre cette matière théâtrale..." Ionesco denies the importance of social problems in a universe where the true human condition is not social, but mortal. "La mort n’est
ni bourgeoise ni socialiste. Ce qui vient du plus profond de moi-même, mon angoisse la plus profonde est la chose la plus populaire." From this point of view, Brecht's characters appear as mere painted masks rattling in the wind and Sartre's people might just as well be the Smiths and the Martins shouting slogans at each other to the accompaniment of a wooden voice in the background chanting, "prit feu! prit feu! prit feu! ... ."

Ionesco sees that man's longing for social justice is but a symptomatic reflection of his thirst for the absolute. Guided by intellect and intuition, man seeks the absolute answer to his enigmatic existence, but finds only the relative and the temporal, because he himself is relative and temporal, and because his only criteria for judgment are relative and temporal. The absence of a response to his questioning gives rise to the terrifying suspicion that he is the butt of a cruel joke, the plaything of a numinous Void.

"... Un théâtre où l'invisible devient visible, où l'idée se fait image concrète, réalité, où le problème prend chair; où l'angoisse est là, évidence vivante, énorme. . . ." Since for Ionesco, the theatre is representational, not of an action, but of a reality, the representation must be accomplished by means more eloquent than the resources of mere language. Since actors are puppets moved by strings, no effort should be made to mystify the audience by hiding the strings. On the contrary, the strings should be made
glaringly and unmistakably visible.²

Similarly, Ionesco makes visible representations of invisible inner emotions and desires through the use of stage tricks and symbols. Choubert, Amédée and Bérenger-Piéton ascend into empyreal regions, representing the soul's efforts to transcend known dimensions in its search for the absolute, for its origin and destiny. Alternately, the inevitable descent of these characters represents the falling, sinking sensation of the return to the temporal banality of existence with no possibility of escape.

The bloody dogwood branch which Jean tears from his breast and leaves on the table to be found by Marie-Madeleine is a visual image of the deliberate expulsion of love from his heart. Amédée and Madeleine face the growing corpse and rampant mushrooms which are visual embodiments of guilt and decaying affection. Furniture, cups, eggs, cobwebs, mushrooms and corpses proliferate automatically to dramatize the exponential rate at which the human race is suffocating in its own garbage, spiritually as well as physically.

Fear, regret, remorse, guilt are everywhere evident in visual manifestations. The anguish resulting from ontological uncertainty and the duality of human nature, coupled with the simultaneous desire for permanence and transcendence—"lourdeur et évanescence"—are vivified in the movement of characters and objects.

"... Un théâtre qui aveuglerait les sociologues, mais

²Ibid., p. 13.
qui donnerait à penser, à vivre au savant dans ce qui n'est pas savant en lui; à l'homme commun, par-delà son ignorance."

Ionesco's theatre has nothing for the spectator who seeks in it a social commentary, though many critics and reviewers have limited their analyses to just that. They have been able to point with some satisfaction to certain scenes and movements which may be interpreted as anti-totalitarian, pro-socialist, or satirical of contemporary customs, but for the most part they have been disappointed. They have in fact been blinded by the magnitude of the spectacle, which is intended to stir the intellect and shock the conscience. The receptive spectator is reminded of the bond of ignorance and vulnerability which joins him to all mankind.

Ionesco employs a series of ingenious techniques to penetrate the sociological and conventional defenses of his audience. He first creates on stage a fantastic, often nightmarish situation, but in such a matter-of-fact manner that the audience is disarmed of reason, prejudice and its rational logic. He then forces the spectator to examine the absurdity of his own words and actions in everyday life, actions and reactions which have become so automatic that no thought has ever been given to the meaning behind them. The parody of language penetrates all of Ionesco's plays, emphasizing the waste of words and the absence of any real communication of ideas. He underscores clichés: "La maison d'un Anglais est son vrai palais." He treats banal conversations and empty words as if they conveyed great metaphysical depth: "Les morts sont plus nombreux que les vivants," a
popular misconception. He demonstrates the fallacies of logic: "Le limaçon, la tortue, c'est la même chose." And again in the café scene of Rhinocéros:

LE VIEUX MONSIEUR : Mon chien aussi a quatre pattes.
LE LOGICIEN : Alors, c'est un chat.

