

A PAINTER OF THE ABSURD: READING THROUGH AND BEYOND EUGÈNE  
IONESCO'S HUMANISM

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The Theatre of the Absurd often has been considered the reflection of a deconstructionist gesture, a negation of the existent theatrical norms, therefore an end in itself without any prospect of possible alternatives or remedies. While this may be partially true, the entropy inherent to the absurd does not adhere to a mechanically formal posture; rather, the “purposeless wandering”, in Eugène Ionesco’s case, points, through humor (*Ce formidable bordel*), toward a longing for meaning, deeply rooted in the human being. This very longing is the crux of Ionesco’s humanism. For him suffering (*Le Roi se meurt*), as the offshoot of the human being’s finite condition and the affect that bonds the community, is intertwined with an unexplained feeling of wonderment—an opening to contemplation of the infinite. The merging of suffering and wonderment that suffuses Ionesco’s textual and visual works presents the field in which his vision of a metaphysical humanism must find form. Art, in Ionesco’s perspective, as the expression of being and the witness of its time (*Rhinocéros*), can be understood as a redemptive medium, a hope for humanism. Through the interplay of text (plays, reflections and short stories), image (drawings, gouaches and lithographs) and performance, this dissertation explores themes, imagery and structures that reflect Ionesco’s paradoxical view on humanism. Thus, in light of interdisciplinary readings, I identify archetypal images recurrent in Ionesco’s works and his subversive interpretation of these images as revelatory of the author-painter’s inner search for meaning. This quest, which is the unifying principle throughout Ionesco’s work, is revealed in themes spanning from the entropy of language (*La Cantatrice chauve*, *Les Chaises*) to the sacrificial act of

substituting for the other (*Maximilien Kolbe*). In this ultimate act of testimony, Ionesco depicts Emmanuel Lévinas' ethics wherein the self becomes a "hostage" of the other, vulnerable at the encounter with the other. My analysis of Ionesco's humanism continues beyond his works with a reading of the historicized absurd and humanism in the works of two contemporary diasporic playwrights: Matéi Visniec and Saviana Stanescu.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

« . . . une œuvre littéraire de valeur est à l'intersection du temps et de l'éternité»  
(Ionesco, *Entretiens* 141)

In his reflection on Kafka's short story "The City Coat of Arms," Ionesco notes that Kafka's interpretation of the Tower of Babel's narrative reveals the author's essential view on the absurd (*Notes et contre-notes* 338). The reason for the destruction of the tower is not, as traditional hermeneutics has it, the human beings' desire to build a tower that can reach God, and in this way be equal to him, but rather, their loss of interest in building the tower. Secondary aims such as erecting signposts or creating districts for the use of tradespersons became more important than the common goal to the extent that humans even forgot why they started to build the tower in the first place. As a result, they were left wandering aimlessly in the labyrinth of the world (*Notes* 337). In Ionesco's view, the overwhelming feeling of guilt, absurdity and anguish is tormenting human beings, because they have lost their vocation: «l'homme ne cherche plus qu'inconsciemment et à tâtons, une dimension perdue qu'il ne peut même plus entrevoir» (*Notes* 338) ("man now reaches out only unconsciously and gropingly for a lost dimension that has completely vanished from sight"; *Notes and Counter Notes* 257). Why did Ionesco choose Kafka as an illustration? In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco writes that Kafka's absurd is metaphysical; it reflects a purposeless wandering (*Entretiens avec Claude Bonnefoy* 148). The author admits in the same interview that in several artists' works, such as Kafka, Borges, and Chirico, he discovered resonances of obsessions similar to his own (44). Moreover, Kafka represents for Ionesco "the most



penetrating and lucid witness and prophet” of the twentieth century («le témoin et le prophète le plus lucide, le plus pénétrant de notre siècle» [*Antidotes* 200]). His interpretation of the Biblical story unveils the impetus of the absurd: the lack of meaning derives from the human being’s estrangement from his or her initial goal. This interpretation prompts Ionesco’s own definition of the absurd:

Est absurde ce qui n’a pas de but: et ce but final ne peut se trouver qu’au delà de l’histoire, il est ce qui doit guider l’histoire humaine, c’est-à-dire lui donner sa signification. . . . [C]oupé de ses racines religieuses ou métaphysiques, l’homme est perdu, toute sa démarche devient insensée, inutile, étouffante. (*Notes* 338)

Anything without a goal is absurd: and this ultimate goal can only be found outside history, it ought to guide the history of mankind, in other words give it meaning. . . . [W]hen man is cut off from his religious or metaphysical roots, he is lost, all his struggles become senseless, futile and oppressive. (*Notes* 257)

Ionesco’s reflection of the human condition stems from this view on the absurd, a label that Ionesco, as well as Beckett, has rejected because of the term’s vagueness and excessive use. Although both Ionesco and Beckett depict the absurdity of the human condition as tied to the disconnection of the human being from his or her metaphysical roots, the two authors approach this malaise using their own unique themes and styles. From Ionesco’s perspective, the overarching theme that permeates Beckett’s art is that of the human being’s protest against God; Beckett, for Ionesco, is Job sitting among the ashes, lamenting humankind’s derisory condition.<sup>1</sup> Oftentimes, Ionesco employs this image when referring to the absurdity of the human condition, which derives from the intrusion of evil, and consequently of suffering, in the world. The absurdity of the human condition is closely linked to Ionesco’s view on humanism. In his opening speech of the Festival de Strasbourg (1972), Ionesco unpacks the agenda of humanists who advocate

for an anthropocentric view, leaving out the essential condition of the human being,  
which is that of being a mortal:

Voilà ce que les hommes et ce qu'on appelle l'humanisme se sont proposé. C'est de l'abandon des soucis spirituels ou métaphysiques qu'il s'agit là. Le problème de notre destin, de notre existence dans l'univers, de la valeur ou de la précarité des conditions existentielles dans lesquelles nous vivons, tout cela n'a plus été pris en considération. C'est justement le problème essentiel qui a été oublié, le problème essentiel, c'est-à-dire le problème de nos fins dernières. Et c'est ainsi que nous ne savons plus où nous diriger. Et c'est pour cela, et c'est bien pour cela qu'à force de vouloir vivre, il nous est devenu impossible de vivre. (*Un homme en question* 73)

This is what men and what we call humanism advocated for. It is about the abandonment of any spiritual or metaphysical preoccupations. The problem of our destiny, of our existence in universe, of the value of or the instability of the existential conditions we live in, all that was no longer taken in consideration. It is the very essential problem that has been forgotten, the essential problem, meaning the problem of our finitude. Therefore, we no longer know which direction to take. And it is for that, and it is exactly because of that, that by wanting to live, it has become impossible for us to do so. (*my translation*)

In Ionesco's view, humanism cannot be separated from the questions addressing our mortality, as well as from the exploration of a possible infinite dimension. In spite of the challenge to encapsulate Ionesco's thought into a syntagm, such as metaphysical humanism, I use this construction, borrowed from the author himself, as a prism through which Ionesco's works, whether theatrical, pictorial, essayistic or musical, are explored. The syntagm of metaphysical humanism can sketch a form of aesthetics, or a genre, specific to Ionesco, anchored in a dynamic of antagonisms, of *coincidentia oppositorum*, as Mircea Eliade defines it. For instance, Ionesco's pessimism is interlaced with flashes of optimism and, in his art, tragedy is interwoven with an intermittent quest for the absolute. Moreover, his writing follows the oneiric structure of dreams, therefore subverting linearity, while his paintings and drawings are the result of intuitive

endeavors. It is important also to note that Ionesco does not advocate for a definite label of humanism that can be easily deciphered—he does not consider himself a philosopher. Like E.M. Cioran, he prefers the short essay or the fragment resembling the aphoristic genre, rather than a cohesive and coherent philosophical discourse. The applied tools of his sometimes-fragmented style allow for intimately humanistic questioning; thus, apparent contradictions and silences can legitimately linger without any expectation that they should be resolved.

Ionesco's complex view on humanism entails two fundamental notions: suffering and wonderment. Suffering engenders a closer fellowship between human beings, whereas wonderment allows for communion with the divine, a contemplative stance before the world's mysteries. The two dimensions are vital in understanding the human condition, and they are fundamental in the structure of Ionesco's works. The community is solidified through compassion: The suffering of the other addresses and questions the self. The contemplative aspect, materialized in ecstatic experiences of epiphany, is what replenishes and gives vitality to the being in his or her wandering through the world's labyrinth, a metaphor that Ionesco, just like Kafka, often uses. Ionesco's humanism finds resonance with Emmanuel Levinas's humanism of the other. In fact, both these authors believe that suffering strengthens one's relationship with the other, a position that presupposes a certain emptying of the self (*Humanism of the other* 46). This sacrificial gesture of emptying of the self that culminates with the physical sacrifice for the other is embodied in Ionesco's last work, *Maximilien Kolbe*, an opera libretto, which will be explored in further detail in chapter III.

The theme of this last work of art, which is one of the author's most "realistic" texts among his fictional writings, can be considered the summit of Ionesco's testament. In fact, it offers closure to the predominant themes of all his earlier works: the suffering for the other, or *in place of* the other, gives meaning and purpose to the absurd through which many of his characters, such as the couples Smith and Martin, fall prey without finding any resolution. Suffering for the other, which entails a negation of the self or a transcendence of the self, destabilizes the anthropocentric idea that the human is the ultimate measure of everything. If art should have a role (although Ionesco steers clear of the idea of engaged art, as well as of the other extreme presumed in the periphrasis "art for art") is that of revelation. This overarching declaration of Ionesco's *ars poesis*, which is elaborated upon in the first chapter of this dissertation, cannot be attributed, as some of his critics have claimed, to Ionesco's advancement in age, which supposedly prompted his inclinations towards mysticism. Even during his Romanian years, as a young critic, Ionesco writes that art is the expression of a transcendent reality, in which the artist and his or her audience becomes aware of a reality that exists beyond the physical limits. In his article on Van Gogh,<sup>2</sup> Ionesco notes that the painter's artistic ideal is to express the human and suffering, which is essentially human. Through suffering, the self enters into an intersubjective relation with otherness.

In the same essay, Ionesco writes that art should be the quest to express the inexpressible: «Les arts ne sont que des modes d'expression d'une réalité qui les dépasse; ils ne sont qu'un moyen de concrétiser, de manifester, de vivre cette réalité là» (270) ("The arts are but modes of expressions of a reality that expands beyond themselves; they are but a means of materializing, of manifesting, of living that reality" [*my translation*]).

Echoing Artaud's words that the origin of drama and theatre is the materialization, or rather the externalization of something essential, metaphysical (*Le théâtre et son double* 76), Ionesco goes as far as to affirm that there is no art without metaphysics (*Notes* 192). Art is supposed to extend beyond its purpose, to be an opening, an overture towards another dimension that the human being can experience. Therefore, the work of art for him is autonomous, cannot be dependent upon externally imposed criteria, it is a living universe, guided by its proper laws, and a continual discovery. Echoing the Pirandellian thought (*On Humor* 120), Ionesco perceives the work of art as spontaneous, the result of an intuitive endeavor rather than of an a priori conceived outline.

There is no shortage of critique of Ionesco's dramaturgical undertakings; on the contrary, one can say that abundant works have been written, each with its own unique approach, ranging from the psychological and psychoanalytical to the sociological, aesthetic, and mythological—and the list can continue. The polemics that surrounded the reception of the author's work are explored in more detail in chapter II: how Ionesco's critics (from his early admirers and opponents) have viewed his works, as well as the tendency in the later years to address the author's work in a rather holistic, even eclectic, manner. Thus, the works of Saint-Tobi (1973), Marie-Claude Hubert (1987), Paul Vernois (1991), and Sonia de Leusse-Le Guillou (2010), who wrote after the majority of Ionesco's works were published, present a more comprehensive view of the author's corpus. Perhaps due in part to the distance in time from the earliest years theatre of the absurd debuted on stage, some critics, such as Sonia de Leusse-Le Guillou, include Ionesco's writings in conjunction with his substantial pictorial work for a more unifying view of his oeuvre.

Through his clumsy and stuttering protagonists, Ionesco shows the inanity of language, the impossibility of words to express the inner desires, turmoil and quests of the individual, the incapacity of reason to chart and contain knowledge. Towards the end of his life, he takes up his pencil, brush, colors and turns, intensively, to drawing, painting, and lithography. Could painting be the symbolic gesture of this impossibility of language to express meaning, the ultimate sign of self-negation as a writer? Or is it rather a more direct medium used by the author to express the imaginary yet humanist ground inherent—or alluded to—in his texts?

One might wonder about adding another work to the already ample critical corpus. Seen through the prism of Ionesco's metaphysical humanism (which shares a meaningful intersection with that of the humanist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas), the aim of this dissertation is to shed light on how Ionesco's visual works along with the textual images drawn from his plays and stage performances, reflect his intermittent, but ceaseless search: the quest for meaning. Ionesco's form of *ut pictura poesis* is not at the service of idealizing art, or painting an idealized nature, as in the Renaissance understanding of the term, but in the search of truth. Which truth, we might ask? In Ionesco's view, truth is revealed through dreams; it extrapolates its sources from the imaginary, which alone is revelatory (*Notes* 44).

The archetypal images and themes that emanate from Ionesco's texts and plastic arts are explored in chapter III. Because theatre is «une architecture mouvante, une construction vivante . . .» (*Entretiens* 166) (“a moving architecture, a living structure . . .” [*my translation*]), it is the perfect medium in which to reveal what is not immediately perceptible to the five senses or empirical measurements. Jean Genet, considered one of

the writers of the absurd, and to whom Martin Esslin dedicates an entire chapter in his study *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), notes in one of his essays, «L'étrange mot d'...» that with the advent of television and cinema, with which live stage theatre cannot compete, playwrights will be prompted to discover other virtues proper to theatre that reveal its myth-like character (12). Therefore the leitmotifs recurrent in Ionesco's textual and visual works of the radiant city, the utopian version of a paradise lost and the imagery of the column and its variants, symbolizing sacrifice, communion with the divine and the desire to fly, will be explored in this chapter. I will also address Ionesco's oscillation between text and image. The interrogative and antagonistic structures are the author's main "technical" devices, revealed in both his narrations and paintings; therefore, my methodology can only be subordinate to this interrogative stance. Trying to find an answer is not the main goal, but rather revealing and discovering the questions that the author poses. If there are answers, they are provisional. Although the medium varies, the layered questions about the meaning of existence and the human being's purpose in the universe remain the same. The search is interwoven with experiences of epiphany—an incarnation, an irruption, a breaking-in of the divine, which the author experienced in ecstatic moments of transfiguration and illumination, first as a child and later, more intensely, as an adolescent. These moments of plenitude are the signposts that direct his path. Through anamnesis, which entails the platonic idea that learning is recollection and that knowledge is actually dormant in the soul but is forgotten at birth, Ionesco tries to recall and materialize in his writings or paintings those moments that are increasingly rare as the author advances in age. Words or colors paradoxically insinuate, on the one hand, the only way to express this luminous encounter and, on the other, the

impossibility of truly representing it. The leitmotifs that seek to capture this euphoric experience—the contemplative side of human existence—are actively coupled with the horizontal dimension: the experience of human suffering, the other focal point of Ionesco's humanism.

The substitution for the other, the ultimate act of suffering, is pivotal and it is the concluding theme of chapter IV. If art is metaphysical, as Ionesco believes, in that it extends beyond the limits that circumscribe it, how has the author's work engaged with the art's temporal and conceptual boundaries? Because theatre of the absurd, and particularly Ionesco's theatre, has been blamed for not addressing the pressing questions of the time, or for being too abstract and remote from world events (the existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel is among those who accuse Ionesco of, in fact, promoting chaos and anarchy), I found it important to start this incursion with an analysis of the entropy of language, which at first sight can be seen solely as a dislocation of discourse without any particular purpose. This dislocation, which is intermittently present throughout Ionesco's works, culminates in the last play, *Voyages chez les morts* (*Journeys Among the Dead*), where the protagonist acknowledges through a «Je ne sais pas» his stupefaction before existence, at the same time pointing towards a need for real—if imprecise—communication. Despite the ineptness of words to express the deep longings of the human soul, Ionesco endows one of his characters, Bérenger, with a speaking ability and a position of engagement, although often times contradictory and anti-heroic. His stance is not one of political protestation against the historical events that shook the last century, but rather one of resistance against, and debunking of, the hidden ideological mechanisms that triggered them. The emblematic play, which guaranteed



Ionesco a place in the French Academy, and his work a place in the pantheon of classics, is *Rhinocéros* (1960). From Bérenger's attempt to resist the hypnotic force of ideology, seen throughout the tetralogy in which he is the protagonist, Ionesco takes the reader to his last character, that of *Maximilien Kolbe*, inspired by the real-life story of a man whose response to alterity takes the form of an extreme gesture of sacrificial substitution for the other. Ionesco's reflection on humanism and Levinas' idea of the humanism of the other converge in this testimonial account. This opera libretto is a testimonial in two senses: firstly, it is the last fictional work published by Ionesco, and secondly, it testifies to the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps. If for Eugène Ionesco «comprendre la souffrance, c'est comprendre l'homme» («Un certain Van Gogh» 279) (“understanding suffering is understanding the human being” [*my translation*]) an antidote to suffering is humor. Humor not only brings about awareness of the human being's ludicrous condition but it contains, through laughter, the medium to surmount it.

Ionesco's view on suffering, as an essential component of his idea of humanism, cannot be dissociated from his humor, therefore chapter V revolves around the notion of a humanism of laughter, or humor as redemptive medium. Although Ionesco uses many of the traditional mechanisms of the comical, as outlined in Henri Bergson's study on laughter, they play a subversive role: they are not mere artifices that support the plot, but they constitute the breathing, the vitality, the rhythm of his works, whether textual or pictorial, in which the notion of a linear plotline is disrupted. The idea of movement, without necessarily any underlying plot line, captivated the author even as a child, when his mother used to take him to the puppet theatre in the *Jardin du Luxembourg*. He was admiring the animation expressed through the motion and rhythm of the lifeless figurines

that simulated life in its tragicomical dance (*Découvertes* 70). This dual penchant is seen throughout his works: the pathetic espouses the burlesque, the ceremony is parodied, and the comic is interwoven with tragic undertones. The antagonisms that permeate the author's quest are illustrated in three plays: *Le roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*), *Ce formidable bordel* (*What a Bloody Circus*) and *Macbett*, as well as in a selection of gouaches and lithographs. Through humor, the reader or spectator is confronted with the dichotomy of identification with—yet objective distancing from—the characters' experience. The identification that occurs in the acknowledgement that everyone is mortal and experiences dying is subverted by the comic relief that allows for a distancing (though not in a Brechtian understanding of the term, which demands a socio-political engagement). With a specifically Ionesquian pirouette, this distancing instead makes room for an examination of the finite human condition. Death represents an absolute demystification, observes Ionesco, but humor is a profoundly human estimation culminating in the compounding effect of distancing from—and apprehension of—the grim reality of human existence (*Entretiens* 153).

If for Eugene Ionesco the vital problems presented in the complexity engendered by the individual's condition as a finite creature, with the absurd emerging from the lack of coherence in the world, the authors who wrote after him were confronted with the systemically absurd generated by the Communist system. The sixth chapter represents, therefore, a shift, an opening towards other playwrights who were directly or indirectly influenced by Ionesco, or at least for whom Ionesco (and other writers from his generation, such as Mircea Eliade and E.M. Cioran) constituted an intellectual point of reference. Matéi Visniec and Saviana Stanescu who are at the center of this chapter were

chosen by virtue of their geographic and linguistic positioning. They are writing, just as Ionesco did, from outside of the Romanian border: Matéi Vişniec from Paris and Saviana Stănescu from New York. How do these diasporic writers grapple with the notion of the absurd and how can they create their own identity without feeling overshadowed by the legacy of their predecessors or lapsing into pastiche? How does their view on humanism converge with or diverge from that of Eugène Ionesco? Including these playwrights was important for the purpose of the dissertation in that it opens up a dialogic space, a reading of Ionesco that expands beyond his own writings. Although only Matéi Vişniec claims to have been influenced by Ionesco's writings, Ionesco's presence is felt indirectly also in Saviana Stănescu's works. But Stănescu's identity, interrelated with the identity of her protagonists—that of global foreigners, emerges from her pursuit to dissociate herself from her predecessors. Another reason for the inclusion of these two authors lies in the kinship of their experiences with those of Ionesco, in particular, the experience of alterity, of living and writing in two languages, oscillating between the two and then deciding to express oneself in the adoptive language. Although Ionesco was more comfortable with French, his reader is often caught by surprise at his inscrutable insertions of Romanian words, translations of sayings and onomatopoeias that burst into his writings. The works of the two younger authors shed light on the prophetic implications of Ionesco's works. The absurd, which Ionesco does not ground in a specific temporal frame, finds its resonance in the absurdity of the communism that Matéi Vişniec and Saviana Stănescu experienced.

This resonance invites the question of whether Ionesco's metaphysical humanism, related to the absurd, could claim to have pragmatic implications. In his *Journal en*

*miettes* (*Fragments of a Journal*) the author intimates a response when he compares his theatre, or the theatre of the absurd with engaged theatre committed to promote a certain ideology:

. . . lorsque, derrière tout cela [la classe, la race, la condition bourgeoise de l'homme], je parle de ce qui est intimement moi, dans ma peur, dans mes désirs, dans mon angoisse, dans ma joie d'être ; ou lorsque je donne libre cours à l'imagination déchaînée, à la construction imaginative, je ne suis pas seulement moi, je ne suis pas un partisan, je ne suis plus avec celui-ci ou contre celui-là, je ne suis plus celui-là contre celui-ci, je ne suis plus seulement moi mais je suis tous les autres dans ce qu'ils ont d'humain . . . (*Journal en miettes* 24)

. . . when I look behind all this [class, race, bourgeois status of man], and speak of what is an intimate part of myself, of my fear, my longings, my anguish, my delight in being; or when I give free reign to my unfettered imagination, to my imaginative constructions, I am not only being myself, I am not being a partisan, I am not taking sides with one against another, I am no longer myself alone but I am all the others in their essential humanity . . . (*Fragments of a Journal* 18)

The personal joins the universal categories not in a homogenizing gesture of appropriation, but through compassion, as response to the suffering of the other, and contemplation. Through the protagonists of his plays and his visual works, Ionesco paints an absurd that points to the need for these two essential dispositions, compassion and contemplation, fundamental in understanding the author's complex view of humanism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ionesco writes in his essay «J'aurais écrit de toute façon» : «Tout Beckett a pour thème la plainte de l'homme contre Dieu, c'est ainsi que je l'ai dit il y a plusieurs années, l'expression s'est répandue, celle de l'image de Job sur son fumier» (*Antidotes* 208).