In this manner Ionesco points up the fact that we live in a world of absurdity where explanations become disguises for ignorance and logic becomes a tool of madness: "L'arithmétique mène à la philologie, et la philologie mène au crime."

Man inflates words with faith and reason to give the impression that he maintains an identity and the illusion that language is an instrument of communication. Ionesco's theatre is a protest against the hollowness and inefficacy of logic and platitudes. He does not claim to have a message or to promote new ideas. Dramatic art is not a demonstration or illustration of a thought that precedes it. The dramatist does not lecture, he invents. His theatre is a reaction and a result of his own experience, the reflection and product of his own imagination. It is fact, not fiction.

Ionesco makes his points indirectly. Characters are used, often in a satirical manner, but it is the total play, including the language and the visible elements, which conveys the impact of Ionesco's meaning. "One cannot point to any particular speeches which are a direct expression of the
author's bias. He deals with reality in ways which make the spectator acutely aware of his situation, rather than allowing him to escape it. The technique is very unsettling, for in opposition to traditional dramaturgy, the action often ends with the climax, for after that nothing is possible. There is no final resolution, and we are left at the end with the unhappy feeling that there is no answer to the dilemma. There is no imitation of action in the Aristotelian sense. Dialogues are something more than mere conversation to give exposition and illustrate an action. "They constitute the very tissue and fabric of the drama—forming the 'plot as soul of the play.'"

Ionesco's apparent preoccupation with theatrical structure rather than plot structure is significant of his efforts to give to his plays the shape of his ideas. Each play is a complete metaphor projected onto the stage. Since the world strikes Ionesco as one in which people seem to be mindless automatons, he places robots before the audience. Convinced that the physical aspects of life deny man the possibility for a full development of his spiritual potential, Ionesco believes that this must be reflected in plays whose décor and physical properties insidiously dominate the characters and destroy them. He considers language worn out, so must show it as ankylosed and calcified into brittle.

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cliché, with words reduced to mere agglomerates of sound.

Ionesco declares himself to be anti-Brecht, but with respect to the careful ordering of a specialized décor and particular acting style, he owes much to the Marxist playwright. "(Brecht) introduced an antinaturalistic logic into acting and stage design as well as into his own dramatic construction. His characters are his puppets, to be sure, but he insists on the fact that they are puppets, does not try to pass them off as real people, and delights in exhibiting their mechanisms."\(^5\) Brecht claims an "epic" style of theatre, while Ionesco characterizes his own production as "mythic." While Brecht's puppets scream insults at capitalist imperialism and bourgeois exploitation of the masses, Ionesco's puppets perform a pantomime of the tragedy in the human soul. The aesthetic result of Ionesco's pantomime is "metaphysics transformed for the theatre, and a theatre transformed by metaphysics but remaining theatre: A source of experience and not of indoctrination."\(^6\)

The function of myth in Ionesco's theatre is perhaps most strikingly demonstrable in the play *Le Roi se meurt*, which is not so much a description as it is an experience of death. Had Ionesco attempted to construct a detailed psychological portrait of a dying man, the result would have been a morbid failure, grossly lacking in interest. On the


contrary, by creating a kind of archetypal dying king who is both human and mythical, Ionesco manages to draw the spectator into the drama emotionally and forces him, through the imagination, to experience the sensation of the physical and spiritual release of death. Dealing with his most profound obsession—"Death is an obsession with Ionesco. He fears and desires it at the same time: he fears his desire for Death"—he reaches a universal level, for death is the only absolute universal that man can know. Yet, our own non-existence remains inconceivable for us. Consequently we tend constantly to put it out of our minds: "Nous courons sans souci dans le précipice, après que nous avons mis quelque chose devant nous pour nous empêcher de le voir."