<sup>2</sup> «Un certain Van Gogh» written in Romanian in 1937, translated into French by his daughter, Marie-France Ionesco, and published in 2010 as an annex to Sonia de Leusse- Le Gouillu's study, *Eugène Ionesco: de l'écriture à la peinture*.

## CHAPTER II

### HUMANISM AND ART

“The essence of art would then be this: the truth of being setting itself to work.”  
(Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 162)

Known as the playwright of the “absurd” alongside Beckett and Adamov, Eugène Ionesco’s body of work has been marked, from the very beginning, by the quest for meaning beyond the absurdity of modern human existence. In this quest, the outcome is less important than the search itself. Although Ionesco’s work contains a message, it does not provide answers to questions; the questions themselves are important, whereas the answers are only significant on an individual basis, and are therefore *not* prescriptive. For the author, the privileged locus for such a quest is art—in all its forms: from discourse to images to music.

Ionesco’s ontological quest cannot be separated from the form in which he expresses it. In *Antidotes*, the author states that there is no art without metaphysics (193). Art is the medium through which humans express their angst, aspirations, desires, dreams, and suffering. Anything that takes humans beyond the limit of the self is metaphysical, in Ionesco’s view (*Antidotes* 61-2). Art is part of being; it belongs to its ontological order, as Emmanuel Levinas highlights in *L’Humanisme de l’autre homme*, 1979 (*Humanism of the Other*): «L’art n’est donc pas un heureux égarement de l’homme qui se met à faire du beau. La culture et la création artistique font partie de l’ordre ontologique lui-même. . . . [E]lles rendent la compréhension de l’être possible». (“So art is not the lovely madness of man who takes it in his head to make beauty. Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. . . . [T]hey make it possible to

comprehend being” [17]). Levinas proposes the analogy between art and liturgy, poetry and prayer, museums and temples, as they are the spaces that make possible “the communion with being” (17). This resonates with Ionesco’s belief that art is or should be a spiritual means that facilitates access to the divine. Could we therefore speak of a *metaphysical genre* in Ionesco’s work? Despite the overuse of this heavily charged term, I would like to employ it as an encompassing term which could qualify Ionesco’s work, whether textual or pictorial, by looking at themes and leitmotifs in his plays, drawings, gouaches that exemplify the author’s complex perspective on humanism. This second chapter will contextualize Ionesco’s thought within the twentieth century paradigm, as well as his *ars poesis*, through the prism of the author’s notion of humanism, while not merely striving to add another label to the plethora of humanist categories. The last part of the chapter will address the reception of Ionesco’s work, noting the disparity between critics who either vehemently positioned themselves against the author, or defended him.

The periphrasis “metaphysical humanism” is used as a mode of identifying, through differentiation and congruence with other forms, Ionesco’s particular view on humanism. I have borrowed this term from the author himself; in one of his collections of essays and reflections, *Antidotes* (1977), Ionesco writes that suffering and wonderment should be the basis for humanism:

C’est le sentiment de l’étonnement et de l’émerveillement face au monde que nous contemplons, lié au sentiment que tout est, en même temps, souffrance, c’est cela qui peut constituer la base fondamentale d’une fraternité et d’un *humanisme métaphysique*. L’enfer c’est les autres, c’est la formule célèbre d’un écrivain et philosophe contemporain. Les autres, c’est nous-mêmes, peut-on répondre. (*Antidotes* 326, *my emphasis*.)

A feeling of astonishment and wonder at the world around us, joined to the knowledge that everything is at the same time a source of pain and suffering, could lay the foundations for a new brotherhood of

*metaphysical humanism*. Hell is other people, such is the famous formula of a contemporary writer and philosopher. We can reply: other people are ourselves. (“Why Do I Write?” 129)

For Ionesco, it is the complex dialectics of suffering (*souffrance*) and wonderment (*émerveillement*) that paradoxically define and unite humans. Michel Lioure, in his essay «L’humanisme d’Eugène Ionesco», has rightly noted that Ionesco’s humanism is nourished by both pessimism and hope.<sup>3</sup> While suffering is inherent in the human condition and can be the catalyst for the bond between humans, it alone cannot be the basis for human connection. It has to coexist therefore with the state of wonderment before the world, a revitalizing emotion and state of mind that is only possible when humans renounce their *a priori* judgments and prejudices about the world. Wonderment—a child-like look upon the world—begins from a place of reverence nourished by the desire to preserve the world’s mystery. The exaltation that one experiences during moments of contemplation before the world is only temporary and happens sporadically, but it accomplishes two things: it reinforces the horizontal axis of the relationship with the other, and it revives a vertical communion with the divine, whom Ionesco associates with the Judeo-Christian God, influenced by his Orthodox (Romanian) and Catholic (French) background.

Authentic humanism, in Ionesco’s view, develops primarily in the interaction with others. Although he talks about a *personal* humanism, as proposed by Emmanuel Mounier, Ionesco vehemently opposes an individualistic view of humanism. The intersubjective relation with the other is at the root of his humanism. Although it is not certain whether or not Ionesco had encountered Emmanuel Lévinas’ work, especially since *L’Humanisme de l’autre homme* was published in the second half of the twentieth

century, I argue that it is not inappropriate to explore the intersection of Ionesco's imaginary, whether textual, pictorial or musical, with Lévinas' concept of the humanism of the other. The emblematic work that illustrates this extreme form of humanism is Ionesco's opera libretto, *Maximilien Kolbe*. It is the author's last work, performed in Italy at the Rimini Opera in 1985. The protagonist, father Kolbe, offers himself to be executed in place of another Auschwitz prisoner. Father Kolbe's extreme sacrifice is symbolic of Ionesco's view of what humanism should signify. This sacrificial gesture is the ultimate intersubjective relation, in which the suffering of the other calls unequivocally for immediate action. This action, in Lévinas' view, should not be premeditated nor should it benefit the Self, but it should perform a complete emptiness of the Self: «La relation avec Autrui me met en question, me vide de moi-même et ne cesse pas de me vider en me découvrant des ressources toujours nouvelles» (46). (“The relation with the Others challenges me, empties me of myself and keeps on emptying me by showing me ever new resources” [*Humanism of the Other* 29-30]). This emptying of the Self does not mean obliterating it, but rather opening it towards the other.

This complex view of the human relationship is what distinguishes Ionesco's humanism from the others. The author's journal entries, essays and articles reveal his view that politics and ideology are rather ephemeral avatars of their time and cannot offer a significant answer, due to their temporality and limited scope. Ionesco opposes Roland Barthes' (and implicitly Bertold Brecht's) statement that plays should represent the social *gestus* of their time. In his essay «Les maladies du costume de théâtre», initially published in *Théâtre populaire* and incorporated in his collection of articles and essays: *Essais critiques* (1964), Barthes notes: «Toute œuvre dramatique peut et doit se réduire à



ce que Brecht appelle son *gestus* social, l'expression extérieure, matérielle, des conflits de société dont elle témoigne» (*Essais critiques* 53). ("Every dramatic work can and must reduce itself to what Brecht calls its social *gestus*, the external, material expression of the social conflicts to which it bears witness" [*Critical Essays* 41]). The costume therefore should perform what Barthes calls an ethical function of representing the true historical facets of the play. The costumer should forget, in Barthes' view, any relation with painting when he creates the costumes (44). For Ionesco, the work of art should express something beyond historical and social context of the period. He is convinced of the irremediable failure of revolutions, regardless of the good intentions that seem to animate them, to bring about solutions and answers to the human struggle. In his view, history has proven that revolutions are doomed to fail since the revolutionaries become in turn the mercenaries that endanger the freedom that they initially upheld.<sup>4</sup> The very notion of humanism, in Ionesco's view, has been perverted. In *Antidotes*, a compilation of essays, journal articles, the author bitterly concludes: « . . . notre culture, que l'on appelle humaniste, ne semble être qu'un château de cartes» (64). (" . . . our culture, which we call humanist, seems to be but a house of cards " [*my translation*]). To the ephemeral answers that politics and ideologies provide, Ionesco prefers the metaphysical interrogations with no answers: «L'interrogation sans réponse métaphysique est plus sûre, plus authentique, finalement plus utile que les réponses fausses ou partielles que prétend donner la politique» (*Antidotes* 326). ("Questions that meet with no metaphysical response are more dependable, more authentic, and ultimately more useful than those partial or misleading answers which politics claim to provide ["Why Do I Write?" 129]). This

could have been the reason why his a-political inclinations were considered as a detachment from the world events.

At the beginning of his career as a playwright in France, Ionesco was accused of upholding a view of an abstract—even anarchic—humanism that does not, in fact, relate to the human. One cannot ignore Barthes' claim that avant-garde theatre, in which he includes Ionesco as well, does not have a political conscience or a prospect for the future. Rather, Barthes argues that avant-garde theatre is suicidal by its very nature bringing about not only its own death but also an apocalyptic end to everything else:

L'avant-garde n'est jamais qu'une façon de chanter la mort bourgeoise, car sa propre mort appartient encore à la bourgeoisie ; mais l'avant-garde ne peut aller plus loin ; elle ne peut concevoir le terme funèbre qu'elle exprime, comme le moment d'une germination, comme le passage d'une société fermée à une société ouverte ; elle est impuissante par nature à mettre dans la protestation qu'elle élève, l'espoir d'un assentiment tout nouveau au monde : elle veut mourir, le dire, et que tout meure avec elle. (*Essais critiques* 81-2)

The *avant-garde* is always a way of celebrating the death of the bourgeoisie, for its own death still belongs to the bourgeoisie; but further than this the avant-garde cannot go; it cannot conceive the funerary term it expresses as a moment of germination, as the transition from a closed society to an open one; it is impotent by nature to infuse its protest with the hope of a new assent to the world: it wants to die, to say so, and it wants everything to die with it. (*Critical Essays* 69)

In his essay published in *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), Ionesco rectifies the notion that his theatre is not relevant, and to the accusation that it is the “parasite and property of the bourgeoisie” (*Critical Essays* 69), by replying that in fact his concept of humanism draws its sources from the common condition of every human, that of being mortal:

En réalité, je suis pour l'homme de partout. . . . L'homme de partout est l'homme concret. L'homme abstrait, c'est l'homme des idéologies. . . . Lorsque je parle de la mort, tout le monde me comprend. 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. (306)

In reality, I am in favor of man wherever he exists . . . . Man everywhere is concrete man. Abstract man is ideological man . . . . When I speak about death, everyone understands me. Death is neither bourgeois nor socialist. It is my deepest anguish, all that comes from the deepest part of myself, which is the most “popular”, as it speaks to all people. (*Notes* 228-229)

Ideologies and politics contain a peripheral value and divide humans, whereas their deepest feelings of angst unite them. In his play, *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*, which emulates Molière's structure of *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, the protagonist, who bears Ionesco's name, reminds his critics (Bartholoméus I, II, III) that humans exist as individuals, but they are also reunited in their universal qualities. Just as the Matryoshka nesting dolls bear within each other a similar image to themselves, humans, in Ionesco's view, at the innermost of their beings share anguishes, obsessions, desires, and dreams that are akin:

IONESCO. Comme je ne suis pas seul au monde, comme chacun de nous, au plus profond de son être, est en même temps tous les autres, mes rêves, mes désirs, mes angoisses, les obsessions ne m'appartiennent pas en propre ; cela fait partie d'un héritage ancestral, un très ancien dépôt, constituant le domaine de toute humanité. C'est par-delà leur diversité extérieure, ce qui réunit les hommes et constitue notre profonde communauté, le langage universel. (*Théâtre complet* 465)

IONESCO. As I am not alone in the world, as each one of us, in the depths of his being, is at the same time everyone else, my dreams and my desires, my anguish and my obsessions do not belong to myself alone; they are a part of the heritage of my ancestors, a very ancient deposit to which all mankind may lay claim. It is this which, surpassing the superficial diversity of men, brings them together and constitutes our deepest fellowship, a universal language. (*Improvisation* 150)

Ionesco emphasizes the personal as well as universal qualities embedded in human beings, and faithful to Montaigne's idea, does not prefer one quality over another. This convergence of the universal and the personal is fundamental to Montaigne's view of the human. In his analysis of French humanism, *Le Jardin imparfait: la pensée humaniste en France* (1998), Tzvetan Todorov offers a synthesis of humanist thought, from the

perspective of three authors whom he considers pivotal for the humanist tradition: Montaigne, Rousseau and Benjamin Constant. Humanism is posed in comparison, and sometimes in convergence, with two other positions: scientism and individualism. The author summarizes the definition that, in his view, best describes what humanism should be at its core: « *Je* dois être la source de mon action, *tu* dois en être le but, *ils* appartiennent tous à la même espèce humaine » (49). (“*I* must be the source of my action, *you* must be its goal, *they* all belong to the same human race” [*Imperfect Garden* . . . 30])). This encapsulates the three attributes of humanism: first, freedom of action initiated by subject (its autonomy); second, an ethical perspective that situates the self in a space of interaction with the other; and third, the unity (or universality—understood as one component) among human beings. Montaigne is the first to use this notion in its noun form, humanism, defining what is uniquely concerned with humans, preoccupied with topics «purement humains» differentiating it from theology. Todorov resumes Montaigne’s view and reiterates that each person is a unique individual, yet, each one carries the traces of the human condition (« . . . tout homme est un individu inimitable, et pourtant chacun porte en lui l’empreinte de la condition humaine dans l’ensemble » [228]).<sup>5</sup> ( The universal, not understood as a homogenizing principle, but rather as a common denominator—an essence that humans all share, and the personal, converge in Ionesco’s view of humanism.

The playwright is also particularly influenced by Mounier’s notion of *personnalisme*, where the person does not revolve egocentrically around the Self, but is in an open and vulnerable communication with the other. In his study, *Introduction aux existentialismes* (1962), Mounier emphasizes this movement of the Self towards the other

person. In this relation, where one is bound to communicate with the other, no one loses his or her particularity. This movement towards the other is what in fact defines the Self.<sup>6</sup> The other, as well as the self, is indispensable to existence, to *comexistence*, to employ Mounier's term. This *personal* view of humanism can be analyzed in dialogue with Sartre's existentialism. In *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), Sartre considers that human beings are defined by what they are accomplishing: « . . . l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet, il n'existe que dans la mesure où il se réalise, il n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes, rien d'autre que sa vie » (51). ("Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more other than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life" [*Existentialism is a Humanism* 36]). Sartre's philosophy as presented in this text, which is a transcript of a conference talk given in Paris in 1945, endorses the idea that existence precedes essence: human beings first come into being and then they define themselves. Meaning cannot be intermediated by any exterior factor (29). In this sense, a human being overcomes the absurdity of life through his or her actions (« . . . c'est à vous de lui donner un sens » [74]; (« . . . it is we who give it meaning [50])). In his *Journal en miettes* (1973) Ionesco contradicts this point of view noting that essence precedes existence. He continues: «L'histoire ne nous fait pas. Parfois même nous la faisons. Les choses ne nous font pas, puisque nous sommes déjà faits » (153). ("History does not make us. Sometimes indeed we make it. Things do not make us, since we are already made." [*Fragments . . .* 106]). In Sartre's perspective, the *other* occupies a place that revolves around the self: he or she is "indispensable" to the self's subsistence (59). For Emmanuel Mounier this type of humanism poses a problematic objectification of the other. If the other is indispensable

to my existence, he/she becomes subject-object, gazed upon and analyzed. Mounier reiterates the notion of *personnalisme* to outline his view that contrasts the idea of the person as object, and that each person edifies his or her own universe with its own laws and truths, but that the individual truths and reality are interconnected with those of the others: «Puisque la personne n'est pas un objet que l'on sépare et que l'on regarde, mais un centre de réorientation de l'univers objectif, il nous reste à faire tourner l'analyse autour de l'univers édifié par elle . . . Chacun n'a sa vérité que relié à tous les autres» (*Le Personnalisme* 2). (“Since the person is not an object that can be separated and inspected, but is a centre of re-orientation of the objective universe, we shall now have to turn our analysis upon the universe that it reveals . . . [T]he truth of each depends upon its relation to the others” [*Personalism* XX]).

The *comexistence*, as Mounier calls it, is, for Ionesco, shared in the act of suffering: «La souffrance d'un seul être est la souffrance de tous les êtres» (“The suffering of one being is the suffering of all beings”; *my translation*), writes Ionesco in his collection of reflections on lithography, painting, and writing (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 17). Similarly, Lévinas considers the condition of the human as that of a hostage. This condition, prior to any intentionality, arises from the sentiment of the Self of non-indifference towards the other, who experiences suffering for the suffering of the other («souffrance pour la souffrance de l'autre» [92]). The philosopher continues by saying that «personne ne peut rester en soi: l'humanité de l'homme, la subjectivité, est une responsabilité pour les autres, une vulnérabilité extrême» (97). (“No one can stay in himself; the humanity of man, subjectivity, is a responsibility for others, an extreme vulnerability” [67]). This vulnerability expressed in empathy when encountering the

suffering of the other is at the root of this version of humanism. Inspired by Mounier, Ionesco denounces the aggression against the individual "I", the negation of the personal "I" whose perpetrators maintain anti-individualist, collectivist tendencies such as Nazism, Communism or any other form of totalitarianism:

Politiciens d'hier, idéologues d'aujourd'hui, tous les négateurs de l'individualisme sont des individualistes acharnés et violents, animés par une volonté de puissance pathologique, un désir excessif de se manifester, de se réaliser, d'absorber ou de dominer les autres, afin que ne survive que leur moi hypertrophié . . . (*Journal* 215)

Yesterday's politicians, today's ideologists, all those who deny individualism are fierce and violent individualists, impelled by a pathological will to power and an excessive urge to assert themselves, to realize themselves, to absorb or dominate others so that only their hypertrophied self may survive . . . (*Fragments* 149)

Albert Camus takes the feeling of empathy and suffering even further; their fructification occurs in rebellion. For the author of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, suffering, which is individual in the absurdist view of existence, becomes universal in the moment in which it is shared in the stage of revolt—the natural response to absurdity. Thus he writes in his sequel to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *L'homme révolté* (1951): « . . . à partir du mouvement de révolte, elle [la souffrance] est l'aventure de tous »(36). (“ . . . from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience ” [*The Rebel* 22]). It is important to note here Camus' philosophy of the absurd. He rejects any encompassing notions of the absurd and proposes that accepting the absurd without trying to escape it is preferable to any attempt to appropriate it. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus defines the absurd as a «divorce entre l'homme et la vie» (223) (“divorce between man and his life” [*The Myth* . . . 5]) marked by the discrepancy between «l'esprit qui désire et le monde qui déçoit» (253) (“the mind that desires and the world that disappoints [*The*

*Myth* . . . 37]). In his philosophical works, Camus explores different reactions to the absurd offered by various schools of thought, and finds none satisfactory, because, in his view, there is no absolute knowledge immediately available to the human; therefore one has to resign oneself and to accept to live out the absurd (256). Yet, Camus points out that even if the absurd annihilates the chance for eternal liberty—as knowledge of this is unavailable empirically, it does not however impede freedom of action (258). Therefore, freedom of action manifests itself in revolt (*L'Homme Révolté* published in 1951).

Contrary to the «sommeil quotidien» (259), rebellion is defined by an awareness that acts in the present. In Camus' view, the absurd human is the person who, without denying it, does nothing for the eternal («celui qui, sans le nier, ne fait rien pour l'éternel» [265]).

Rebellion, in Camus' view puts into question the very notion of the individual (28) because it leads to the hypothesis that there might be a human nature (*L'Homme Révolté* 28). In the act of revolting, humans go beyond their own limits: « . . . dans la révolte, l'homme se dépasse en autrui et, de ce point de vue, la solidarité humaine est métaphysique»(29). (“When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical” [*The Rebel* 17]). Ionesco and Camus both espouse this concept of solidarity, or “brotherhood” in Ionesco's terms, that emerges from empathy towards the other.

Suffering, in its many forms: angst, weakness, disease, disability, is at the root of solidarity and community. It is the horizontal interaction among humans facing similar fears that primarily originate in the fear of death. The vertical orientation, which is the other important axis in Ionesco's metaphysical humanism, occurs in moments of contemplation, exaltation, and reverence before creation. It is, in the author's view, what



keeps the human afloat, what gives oneself a flickering hope for survival. In Ionesco's imagery, there is a leitmotif of moments in which the divine manifests in a sudden irruption of light, of illumination. This Manifestation, in its chromatic translucence, is what prompts Ionesco to write. In his collection of drawings and essays, *Découvertes* (1969), he reveals to his readers his reason for writing: «C'est pour parler de cette lumière . . . que j'ai fait de la littérature» (60). ("It is to talk about this light . . . that I am into literature" [*my translation*]). The representation of light emerges from Ionesco's desire to recreate and experience again the wonderment of his childhood. In his *Journal en miettes*, the author writes about a few instances in which he experienced the feeling of exaltation and plenitude. In these rare moments, physical space and his being were transfigured and transformed in epiphany or *satori* in Mircea Eliade's terms.