All four Bérenger archetypes perform a kind of sacrificial rôle of intercession between humanity and the Grand Rien. The mythical figure of King Bérenger Iᵉ is a combination Prometheus and Arthurian Fisher King. In his monologue, the decrepit guard outlines all the accomplishments of the dying King:

LE GARDE : Majesté, mon Commandant, c'est lui qui avait inventé la poudre. Il a volé le feu aux dieux puis il a mis le feu aux poudres... Il a installé les premières forges sur la terre. Il a inventé la fabrication de l'acier... Enfin, il a construit de ses mains le premier aéroplane... Bien avant encore, quand il était petit dauphin, il avait inventé la brouette... Puis les rails, le chemin de fer, l'automobile. Il a fait les plans

7George Strem, p. 153.

de la tour Eiffel, sans compter les faucilles, les charrues, les moissonneuses, les tracteurs... Il a bâti Rome, New York, Moscou, Genève. Il a fondé Paris. Il a fait les révolutions, les contre-révolutions, la religion, la réforme, la contre-réforme... Il a écrit L'Iliade et L'Odyssée... Il a écrit des tragédies, des comédies, sous le pseudonyme de Shakespeare... Il a inventé le téléphone, le télégraphe, il les a installés lui-même... Il n'y a pas longtemps, il a inventé la fusion de l'atome... Majesté, mon Commandant, Maître, monsieur le Directeur... 9

King Bérenger is the summary of all of man's accomplishments. In this respect he becomes a mythical representation of the human race; but he is also its surrogate, and like the Roi Pêcheur—which name might easily be read as "Roi Pêcheur"—of Chrétien's Perceval, represents the repository of the guilt and crime of existence. Thus, only his death will permit a rebirth of the world he must redeem. Because of him there is absolute sterility in the realm. Not a leaf will grow until he has accepted his fate:

LE ROI : ...Hélas, hélas, tant de gens naissent en ce moment, des naissances innombrables dans le monde entier.
MARGUERITE : Pas dans notre pays.
LE MEDECIN : La natalité est réduite à zéro.
JULIETTE : Pas une salade ne pousse, pas une herbe.
MARGUERITE (au Roi) : La stérilité absolue, à cause de toi.
JULIETTE : Tout repoussera peut-être.
MARGUERITE : Quand il aura accepté. Sans lui. 10

The mythical and ritualistic atmosphere is enhanced, especially in several scenes, by a liturgical style, employing chanting and gestures as the characters surrounding the

10 Ibid., p. 39.
King call upon the dead who have gone before, and beseech the Grand Rien to assist the King in accepting the fact of his death. By bringing the ritual of life and death back into the theatre, Ionesco returns to the original source of dramatic expression as it was practiced in pre-Aeschylean tragedy and in the sacramental liturgies of primitive religions. The effect of religious theatre is apparent in reforging "the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature."\textsuperscript{11}

"My hero, if indeed you can call him that," said Ionesco, "is not the anti-hero so much as a hero in spite of himself."\textsuperscript{12} In the past the hero was always the shining example of society. Whether he was myth turned into reality, or reality changed into myth, he was "the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forces."\textsuperscript{13} In an age when the very existence of humanity is threatened on the one hand with nuclear annihilation and ecological extinction on the other, it becomes irrelevant to conceive of a hero representing social and moral conflicts. Ionesco's hero, the modern hero, is the common man.


Confronted with the extermination, not only of individuals, but of the entire race, he stands none the less heroic in a new sense. He goes infinitely beyond the heroic hero, and even transcends the old concept of the tragic hero.

True heroism for Ionesco is a quality of the heart rather than of the mind. In our computerized world of suppressed individuality, the innocent wish of a modest man to assert his freedom of choice which he feels to be inherent in his nature, is in itself an act of defiance. The dingier the hero the sharper the tragic irony of his act. It is the mixture of heroism and commonalty which gives to Ionesco's hero the exhilaration and transcendence of tragedy. He has "an extraordinary, often a nearly divine destiny almost within his grasp, and the glory of that original vision never quite fades,"14 though he is doomed never to attain it. On one side of the tragic hero is a promise of freedom, while on the other side there is the inevitable consequence of losing that freedom.