Une grande énergie lumineuse semblait être tout le temps sur le point de désarticuler, de dissoudre les choses; et cette lumière, cette force semblait avoir été cachée sous les masques des choses, et voici qu'elle éclatait, qu'elle explosait. Lumière unique : les choses avaient été les événements particuliers de cette lumière, les événements-objets dans lesquels elle se particularisait. (*Journal en miettes* 61)

A great luminous energy seemed for ever on the point of breaking things up, of dissolving them; and this light, this force seemed to have been hidden under the mask of things, and now was bursting forth, exploding. A light like no other: things had been particular incidents within this light, the incident-objects through which it assumed specific shape. (*Fragments* . . .42)

David Lodge's definition of epiphany is pertinent to this context: "[epiphany is] any descriptive passage in which external reality is charged with a kind of transcendental significance for the perceiver" (*The Art of Fiction* 146).<sup>7</sup> The experiences of being outside or beyond history in a feeling of wonder and stupefaction are, in Ionesco's view, the moments in which consciousness is at its most lucid and authentic state. In *Découvertes*

(1969), the author describes the biographical instance, a point of reference in his work, when the hierophanic event happened:

Lorsque j'avais huit ans, neuf ans, j'ai vécu deux mois d'avril et deux mois de mai que je n'oublie pas. Je courais sur le chemin bordé de primevères, je courais dans les prés reverdis, dans la joie indicible de l'être. Ces couleurs, cet éclat hantent mon esprit et ce n'est pas profondément vrai quand je dis que le monde est une prison. Au printemps, je reconnaissais peut-être les couleurs, la beauté, la lumière d'un paradis dont je devais encore me souvenir. (317)

When I was eight, nine years old, I lived two months of April and two months of May that I don't forget. I was running on the alley lined with primroses, I was running through the green meadows, in the unspeakable joy of being. Those colors, this radiance haunt my spirit and it is not completely true when I say that the world is a prison. In the spring time, I would perhaps recognize the colors, the beauty, the light of a paradise which I would still have a memory of. (*my translation*)

Mircea Eliade, an erudite in mythology and a historian of mythology and religion, also a close friend of Ionesco's, conveys the importance of this sort of experience as it constitutes an escape from the profane and the quotidian and transposes the person into a sacred world («Lumière et transcendance» 125).<sup>8</sup> Ionesco's plays, paintings, lithography, essays, are motivated by this process of anamnesis, by a remembering and a reenacting of this moment, even though, as the author admits, the event that is being remembered is buried deeper and deeper under the dust of time.

Ionesco's humanism emerges from the desire to recapture and reveal, through art, this experience, as well as the responsibility to partake in the suffering of the other. In *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco confesses: «En exprimant mes obsessions fondamentales, j'exprime ma plus profonde humanité» (87). ("By expressing my deepest obsessions, I express my deepest humanity" [*Notes* 48-9]). Art is the medium, and at the same time, paradoxically, the end of his quest. As art is communicating the incommunicable, it is

intransitive, non transcendental as it collapses within itself, while, at the same time just by communicating the incommunicable, it leaves open the space towards something beyond itself.

### ***Art as «communication d'un incommunicable»***

For Ionesco, art is the expression, the projection of a being's inner core struggles revealed as it is, in a visceral, grotesque and at the same time sporadically sublime manner. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint a methodology or paradigm. Numerous times the author rejected the idea of a «pièce à thèse». Theatre should not have an intentionally didactic role. Ionesco insists that if art falls prey to an ideology, it will fade once that particular ideology becomes obsolete. This is not to say that the author is immune to what is happening in the world around him. *Rhinoceros*, one of his most militant plays, is deconstructing, or re-enacting, the dangers of totalitarianism, of the contagious nature of utopian ideologies and how their tendencies turn into dystopian reminiscences the paradise they promise. Historicizing art is replaced with the Artaudian idea of theatre as ritual (*Le théâtre et son double*), as cathartic experience meant to breach into the real and create an openness towards a world that escapes chronology and the quotidian. When describing the Balinese performances, which are the inspirations for his vision of theater, Artaud notes the ceremonial allure that defines them: «Il y a en elles quelque chose du cérémonial d'un rite religieux, en ce sens qu'elles extirpent de l'esprit de qui les regarde toute idée de simulation, d'imitation dérisoire de la réalité » (92). (“There is in them something of the ceremonial quality of a religious rite, in the sense that they extirpate from the mind of the onlooker all idea of pretense, of cheap imitations of reality” [*The Theater and its Double* 60]).

Despite disillusioning realities, the author is relentlessly advocating for humanist values, and art seems to be the medium through which this can be accomplished. The artist is the witness of his/her time. It is art, affirms Ionesco in *Un homme en question*, which reveals the human to himself or herself («qui révèle l'homme à lui-même» [60]). It is art that unifies people, crosses boundaries and provides the locus to express doubts, to raise questions and to search for answers to the human condition. Michel Lioure, in his article «L'humanisme d'Eugène Ionesco,» notes that the playwright is convinced that culture, therefore art, is one of the components, vectors and essential catalysts of humanism (« la culture est un des composants, des vecteurs et des ferments essentiels de l'humanisme » [5]).

In *Notes et contre-notes*, the author questions the role of art. In his view, art and science are the only mediums that can offer a true image of the universe. Art should be transparent, it cannot be false: «L'art ne ment pas. L'art est vrai. . . . Même le mensonge, dans l'art, est révélateur . . . » (*Notes* 304) (“Art does not lie. Art is true . . . Even a lie is revealing, in art . . .” [*Notes* 227]). The veridical aspect of art is pivotal for Ionesco. But what type of verity is the author advocating for? To a mimetic art, which presupposes a loyal imitation of reality, Ionesco prefers an art that is stylized, that captures the essence of the artist's vision. In his article on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” reproducing his 1936 lectures, Martin Heidegger stressed that the premise of the work of art is “the reproduction of things' general essence” (162). The term proposed by Ortega Y Gasset is “dehumanization” (*The Dehumanization of Art*, 1968). The term, apparently pejorative, signifies in fact the search for the essence of the object and the attempt of modern art to liberate itself from the constraints of the familiar, reaching therefore an essence through

the process of stylization (23). For Ionesco, «l'œuvre d'art n'est pas le reflet, *l'image* du monde; mais elle est à *l'image du monde*» (*Notes* 304; author's italics). ("A work of art is not a reflection, *an image* of the world; but it is made *in the image of the world*" [*Notes* 227]). From the direct object function, the expression becomes indirect as it is mediated by the preposition "à"—an intermediary screen between art and reality. Art is not a mimetic reflection of the world as we see it in its appearance, but rather indirectly, it stylizes it in order to reflect its profoundness. Truth, in Ionesco's terms, extracts its sources from imaginary, which alone is revelatory (*Notes* 44): «Notre vérité est dans nos rêves, dans l'imagination . . .» (48) ("Truth lies in our dreams, in our imagination . . ." [16]). If both art and science are revelatory of existence and its truth, art precedes science: « . . . le mythe d'Icare a précédé l'aviation, et si Ader et Blériot ont volé, c'est parce que les hommes avaient rêvé de l'envol» (48). (" . . . the myth of Icarus came before aviation, and if Ader or Blériot started flying, it is because all men have dreamed of flight" [16]). Not only does art precede science, but it is at the root of its development and creation.

A second quality of the work of art: it is a living universe («un univers vivant» [24]). In the same line of thought as Artaud, Ionesco describes art as a moving architecture, a living, dynamic structure of antagonisms (*Entretiens* 166). Matei Calinescu, in his monographic study on Ionesco, notes the antagonistic or dialectic character of Ionesco's works:

L'auteur vit son propre drame à la fois comme un drame métaphysique universel et comme une comédie atroce . . . de vitalité frénétique et d'angoisse paralysante devant le scandale de la mort—le grand scandale, dans le sens étymologique aussi (obstacle, pierre de touche). (*Recherches identitaires* 52)

The author lives his own drama at the same time as an universal metaphysical drama and as an atrocious comedy . . . of frenetic vitality and paralyzing angst in face of the scandal of death—the great scandal also in the etymological sense (obstacle, touchstone). (*my translation*)

Art is autonomous since it invents its own criteria (*Notes* 31). It does not have to be historicized, circumscribed within a propaganda or ideology. An idea intentionally inscribed in a historical progression of events loses its innocence; moreover, insists Ionesco, it becomes monstrous and collapses (*Notes* 311).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, French Revolution, despite its attempt to instill social equality, ended up reinforcing other hierarchical structures. Christianity aimed to establish peace, but in fact, it reinforced the perpetual war and new reasons of hate. Although revolutionaries thought they abolished class disparities, they buttressed a more rigid hierarchy (*Notes* 313).<sup>10</sup> From an historical perspective, art is beyond history: it does not make abstraction of it, but transgresses the coordinate constraints of its time. Differently from Brecht's epic theatre, Ionesco's theatre is one that is not bound by period-related circumstances. Brecht seeks to awake the consciousness of the spectator through the theatrical technique of *distanciation*, *Verfremdungseffekt*, which, contrary to Artaudian catharsis that suggests a hypnotic performance, discourages the identification of the spectator with the characters on stage. In Brecht's view, if there is identification, it should only be halfway. The technique of *distanciation* reminds the spectator that he or she assists at a representation of a construed reality, therefore urging him or her to reflect and react to the social and political situation. Theatre in the Brechtian view, inspired from Marx's dialectic-materialism, has a socio-political use. *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), Brecht's most acclaimed work, depicts the story of a mother who profits from war through trade, while, due to the same war, she loses her children in battle. The spectator cannot identify with Mother Courage,

although he or she can be empathic to her condition created by the cruelty of war.

Brecht's technique of *alienation* is parodied in Ionesco's *Impromptu de l'Alma*

(*Improvisation . . .*). In his final monologue, the character Ionesco is wary of the three critics, Bartholoméus I, II, III and their attempt to replace truth with dogma. It is what Ionesco so often reproached in Brecht.

IONESCO. Je reproche à ces docteurs d'avoir découvert des vérités premières et des les avoir revêtues d'un langage abusif, qui fait que ces vérités premières semblent être devenues folles. . . . Elles deviennent dangereuses lorsqu'elles prennent l'allure de dogmes infaillibles et lorsque, en leur nom, les docteurs et critiques prétendent exclure d'autres vérités et diriger, voire tyranniser, la création artistique. (*Théâtre complet* 464)

IONESCO. I blame these doctors for discovering elementary truths and dressing them up in exaggerated language so that these elementary truths appear to have gone mad. . . . They become dangerous when they take on the appearance of infallible dogma, and when in their name scholars and critics claim to reject other truths and govern artistic creation even to the point of tyranny. (*Improvisation . . .* 149)

Instead of providing answers influenced by ideologies, or by what Jean-Pierre Martin (and before him Julien Gracq) calls *doxa*, a work of art has to be defined, in Ionesco's view, by a perpetual interrogation and questioning of the world and of the self.<sup>11</sup> In his collection of essays and drawings, *Découvertes* (1969) the author underscores the interrogative quality of art: « L'œuvre n'est pas une série de réponses, elle est une série des questions, elle n'est pas des explications, elle est des demandes d'explication, des demandes d'éclaircissement » (51). ("The work of art is not a series of answers, it is a series of questions, it is not explanations, it asks for explanations, for clarifications [*my translation*]). As the title of the book suggests, the work of art is a discovery and the writer a discoverer, whose task is to represent the world as it is shown and in the process to discover himself or herself (91).

The importance of dreams, as a repository of our collective and individual subconscious, is revealed throughout Ionesco's works. A Jungian at heart, Ionesco believes that dreams reveal the essential truths about humans, more so than what logic pretends to reveal. Therefore, often times his plays follow the apparent chaotic structure of dreams, as the author allows his own dreams and nightmares to emerge on the stage. Refusing to create following a linear outline, Ionesco prefers the unpredictable and revelatory configuration of dreams and imagination: « . . . l'imagination est révélatrice. . . elle est chargée de multiples significations que le « réalisme » étroit et quotidien ou l'idéologie limitative ne peuvent plus révéler . . . » (*Notes* 125). (“ . . . imagination is revelation . . . it is charged with multiple meanings which a narrow and everyday ‘realism’ or a limiting ideology can no longer reveal . . . ” [*Notes* 80]). In Ionesco's view, dream and reason are not incompatible « . . . lorsque je rêve, je n'ai pas le sentiment d'abdiquer la pensée. J'ai au contraire l'impression que je vois, en rêvant, des vérités, qui m'apparaissent, des évidences, dans une lumière plus éclatante, avec une acuité plus impitoyable qu'à l'état de veille . . . » (*Notes* 166). (“ . . . when I dream I do not feel I am abdicating thought. On the contrary, I have the impression that as I dream I see evident truths that appear before me more brilliantly illuminated, more ruthlessly penetrating than in my waking state . . . ” [*Notes* 111]). The oneirical structures, themes and imaginary create the architecture of Ionesco's plays.

The essential quality of the work of art is to communicate what is incommunicable, without, however, interpreting this incommunicable, but rather letting it play out, with its apparent antagonisms and contradictions. In his article «La crise du théâtre et le crépuscule de l'humanisme» Gabriel Marcel accuses the playwright of



dilettantism, and a backwards didacticism—a pact with the ignoble and nothingness (25). Ionesco replies to the accusations underscoring that the apparent chaos and nothingness that emerge in his plays (notably his first creations) are not the mere result of word play and stream of consciousness, but that the disordered structure and form reveal the longing for a deeper signification that the logic cannot express. The work of art's role is, in Ionesco's interpretation, to communicate what is inexpressible.<sup>12</sup>

Art is transcendent. The overuse of this term and its connotations tends to occult its etymological reference. Transcendence comes from Latin *transcendere* (to climb beyond, to surmount) composed of the prefix *trans-* "beyond" and the verb *scandere* "to climb".<sup>13</sup> Transcendence, in the context used by Ionesco and other writers, such as Cioran, presupposes surpassing the quotidian, the chronological time of events, and accessing the infinite, outside time and space, without necessarily considering the need to categorize this "infinite". In his collection of aphorisms, *Sur les cimes du désespoir*, written in 1932, Cioran relates the importance of contemplation and the ambiance of the ritual, crucial in transcending temporality:

L'expérience de l'éternité dépend de l'intensité des réactions subjectives, l'entrée dans l'éternité ne peut s'accomplir qu'en transcendant la temporalité. Il faut mener un combat rude et soutenu contre le temps pour qu'il ne reste—une fois dépassé le mirage de la succession des moments—que le vécu exaspéré de l'instant, qui vous précipite tout droit vers l'intemporel. . . . La fréquence de la contemplation est essentielle: seule la répétition permet d'atteindre l'ivresse de l'éternité, où les voluptés ont quelque chose de supra-terrestre, une transcendance rayonnante. A isoler chaque instant dans la succession, on lui prête un caractère d'absolu . . . Dans la perspective de l'éternité, le temps est, avec son cortège d'instantanés individuels, sinon irréel, en tout cas insignifiant au regard des réalités essentielles. (63)

The experience of eternity therefore depends on intensity of subjective feeling, and the way to eternity is to transcend the temporal. One must fight hard against time so that—once the mirage of the succession of

moments is overcome—one can live fully the instant one is launched into eternity. . . . [T]he frequency with which such contemplations occur matters greatly: only through frequent repetition can one experience the intoxication of eternity, the delights of its luminous, extraterrestrial transcendence. By isolating the moment from its successions, you confer upon it, subjectively, an absolute value. From the point of view of eternity, time with its long train of individual moments is, if not unreal, irrelevant. (*On the Heights* . . . 64)

Art is an antidote to angst; it chases the demons of desperation, the fear of death: « . . . j'écris aussi pour crier ma peur de mourir, mon humiliation de mourir » (*Notes* 304). (“I also write in order to cry out my fear of death and my humiliation at the thought of dying” [*Notes* 227]). Death is the obsession that haunts Ionesco even from his childhood. In an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco recalls the instant he found out that everyone is going to die, even his own mother whom he dearly loved:

Un jour j'ai demandé à ma mère : « Nous allons tous mourir ? Dis-moi la vérité ! Elle m'a dit : « Oui ». Je devais avoir quatre ans, cinq ans, j'étais assis par terre, elle était debout devant moi. Je la vois encore. Elle tenait ses mains derrière son dos. Elle était appuyée contre le mur. Quand elle m'a vu sangloter—parce que tout d'un coup je me suis mis à pleurer—elle m'a regardé, désarmée, impuissante. J'ai eu très peur. Surtout, j'ai pensé qu'elle allait certainement mourir un jour, cela me hantait. . . . (*Entretiens* 12)

One day I asked my mother: “Are we all going to die? Tell me the truth! She answered: “Yes”. I think I was four, five years old, I was sitting on the ground, she was standing in front of me. I see her still. She was holding her hands behind her back. She was leaning on the wall. When she saw me sobbing—because all of a sudden I started crying—she looked at me, helpless, powerless. I was very afraid. Especially when I thought that she would be dying one day, that was haunting me . . . (*my translation*)

Echoes of this angst before death are heard and seen throughout his theatrical imagery.

Thérèse Malachy is right to draw the conclusion that Ionesco's theatre is a permanent spectacle of death (*La mort en situation dans le théâtre contemporain* 81). In a secularized world, *désacralisé*, to use Mircea Eliade's expression, humans are

assiduously searching for techniques and ways to postpone, or if possible bypass death. Ionesco projects this fear of death onto his characters. In his essay on Ionesco, «Lumière et transcendance», Mircea Eliade notes that Ionesco's fears are emblematic of modern society.<sup>14</sup> Although fear of death also exists in traditional societies, the difference rests in seeing death as a constitutive part of life, rather than a purposeless end of it.<sup>15</sup>

In his poetically visceral aphorisms, Cioran prescribes a method to appropriate death echoing Montaigne, the philosopher of *thanatos*, who wrote in his *Essais I*: «Le continuel ouvrage de vostre vie, c'est bastir la mort. Vous êtes en la mort pendant que vous estes en vie» (95). Ionesco has dedicated an entire play to this «apprentissage de la mort» in *Le Roi se meurt*, where king Bérenger is living out on stage the agony of his last breathing moments. In his beautiful Nietzschean prosody, Cioran illustrates this gesture of appropriating death using an extreme example of hermits who retire from the quotidian agglomeration into what Cioran calls in *La Tentation d'exister* (1956), the negation of history:

Le solitaire s'y retire, moins pour agrandir sa solitude et s'enrichir d'absence, que pour faire monter en soi le ton de la mort.  
Ce ton, il nous faut, pour l'entendre, aménager en nous un désert . . . Si nous y parvenons, des accords traversent notre sang, nos veines se dilatent, nos secrets comme nos ressources apparaissent à notre surface d'où le dégoût et le désir, l'horreur et le ravissement se confondent dans une fête obscure et lumineuse. L'aurore de la mort se lève en nous. Transe cosmique, éclatement des sphères, mille voix ! Nous sommes la mort, et tout est la mort. (*Œuvres* 965)

The solitary retires there less to expand his solitude and enrich his absence than to produce within himself the tonality of death.  
In order to hear this tonality we must institute a desert within ourselves . . .  
If we succeed, certain harmonies flow through our blood, our veins dilate, our secrets and our resources appear upon the surface of ourselves where desire and disgust, horror and rapture mingle in obscure and luminous festivity. The dawn of death breaks within us: cosmic trance, the bursting of the spheres, a thousand voices! (*The Temptation to Exist* 216)

Art should embrace contradictions without attempting to reconcile them: «Il faut laisser les contradictions s'épanouir en toute liberté; les antagonismes se réuniront d'eux-mêmes, peut-être, tout en s'opposant en un équilibre dynamique» (*Notes* 170-71). ("We must allow contradictions to develop freely; perhaps our conflicts will resolve themselves dynamically by counterbalancing each other" [*Notes* 116]). We cannot help but notice the dialectical intertwining of obscurity and light, of disgust and desire, horror and fascination present in Ionesco's writings. His protagonists survive thanks to *satori*, the luminous experiences transcending time and death—but these moments are increasingly scarce, until they cease to exist; abyss and nothingness take their place. If Ionesco's protagonists experience these hierophanic moments in the earlier plays, towards the end, as in synchronization with the author's life, the protagonists are impaired by amnesia since they only bear vague memories of these luminous moments. For example, in *Voyages chez les morts*, Ionesco's last play, Jean, during a labyrinth-like voyage in the realm of the dead sees some Romanian mystical books that he used to read, but whose meaning he is not able to grasp anymore: «Ce sont des vieux livres, ce sont des expériences déjà bien anciennes qu'on y décrit, bien anciennes, de toute façon, je ne les comprends pas, j'ai oublié la langue» (*Théâtre complet* 1308). ("They're old books, the experiences they describe are already very ancient, very ancient, at any rate I don't understand them, I've forgotten their language" [*Journeys* 24]). In writing his «pièce testament», the author expresses his regrets of remembering less and less his experience of illumination (*Eugène Ionesco* 22). Jean only vaguely remembers this luminous experience and the city, Alumina, associated with it. The memories he has left come to him in short flashbacks that quickly disappear in obscurity: «Je n'ai plus la force pour

garder en moi la lumière d'Alumina » (1339). (“I haven't enough strength left to keep Alumina's luminosity in me”, utters Jean in desperation [*Journeys* . . . 48]). Similarly, *Le Vieux*, character in *Jeux de massacre*, in a scene on the street where he and *La Vieille* witness arbitrary destruction and death, reveals the gradual regressive path once the feeling of wonderment fades away:

LE VIEUX. Au débout, le monde m'avait plongé dans la stupefaction. Je regardais moi-aussi: «Qu'est-ce que tout cela?», puis, je me réveillais de ma stupeur: «Qui étais-je?» et ce fut une stupeur nouvelle de me regarder moi-même. . . . Puis, on ne s'interroge plus, on s'en fatigue. La menace seule subsiste, cette inquiétude qui ronge. Le monde devient habituel et tout naturel. Il n'y a plus que la fatigue, l'ennui et la peur qui est toujours là, qui seule est restée depuis le commencement. La vie n'est plus miracle, elle est cauchemar. (*Théâtre complet* 1018-1019)

OLD MAN. Once upon a time the world plunged me into stupefaction. I too used to look about me—“what is all this?”—then I awoke from my stupor: “Who was I?” And I was stupefied afresh to look inside myself. . . . Then one stops questioning, one gets tired. Only the menace remains, the gnawing anxiety. The world becomes familiar and quite natural. All that is left is weariness, boredom and that fear which is still there, which alone has been there since the beginning. Life is no longer a miracle, it is a nightmare. (*Here Comes a Chopper* 80)

Artistic expression helps live through—although not necessarily surmount—life's nightmares. When asked if we should give up art, Ionesco answers: «Puis-je, malgré mon pessimisme, ma mauvaise humeur, renoncer à respirer? La poésie, le besoin d'imaginer, de créer, est aussi fondamental que celui de respirer. Respirer c'est vivre et non pas s'évader de la vie» (*Notes* 171). (“Can I, in spite of my pessimism and my bad temper, give up breathing? Poetry, the need to imagine and create, is as fundamental as the need to breathe. To breathe is to live and not to escape from life” [*Notes* 116-117]). Creating art is therefore a human necessity.