In whatever form he appears, Bérenger is totally identifiable with the audience because of the easily recognizable universality of his human frailties. He is shy, given to day dreaming, passionate in love in the desperate way of men who are emasculated by conformity, and subject to alternating states of exaltation and depression. He adapts poorly to social pressures, neglects his appearance, is ineffective at

work and easily offended. The muscles of his body are flabby, and he is paunchy from over-drinking. He is the antithesis of the heroic hero. Yet, when such a man defies the order of things, his defiance and ultimate destruction strike a note of triumph in every heart. "We recognize ourselves in his love of life, and in his mortal terror at the thought of solitude or annihilation. With shaking knees and quivering stomach he faces a destiny he has not chosen, and shouts: 'I will not give in!'" But he knows that he must.

Inner conflicts are unleashed, dark powers are disengaged, and liberating possibilities are revealed which were not in evidence before. By taking dormant images of a latent disorder, translating them into dramatic gestures and pushing them as far as they will go, Ionesco has done what Artaud hoped someone would one day do: invert form and displace stratified significations, thereby creating a poetry of movement, both humorous and sublime, which can exist only on the stage.

To make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock; to divide and distribute it actively in space; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one could say alimentary, sources, against its trapped-beast origins; and finally, to consider language as the form of Incantation.

Everything in this active poetic mode of envisaging expression on the stage leads us to abandon the modern humanistic and psychological meaning of the theatre, in order to recover the religious and mystic preference of which our theatre has completely lost the sense.\textsuperscript{16}

Though it becomes readily apparent that Artaud has supplied the blueprint and foundation for Ionesco's creation, other important influences impose themselves with equal clarity, if not with equal magnitude. In his use of symbolic, impressionistic, and surrealistic techniques, Ionesco demonstrates the considerable influence of Maurice Maeterlinck. One may also establish evidence of his debt to Alfred Jarry for the iconoclastic bludgeon of the guignol, to Jean Cocteau for certain artistic and poetic stage effects, to Pirandello for the use of inversion and reversal techniques, and to Samuel Beckett for the crucible of simplification, reduction and refining of philosophical concepts to quintessential images. "Like Beckett he strips man of his veneer of civilization to point to his savagery, his greed and selfishness, his inability to love, his helplessness in an uncomprehending and incomprehensible universe."\textsuperscript{17}

On the other hand, he never falls to the depths of utter despair, ugliness and depravity, which are overwhelming characteristics in Beckett's plays. Ionesco never loses sympathy with his heroes. One never loses the feeling of solidarity he maintains with his characters, because he is portraying his own anguish and solitude. He might even be

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 46.

\textsuperscript{17}George Strem, p. 156.
heard to confess with Montaigne, "Je me peins moi-même."

Ionesco's plays are above all tragic poems on the inevitable and undeserved horror of death beyond which there is no promise, of the frailness of human life, of the equivocal nature of its existence, and of the shining light of man's spirit condemned to be extinguished. The poetic reality of this theatre, superior to materialistic representation of the universe, is created by the same sound-and-light effects used to produce ritual. Its only boundaries are those of the imagination and the supra-conscious. Its properties are those of the fairy tale and the enchantment of illusion. The shimmering Camelot is either always just out of reach, or it vanishes at a touch, like Maeterlinck's Blue Bird.

In the tragic poem, happiness is always lost. The one tenuous victory of Bérenger (Rhinocéros) is of no use to him, since man must share success for it to have meaning. Defiance and resistance can only postpone the tragic fate. Bérenger cannot for long endure the implacable oppressiveness of the material universe. The meaning of the tragedy, for the hero as well as for the audience, lies neither in the fleeting glimpse of victory, nor in the final crushing defeat, but in the spirit of resistance. It is in the nature of man to assert his freedom, his independence, his individuality. As long as the human race continues, there will always be the heroes, those who will dare to say "no," regardless of the consequences. This, at least, is the
affirmation of Bérenger, the tragic hero of the common man.

Many commentators on dramatic theory have claimed the impossibility of tragedy in the context of modern experience. There was a time, corresponding roughly to the first half of the Twentieth Century, when this was very nearly true, for with the rise of scientific scepticism and social and moral liberalism, attention was concentrated on the loss of faith in man's position at the center of the universe and his relationship to a cosmic order, all of which were judged essential to the creation of tragedy in the past.