The contradictions and antagonisms that energize the rhythm of Ionesco's works are the ingredients that season the reception scene of his works. From the beginning of his career as a playwright, Ionesco is target for attacks from critics. In his essay, «J'aurais écrit de toute façon», published in *Antidotes*, Ionesco defends himself and reproaches his critics for not hearing his "message" and being rather concerned with what his position should be in the pantheon of writers (188).<sup>16</sup>

### ***Ionesco and His Critics***

Ionesco's works have stirred heated debates, especially at the beginning of the playwright's career. We quoted earlier Roland Barthes's essay, «À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre? », where he criticizes this new wave of writing theatre for not being engaged or pertinent to the socio-political issues at hand. He proposes a solution to the avant-garde author: « . . . que le créateur d'avant-garde, accédant à une conscience politique du théâtre, abandonne peu à peu la pure protestation éthique (c'est sans doute le cas d'Adamov), pour s'engager dans la voie d'un nouveau réalisme» (*Essais critiques* 82). (" . . . the *avant-garde* playwright, acceding to a political consciousness of the theater, will renounce pure ethical protest (indubitably Adamov's case) for a new realism" [*Critical Essays* 69]). Whereas certain writers, such as Raymond Quéneau, Audiberti, André Breton, Adamov and others have applauded the new avant-garde theatre, the majority of Parisian intellectuals considered Ionesco's plays as an endeavor to create chaos, without offering any alternative. Gabriel Marcel, philosopher and playwright, for whom Ionesco had a profound admiration, in his article «La crise du théâtre et le crépuscule de l'humanisme» (1958) accuses Ionesco of diletantism and lack of

didacticism. His theatre, Marcel announces, is nothing but a miserable bargain with nothingness and chaos.<sup>17</sup>

As Ionesco is ceaselessly attempting to explain himself to himself and others, he responds to Gabriel Marcel in a letter, published in 1987 by the *Revue de la Bibliothèque nationale*, and insists that the apparent chaos is in fact a reality that is absurd in appearance, which implodes within the trivial daily reality and undoes it. The saturation that Gabriel Marcel mentions is not due to laziness or fatigue, instead it is an intentional effort to break the imposed structures and linear plots so that a more authentic reality can surface.<sup>18</sup>

Ionesco's attempt is not original in principle. Artaud, in *Le théâtre et son double*, clearly outlined the features of this essential theatre which emerges out of chaos and anarchy, completely different from the traditional theatre, which, in Artaud's view ceased to evoke images and became a cemetery for the mind («un cimetière pour l'esprit»). For Artaud, this essential drama, which is a double (not a mimesis), or rather a materialization, a staging, of life's mysteries, arises out of an anarchy which organizes itself.<sup>19</sup>

Ionesco claims that each work of art has to be perceived through its own unique inner mechanisms. In *Impromptu de l'Alma*, where Ionesco stages his views on theatre in a polemic and satiric debate with three other critics, intentionally named Bartholoméus I, II and III, the author insists that a work of art should be interpreted according to that work's own rhythm: « . . . Si le critique a tout de même bien le droit de juger, il ne doit juger que selon les lois mêmes de l'expression artistique, selon la propre mythologie de l'œuvre, en pénétrant dans son univers . . . » (*Théâtre complet*, 464-465). (“ . . . If

however we admit that the critic clearly has the right to exercise his judgment, he should only judge a work on its own terms, according to the laws that govern artistic expression, the mythological structure of each work, and so penetrate each new universe afresh” [*Improvisation* . . .150]).

Ionesco’s theatre was judged as being a satire of bourgeois society, anchored in quotidian reality, as Hildegard Seipel declares in 1963 in his article «Entre réalisme et surréalisme» : «Toutes les pièces de Ionesco sont ancrées dans la réalité quotidienne. On peut même définir le lieu: l’univers petit-bourgeois» (34). (“All of Ionesco’s plays are anchored in the daily reality. We can even define the place: the petit-bourgeois universe” [*my translation*]). Ionesco vehemently denies this in a series of articles, published in a corroborated version in *Antidotes*. *La Cantatrice chauve*, he says, is the most detached of quotidian («la plus déréalisante de la quotidienneté») and that, through this tragedy of language, it renders the chaos of an inexplicable world (214). However, Ionesco does not entirely reject the bourgeoisie as the target of criticism for his first plays, but he confers upon it another dimension, besides the social and intellectual one: he attributes to it a broader, a universal signification. He explains in his *Notes et contre-notes*:

. . . cependant il ne s’agit pas dans mon esprit, d’une satire de la mentalité petite bourgeoise liée à telle ou telle société. Il s’agit, surtout, d’une sorte de petite bourgeoisie universelle, le petit bourgeois étant l’homme des idées reçues, des slogans, le conformiste de partout : ce conformisme, bien sûr, c’est *son langage automatique* qui le révèle. (249, *author’s italics*)

. . . but to my mind there is no question of it being a satire of a petit bourgeois mentality that belongs to any particular society. It is above all a kind of universal petite bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeois being a man of fixed ideas and slogans, a ubiquitous conformist: this conformism is, of course, revealed by the *mechanical language*. (*Notes* 180)



In his monographic study, *Ionesco*, published in 1964, Philippe Sénart qualifies Ionesco's theatre as theological, but one in which, paradoxically, God is missing. When analyzing the agony before death of Bérenger in *Le Roi se meurt*, the author concedes that the human is left alone in his quest and despite the anguish and heartfelt prayers, there is no redemption, since there is no God that can redeem.<sup>20</sup>

The absence of God should not be interpreted as non-existence, insists Ionesco. Artaud writes : «Tout sentiment puissant provoque en nous l'idée du vide» (*Le théâtre et son double* 110). (“All powerful feeling produces in us the idea of the void” [71]). The absence, or the emptiness, is the aftereffect of plenitude. In 1985, in his acceptance speech of the T.S. Eliot-Ingersoll Prize, Ionesco reminds his audience that by ‘representing’ this absence, he implicitly expresses the longing for the absent one's presence. He emphasizes that without this essential need for spirituality, humans turn into empty pawns. The image of the marionette is often represented by the protagonists in his theatre of shadows. Spiritual values are expressed via negation and absence.<sup>21</sup>

It was a challenge for Ionesco's critics at that time to see his work as the representation of a devastated world, where the destruction caused by wars, the Shoah, gulags had overturned the existing values, when the Declaration of Human Rights had become a vestige of a civilization in ruins. The political events after the two world wars exerted an activist response from writers. Theatre could be one of the propaganda means serving certain ideologies, which in their essence were good. Ionesco strongly opposed this pursuit, because he witnessed, first during his years in Romania, how ideologies, despite their different platforms, do not change: they contain the germ of destruction within themselves, as they are abused by the powerful. Theater should not succumb to

political discourse. It belongs to the realm of the imaginary, where the boundaries are blurred and external ideologies are replaced by inner beliefs, discouragements, dreams, disappointments, and fears of the human being. The ultimate fear, cause of all anguish, is the fear of death. Any other preoccupation, according to Ionesco, is peripheral.

While acknowledging the importance of criticism: «une oeuvre semble n'exister que dans ce qu'on en pense» (*Notes* 184) (“[a work of art] seems to owe its very existence to what others think about it” [*Notes* 128]), Ionesco equally highlights the limitations of criticism that restricts itself to a definite perspective. In his interview with Gilbert Tarrab, who, in *Ionesco à cœur ouvert* (1970) writes a sociological analysis of the plays, Ionesco talks about the insufficiencies of such sorts of perspectives if they are not supported by what might be called a metaphysical perspective (60).<sup>22</sup>

The more recent critics have recognized the metaphysical aspect of Ionesco's theatre, owing also to the publication of his later plays where the imaginary, dreams, and feelings of angst are strongly pronounced. Roland Beyen, in *Ionesco ou le sens de la contradiction* (2001) emphasizes the spirit of contradiction characteristic to Ionesco's work. Nevertheless, he concludes that the author becomes more interested in finding a meaning through religion, or metaphysics towards the end of his life when sickness (Ionesco was diabetic) and old age were taking their toll (76).<sup>23</sup>

Whereas Roland Beyen has difficulties seeing Ionesco's penchant for transcendence, Saint-Tobi proposes a comprehensive view on Ionesco's work. In his poetically passionate work, *Ionesco ou À la recherche du paradis perdu* (1973), the author proposes a synergy of existing interpretations, necessary to give justice to Ionesco's work.<sup>24</sup> This open view towards the text allows the critic to discover it rather

than to mold it according to his/her own interpretations. Ionesco's term for the critic is that of the «découvreur» whose importance is not to modify the work but to shed a different light on the text that already exists.

In Emmanuel Jacquart's analysis, *Le Théâtre de derision* (1974), the term derision is understood as a unification of two contraries: tragic and comic. He places under this category Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett and notes that despite their great differences, what unites them is their constant attempt to represent the tragic absurdity of the human condition, but from a detached standpoint. This detachment is accomplished through humor, an essential component of humanity. The perspective of death and suffering is accompanied by laughter, a sign of either hope or despair. In this theater, writes Jacquart, tragic is accompanied by a derisory comic.<sup>25</sup>

Paul Vernois identifies two polar axes, in *La dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco* (1991), which intersect in Eugène Ionesco: there is a continuous oscillation between shadow and light, sacred and profane, flying and falling. In his analysis of the dynamic scenic 'architecture' of *Jeux de Massacre*, Paul Vernois reveals that Ionesco has been faithful to his initial vision revealed in his early plays, but that his vision has become more ample with his later works. He eloquently describes how the rhythm of these plays mirrors that of life:

. . . le rythme de la pièce est à l'image même de celui de la vie. C'est un souffle modulé. Il suppose un mouvement vers l'Espoir et une chute dans l'abattement sinon le désespoir. Il est le symbole de nos désirs sans cesse rallumés et sans cesse déçus, de l'impossibilité de rester là, d'être comme cela. C'est une interrogation perpétuelle, constamment suivie d'un constat de faillite, lui-même insatisfaisant et remis en cause. Ce mouvement de vague s'esquisse dès la *Cantatrice chauve* avec des périodes d'excitations suivis d'un ennui brusque. Il s'inscrit dans un double *crescendo-décrescendo* dans *La Leçon* et dans *Les Chaises*. . . Il subsiste dans *Tueur sans Gages*, se retrouve dans la suite des scènes du *Piéton de l'air* et dans

les bonds de Bérenger, rythme l'agonie du Roi, dessine les trois moments de chaque épisode de *La Soif et la Faim* et finalement souligne le sens de *Jeux de massacre*. L'unité des pièces de Ionesco est donc à la base «pulsive», émotive et vitale. (217)

. . . the rhythm of the play is like that of life. It is an undulated breathing. It supposes a movement towards Hope and a fall in discouragement if not desperation. It is the symbol of our desires ceaselessly reawaked and ceaselessly disillusioned, of the impossibility to remain fixated there, to be like that. It is a perpetual interrogation, continually followed by an awareness of failure, unsatisfying and called into question. This wavering movement begins to form with *The Bald Soprano* with moments of excitement followed by sudden boredom. In *The Lesson* and *The Chairs*, it follows a double *crescendo-decrescendo* movement. . . . It persists in *The Killer*, it is found again in the succession of scenes from *A Stroll in the Air* and in Bérenger's leaps, it punctuates the King's agony, it shapes the three moments of each episode from *Hunger and Thirst* and finally points out the direction in *Here Comes a Chopper*. The unity of Ionesco's plays is at its core vibrant, emotional and vital. (*my translation*)

Other critics who wrote after the 1980's, such as Marie-Claude Hubert, professor and drama specialist at the University of Aix-en-Provence, offer comprehensive accounts of the author's work. This is justifiable since Ionesco's last work of fiction, his opera libretto *Maximilien Kolbe*, is published in 1989. These critics are also more detached from the tumultuous time after World War II when all systems of reference had to be questioned. Marie-Claude Hubert dedicated a number of works to the conventionally-named new theatre («le nouveau théâtre»). In the last chapter of her study, *Eugène Ionesco* (1990), Marie-Claude Hubert explores themes (or obsessions, as Ionesco calls them in *Notes* 129) of the author's last works, filled with imagery of dark, obscure spaces in which the characters wonder, having lost their ability to speak, as in a labyrinth. In these final plays there are fewer and fewer moments of epiphany which bring but a brief, temporary relief (*Eugène Ionesco* 229-30). It is as if the author and his protagonists return

to the Beckettian, heavily charged atmosphere of waiting, in silence and obscurity, for a redemptive sign or word.

In her article, «Ionesco et le bilinguisme» (1998) Marie-Claude Hubert insists that the characters' inability to utter logical discourse and communicate expresses indirectly their separation from the sacred, from God, which is the incarnation of the Word.<sup>26</sup> This linguistic collapse could paradoxically lead to accessing a divine utterance, which hesitates to reveal itself. This caving in of language is seen even from the first play, *La Cantatrice chauve*. The title itself emerged from Henri-Jacques Huet's lapsus, the actor playing the role of the fire chief, who, at the rehearsals, uttered «cantatrice chauve» instead of «institutrice blonde». Ionesco takes advantage of his actor's temporary amnesia and chooses it as the title of the play (*Notes* 253). Marie-Claude Hubert notes that this lacuna is not without significance since it suggests that language is an enormous lapsus: «Il est un instrument de fausse communication puisque son sens, échappant à qui le transmet, est a fortiori insaisissable pour qui le reçoit» («Eugène Ionesco et le bilinguisme» 99-100). (“It is an instrument of false communication since its meaning, escaping to the one who transmits it, is even more elusive to the one who receives it” [*my translation*]).

Other critics, such as Arzu Kunt explore the imaginary, the oneiric reality and the quest for the Absolute in Ionesco's works. From Arzu Kunt's perspective, Ionesco's characters are freed from existential malaise thanks to their ability to ascend. The human is able to survive this existence precisely because of the quest for «Ailleurs» which fuels the energy to continue to strive and live. Focusing on the pictorial realm of Eugène Ionesco, in her recent study, *Eugène Ionesco de l'écriture à la peinture* (2010) Sonia de

Leusse-Le Guillou arrives at the same conclusion, noting the unifying principle of this spiritual quest which permeates all genres explored by the author:

Des écrits sur l'art à la pratique de la peinture, la quête formelle de Ionesco est inséparable de sa quête spirituelle. Si la lassitude le décourage de trouver des réponses aux incertitudes existentielles qui le hantent, il ne renonce pas pour autant à la création, qui, à défaut d'apporter des solutions, réitère les interrogations essentielles. (264)

From writings on art to the practice of painting, Ionesco's quest for form is inseparable from his spiritual quest. If lethargy discourages him to find answers to the existential uncertainties that haunt him, he does not, however, abandon creation, which, although it does not bring solutions, reiterates the essential interrogations. (*my translation*)

Her work is the first contribution of this scale on the playwright-painter to explore the interplay between text and imagery in Ionesco's work. The catalogue *Ionesco* (2009), published by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, reflects, through of Ionesco's plays, performances and visual works of art (fig.1).



**Fig. 1.** “Ionesco at the Gallery Saint-Gall”; rpt. in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco : exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009 ; print ; 94)

Similar interrogations that animate the works of art should characterize, in Ionesco's view, a critic. Ionesco has written extensively on the "issue" of criticism. He himself has been a critic, even though not a conventional one. He gives an account in *Notes et contre-notes* about his attempt to deconstruct a Romanian poet, by demonstrating, poem by poem, that his poetry had no value. Soon after, he would write another article 'demonstrating' that the same author wrote only masterpieces. This exercise, which undermined his credibility as a critic, was to show the inflexibility of criticism, and that if the critic uses specific technical words, he or she can construct or deconstruct any work of art. A master of paradox and contradiction, Ionesco remains faithful to this practice which permeates his works, and upholds the idea that a critic should be able to simultaneously explore this contradictory movement: «Un critique honnête devrait faire une critique double de chaque œuvre, une critique contradictoire. Cela serait révélateur, aussi bien pour la critique, que pour le mécanisme de la pensée humaine» (*Notes* 184). ("An honest critic ought to write two contradictory articles about each work. This would reveal as much about criticism as about each work. This would reveal as much about criticism as about the process of human thought" [*Notes* 128]). Despite his aversion to some critics, and criticism in general, Ionesco maintains that there is a way to criticize, by analyzing a work in keeping with its unique language and inner rhythm:

Il y a peut-être une possibilité de faire de la critique: appréhender l'œuvre selon son langage, sa mythologie, accepter son univers, l'écouter. Dire si elle est vraiment ce qu'elle veut être: la faire parler toute seule, ou la décrire, dire exactement ce qu'elle est, non pas ce que le critique voudrait qu'elle fût (185).

There is perhaps one possible way of writing criticism: to come to terms with a work through its own idiom and mythology, to accept this new

universe and take stock of it. To say whether it really is what it aspires to be: to let the work speak for itself, or describe it and say exactly what it is and not what the critic would like it to be. (*Notes* 128).

No external rules imposed; no ideological mold to contain art. Although achieving this unassuming state is extreme, and perhaps impossible to accomplish, Ionesco reminds his reader/spectator that he or she should aim towards this naiveté and spirit of self-contradiction when we approach a work of art.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Lioure, Michel. «L’humanisme d’Eugène Ionesco» : «Son humanisme est donc à la fois nourri de pessimisme et pénétré d’espérance» (last page).

<sup>4</sup> «Les révolutions faites au nom de la justice et de la liberté et pour la justice et la liberté sont devenues la tyrannie et l’enfer» (*Un homme en question* 64).

<sup>5</sup> Montaigne writes: «Chaque homme porte la forme entière de l’humaine condition» (III-2-805). He defends an idea of humanism accessible to everyone, not only to certain members of the elite. This universal condition of the human is not limited to a certain imposed form, but it contains an indefinite capacity of variations and transformations.

<sup>6</sup> Mounier remarks : «de toutes les réalités de l’univers, elle [la personne] est la seule qui soit proprement communicable, qui soit *vers autrui* et même *en autrui, vers le monde et dans le monde*, avant d’être en soi» (*Introductions aux existentialismes* 208).

<sup>7</sup> Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*. New York: Viking, 1993. In his entry “Epiphany”, Lodge emphasizes the use of the term in modern fiction, in a context outside religious experience. He paraphrases Joyce, “an apostate Catholic, for whom the writer’s vocation was a kind of profane priesthood, [and who] applied the word to the process by which a commonplace event or thought is transformed into a thing of timeless beauty by the exercise of the writer’s craft: ‘when the soul of the commonest object seems to us radiant,’ as his fictional alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, says” (146).

<sup>8</sup> Eliade notes: « Entre tous les types d’expériences de lumière, il y a ce dénominateur commun : elles font sortir l’homme de son univers profane ou de sa situation historique, et le projettent dans un univers qualitativement différent, qui est tout un autre monde, transcendant et sacré » (« Lumière et transcendance » 125).

<sup>9</sup> Ionesco : « dès qu’une idée, une intention consciente veut se réaliser historiquement, elle s’incarne en son contraire, elle est monstrueuse » (*Notes* 311).

<sup>10</sup> Ionesco reiterates in *Notes* his view on ideologies and revolutions : « Ainsi: la Révolution française déclarait vouloir établir (entre autres) l’égalité. Elle a fermement établi l’inégalité sociale. Le tsar s’intitulait le « petit-père » du peuple : en fait, il en était son bourreau. Le christianisme voulait établir la charité, la paix. Il a renforcé la fureur, la guerre perpétuelle. Il a apporté de nouvelles raisons de haine. Des révolutionnaires pensent vouloir abolir les classes : ils rétablissent une hiérarchie plus dure » (*Notes* 313).

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Pierre Martin : « Le doxa littéraire est un produit dérivé de l’enseignement. Elle a une prédilection pour le classable : les genres, les catégories, la « théorie ». Elle compte des adhérents, des adeptes, des



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militants, des doctrinaires, des instituteurs, des sectaires, mais surtout, bien des sympathisants spontanés. Tous sont alignés sur un programme assez flou, pour former peu à peu une vague opinion commune, qui cependant nourrit des phobies partagées. . . . Car la doxa est assez sournoise, assez retorse pour s'insinuer en chacun de nous » (*Les écrivains face à la doxa ou du génie hérétique de la littérature* 22).

<sup>12</sup> Ionesco : « Voilà ce que l'œuvre d'art réussie est pour moi : communication d'un incommunicable ; elle est quelque chose qui saisit sur le vif ce qui est insaisissable autrement ; elle dit ce qu'on ne peut dire autrement ; ce qu'on ne peut dire logiquement. . . . ; oui, elle est un mélange de lucidité très pénétrante et d'inconscience » (*Théâtre complet* 1403).

<sup>13</sup> See the etymology of "transcendant(e)" in *Dictionnaire de la langue française* par Émile Littré (V.2) : « du latin, transcendere, de trans, au delà, et scandere, monter ».

<sup>14</sup> This article originates from a talk given by Eliade at the Colloque de Cérisy from 1980, organized by Marie-France Ionesco. The talks were gathered in a collection of essays directed by Marie-France Ionesco, Paul Vernois, and Claude Abastado. *Ionesco: Situation Et Perspectives : [colloque], Centre Culturel International De Cerisy-La-Salle [du 3 Au 13 Août 1978]*. Paris: P. Belfond, 1980. Print. (117-128)

<sup>15</sup> Eliade : « Comme vous savez, Ionesco est préoccupé, parfois obsédé, terrorisé par la mort. Bien entendu, c'est une expérience qui caractérise notre société, ou disons notre crise historique : parce que dans toutes les sociétés traditionnelles on a peur de la mort, mais la mort a toujours un sens, c'est un passage du non-être à l'être, de l'être au non-être, mais c'est un passage. Il n'y a que dans les sociétés désacralisées comme la nôtre où, bien qu'on ait toujours peur de la mort comme dans toutes les autres cultures, cette peur est devenue terrifiante à cause du manque de sens de l'expérience de la mort » (« Lumière et transcendance » 120).

<sup>16</sup> Ionesco : « Certains de mes critiques me traitent souvent de fumiste, d'imposteur. C'est parce que je suis d'une sincérité totale. Dans leur médiocrité, ils ne peuvent imaginer que je sois si préoccupé, absorbé, par le problème du mal et du bien, par celui de l'impossibilité de la connaissance, par celui de l'existence, par le malaise existentiel, par celui des fins dernières de l'homme, etc. . . . Ils ne parlent que de succès ou d'insuccès, de réussite, de « ma carrière théâtrale », de la place que je mérite ou ne mérite plutôt pas d'avoir dans les Lettres. . . . C'est embêtant de leur parler. Ils n'écoutent pas ce que je dis, ils jugent de la qualité de ma voix : suis-je un ténor ou baryton ? Les paroles de la chanson, ils ne les écoutent pas » (*Antidotes* 188).

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Marcel notes : « Je crois en réalité que nous sommes en présence d'un phénomène très singulier et très inquiétant qui n'est autre qu'une démission de l'homme, un rejet, une nausée si l'on veut, assez différente d'ailleurs que celle qu'à décrite Sartre, et qui s'explique selon moi avant tout par la fatigue, par la saturation » (« La crise du théâtre et le crépuscule de l'humanisme » 23).

<sup>18</sup> Ionesco explains: « . . . dans *La Cantatrice chauve* c'est un essai d'exprimer- en partant de la réalité « réaliste » la plus quotidienne, la plus banale- un insolite, un absurde peut-être qui (selon mon sentiment spontané) se cache derrière cette réalité quotidienne et la mine, la défait . . . » (*Théâtre complet* 1403).

<sup>19</sup> « Il semble bien que là où règnent la simplicité et l'ordre, il ne puisse y avoir de théâtre ni de drame, et le vrai théâtre naît, comme la poésie d'ailleurs, mais par d'autres voies, d'une anarchie qui s'organise . . . » (Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double* 79).

<sup>20</sup> Philippe Sénart : « [Le théâtre] 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 grâce, le paradis perdu. Mais, à la théologie de M. Ionesco, il manque Dieu. Si l'homme se sauve, ce sera seul » (*Ionesco* 112).

<sup>21</sup> Ionesco : « . . . je ne faisais qu'exprimer, contradictoirement, négativement, par leur absence, ces valeurs spirituelles. Si j'ai montré les hommes dérisoires, risibles, ce ne fut nullement par souci de comédie. Mais,

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comme on ne peut guère en ces moments de déchéance mondaine de l'esprit, proclamer la vérité, on peut toujours au moins, montrer ce que l'homme devient ou peut devenir quand il est coupé de toute transcendance ; quand le destin est absent du cœur humain, c'est-à-dire quand la réalité réaliste se substitue au réel, à l'éternel» (*Théâtre complet* XCV).

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Tarrab : « . . . je doute fort que les critères du psychanalyste, du psychologue, du sociologue, soient non pas faux, (je ne doute pas qu'ils soient tout à fait vrais) je me demande s'ils sont suffisants, et si le sociologue que vous êtes n'est pas lui-même englué dans la sociologie . . . alors que la sociologie, la prospection sociologique est certainement indispensable, mais il faut, je pense, qu'elle soit soutenue, ou complétée par ce qu'on pourrait appeler une métaphysique » (*Ionesco à cœur ouvert* 62)

<sup>23</sup> Beyen continues : « A l'époque de ses grandes pièces, Ionesco était sinon athée, du moins très peu préoccupé par les questions religieuses. Il est frappant que dans *Le roi se meurt*, sa première grande pièce « métaphysique », Bérenger son porte-parole, ne s'interroge à aucun moment sur ce qui l'attend après la mort » (*Ionesco ou le sens de la contradiction* 71).

<sup>24</sup> «Pour pouvoir expliquer une œuvre aussi complexe que le théâtre de Ionesco, il faut faire l'addition de toutes les théories existantes, qui représentent autant de lectures possible et encore . . . En tenant compte de l'infinité des significations d'un univers artistique, jamais les études critiques, forcément limitées comme nombre, ne pourront l'épuiser» (26).

<sup>25</sup> «Enfin, et c'est là surtout que réside l'originalité du Théâtre de Dérision, le tragique n'est jamais pur mais associé au comique de dérision ». (*Le théâtre de dérision* 92).

<sup>26</sup> Marie-Claude Hubert : « . . . cet effondrement du sens, au cœur même du langage, est lié à la perte du sacré. Selon lui, l'impuissance qui est le lot de tous les personnages qui cherchent à communiquer par le langage, provient de leur séparation avec Dieu qui est le Verbe » (102).

## CHAPTER III

### A HUMANISM OF ARCHETYPES

“The true purpose of the Theater is to create Myths . . .”  
(Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* 116)

In his play, *L'Impromptu de l'Alma* (1956), where Ionesco stages himself and his critics, the character-author reveals the importance of theatre, and implicitly art, as an outlet for his inner obsessions: «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 intérieures que, pour ma part, je me réserve le droit de prendre cette matière théâtrale» (*Théâtre complet* 135). (“For me, the theatre is the projection onto the stage of the world within: it is in my dreams, my anguish, my dark desires, my inner contradictions that I reserve the right to find the stuff of my plays” [*Improvisation* 150]). The inner world does not only concern the individual, in Ionesco’s view, but also humanity in general. The images that reappear as leitmotifs are in fact mirroring the dreams of others, the universal consciousness, in Jung’s terms. Myths are essential to humans, notes Mircea Eliade, and particularly to the artists, because they connect them with a wider community. In his study, *Mircea Eliade’s Vision for a New Humanism* (1993), David Cave stresses the communitarian quality of myths as mediators for meaning: “only within the community of others—of other myths, symbols, cultures, religions—is meaning attainable and personal, cultural and religious authenticity achieved” (91). As with painting, where Ionesco’s guiding principle is the hand («il faut laisser penser la main» (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 14), dreams, imagination, myths—what escapes logic—are the inspiration for his theatrical explorations. In his interview with

Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco mentions that the revelatory quality of dreams, dramatic in essence, is therefore crucial for someone who writes theatre.<sup>27</sup> Ionesco notes the complementary relationship of the two sides of consciousness, nocturnal and diurnal:

. . . ce que le rêve révèle, à travers les censures, à travers les symboles, c'est ce que la conscience diurne cache. La conscience diurne révèle ce que le langage du rêve veut cacher. . . Je penche à croire, cependant, que le langage du rêve est plus lumineux que l'autre, ce qu'il exprime est d'une évidence indiscutable, vivante ; la pensée diurne est plus extérieure aux réalités. (*Journal en miettes* 49)

. . . what a dream reveals, breaking through censorship and by means of symbols, is what the waking consciousness hides. . . I incline to think, however, that the language of dream is more luminous than the other, what it expresses contains an unquestionable, living truth; everyday thinking stays more on the outside of things. It does not express their inner core. (*Fragments of a Journal* 34)

Mythical or archetypal images are relevant in Ionesco's works as they are, in Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's terms, true embryos of meaning, («véritables embryons de sens»[*La vie des images* 19]). In his collection of essays and drawings *Découvertes* (1969), Ionesco emphasizes the truth found in myths and archetypes; they are not obsolete since myths of modern man are rooted in them. He reveals the importance of history as rooted precisely in what is extra-historical and that ideologies, events such as revolutions, tyrannies, the idea of progress are indicators of deeper desires of humans that myths reveal.<sup>28</sup>

Image is intrinsic in Ionesco's fictional writings, yet, it is mediated by words. It is no surprise that the author is inclined, notably towards the end of his life, to gradually, but not completely replace his pen with his pencil or brush. Therefore, a first section of this chapter will address the interplay and transition from text to image in Ionesco's works, the author's predilection for visual art, which he calls 'art of silence'. Secondly, I

will analyze some of the motifs that recur in Ionesco's plays, gouaches, drawings and essays. Important among these are the images of the radiant city and of the pillar, and all of its flight evoking variants which reveal the quest for paradise lost, and the intense desire for connecting with the divine. Similar imagery is found in Constantin Brancusi's work, who, in his polishing and reworking of columns and his series on birds has attempted to capture into bronze, stone and marble the essence of flying.

### ***The Art of Silence***

“I was tired of speaking, of words and I needed an art of silence”, confesses Ionesco to Marie-Claude Hubert (*my translation*).<sup>29</sup> The inadequacy of words to accurately reflect inner paradoxes, human desires and quests, motivates Ionesco to resort to images as another means to reach the truth. It has been evident that, even in his early years as a critic in Romania, the author privileges the work of art that is spiritual, mystical and idealistic. In the annex of Sonia de Leusse's study on Ionesco's painting, Marie-France Ionesco, the author's daughter, published a translation of an essay written by Ionesco when he was twenty-eight years old, entitled «Un certain Van Gogh». He admired what he called Van Gogh's spiritual poverty, referring to the painter's inclinations to depict suffering, and to go beyond the technicalities of art in order to express his internal realities and spiritual vision.<sup>30</sup> In *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco makes this general statement about art: «L'art pour moi consiste en la révélation des certaines choses que la raison, la mentalité quotidienne me cachent» (185). (“For me art means the revelation of certain things that reason, everyday habits of thought, conceal from me” [*Notes and Counter Notes* 129]).

Kandinsky, whom Ionesco valued as one of the painters who tried to rediscover or reinvent painting and rid it of everything else that does not belong to its realm (*Notes* 68), has expressed that the work of art contains within itself the revelation of a superior reality that the rational discourse cannot unveil.<sup>31</sup> In the preface to Kandinsky's work *Du spirituel dans l'art, et dans la peinture en particulier* (written in 1910, published in French in 1954), Philippe Sers, captures the essence of Kandinsky's artistic endeavors and notes that the work of art, due to its opening towards another reality is the support for metaphysical meditation as well as the mediator that illuminates the way.<sup>32</sup>

The affinities between Ionesco and Kandinsky's endeavors are clear. Just as painting, theater through its specific language, not limited to speech, such as lighting, décor, props, gestures, dance, pantomime, etc., is an opening towards a mystical, a transcendental experience. Art in general expresses the desire for a connection that surpasses the quotidian and sometimes it is that medium that opens the access to what is mythical, archetypal, extra-historical, but which has significant relevance in the present tense, as it embodies the sensibilities, inner quests that people experience in that moment. It is worth noting that Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov, authors who were generally grouped as the founders of the Theater of the Absurd, wrote their works without knowing about each other's writings. The theme of absence and endless waiting is strikingly similar in Ionesco's *Les Chaises* (written in 1951 and first performed in 1952) and Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (written in 1948, first performance directed by Roger Blin takes place in 1953), symbolizing that they expressed the angst specific to their times.

The attraction to the realm of the visual, of the silent art, as Ionesco calls it, which is freed from the scriptural system of signs, is stirred by the sense of immediacy and of

unmediated access to truth that it confers. As the author advances in age, and is therefore closer to death, this sense of immediacy takes another dimension, namely, that of urgency. In *Le Blanc et le Noir* (1985) which reproduces images of some of Ionesco's lithographs, along with the author's reflections on art, Ionesco ponders the synthetic quality of the image, adjacent to the sense of immediacy that the images provides: « . . . on peut dire beaucoup de choses avec le dessin et la couleur. . . . On peut dire autant, sinon mieux que ce que j'ai dit pendant plus d'un quart de siècle dans mes pièces de théâtre, dans mes Contes, dans mon roman, dans mes essais. » (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 14) (“ . . . one can say many things with drawing and colors . . . One can say as much, if not better than what I said during a quarter of a century in my plays, stories, novels, essays.” [my translation]). Ionesco is conferring a primordial role to image, reversing its traditional, unfavorable position as a secondary medium of communication, merely illustrative of text. In her study *La couleur éloquente* (1989), Jacqueline Lichtenstein analyzes the metamorphosis that the notion of «sensible» (perceptible to the senses), constitutive of color and image in general, has undergone beginning with the platonic era. Image was therefore understood and interpreted through the paradigm of the philosophical discourse, inappropriately applied to the world of images. In Lichtenstein's view, the combat between discourse and image was unfair since it played out within the parameters of discourse which would invent the game and its rules (2). Any hegemonic appropriation of image was doomed to fail. The analogy of a “worm in a fruit” illustrates the intrusive and subversive place occupied by image:

L'image s'est développée sur le terrain philosophique tel un ver dans le fruit, corrompant le logos auquel elle devait sa naissance et affirmant des qualités incompatibles avec les conditions déterminant l'appartenance à ce champ d'où elle était issue. Enfant illégitime d'une métaphysique dualiste,

le sensible allait revendiquer les marques de sa bâtardise et rejeter une paternité qui ne pouvait reconnaître les images sans les soumettre à son autorité. (*La couleur éloquente* 11)

The image developed in philosophical compost as a worm develops in fruit, corrupting the logos to which it owed its birth and affirming qualities incompatible with the conditions that determined its filiation. An illegitimate child of dualist metaphysics, the visible vindicated the marks of its bastardy and rejected a paternity that could not recognize images without subjecting them to its authority. (*The Eloquence of Color* 3)

The liberation of the image—a rather generic term that encompasses the visual arts such as painting, drawing, lithography—from the monopoly of text is prompted by the realization that language cannot encompass the range of emotions, the colors of vibrations that the image can transmit. In his collection of articles, gathered in *La vie des images* (2005), Jean-Jacques Wunenburger reestablishes the position of the image as an analogical device to reach knowledge, as important as rational thinking, which was for such a long time favored. The political, economical, ecological, spiritual crises that came along with the advent of technological advancement prompted a reevaluation of the importance of analogical thinking (*La vie des images* 28). As important components in the symbolic and mythic realm, images have access to an infinite richness of significations. They cannot be considered anymore, as in the platonic tradition, as deviations from reality and consequently from truth:

La disqualification de l'image, en général, et des récits mythiques en particulier, comme prototypes d'irréel, résulte donc, avant tout, d'une approche analytique, cherchant à définir les types véridiques de représentation, par rapport auxquels les images dites de fiction, ne peuvent apparaître que comme des écarts, des déviations, des déformations, sans autre valeur, à la rigueur qu'affective, onirique ou esthétique. (*La vie des images* 68)

The disqualification of the image, in general, and of mythical narratives in particular, as prototypes of the fictional, consequently results, before anything, from an analytical approach, attempting to define authentic



types of representation, compared to which, the images said of fiction, cannot appear but as gaps, deviations, deformations, without any other worth or value, except affective, oneiric or esthetic. (*my translation*)

Ionesco's choice to express himself within the realm of images is reflective of the crisis of rationality characteristic of the post-modern era which questions the efficiency of the Cartesian paradigm and the dialectical argumentation as the only legitimate epistemological path. Wunenburger underlines the ineffable quality of image and the richness of significations it gives access to, rendering it as a rightful medium in the quest for meaning. In his view, images are not mere secondary and accidental materials in our psyche, but belong to a vital totality through which we perceive reality and are able to make sense of our world.<sup>33</sup>

Images can, since they belong to the symbolic, analogical realm, be considered as part of a sacred, iconic realm, where truth makes itself visible through revelation, through epiphany, rather than through narrative argumentation. When examining the origin of colors, as being from another world, Jacqueline Lichtenstein compares it with the vision of God in negative theology: « . . . la couleur ressemble fort au Dieu de la théologie négative que les catégories de la rationalité ne peuvent jamais appréhender adéquatement et dont on ne peut parler qu'à condition de ne rien dire» (*La couleur éloquente* 13) (“ . . . color bears a striking resemblance to the god of negative theology that the categories of rationality can never adequately apprehend and of which the only way to speak is to say nothing” [*The eloquence of color* 5]). In her article, «Eugène Ionesco: de l'écriture à la peinture» (2009), Sonia de Leusse-Le Guillou presents two reasons for Ionesco's aspiration to express himself through painting and drawing. One is the inability of words to express the unsayable (*l'indicible*). The critic identifies as the second motivator

Ionesco's perception of the pictorial realm as another register of signs in his search for truth. In his last collection of essays, *La quête intermittente* (1987), Ionesco reveals the transcendental quality of colors and consequently of painting, as well as the ability of painting to convey what discourse has lost:

Les couleurs sont de ce monde, encore, pour moi: elles chantent, elles sont de ce monde et il me semble qu'elles me relient à l'Autre Monde. Je retrouve en elles ce que la parole a perdu : le dessin oui, mais surtout la couleur est parole, langage, communication, vie, tout ce qui peut me relier au reste, à l'univers. Elle est ce qui me rattache à Lui, ce qui fait que je vis. (13)

Colors are, for me, still of this world: they sing, they are of this world and it seems that they connect me to the Other World. I find in them what the word has lost: drawing, too, but above all color is word, language, communication, life, everything that can connect me to the rest, to the universe. It is what links me to Him, what makes me live. (*my translation*)

In the search for a purer language, Ionesco is motivated by the same belief that through art, in all its forms, he can access meaning, or that he can get as close as possible to understanding existence, and therefore reality.<sup>34</sup> The narrative and visual techniques are alike in Ionesco's works: he starts by drawing abstract sketches, which he blames on his inability to draw, and then goes on to introduce more figurative, symbolic elements.

In her comprehensive work on Ionesco, Marie-Claude Hubert notes that Ionesco has undertaken the same quest in theatre as in his painting. She remarks the parallelism of trajectory in Ionesco's theatre and painting, underlining the concept of *irréalisme*, in which the artist attempted the same movement: irreverent towards tradition, starting from abstract, non-figurative painting to gradually adding figurative elements.<sup>35</sup>

When Ionesco comments on the painting of Gérard Schneider, an abstract painter whose plastic language is defined by a spontaneous expression of lyricism, Ionesco notices a similarity in the concept that leads to the genesis of his plays and Schneider's

paintings. While the mediums might differ, the approach remains faithful to an innate unifying principle:

Pour moi, analogiquement, c'est à peu près de la même façon que je tente spontanément de procéder pour construire une pièce de théâtre. Le processus créateur et la composition archétype des œuvres d'art, des mondes imaginaires, sont identiques essentiellement: les matériaux seuls diffèrent qui servent à construire; ou les langues qui expriment la même idée. Comme nous sommes tous, au fond de nous-mêmes, peintres, musiciens, architectes, nous n'avons qu'à choisir les matériaux qui nous conviennent, ou les moyens d'expression, et à les employer selon des lois innées que nous n'avons, tout simplement, qu'à découvrir dans notre propre esprit. (*Notes* 351)

By analogy, it is almost in the same way that I myself try to spontaneously to construct a play. The creative process, the archetypal composition of works of art and of imaginary worlds is in essence identical: only the materials used to construct them differ; or the languages used to express one and the same idea. As there is basically in all of us something of a painter, a musician and an architect, we have only to choose the material or the medium that suits us best and use it according to innate laws which we have only quite simply to discover in our own minds. (*Notes and Counter notes* 268)

In his non-conformist style, Ionesco rejects fixed notions that could limit art, and so, in the above mentioned analysis of Gérard Schneider's painting, published in 1961, Ionesco defies boundaries that attempt to categorize art as non-figurative ( non-representational) and figurative (representational). If total abstraction in art bears no trace to any recognizable reality, he argues that the representational reality is itself based on a subjective correlation between reality and how it is perceived. Ionesco concludes that all images are figurative (representational) and non-figurative (non-representational) at the same time. They represent the internal and external reality, in an alternate mode. The distance an artist takes when creating abstract images is found in the figurative painting as well. The models, either external or internal, are both filtered through the artist's

vision. In both cases, it is the painter's internalized view of the external world presented to the viewer, concludes Ionesco:

. . . le non figuratif n'est qu'une façon de parler car il est tout simplement une autre sorte de figuratif, plus dépouillé mais tout aussi concret. Tous les tableaux sont figuratifs, tous les tableaux sont non-figuratifs, puisque ce sont les rapprochements, les contrastes, les valeurs, les profondeurs, la froideur ou la chaleur des tons que tous les peintres recherchent, organisent, expriment. Car il est clair que le paysagiste faisait seulement semblant de regarder ce qu'il voyait à l'extérieur : en fait il regardait en lui. De même, le peintre non figuratif, tout en regardant en lui, regarde au-dehors, l'univers de tous les hommes dont il surprend, dégage, exprime les lignes de force, les événements énergétiques purs. (*Notes* 352)

. . . "nonrepresentational" is only a figure of speech, for it is simply another sort of representation, pared down but just as concrete. All pictures are representational and all pictures are nonrepresentational, since all painters are seeking, organizing and expressing the resemblances, contrasts, tonal values, intensity and degree of coldness and warmth which exist in colors. For it is clear that the landscape artist was only pretending to absorb what he saw outside: in fact he was looking at himself. In the same way the nonrepresentational painter, while looking at himself, gazes outward at the universe of all mankind and catches, abstracts and expresses its lines of force and active energy in all its purity. (*Notes and Counter Notes* 268-269)

Figurative as well as non figurative art are both simultaneously subjective and objective. Pretending objectivity is a false premise, in Ionesco's view. Non-figurative art is based on the expression of the inner feelings of the artist. In his portrait of Brancusi, reproduced in *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco argues that through the stylization of the "object" painted, non-figurative (abstract) painting reveals the temperament, the characteristics of the painter:

Une direction importante de la peinture non figurative arrive à exprimer le tempérament du peintre, son individualité, son pathétisme, sa subjectivité. On peut donc distinguer un tableau d'un autre, d'après l'angoisse particulière à celui qui l'a peint, angoisse qui est devenue le langage même du peintre. (*Notes* 347)

One important tendency in nonrepresentational painting aims at expressing the poet's temperament, his individuality, his emotions, his subjectivity. We may thus distinguish one painting from another according to the particular anguish of each painter, an anguish that became the very idiom of the painter. (*Notes and Counter Notes* 264)

In *Découvertes*, which constitutes the hesitant debut of the author in the pictorial realm, the image is still rather dependent on the text. Text and image interact, not only complementing, but also interrogating each other. Whereas in his text Ionesco analyzes the distinction between intuition and logical knowledge, in his drawings—monsters with big heads, animated by vivid colors, or sometimes just shallow images, with square or rhomboidal heads, and staring round eyes as symbolizing a perpetual astonishment—he releases his deepest fears and anguishes. The text, as well as the images that illustrate it, represent a world before 'coherence' not following a preconceived design, a world populated by grotesque, dismembered figurines. These child-like drawings represent a world into making, a world in movement, a world of the indescribable. In her review of *Découvertes*, Rosette Lamont synthesizes eloquently the dialectics that exists between the narrative aspect, which resembles classical autobiography, and surrealist images, which break the barriers of tradition:

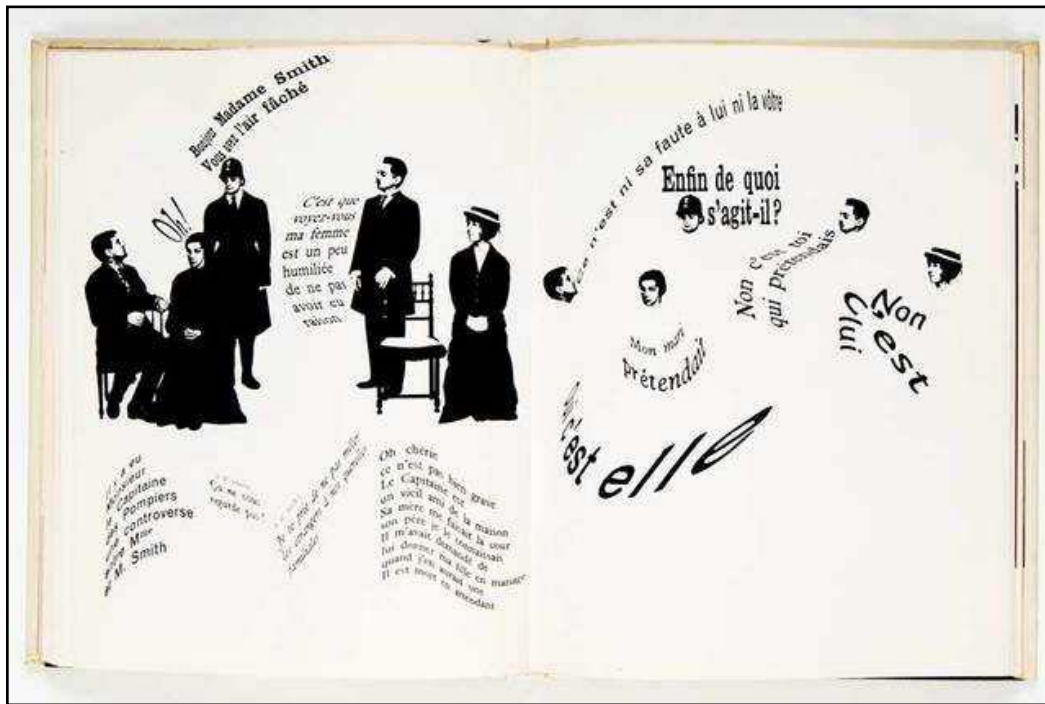
Despite the surrealist drawings, *Découvertes* is a classical autobiographical essay. It is in the tradition of Montaigne's personal essays, or La Rochefoucauld's autobiographical sketch. It reveals Ionesco's philosophical penchant, the lucidity of his mind and his tender humanity. It is witty, serious, contemplative and polemical. It rejects pompous gravity and substitutes for it the profound seriousness and wonder of the child. It teaches us to enter in that in-between realm, the universe of contemplation and creation: «Ne pas être tout à fait au monde, bien sûr, mais être dans sa lumière. L'avoir vue. Neuf. » (*French Review* 1057)

In *Le Blanc et le Noir*, which Ionesco describes as a naive attempt at lithography, a mélange between figurative and non-figurative images on the same canvas, the author

introduces and sometimes subverts symbolic, or figurative images (7). They are geometrical, rectangular figures, stick figures, dismembered or whole, hanged on trees or crosses. Ionesco underlines the complex capacity of image which allows the freedom to transgress boundaries of representation and signification: « Inventer ou tâcher d'inventer des formes et des distances et que cela ne voulait rien dire, et que cela voulait tout dire » (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 19). (“Inventing or attempting to invent forms and distances and that they do not mean anything while at the same time meaning everything “[my translation]).