Mindful that Greek tragedy was based on the presentation of a historical story with moral and religious implications, and that the poet, gifted with insight into the social and moral meanings inherent in the myth, was regarded as a teacher whose purpose was to "impose a vision of human beings and society that should balance rational and passionate elements," the new critics found it extremely difficult to reconcile, through the application of standard aesthetic criteria, the sublime tragedy of Sophocles with a contemporary state of mind which was rejecting all implacable values as false. Furthermore, the setting of the Greek drama was a religious festival, attended by the entire population, not just people interested in the theatre. Turning from the noble hero to the common man, the modern writers believed that "the best that we can achieve is pathos and

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the most that we can do is feel sorry for ourselves."\(^{19}\) Consequently, it became a commonplace belief that since the old illusions regarding the cosmos had been destroyed by modern science and philosophy, audiences could no longer be moved by old tragedy's representation of human life and destiny.

Still the old tragedies continued to be read and even occasionally put on the stage, though none were written. "One cannot dismiss lightly the fact that even modern people have some inner necessity for returning to Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedy, that they find there some deep human satisfaction not given by modern drama."\(^{20}\) This fact would imply that something has been missing in the contemporary production of serious theatre. The successful efforts of Giraudoux and Anouilh to adapt the Greek plays to modern tastes are witness to the validity of this need to find new inspiration in the old. The return to the classical mode of dramatic expression has recently become especially remarkable in America, where Greek tragedy has traditionally been regarded as inaccessible to the temperament of the masses, who felt out of touch with heroes whose fate seemed excessively horrifying and whose actions seemed to depend too much on the will of the gods and too little on man's


\(^{20}\)Louis I. Bredvold, p. 333.
power to control his own destiny.

In the past decade, public events have brought home to Americans a growing awareness that fate may not be in one's hands but at one's throat. The dirge-like destiny of the Kennedy's, the war in Viet Nam, racial turmoil, urban carnage, the generational vendetta and the growth of drug addiction have moved an entire nation toward at least the beginnings of a tragic sense of life. 21

The increasing ability to see the misunderstandings inherent in the scientific method, the impossibility of absolute objectivity, the realization that there is only the self and experience, and that the only way to universalize experience is through poetic analogy, which is at once more desirable and more rational than philosophy, are all indications of the growing preference of primitive over sophisticated art. The primitive allows for fewer misapprehensions about life. The mounting insecurity and the communal awareness of death are not confined to the North American continent, but extend to all mankind. "To a modern consciousness is not death equal to the immortal gods?" 22 This awareness is the primary essential, not only to the development of a tragic view, but to the creation of human tragedy on the stage. Consequently, modern tragedy is not only possible, it exists; and it exists most vividly and most eloquently in the theatre which expresses analogically, as did the Greeks, the nature of human freedom, of moral action, and the dilemma resulting from the conflict of inner necessity and the

21 "All Fates are Black," *Time*, vol. 95, no. 10 (March 9, 1970), p. 54.

22 Lionel Abel, p. 51.
lack of certainty with respect to the order of the universe.

Ionesco's theatre captures the essence of the tragic form in the spiritual awakening of the hero as he struggles to transcend the confinement of matter, to "get rid of it" and assert his freedom to choose, even though there is no assurance that his choice will reveal any ultimate meaning in the collective destiny of mankind. The revolt of Ionesco's modern tragic hero against the oppressive sense of the absurd represents the expression of the irrepressible necessity to make this assertion. He must arrive at his own decision without reference to supernatural revelation.

The tragic hero of today is unheroic, in the old sense, because he is by nature a relativist, a creature of paradox for whom all motives are open to question, no passion is pure, no sacrifice justified, no moral victory possible. Though he protests against the absurdity of existence, he makes no effort, in the manner of Kierkegaard, to transform the absurd into the absolute. He seeks to rise above the myth of the absurd by remaining true to his existential vision of nothingness and by striving to fulfill himself creatively.  