Ionesco does not start writing, or drawing with a plan in mind; he confesses that he imagines his characters which then begin to have a life of their own. His position is that of the privileged observer that notes their movement, follows and documents their trajectory. With drawing, the hand, the unconscious, his emotions are the guiding principle. His figures are not necessarily symbolic, but rather, just simple drawings: «Elles ne sont rien. La main a fait ce qui lui a plu. Je vais demander à ma main si, d'après elle, cela signifie quelque chose. Je crois que ce ne sont pas des signes : surtout de la graphie » (58). (“They mean nothing, explains ironically the author. My hand did whatever it wanted. I'll ask my hand if, in its opinion, that means anything. I do not think that they are signs (symbols) but rather simple drawings” [my translation]). Similarly, in theater, the characters from *La Cantatrice chauve* are but derisory puppets, the product of plagiarism of phrases from the English conversation manual, admits Ionesco (*Notes and Counter Notes* 178). Just as the figurines from his drawings are set off by subconscious impulse, the automatons from the English manual Ionesco was using to learn from underwent a transformation, against Ionesco's will: «Les propositions toutes simples et lumineuses, que j'avais inscrites avec application sur mon cahier d'écolier, laissées là,

se décantèrent au bout d'un certain temps, bougèrent toutes seules, se corrompirent, se dénaturèrent » (*Notes* 247). (“ . . . those inspired yet simple sentences which I had so painstakingly copied into my schoolboy’s exercise book, detached themselves from the pages on which they have been written, changed places all by themselves, became garbled and corrupted” [*Notes* 178]). Massin’s typography in collaboration with Henry Cohen’s photo-graphical technique are an apt illustration of the absurdist style of the play’s initial staging by Nicolas Bataille. The page layout and its typographical anamorphosis mirror the performance to the smallest details, from the onomatopoeic sounds of the characters’ clearing their throat or clicking their tongues, to the inflections in their voices and their automatic replies and gestures. The scene illustrated below (fig.2) depicts the Fire chief’s entry on stage right in the middle of a dispute about whether or not there is someone at the door when the doorbell rings.



**Fig. 2.** Page from *La cantatrice chauve* ; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *La Cantatrice chauve*. (Illustr. Massin et Henry Cohen. Paris : Gallimard, 1964 ; print ; n.p.)

If the earlier drawings present figurines apparently without any attempt to endow them with symbolism, although the representational and non-representational intermingle, the author's watercolors are charged with more symbolism. A similar process happens in the plays: the emergence of Bérenger, as the spokesperson of the author, signals the growing presence of autobiographical, symbolical elements in his creation. This cyclical reappearance of Bérenger, protagonist of the tetralogy: *Tueur sans gages* (*The Killer*), *Rhinocéros*, *Le Piéton de l'air* (*A Stroll in the Air*), *Le roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*) to whom the artist lends his metaphysical quests, his reasoning, doubts, searches and contradictions, reflect the introduction of lyricism in Ionesco's work. In his later plays, written between 1973 and 1980, the comical and farcical elements practically disappear, leaving room for dream-like or rather nightmarish images, revelatory of the author's inner world.

The projection of this inner world is tightly connected with myths, which contain the universal quality of collective "inner worlds". Both in his theatre and in his paintings, there are images which appear as leitmotifs, drawn from myths or dreams, which are interrelated since they embrace the universal as well as the personal. Images of the radiant city, or of the columns, embody the ascensional movement that characterizes the work of art, the movement which, in Kandinsky's view, makes a lasting impact and resonates beyond the ephemeral.<sup>36</sup> Kandinsky writes that the artist has to draw his sources from the interior necessity («les lois de la nécessité intérieure» [140]), which is similar to Ionesco's belief that a work of art should reflect the artists' inner obsessions, desires, fears rather than to be an imitation or the result of external impositions.



## ***The Radiant City: Paradise or Utopist Disillusion?***

« Nous savons déjà que l'idée d'une société parfaite exprime la nostalgie du paradis perdu », writes Ionesco in *Découvertes* (115). (“We already know that the idea of a perfect society expresses the nostalgia of a lost paradise” [*my translation*]) Thus, his protagonists, narrators, watercolor figurines throw themselves into a nostalgia-filled, never-ending quest of an Eden-like world, so that, in the end, they are disenchanted as they slowly realize that they have been blindly swirling in the mirage of an unreachable oasis.

Ionesco's plays, although autobiographical and to some extent personal, join on a broader level archetypal myths and universal principles. For instance, the author's mystical experience of illumination, deeply rooted in the longing for a paradise, is materialized in the discovery of the radiant city, which appears notably in his play *Le Tueur sans gages* (written in 1957). On the other hand, the author's obsession with death, connected to the notion of the human being's fall from grace and to original sin is materialized in the image of the killer.

Ionesco himself admits that his works are filled with autobiographical moments and that his protagonists' quests mirror his own. One often reappearing episode is the experience of illumination, of Manifestation of the divine, accompanied by an “unspeakable joy of being” (*Antidotes* 122). It all started when young Ionesco, at eight or nine years of age, living in the idyllic Mayenne country town, la Chapelle-Anthenaise, experienced what Mircea Eliade would call a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. These moments were repeated during his adolescence, but they faded away as the author

advanced in age. In his *Journal en miettes*, Ionesco relives an experience of his late adolescence:

Je me trouvais dans une petite ville de province, je devais avoir près de dix-huit ans. . . . Ce qui se passa fut tout à fait inattendu. Une transformation subite de la ville. Tout devenait à la fois profondément réel et profondément irréel. C'était bien cela : l'irréalité mêlée à la réalité, les deux s'imbriquant étroitement, indissolublement. Les maisons devenaient plus blanches encore, très propres. Quelque chose de tout à fait neuf dans la lumière, virginal dans la lumière, un monde inconnu et qu'il me semblait connaître éternellement. Un monde que la lumière dissolvait et qu'elle reconstituait. Une joie débordante surgissait de mes profondeurs, chaude et comme lumineuse elle aussi, une présence absolue, une présence ; je me suis dit que cela était la « vérité », sans savoir comment définir cette vérité. (99)

I was in a small provincial town and I must have been about eighteen. . . . What happened was quite unexpected. The whole town was suddenly transformed. Everything became at once profoundly real and profoundly unreal. That was exactly what happened: unreality mingled with reality, the two becoming closely and indissolubly interconnected. The houses grew still whiter, utterly clean. There was something quite new and unsullied about the light, this was an unfamiliar world which I seemed to have known for eternity. A world that the light dissolved and yet reconstituted. An overflowing joy rose up from deep within me, warm and luminous itself, an absolute presence, a presentness. I said to myself that this was 'truth', without knowing how to define this truth. (*Fragments...* 68)

From Mircea Eliade's perspective, the importance of this experience lies in the encounter with a trans-human reality which confirms the authenticity of absolute values, thus granting significance to the human existence (*Aspects du mythe* 147). Ionesco's reflections on this experience echo Eliade's remarks:

Quand l'étonnement est à son comble, c'est alors que je ne doute plus de rien. J'ai la certitude d'être né pour l'éternité, que la mort n'existe pas et que tout n'est qu'un miracle. Une glorieuse présence. . . . C'est dans ces instants-là, au-delà de tous les malheurs et de toute l'angoisse du monde, que je suis sûr d'être pleinement, véritablement conscient. (*Antidotes* 317)

And when I reach the height of wonderment then all my doubts have vanished. I know with certainty that I was born for eternity, that death

does not exist and that everything is a miracle. A glorious presence... it is at such moments as these, transporting me beyond all the agony and the anguish of the world, that I know that I am a fully, truly conscious human being. ("Why Do I Write?" 122)

Ionesco's works retrace the anamnesis process of unburying these moments from under the dust of forgetfulness. In his essay, "Why Do I Write?" published in *Antidotes*, Ionesco avows: « J'écris pour retrouver cette lumière et pour essayer de la communiquer. Cette lumière est à la frontière d'un absolu que je perds, que je retrouve. » (*Antidotes* 316). ("I write in order to recapture this light, which I then try to communicate. It is on the frontier of an Absolute which at times I lose sight of and then find it again [121-122]). The existential urge to relive this experience of illumination, of Satori, in Mircea Eliade's terms, is essential in the life of the *homo religiosus*, as he or she takes part in the mystery of creation. The imitation of God, *imitatio dei*, confers meaning to one's existence. The mystery of creation consists, in Mircea Eliade's view, in that the sacred manifests itself as revelation of the infinite while at the same time circumscribing itself within the coordinates of time and space.<sup>37</sup> The paradox of this dialectic movement is essential to understanding Ionesco's 'reasoning' behind the reiteration of these experiences. In his interpretation, the attempt to circumscribe in space and time the revelation of the divine is doomed to fail. Paradise turns into utopia. Revelation becomes a misfortunate prediction of evil. Nevertheless, those very moments sustain the protagonists in their quests.

The overflowing joy at the hope of the marvelous discovery quickly turns into a stupefying horror in *Tueur sans gages* (first version created in 1957 and the second, final version, in 1972; *Théâtre complet*, 1626), as Bérenger discovers that the radiant city (*la cité radieuse*) is marred by the existence of a killer who arbitrarily murders its inhabitants. The play emerged from a short story written in 1955, «La Photo du colonel»,

where Ionesco rewrites one of his nightmares which he evokes in an interview with Alain Spirot: « Figurez-vous que je cherchais un assassin. Tout à coup, dans la pénombre, je l’aperçois. Je vais vers lui, c’est alors que j’aperçois son couteau. . . . Ce couteau a coupé le fil de mon rêve. Mais, le matin même, j’écrivais une nouvelle, *La Photo du colonel*» (*Théâtre complet* 1625). (“Imagine that I was searching for the assassin. Suddenly, I perceive him in the dark. I go towards him, and it is then that I see his knife. . . . This knife cut the thread of my dream. The following morning I was writing the novel: “The Colonel’s photograph” [*my translation*]).<sup>38</sup>

The hierophanic space that Bérenger, protagonist of the play and narrator in the short story, encounters by chance appears in an anodyne, monotonous neighborhood. At the end of a short tramway trip, the narrator of the short story, just like the protagonist of the play, finds himself suddenly in a transfigured, luminous place. He remarks how this oasis contrasts with the dirty neighborhood («faubourg sale») with its wintry, muddy and dusty streets («rues d’hiver ou de boue ou de poussière»). For Bérenger, this city represents a reality beyond imagination («une réalité dépassant l’imagination»), a prolonging of an inner universe. This luminous city has transformative effects: in it, Bérenger finds his place in the universe and feels renewed. Age becomes irrelevant. Bérenger confesses to the Architect: «. . . depuis ce matin je suis un homme nouveau» (*Théâtre complet* 475). (“. . . since this morning, I am a new man” [*The Killer* 15]).

The enclosed space of the city prefigures a sacred *topos*, a sanctuary that mediates the encounter between human and divine. Due to its isolated topography, separated from the world, this space allows a mystical communion. In one of his chapters of *La vie des images* (2002) Jean-Jacques Wunenburger explores the symbolism of prototypical

miniatures, models from which architectural spaces come into being. The closed spaces, such as fortresses, castles, fortified cities have in themselves the imprint of the divine. It is the architectural structure that circumscribes a sacred space and separates it from the profane world mirroring the disposition of the soul:

Ainsi l'âme ou le cœur humain, en tant qu'il s'ouvre sur des réalités suprasensibles, est souvent décrit comme une forteresse, un château, une ville fortifiée, qui symbolisent dès lors une topographie intérieure où le divin peut-être concentré, manifesté de manière intime. Ces formes obéissent généralement à un même prototype, celui d'un espace clos, doté d'un dedans, qui permet de signifier un espace sacré séparé du monde profane. (*La vie des images* 144).

Thus the soul or human heart, as it opens to other realities, is often described as a fortress, a castle, a fortified city, which symbolize from then on an interior landscape where the divine can be concentrated, manifested in an intimate way. These forms generally obey the same prototype- that of the enclosed space, endowed with an interior, which can signify a sacred space, separated from the profane". (*my translation*)

In Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's view, humans create objects to animate their spiritual life and to bring to existence invisible realities. The radiant city represents, in Bérenger's mind, a space that imitates, or rather incarnates and brings to life the incandescence of the divine. Thus he exclaims to the Architect of the city: « . . . Inouï! Inouï! C'est extraordinaire! Pour moi cela tient du miracle... Du miracle ou, si vous préférez, car, sans doute êtes-vous un esprit laïque, cela tient du merveilleux !»(*Théâtre complet* 472). (“ . . . Amazing ! Amazing! It is extraordinary! As far as I can see, it is a miracle . . . A miracle, or, as I don't suppose you're a religious man, you'd rather call it a marvel!” (*The Killer* 10).

In this miraculous space, similar to a Kafkaesque world, something inspires an uncanny feeling: the city is under constant supervision by public officials of the Administration. Over this Eden-like space, where Bérenger is freed from «his malaise de

l'existence», hovers an unsettling silence. In the play, this represents a turning point in the flow of the events. To his question as to why the streets are deserted, the cold and implacable facial expression of the Architect foreshadows a frightening prospect. Bérenger, the incurable idealist tries to find an answer: «Ah oui, sans doute, c'est parce que c'est l'heure du déjeuner. Les gens sont tous à table. Pourquoi, cependant, ne s'entendent pas les rires des repas, le tintement des cristaux ? Pas un bruit, pas un murmure, pas une voix qui chante» (*Théâtre complet* 482). (“Oh yes, of course, it must be because it is lunchtime. Everyone's eating. But why can't we hear any laughter at table, any clinking of glasses? Not a sound, not a whisper, not a voice singing” [*The Killer* 30]). He refuses to believe the Architect's prediction that reality can anytime turn into nightmare. Soon enough the reality of this nightmare slowly reveals itself. While Bérenger hangs on to the sensorial experiences of the space that remind him of his childhood paradise, the Architect insists on the material side, specifically utopist, noticing that the city is built with the best materials: «C'est calculé, c'est fait en exprès. Rien ne devait être laissé au hasard dans ce quartier. . . .»(473) (“It was all calculated, all intentional. Nothing was left to chance in this district. . . .” [*The Killer* 12]). The significations that Bérenger attributes to this city start to gradually lose meaning. What should have been the affirmation of a paradise-like world becomes its simulacrum and negation. The points of reference are destabilized, and the radiant city slowly turns into the mirage of a childhood memory in Bérenger's mind. In the short story, «La Photo du colonel» (“The Colonel's Photograph”), the imagery of detachment and schism between reality and dream is illustrated through an analogical figure: a painting, an inanimate object, a lifeless replica of a paradise which, having lost its significance, is nothing but an

empty sign, a photographic duplication which can be multiplied infinitely. The narrator describes how this idyllic world loses its signification:

Le paysage resplendissant dans lequel je m'étais enraciné, qui avait, tout de suite, fait partie de moi-même ou dont j'avais fait partie, se détacha, me devint tout à fait extérieur, ne fut plus qu'un tableau dans un cadre, un objet inanimé. Je me sentis seul, hors de tout, dans une clarté morte. (33)

The dazzling landscape in which I had felt myself take root, which had immediately become part of me, or of which I had become a part, detached itself, became something quite outside me, a mere picture in a frame, an inanimate object. I felt alone, totally excluded, and the life had gone out of the light. ("The Colonel's Photograph" 26).

The intrusion of evil into this enchanted world is materialized in the presence of the killer and the principles behind the architecture announce that this space resembling a sanctuary is an artifice, devoid of any real transcendence. It is the mere result of technology. The Architect warns Bérenger from the beginning that his paradise is nothing but the fruit of advanced technology, the unreal product of his exalted imagination, but Bérenger is too enthralled to hear.

L'ARCHITECTE. Rien d'extraordinaire, je vous dis, c'est de la technique ! . . . Ici, c'est tout simplement un îlot . . . avec des ventilateurs cachés que j'ai pris pour modèles dans ces oasis qui se trouvent un peu partout, dans les déserts, où vous voyez surgir, tout à coup, au milieu de sables arides, des cités surprenantes, recouvertes de roses fraîches, ceinturées de sources, de rivières, de lacs . . . (476-477).

ARCHITECT. I tell you there's nothing unusual about it, it is a technical matter! . . . It is just that this is a little island . . . with concealed ventilators I copied from the ones in those oases that crop up all over the place in the desert, where suddenly out of the dry sand you see amazing cities rising up, smothered with dewy roses, girdled with springs and rivers and lakes . . . (*The Killer* 17)

The subtle undermining of anything genuine is characteristic of utopian principles. The paradigm of utopist principles is analogous to that of simulation discussed by Jean Baudrillard in his work *Simulacres et simulation* (1981). Simulation short-

circuits reality and creates its own hyperreality, and, in his terms, it is dangerous in that it displaces and cancels out reality (*Simulacra and simulation* 27). As an example of simulacrum, Baudrillard uses the Lascaux cave and its copy created to preserve its archeological vestiges. In his view, simulating the experience of Lascaux, by duplicating it, has rendered both the cave and its copy artificial.<sup>39</sup> When analyzing the reality and simulation existent in the established order, Baudrillard goes as far as to affirm that : «La simulation est infiniment plus dangereuse car elle laisse toujours supposer, au-delà de son objet, que l'ordre et la loi eux-mêmes pourraient bien n'être que simulation » (*Simulacres . . .* 36). (“Simulation is infinitely more dangerous [than transgression and violence, since they contest the distribution of the real], because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, law and order themselves [in other words, reality] might be nothing but simulation” [*Simulacra and simulation* 20]). As Bérenger and the narrator of the short story relate, the radiant city loses its miraculous aura as it slowly unveils its desolate empty signs. Nostalgia, the longing for a memorable moment in the past, takes place of the feeling of plenitude experienced by Bérenger. Baudrillard notes this transition : « Lorsque le réel n'est plus ce qu'il était, la nostalgie prend tout son sens. . . . Escalade du vrai, du vécu, résurrection du figuratif là d'où l'objet et la substance ont disparu » (*Simulacres et simulation* 17). (“When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. . . . Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared” [*Simulacra and simulation* 6-7]). The basin in the middle of the city, symbol of cosmic center, of purity and clarity, perfect in its ovoid form is now the crime scene where the drowned victims of the killer are found. Also, as the plot unfolds, we discover that the killer lures his victims with a picture—another allusion to simulacrum.



The mechanical references join the utopian system of signs, an upside-down symbolism of paradise, according to Wunenburger: «Le complexe des espaces utopiques apparaît même comme une sorte de cristallisation d’images qui inversent insensiblement le paradis perdu en ville policée» (*La vie des images* 222). (“The complex of utopist spaces appears as a crystallization of images which subtly transform the lost paradise into a civilized city” [*my translation*]). What Bérenger sees as magical light is in fact electrical lighting. Even natural elements are controlled. For instance, rain is replaced with an irrigation system which waters the plants from underneath the earth. This transfigured world is a technical wonder, concludes Bérenger (474). Just as simulacrum is detached from a referent, this utopian place is completely freed from its original, paradisiacal referent. Utopia, Wunenburger reminds us, is a form of laicization of the quest for a lost paradise, stripped of its transcendent values as a mediation space between human and divine (*La vie des images* 222). Ionesco maintains that even in the ideologies that evolved at the beginning of the last century there is the nostalgia of a lost paradise. Behind Marxist ideology, affirms Ionesco in his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, there is an essential, profound truth that is found in myths.<sup>40</sup> It is a space where artificiality predominates as principle. The pristine the paradisiacal garden, symbolic of Eden, is transformed in what Wunenburger (227) calls a rational workshop («atelier rationnel»). The structure of island, infused with paradisiacal values of redemption, felicity, communion, is appropriated in the urban space and subverted. The safe haven that the island should signify becomes an apocalyptic scene where evil, arbitrarily killing of the city’s inhabitants, runs the show. The insular *mythème*, which, according to Levi-Strauss is a founding, irreducible principle for mythical narratives, is thus a combination of

ambiguous, antithetical connotations: paradise and inferno, light and darkness, prosperity and austerity, protection and vulnerability. Levi-Strauss, in his chapter “The structure of myths”, notes that it is exactly this antinomy that is the basis of myth (*Structural Anthropology* 234).

Since we are analyzing theatre, the element of stage representation is crucial, notably because representation is a projection which even resembles the principles of a simulacrum because it sometimes destabilizes the text it originates from. In his essay, Baudrillard notes the difference, even the opposition, between representation and simulation, noting that representation stems from “the principle of equivalence of the sign and of the real”, but that simulation, on the contrary, “stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reverence” (*Simulacra and simulation* 6). I argue that performances of the theatre of the absurd have this simulacrum effect, as they negate its signs and its referential textual points. Oftentimes stage instructions in Ionesco’s plays are completely subverting the text and indicating a contrary performance. Just as the absurd in Camus’ thought signifies the divorce between a human and his or her surroundings, there is a disparity between theatrical stage setting and characters. The decor as indicated in the stage instructions contrasts with Bérenger’s discourse. The spectator is confronted, from the beginning, with the dichotomy between the empty stage and Bérenger’s vivid descriptions of the radiant city. As Bérenger ecstatically speaks of the magical perfection and points towards the city, his gesture fades away in the deceiving emptiness of the stage. The non-representable is suggested, but not materialized on stage: it exists solely in Bérenger’s discourse. The audience is therefore

alerted in advance, before the reader, to the implacable intrusion of evil. The empty stage could indicate the impossibility to represent, a predicament in which writers found themselves during the period following the two world wars, where notions of reason and progress were shaken and logical discourses and their representations had to be reconsidered.

The imagery of the void does not necessarily suggest an absence, but it is, in Ionesco's view, the illustration of a logic of negation in which the search for meaning is nevertheless concealed. For example, the absence which is epitomized in *Les Chaises* is in fact just a *displaced* presence. The absence points to spatial dislocation and not to lack of meaning. Absence for Ionesco does not suggest inexistence; it is rather a sign of the impossibility to project on stage the immaterial. In Wunenburger's terms, images of void, due to their imperfection and inadequacy in relation to the concept are conditions that invite reasoning to understand what exists (*La vie des images* 174). The emptiness is nuanced in the staging of *Tueur sans Gages* by Jacques Mauclair (1967 and 1972). The director, engaged in a long collaboration with Ionesco, starting from 1956, envisages the empty stage where the only props are lighting and sound. In his stage instructions, Ionesco specifies the importance of lighting on the set:

Dans le lointain, bruit d'un tramway, silhouettes confuses des maisons qui s'évanouissent lorsque "soudain", la scène s'éclaire fortement: c'est une lumière très forte, très blanche; il y a cette lumière blanche, il y a aussi le bleu du ciel éclatant et dense. Ainsi, après la grisaille, l'éclairage doit jouer sur ce blanc et bleu, constituant les seuls éléments de décor de lumière. (*Théâtre complet* 471)

In the distance the noise of a tram, vague outlines of houses; then, suddenly, the stage is brilliantly lit; a very bright, very white light; just this whiteness, and also the dense vivid blue of the sky. And so, after the grisaille, the lighting effects should simply be made up of white and blue, the only elements in the décor. (*The Killer* 9)

The grayish light suggests the muddy and dusty neighborhood where Bérenger lives, while the white and blue lights evoke, in a rhythmic dance, the appearance of the paradise-like city. In the new theatre, light is an important element of the set. In his study *Le théâtre et son double*, writing on the unifying principle in which all languages of theatre (music, lighting, sound, costumes, etc) engage, Antonin Artaud notes the importance of light in evoking a wide spectrum of feelings: «Pour produire des qualités de tons particulières, on doit réintroduire dans la lumière un élément de ténuité, de densité, d'opacité en vue de produire le chaud, le froid, la colère, la peur, etc » (*Le théâtre et son double* 114). (“In order to produce the qualities of particular musical tones, light must recover an element of thinness, density, and opaqueness, with a view to producing the sensation of heat, cold, anger, fear, etc.” [*The Theatre and Its Double* 95])

In the final act of the play, where Bérenger (like Camus's rebel) confronts the killer, the light is crepuscular, suggesting the solitude and desperation that crush the protagonist. His will succumbs to the glacial determination of the killer to exterminate him. His last monologue which begins with the obstinate desire to convince the killer to stop his rampant murders ends with the disappointed recognition of his inability to do so:

BERENGER. . . . Oh . . . que ma force est faible contre ta froide détermination, contre ta cruauté sans merci! . . . et que peuvent les balles elles-mêmes contre l'énergie de ton obstination? (*Sursaut.*) Mais je t'aurai, je t'aurai . . . (*Puis, de nouveau, devant l'Assassin qui tient le couteau levé, sans bouger, Bérenger baisse lentement ses deux vieux pistolets démodés, les pose à terre, incline la tête, puis, à genoux, tête basse, les bras ballants, il répète, puis balbutie :*) Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire ! . . . Mais pourquoi . . . Mais pourquoi . . . (*Théâtre complet* 535)

BERENGER. . . . Oh...how weak my strength is against your cold determination, your ruthlessness! And what good are bullets even, against the resistance of an infinitely stubborn will! (*With a start:*) But I'll get you, I'll get you... (*Then, still in front of the KILLER, whose knife is*

*raised and who is chuckling and quite motionless, BÉRENGER slowly lowers his two old-fashioned pistols, lays them on the ground, bends his head and then, on his knees with his head down and his arms hanging at his side, he stammers:)* Oh God! There's nothing we can do. What can we do . . . What can we do. . . (*The Killer* 108-109)

The existence of the killer, the one-eyed dwarf who randomly murders people, is, in Ionesco's interpretation, the result of the human fall from grace, the intrusion of evil in the world, as he explains in his conversation with Claude Bonnefoy:

. . . c'est la chute, le péché original, c'est-à-dire le faiblissement d'une intensité de l'action, d'une force du regard ; c'est-à-dire encore la perte de la faculté de s'émerveiller ; l'oubli ; la sclérose de l'habitude ; le quotidien est une couverture grise sous laquelle on cache la virginité du monde ; c'est bien le péché originel ; on peut connaître mais on ne reconnaît plus rien et on ne se reconnaît plus. C'est aussi un mal qui s'introduit dans le monde. (*Entretiens* 35)

. . . it is the fall, the original sin, namely the weakening of an intensity of action, of the intensity of the gaze ; moreover, the loss of the ability to wonder ; the forgetfulness ; the sclerosis of habits ; the daily routine, a grey cover under which we hide the innocence of the world; it is indeed the original sin; we can know each other but we do not recognize anymore, we do not recognize each other anymore. It is also an evil that intrudes into the world. (*my translation*).

A reflection of the opaque light that illuminates the utopian city can be seen in the gouache *Broadway 6 p.m.* (fig.3), where the light is reflected in the contours of the glowing, anxious figures, spread out disparately against a dark background. It is the artificial light, nuanced by reflections of yellow, green and red which does not confer a harmonious spiritual experience, but rather a strange calmness, anticipative of the storm which is about to break. The hieroglyphic presences, marked by anxiety and whose large, round eyes project looks of stupor, wonderment and fear seem to be the inhabitants of a post-apocalyptic city, ravaged by destruction, mistrust, desolation. The warmth of the yellow contours is contrasted by the violent red and coldness of the blue and white

contours, balanced by the neutral, almost impassible, green. In his study, Kandinsky characterizes the color blue in the following way: «Glissant vers le noir, il prend la consonance d'une tristesse inhumaine » (*Du spirituel . . .* 150). (“When it sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human. [*Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 38]). The painter attributes a passive effect to pure green, whereas for Ionesco, green surrounded by black and white, represents a firm hope.<sup>41</sup> It looks like Ionesco’s figurines, as he calls them, are petrified in their apathy and sadness.



**Fig. 3.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Broadway 6 p.m.*, gouache, 1985; rpt. in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco: exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 94)

In the author's last play, *Voyages chez les morts (Journeys Among the Dead)*<sup>42</sup> the radiant city is just a mere shadow of the past. Jean, the protagonist, cannot remember whether or not this city existed or it is the imagination of his memory. The play is an accumulation of fifteen scenes, all variations on the theme of familial divisions, Ionesco's long-term obsession with the conflict with his father, the divorce between his mother and father and his nightmarish years in Romania. In the words of Michel Bataillon, who collaborated with Roger Planchon on the creation of *Ionesco* (fig.4), this montage, created from the last plays and previously unpublished works by Ionesco, is an exploration of the remembrance realm (*Théâtre complet* 1857). In scene XIII, Jean, the protagonist is reliving his complexes, fears, anguishes and in his conversations with Lydia (the protagonist's sister) he evokes a city of light, but does not remember whether or not it is from a dream or reality.

JEAN. . . . Oui, je la revois, cette côte et je revois cette campagne, pleine de lumière. Quelle lumière c'était ! Une lumière différente de la lumière. Et puis, on grimpait la côte et tout en haut, au sommet on arrivait dans la ville claire. J'y suis allé plusieurs fois. Était-ce en rêve ou dans la réalité ? Dans la réalité ! Mais c'était si beau que je croyais que je faisais un rêve. . . . Alumina, ville de mon cœur, Alumina, ville de mon rêve, Alumina, ville de ma vraie réalité. (*Théâtre complet* 1339)

JEAN . . . Yes, I can see it now, that little hill, and I can see that bit of the country, it was so luminous. That light! It was a light that was different from light. And then, we used to climb up the hill, and right at the top, at the summit, we came to the luminous city. I went there several times. Was it in a dream or in reality? In reality! But it was so beautiful that I thought I was dreaming. . . . Alumina, town of my heart, Alumina, town of my dreams, Alumina, town of my true reality. (*Journeys...* 47)

Similar to a sacred space, Alumina is an island of light, sheltered from the rest of the world, a place of reinvigoration and renewal. Soon enough, though, the memory of the place fades away, the cardinal points become fluid and various obstacles impede Jean's



**Fig. 4.** Jean Carmet in *Ionesco*; rpt. in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco: exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 71)

pilgrimage to this city of light. Whereas before, Jean was able to reach Alumina just by walking and climbing the mountain slope, now due to his fatigue, he is unable to reach the city, which is farther and farther away.

JEAN. . . . Je montais à pied la côte et il y avait Alumina tout de suite. Maintenant la fatigue m'empêche de monter et même d'aller à pied sur des chemins plats. J'ai besoin d'argent pour acheter mon billet de chemin de fer. (1339)

JEAN. . . . I used to walk up the hill, and Alumina was immediately revealed. But now I'm too tired to walk uphill, or even to walk on the flat. I need money to buy my train ticket. (*Journeys* . . . 48)

Alumina is no longer an affair of the spirit, where one needs only the right state of mind to reach it. It has become materialization, the manifestation of that sacred space via negation. Instead of paradise, it is the first circle of Dante's inferno, the realm of the moral, virtuous non-Christians as well as un-baptized children.

JEAN. . . . Puisque de toute façon nous brûlons, ne brûlons pas d'impatience. Dansons plutôt en rond, ou bien tenons-nous tous, innombrables que nous sommes, la main dans la main ou bras dessus dessous vers l'éternité du rien, les paradis du silence. . . . Hélas, qui peut



garantir que nous n'en sommes qu'au premier cercle. Le deuxième sera peut-être pire. (*Théâtre complet* 1340)

JEAN. . . . Since in any case we're going to burn, let's not burn with impatience. Let's dance in a ring, instead, or else, even though there are such infinite numbers of us, let's us go hand in hand or arm in arm, towards the eternity of nothingness, the heavens of silence. . . . Alas, who can guarantee that we're only in the outer circle. The next one may well be worse. (*Journeys* 48)

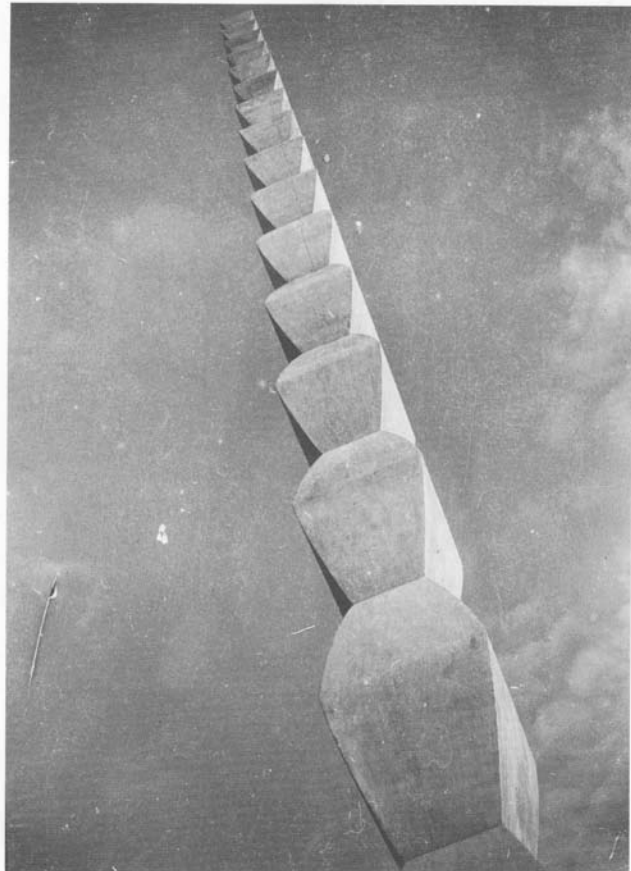
In these two plays, Ionesco reiterates the myths and reinterprets them: the archetypal longing for a paradise lost is materialized in the modern utopia of the corrupt city. Both the radiant city from *Tueur sans gages* and Alumina from *Voyages chez les morts* echo modern renderings of traditional myths. The vertical axis, represented in the gesture of communion with the divine, manifested in contemplation before creation is short-circuited by the actual materialization of this communion depicted through the imagery of flawed cities. The images evoked by the plays are reiterated in the author's gouaches in which the city is again represented in its post-apocalyptic stage, suggested by the dark void that surrounds the colorful figurines.

### ***The Column: From Ascendance to Apocalyptic Revelation***

A similarly subversive gesture occurs in the imagery of the column that reappears again and again in Ionesco's works; the column is either the symbol of sacrificial love or an indicator of evil. This section of the chapter explores the imagery of the column that emerges in Ionesco's works, as well as its relation with the works of the so called 'Carpathian peasant of modern sculpture', Constantin Brancusi, who dedicated his time to find the perfect rendering for the human's need to fly, to levitate and escape his existence. The symbol of the column has strong roots not only in what Jung calls the collective unconscious, but also resonates with the Romanian folkloric imagery. For

instance, in many regions of Romania it is believed that the earth is sustained by four silver columns and people have to fast so that these columns are not eroded or eaten by Judah, the ultimate symbol of evil and betrayal (Pamfilie 458).

Moreover, this totemic image, symbol of verticality, sustainer of the sky vault is prolific throughout Romania. In the regions of Oltenia and Transylvania people place columns, in beautifully crafted wood, at the tomb of the deceased- a grave-post signifying the desire for immortality. Brancusi's *Endless Column* (*Colonne sans fin*, fig.5), inspired by the Romanian folkloric imagery, reveals through the continual process of polishing and stylization of "the rhythmic soaring sculpture" (Edith Balas 95) the sculptor's desire to capture the essence of flying.



**Fig. 5.** Brancusi, Constantin. *Endless Column*. Stone, Targu Jiu, Romania, 1937; rpt. in Balas, Edith. *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987; print; 94)

As Mircea Eliade notes, through the process of internalization (not merely reproducing folk art, but incorporating it and revealing its profound origins), Brancusi has bridged the folkloric local symbolism of the column with its global meaning:

Having grasped the central “secret”— that it is not the creations of ethnic or folk art in themselves that will enable us to renew and enrich modern art but rather the discovery of their “sources”— Brancusi threw himself into an endless quest that was terminated only by his death. (*The Ordeal by Labyrinth* 198)

This gesture of dehumanization, to use Ortega Y Gasset’s term, has placed Brancusi as a precursor of modern art. Eugène Ionesco describes the sculptor’s endeavor to move away from the particular, temporal realism as expressive of his desire to tap into a universal reality: «Il a su saisir l’idée du mouvement en écartant tout réalisme particulier au profit du réel universel » (*Notes* 346). (“He was able to catch the idea of movement without recourse to any particular realism and so comes closer to universal reality” [*Notes* 263-264]). Ionesco goes on to say that Brancusi’s works are representations of essences: «Brancusi s’est dégagé de tout particularisme . . . pour atteindre les essences concrètes». (“he shook off all particularity . . . in order to achieve his concrete essences” [264]). It is precisely this same drive that motivates Ionesco’s creations, namely to explore the profound universalism (which does not entail a homogenizing, nor an appropriating attempt) that reunites people in their own personal experiences.

In his interview with Claude-Henri Roquet, Mircea Eliade discusses the limitless features and universality of any symbol: by its very nature, a symbol is continuously open to interpretations and contains a multitude of significations. The column, which in its mythical connotations retains a cosmogonist function, as it represents the communion with the divine, is the symbol of *axis mundi*, The Cosmic Tree. Its perfect verticality

mediates the connection with the sky, gives access to spiritual knowledge. The image of *axis mundi* reappears in different forms in Ionesco's works, not only in the textual but also in the pictorial. The semiotic significance is complex, since the column (cross, tree, and ladder) can paradoxically embody the blasphemous existence of evil, as well as the communion with the divine.

The image of the cross is abundant in the plastic works of the author. His gouache, *Crucifixion* (fig.6), which is exposed in Ionesco's dining room, invokes the sacred in the irregularity of the sporadic lines and rather abrupt forms. The inscription that accompanies the image, a quote that is found in *Le Blanc et le Noir*, the author's collection of black and white lithographs, reveals the author's quest for the sacred, manifested in the confrontation of the black and white paint strokes: "Le sacré seulement dans les lignes, les contours, les volumes. Des inventions des formes. Inventer des formes comme j'ai inventé des mots» (*Le Blanc et le Noir 14*). ("Sacred only in the lines, shadows, volumes. Inventing forms. Inventing forms as I invented words" [*my translation*]).

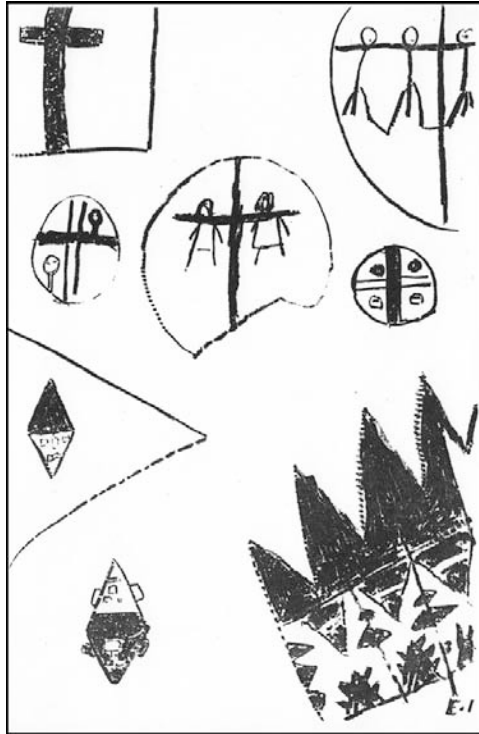
Ladder, tree, cross, figurines populate the gouache in a seemingly chaotic display, although the eye is clearly directed toward the center of the image. The cross in this lithograph is either lonely, lacking a crucified, symbolizing death and finitude in a desolate world (*Le Blanc et le Noir 13*) or surrounded by figurines with arms reached high, as in a gesture of either despair or contemplation.<sup>43</sup> There is, however, a figure resembling a snake that hangs on this cross. This depiction echoes the Old Testament image of the copper snake hanged on the cross erected in the desert. The image of the hanged snake, foreshadowing the messianic sacrifice from the New Testament, had

redeeming powers for it saved from the deadly bites of real snakes those who gazed upon it.

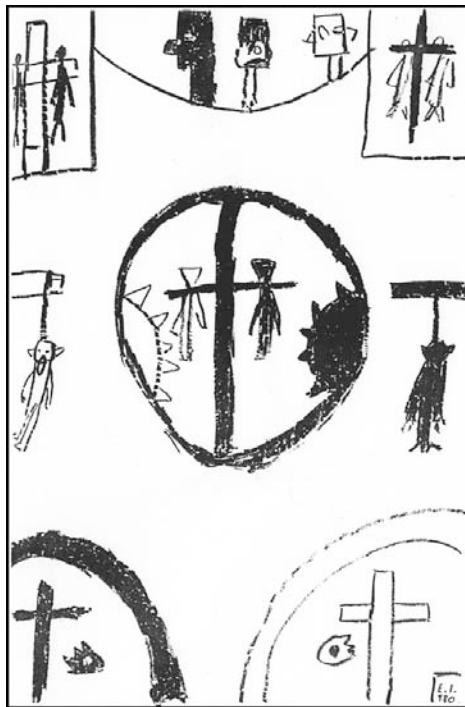


**Fig. 6.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Crucifixion*, gouache, 1986; rpt. in Hubert, Marie-Claude. *Eugène Ionesco* (Paris : Seuil, 1990; print; 155)

The author's lithographs abound in images of the cross, expressing the author's mystical quests. They are isolated dark depictions scattered on a white, austere background. In the center (fig. 7 and fig. 8), the crosses are enclosed within an ovoid shape. The encounter of black and white, symbols of evil and good in Ionesco's allegoric realm, is doubled by the chiaroscuro effect, a confrontation between shadow and light. The contrast between the two tones, black and white, resounds in their effect on the viewer. In Kandinsky's interpretation, white exerts on the viewer's soul an absolute silence, but a silence that is filled with possibilities (155) whereas black is the reverse, a nothingness without possibilities, an eternal silence without hope or future (156).<sup>44</sup> The



**Fig. 7.** Ionesco, Eugène. Lithograph; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 58)



**Fig. 8.** Ionesco, Eugène. Lithograph; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 62)

two fight for sovereignty in Ionesco's lithographs. This is especially visible in fig. 8 where the two crosses placed on the bottom edge of the lithograph exude either salvation (the cross, protected by a white semicircle, which evokes a continuity, as the viewer is left to imagine its continuation outside the border of the lithograph) or a prophecy of doom, as the black cross on the left hand side suggests. Anguish and despair emanates from the head-shaped figure facing down at the foot of the cross on the left. The author's caption for this lithograph (fig.8) narrates the antagonistic movement that the lithograph depicts: «Blanc et noir. Pendus blancs et pendus noirs. Bien obligé de ne pas l'admettre. Mais surtout équilibre du blanc et du noir, équilibre dans l'antagonisme. Les figures, prétextes de formes. Est-ce vrai?»(62) ("Black and white. White and black hanged persons. But above all equilibrium of white and black, equilibrium in antagonism. The figures, just pretense of shapes. Is this true?"[*my translation*]). The final question marks the essence for the author's aim: are his depictions truthful? Do they unveil the artist's profound quest? Whether or not the figures are abstract or figurative is secondary for the artist.