It is the refusal to abandon the old social action criteria for the measurement of the tragic hero which results in the failure to see Bœrenger as truly tragic. If he appears grotesque, it is not, as Marta Piwinska suggests, that he has "made a monster of the power in the Castle," but because the power in the Castle is indeed a monster. If the population turns itself into rhinoceroses, it is because of the evil nature of the world and the weakness of humanity.

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"How tragic and sublime in everything he does, in his revolt and humiliation, would Breenger be if he were a plaything in the hands of others," laments Miss Piwinska. On the contrary, the magnitude and the sublimity of the tragedy are precisely defined by the fact that he is the plaything, not in the hands of others, but in the hands of a numinous void.

The writer of a tragedy does not have to express ideas, since true tragedy carries one beyond thought and reason. It is only in the realm of the imagination, as Ionesco has discovered, that the self-conscious, sophisticated audience can become involved in the irony of the play as make-believe and transfer that recognition to the supreme irony of the play of life itself. Shakespeare, Calderón and their modern counterparts of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, exemplify that illusion is inseparable from reality, that fantasy is at the heart of reality. In this respect, fantasy becomes fact in the same sense as it did for the Greeks. Tragedy must be a visualization of this kind of fact. "The effect of tragedy is to induce into the spectator an almost overwhelming sense of reality. You cannot call a spectator back to reality from a tragic moment for that moment, if truly realized by the dramatist, is a concentrate of reality beyond anything that might be felt in life." It is for this reason that authentic tragedy is capable of giving a


25 Lionel Abel, p. 106.
stronger feeling of reality than can realism. To understand Ionesco's theatre as tragedy it is essential to make this distinction between realism and reality.

Ionesco's plays, because of their penetration into metaphysical reality as well as their preoccupation with very human problems of identity, conformity and physical insecurity, may be regarded as a synthesis of tragedy and what Lionel Abel defines as metatheatre. On one hand Ionesco gives a very strong sense of the reality of the world, while on the other he creates the sense, equally strong, that the world is a projection of human consciousness. Abel outlines the differences between tragedy and metatheatre in the following manner:

Tragedy glorifies the structure of the world, which it supposedly reflects in its own form. Metatheatre glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate.

Tragedy makes human existence more vivid by showing its vulnerability to fate. Metatheatre makes human existence more dreamlike by showing that fate can be overcome.

Tragedy tries to mediate between the world and man. Tragedy wants to be on both sides. Metatheatre assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination.

Tragedy cannot operate without the assumption of an ultimate order. For metatheatre, order is something continually improvised by men.

There is no such thing as humanistic tragedy. There is no such thing as religious metatheatre.

Tragedy, from the point of view of metatheatre, is our dream of the real. Metatheatre, from the point of view of tragedy, is as real as are our dreams.

Tragedy transcends optimism and pessimism taking us beyond both these attitudes. Metatheatre makes us forget the opposition between optimism and pessimism by forcing us to wonder.  

26 Ibid., p. 113.
Though some of Ionesco's stage myths are derisive of the world structure in their attacks on its inhumanity, from as early as Les Chaises in 1951 there emerges a strong affirmation of confidence in man's willingness to come to grips with the reality of physical existence, reflecting in warmly moving terms "the profound humanity of the author as he suffers for himself and for all men in the face of death."\(^{27}\) The hysterical old couple are confident that their "message" will be delivered. Bérenger is confident in the perfectibility of the "cité radieuse." Bérenger-Piéton is overcome by a feeling of confidence in something he cannot exteriorize. At the same time, the perception of the co-existing states of "lourdeur-évanescence" indicates the artist's conception of existence as both of the world and transcending it into supra-reality.

On every point Ionesco's creation is consistent with both aspects of Abel's definition. There could be no clearer image of man's vulnerability to fate than the Bérenger hero. If he is not able to defeat the power which engulfs him, he embraces it and becomes part of it, as does King Bérenger I\(^{e}\) in his slow and painful concession to the inevitability of his non-existence. In this sense he does overcome it. Ionesco's mythical hero stands as a sacrificial mediator between man and nemesis, while at the same time projecting an image of humanity's self-created essence. Ionesco's theatre must consequently be viewed as a

\(^{27}\) Leonard C. Pronko, p. 43.
paradoxical fusion of tragedy and metatheatre, at once
humanistic and religious, performing the functions of trag­
edy's transcending catharsis and metatheatre's provociative
illusion of otherworldliness.

The psychic spectacle of man whose existence is marked
by a craving for absolutes in a chaotic universe devoid of
tangible absolutes is more terrifying and piteous than old
tragedy which conferred upon the hero a meaning and a nobil­
ity which he could understand. The absurd tragedy is inten-
sified by Ionesco's dramatic structure of contradicting
principles, where tragic and comic elements co-exist contra-
puntally.

The human mind perceives two planes of
being—finite and infinite, or the trivial and the
tragic. The first is the realm of the familiar,
mundane, diurnal, including cycles of routine and
the minutiae of behavior; the second seeks to dis­
cern the indwelling order of the universe, the
ultimate cause of being, the dimension of eternity,
the meaning of fate. One is relative, the other
absolute. The first lends to comedy, the second
to tragedy. The two planes intersect, though they
resist the artist's efforts to fuse them.28

One of the most imposing aspects of Ionesco's genius is
that, recognizing the illusiveness of the conditions neces-
sary for such a fusion, he has been able successfully to
depict the interaction of the two planes, which, undulating,
flow in and out of each other. He may begin an action with
a comic tone, which ends by being submerged in the tragic.
He explains:

Le comique, dans mes pièces, n'est souvent
qu'une étape de la construction dramatique, et

28 Charles I. Glicksberg, p. 149.
There is, for Ionesco, something darkly amusing in the futility of man's efforts to find meaningful and positive attachments in the midst of hysterical and chaotic disorder. If the movement of a tragedy is accelerated, the result is laughable, as for example the frantic, Chaplinesque movements of a column of soldiers marching to war, or a crowd witnessing the Hindenberg disaster, shown in the poorly synchronized film of early motion pictures. Similarly, Ionesco's comedy presents a frenzied and disorderly progression of movement until the action gets out of control and the machine explodes into fragments. When we laugh at Ionesco's plays, it is because we recognize a tragic absurdity identifiable in our own consciousness and experience, and we feel relieved. The humor is cathartic and liberating of a perception of something that would otherwise be unbearable.

Since Plato, the world's philosophers have sought a fully rational explanation for the contradictions in the universe, but the tragic poets—and Ionesco is a tragic poet—know the universe cannot be explained in rational terms. They recognize that somewhere there is a flaw that is responsible for man's ultimate defeat. "Sometimes the 'tragic flaw' is in the universe, and this is a possibility

29 Eugène Ionesco, Notes et Contre-notes, pp. 99-100.
which the philosopher is reluctant to admit.\textsuperscript{30} For Aeschylus and Sophocles, the suffering of the hero, whether guilty or innocent, was seen to be a part of a world order, which, though not always beneficent, was at least intelligible. For Ionesco, the intelligibility is, if not altogether absent, at least not made manifest.

Ionesco's heroes, like all tragic heroes, have an indefinable quality of mind and spirit which somehow atones for the evil nature of the world in which they and we live. "In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theatre which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times."\textsuperscript{31} In its mythical and analogical application of the tragic vision, Ionesco's theatre answers this need, stimulating the nerves and heart of a sensibility on the point of deterioration. If we find it difficult to recognize the face of tragedy in the drama of the absurd, we must realize that that face must be continually reconstructed, as Ionesco reconstructs it through the cubistic optic that is valid for our time. As the face of tragedy may be seen at different periods of history to emerge in very different shapes of subject matter and tone, it re-emerges now, from necessity, in a form consistent with the


\textsuperscript{31}Antonin Artaud, p. 84.
climate of our time and with the contemporary state of literature and the theatre as outgrowths of existentialism and surrealism.
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Vita

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Title of Thesis: Aspects of Tragedy in the Theatre of Eugène Ionesco

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Date of Examination:

April 23, 1970