Ionesco's lithograph *L'Arbre du Mal* (fig.9) illustrates an equally pessimistic version of the column: the tree that bears geometrical figures instead of fruits, decapitated heads in the form of reversed triangles does not convey redemption. There is no antagonism between the symbolism of black and white. Evil seems to prevail.

Although the upper part of the tree evokes the Judaic menorah—the seven-branched candelabrum that illuminates the altar in the Tabernacle and in the temple of Jerusalem, symbolizing God's presence, the symbolism is subverted, as the tree is the sustainer of dismembered, robotic figures. It is a rhythmic composition that starts



**Fig. 9.** Ionesco, Eugène. *L'Arbre du mal*, lithograph; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 40-41)

from the center and radiates towards the exterior, populated by antagonistic figures: geometrical black and white forms, some of them devoid of connotations; others, symbols of evil, one-dimensional, inverted triangles (reversal of the Trinity image of the Judeo-Christian God), such as the diabolical figure that sits on a throne, or symbols of intellectuals depicted by the morose heads attached by long black strings. The author confesses his inability to draw oval forms, bearers of positive meanings (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 15).

Another image of the tree, emanating a negative connotation, appears in the lithograph called simply *Arbre* (fig.10), which depicts an abandoned tree, branches arching down, resembling a willow. Ionesco describes it as alone and abandoned, but dignified in its sadness (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 14). There is no connection with the absolute. It is an inversion of the sacred symbolism of *axis mundi*. The hanging-down branches evoke a feeling of hopelessness, generating pessimism, reminding of one of the few stage



elements in Beckett's *En attendant Godot*: a leafless tree, which at the end of the second act barely grows a few leaves.



**Fig. 10.** Ionesco, Eugène. *L'Arbre du mal*, lithograph; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 66-67)

The inverted meaning of the column and its derivatives occurs in Ionesco's plays as well. In *Jeux de massacre (Here Comes a Chopper)* written in 1969, death strikes through a proliferation of means: plagues, swords, revolvers, submachine-guns and fire, attacking the city dwellers. In this play—which does not follow a traditional progressive plotline but is rather structured on a fresco-like model where tableaux are juxtaposed—the city is struck by random acts of evil that bring about death and destruction. The city's civil servant makes an announcement to its dwellers ordering that any house contaminated by plague be marked with a red cross drawn on the door with the inscription: «Dieu aie pitié de nous! » (“May God have mercy on us!”) and that no one should exit their house. In this imagery, the cross, instead of being the sign of salvation and protection, as in biblical

symbolism from Exodus, becomes the stigmatization of people struck by disease. A symbol of death, segregation and marking, the cross bears a resemblance to the yellow star attached to the clothes of Jewish people during Nazi rule. Instead of bringing about freedom and life, the cross is the bearer of isolation and ultimately, death.

In *Le roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*), a play epitomizing the process of dying, the throne of King Bérenger is another variant of the column, or of the cross. The king dies at the end, almost as if crucified, fixated on his throne. This is a play in which Ionesco depicts, transgressing the rule of *bienséance* which specifies that death should occur backstage, the steps that the moribund goes through before dying. This phenomenon of dying occurs in a rhythmic symbiosis between the body and the space, during the real time of the play. Bérenger's kingdom is in decrepitude: everything is dying, from nature to palace. Everything is exposed to the ravages of time. Marie-Claude Hubert notes that the body of the king is a microcosm which lives at the same rhythm as his universe. The king dies a few seconds after the décor disappears. «Cette image forte place le spectateur dans la position du mourant, pour qui c'est le monde- non lui- qui disparaît. » (169) (“This powerful image places the spectator in the position of the moribund, for whom it is the world, and not him- that disappears” [*my translation*]). In his way towards death, Bérenger has to give up colors, symbols of life, vitality, sensations, in other words, his imagination. The queen Marguerite reminds him of that: « Il perçoit encore les couleurs. Des souvenirs colorés. . . . (*Au roi :*) Renonce aussi à cet empire. Renonce aussi aux couleurs. Cela t'égaré encore, cela te retarde » (*Théâtre complet* 795). (“He can still distinguish colours. . . . (*To the King.*) Give up this Empire too! And give your colours up! They're leading you astray, holding you back” [*Exit the King* 93]).

The question of the finality of the human being has haunted Ionesco from his early childhood. He describes his desperation when he realized that his mother and his close ones will one day die (*Journal en miettes* 27).<sup>45</sup> Towards the end of his life, when he wrote *La Quête intermittente* (1987), he confesses that it is him the protagonist of *Le roi se meurt* : «Je me joue, à moi-même, ma propre pièce, *Le roi se meurt*, dans le rôle principal» (58). (“I am playing myself, to myself, my own play, *Exit the King*, in the main role”[*my translation*]). In *Le Blanc et le Noir*, his imperative concerning the “problem of death” denotes a nuance of urgency: «Nous en sommes arrivés au point où il faut absolument résoudre le problème de la mort. . . . Ou bien nous devons savoir que nous sommes immortels, ou bien que l’on sache pourquoi on meurt!»(22). (“We arrived at the point which we absolutely must solve the problem of death . . . . We either should find out that we are immortals, or, if not, that we know why we die” [*my translation*]). When reading the end of Plato’s great dialogue from *Phaedo*, Ionesco notes that the description of Socrate’s death was more convincing than all of Socrate’s arguments for immortality.<sup>46</sup> The human, he writes in his *Journal* cannot comprehend, and this powerlessness (whether provoked by the walls of limitations or abysses of unknown) is what provokes the greatest anguish (37-38).

If the symbolism of pillar in the above cited works has a negative connotation, as they represent death, injustice, or evil, in moral terms, the column (represented by images of the cross, tree, ladders) can also symbolize transcendence, a medium of redemption from the gloomy existence.

In his gouache, *Crucifixion* (Fig.11), dedicated to his daughter, Marie-France, Ionesco evokes the cosmic tree. This time, there is a crucified figure on the cross. The

choice of representing the iconic Christian image of sacrifice and redemption reveals the author's predilection towards mysticism and the influence of the mystical Byzantine paintings to which Ionesco was exposed as a child. Marie-Claude Hubert underlines the significance for Ionesco of religious images, epitomized in the symbol of the icon: «L'icône représente la personne qui, transfigurée, a vécu, dans la plénitude, la pénétration de l'esprit. Dans sa brillance, elle témoigne de cette expérience de lumière, ce qui en explique le hiératisme et la stylisation » (223). ("The icon represents the person who, transfigured, lived, in plenitude, the penetration of the spirit. In its brilliance, it bears witness of this experience of light, which explains its hieratism and stylization" [*my translation*]). The pattern after which the Byzantine icons are created not only evokes the ecstatic, mystic experience of the character depicted, but it elicits from the viewer a pious, reverent posture which leads to a possible encounter with the divine.



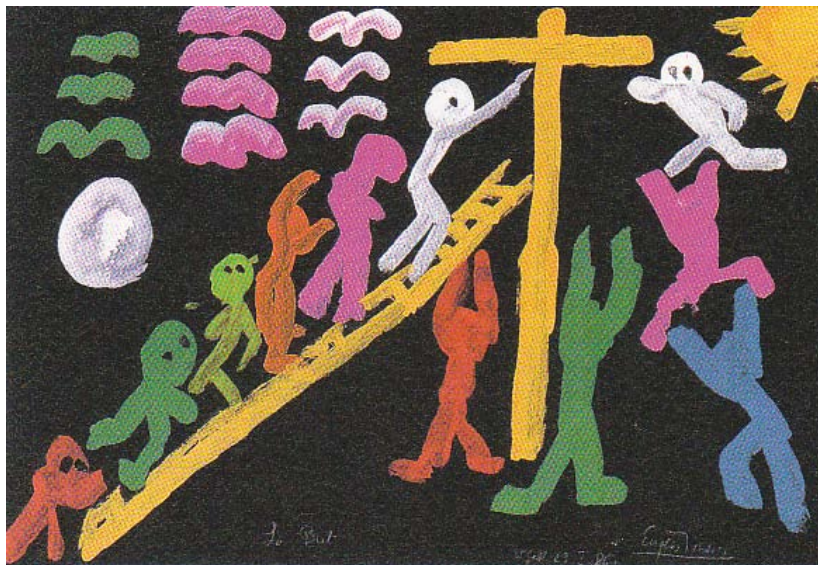
**Fig. 11.** Ionesco, Eugène. Crucifixion, gouache, 1983; rpt in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco: exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 111)

The violence of pain expressed in the forceful bright red strokes, contrasting with the grey background and black cross has an even greater impact as it evokes an act of sacrifice. The slightly bent figurine and the large drops of blood trickling down are the image of the ultimate sacrifice, pinnacle of Christian religion. The imagery of sacrifice can also be traced back to one of the Romanian founding myths, that of *Mesterul Manole*, the stonemason who, in order to assure the endurance of the cathedral he builds, buries his pregnant wife, Ana, inside the walls. The implication is that the permanence of the work of art or any work is guaranteed only by sacrifice. In this gouache, the cross, although charged with negative connotations, is transcendent since it represents the supreme sacrificial act of the love for *the other*. The gouache can be a symbol of the artist, arched over his or her work. It is the image of the martyrdom that Kandinsky evokes when describing the artist's task: « il [l'artiste] n'a pas le droit de vivre sans devoirs, il a une lourde tâche à accomplir, et c'est souvent sa croix »(202). (“[the artist] must not live idle; he has a hard work to perform, and one which often proves a cross to be borne” [54]).

Another variant of the column is the ladder. In Ancient Egyptian tradition, “the notion of the ladder was associated with the myth of the centre of the world” (*Dictionary of symbols* 584). In the mystic tradition, the ladder and its rungs represent the steps that the human beings can take towards perfection, towards an encounter with the divinity: “They stand as units where the upper and the lower, Heaven and Earth, can meet” (582). The ladder is an ascensional symbol that indicates motion, movement as well as hierarchy. It does not only imply spiritual ascendance but also intellectual one, as in the Platonic symbolism, where climbing a ladder “describes the ascent of the soul from the

phenomenal to the intellectual world” (583). In psychoanalytic interpretations, ladders occupy a complex semantic field: “in so far as ladders are means of ascent, they engender terror, fear and anxiety or their opposites, happiness, a sense of security and so on. ... their interpretation is mainly derived from a dialectic of a verticality, with the occasional anxious fear that the ladder may overbalance” ( 584-588). This dual symbolism of the ladder, similar to that of the pillar, is prevalent in Ionesco’s plastic and textual works.

The image of the ladder appears in Ionesco’s watercolors as well, symbolizing this time the connection between human beings and divinity. *Le But* (Fig.12) is one example.



**Fig. 12.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Le But*, gouache, 1986; rpt. in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco : exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 24)

The ladder is bridging the earth and the cross, which reaches the sky. Colorful human figures climb the bright yellow-gold against a black background, illuminated by both the glacial presence of the moon, as well as the warm yellow sun, painted in the same nuances as the ladder and the cross. The center of the gouache is the cross which can be

reached only by climbing solitarily the narrow ladder, perhaps indicating the way to freedom. Climbing signals the gesture of flying, an intrinsic desire in human beings. The ladder in this gouache mediates between human beings and divine; it is what facilitates their union, while at the same time, implying the impossibility of humans to levitate on their own. The gouache depicts the semantic ambivalence of the cross, as representing human suffering and pain, as well as the connection with the divine, a connection that Ionesco admired in the great mystics as well as in Christ. Through the passion of Jesus, Ionesco depicts a cathartic experience, of the possibility to overcome suffering—the most recognizable face of evil.

Ionesco's quest resonates with that of Constantin Brancusi, nick-named the Transylvanian peasant. His columns represent a similar ascensional movement. In his interview with Claude-Henri Roquet, Eliade notes that for Constantin Brancusi, the column marks the desire to climb the tree to heaven (199). A variant of his columns is Brancusi's *Magic Bird* (*Pasarea maiastra*, fig.13).



**Fig. 13.** Brancusi, Constantin. Bird in Space (*L'Oiseau dans l'espace*), sculpture, 1923. Coll. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

A series of Brancusi's birds from the *Bird in space* collection (1923) resemble a slightly bent column. Just as the column, the bird has strong significance in Romanian folklore: it lives in solitude and sometimes shows its splendid multicolored feathers; it has infinite powers and its role is to bring about justice. It also serves as an oracle. Its song that emerges only in solitude can have restorative and rejuvenating powers for the one who hears it.

As the image illustrates, Brancusi, in his attempt to capture the essence of flying, combined the lightness of flight, conveyed in the stylized image, and the heaviness of the stone or metal (marble or bronze) realizing what Eliade calls a *coincidentia oppositorum* (201). In his anecdotal essay on Brancusi, Ionesco captures the essence of the binary oppositions that meet in Brancusi's work:

Bien surprenantes, incroyables, ces synthèses: folklore sans pittoresque, réalité anti-réaliste; figures au-delà du figuratif; science et mystère; dynamisme dans la pétrification; idée devenue concrète, faite matière, essence visible; intuition originale, par-delà la culture, l'académie, les musées. (*Notes* 348-349)

Very surprising, incredible, these syntheses: folklore that is unpicturesque, reality that is anti-realistic; figures that surpass the figurative; science and mystery; dynamism in petrification; ideas made concrete or turned into matter, visible essence; native intuition, transcending culture, academics and museums. (*Notes* 266)

The desire to fly, to ascend and surmount the gloomy existence is expressed by many of Ionesco's protagonists; however, often times, flying is impossible or accompanied by falling or engulfing into mire. In the play *Le Piéton de l'air* (1963), Bérenger, a famous playwright is overwhelmed by the same archetypal desire to escape his monotonous existence and to find again the passion for living and especially for writing. Literature and writing has to be a passage towards something else in order to



have meaning: «L'activité littéraire n'est plus un jeu, ne peut plus être un jeu pour moi. Elle devrait être un passage vers autre chose. Elle ne l'est pas» (*Théâtre complet* 671). (“Writing isn't a game for me anymore, and it will never be a game again. It ought to lead to something else, but it doesn't” [*A Stroll in the Air* 20]). His ascension to places where space and time converge springs from his dream of flying, of transcending the limits of his body: «Voler, c'est un besoin indispensable à l'homme» (*Théâtre complet* 707)(“Man has a crying need to fly” [*A Stroll . . .* 73]) utters Bérenger revealing the universal symbolism of his aspiration to fly. In *Le Piéton de l'air* the images of ascension are closely related to the experiences of illumination. Marie-Claude Hubert notes this connection: «Ionesco mêle les images d'une nature paradisiaque et des symboles d'ascension, suggérant par cette contiguïté que la montée vers l'expérience extatique est liée à la vision d'un paysage de lumière» (*Eugène Ionesco* 158). (“Ionesco combines paradise-like images and symbols of ascension, suggesting by this contiguity that the ascent towards the ecstatic experience is related to the appearance of a luminous landscape” [*my translation*]). In the short story with the same name, which served as inspiration for the play, the overwhelming feeling experienced during the episodes of illumination, is ontological, as it traverses Bérenger's whole being. The sentiment of plenitude—plerophory—full assurance of faith accompanies the moment of revelation of truth. However, in the play, the intensity of the experience is accentuated: «Cette allégresse est physique. Je la sens là. Mes poumons se gonflent d'un air plus subtil que l'air. Ses vapeurs me montent à la tête. Divine griserie ! Divine griserie!» (*Théâtre complet* 698). (“This happiness is something physical. I can feel it *here*! The air that fills my lungs is more rarefied than air. It gives off vapours that are going to my head. A sort

of divine intoxication! Divinely intoxicated!”[*A Stroll*. . .37]) The desire for levitation is depicted in the alternating appearance and disappearance of the pink column, the tree, the immense silver bridge. The sight of these marvelous totems prompts Bérenger to begin jumping up and down, a preamble to his flying experience. The image of the arch that the bridge projects is described as a celestial ship in the stage directions: « Le pont d’argent, éblouissant de lumière, au-dessus de l’abîme, relie ses deux bords. Il est comme un vaisseau en forme d’arche, aérien, semblant suspendu très haut, au-dessus de la rivière, chevauchant les cimes lumineuses» (699). (“The silver bridge, dazzlingly brilliant, joins the two sides of the gorge above the abyss. It is like some ship in the shape of an arch, which seems to be suspended very high in the air above the river, leaping from one gleaming hilltop to the other” [*A Stroll*... 39]). To Bérenger’s horror, his levitation to the world of beyond (*de l’au delà*) does not reveal a realm of hope, but rather a world of desolation. Just as the radiant city subverts the myth of Eden, the transcendence that should occur in the act of flying is subverted in Ionesco’s imagery. Similar to the mythological figure of Icarus, whose ambition to fly destroys him, as his wings are burned, Bérenger finds a symbolic death: a world without hope, populated by guillotined humans, giant grasshoppers, fallen angels, archangels gone astray (74). Dante’s shadows and Bosch’s imageries of hell populate the gloomy world discovered by Bérenger. Levitation does not reveal a flawless world, as one would hope, but brings awareness about the grim reality of doom. When in his interview with Claude Bonnefoy Ionesco is asked about the origin of the short story, he replies and explains the meaning of the anti-world that his narrator and protagonist encounter:

. . . à l’origine de ce conte, il y a d’une part un rêve, rêve de libération, de puissance et, d’autre part, une critique, une satire, une description réaliste

de la vie de cauchemar dans les régimes totalitaires, une prophétie de malheur. . . . Le rêve c'est le monsieur qui s'envole. La partie consciente, c'est ce qu'il voit grâce à cet envol. Et que voit-il ? Simplement ce qui se passé dans la moitié de l'univers et que l'autre moitié, par aveuglement, indifférence, parti pris, ne veut pas voir . . . (*Entre la vie* 63-4)

. . . at the source of this tale is, on one hand, a dream—a dream of liberation, of power—and on the other hand, a critique, a satire, a realistic description of the nightmarish life in totalitarian regimes, a prophecy of doom. . . . The dream is about a man who takes off in the air. The conscious part concerns that which he perceives thanks to his ascension. And what does he see? Simply that which happens in one half of the world and that which the other half, because of its blindness, indifference and prejudice refuses to see. . . (*my translation*)

The experience of levitation does not necessarily guarantee the deeply desired connection that Ionesco's protagonists and figures seek; they are rather a *prise de conscience*, an awareness of the brokenness that exists in the world. The paradisiacal flight results in the acknowledgement of an apocalyptic, hopeless world. Bérenger exclaims: « Je vois, hélas ! Je vois tout ! Plus d'espoir. Ce n'est pas possible. Ce n'est pas possible. Et pourtant, si. Si ce n'était qu'un rêve. Non, non, ce n'est pas un rêve. Mon Dieu ! » (*Théâtre complet* 728). (“I can see, I'm afraid I can see everything! And there's no more hope. It is impossible, it is just impossible. And yet, perhaps, if it were only a dream. No, no, it is not a dream. Oh God! [*A Stroll in the Air* 70]). The desire for sublimation through flying is countered by the morbid reality of the anti-world.

In the stage production, flying is materialized with the aid of circus elements, such as the bicycle that Bérenger uses to levitate towards the anti-world: «Une bicyclette blanche de cirque est lancée des coulisses. Bérenger l'attrape. Au même moment, des gradins apparaissent comme au cirque, sur lesquels s'installent les Anglais et Joséphine. Ceux-ci sont devenus des spectateurs de cirque. . . . » (712). (“A white circus bicycle is thrown on from the wings. Bérenger catches it. At the same moment tiers of seats appear,

like a circus, and the English characters and Josephine go and take their places there. They have become the audience at a circus” [*A Stroll in the Air* 52]). Through the procedure of the *mise en abyme* Ionesco borrows from the circus and introduces an element of strangeness, of uneasiness that foretells Bérenger’s apocalyptic vision. The comic relief the circus provides is an escape from the eternal anguish that haunts Ionesco and his characters who are painfully aware of human mortality and the impossibility of finding meaning, or of making sense of the absurdity of existence. In *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco emphasizes the role of humor as a liberation, a counter-balance against the great malaise of existence : «Prendre conscience de ce qui est atroce et en rire, c’est être maître de ce qui est atroce. . . .[L]e comique est seul en mesure de nous donner la force de supporter la tragédie de l’existence» (201-202). (“To become fully conscious of the atrocious and to laugh at it is to master the atrocious. . . . [T]he comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence [*Notes* 144]).”

In his exploration of archetypes, Ionesco reveals another dimension of humanism, one that concerns values that expand beyond the historical, political, and quotidian. Matei Calinescu, who dedicated many of his studies to Eugene Ionesco’s works, coins a term for Ionesco’s aesthetic approach: oneiric realism. The reality is veiled or revealed through dreams, and the role of consciousness is to capture and reiterate them, through anamnesis. Although he was criticized for defending an abstract humanism that does not apply in real life, Ionesco insists that he is concerned for every human, that the essential condition of the human is not that of the citizen, but that of a mortal being (*Notes* 306) and these are the themes and motifs inspired from archetypes that permeate his plays. Kandinsky emphasizes the role of art which beyond its aesthetic function fulfills an almost spiritual

need for the human: «Il [l'art] est le langage qui parle à l'âme, dans la forme qui lui est propre, de choses qui sont le *pain quotidien* de l'âme et qu'elle ne peut recevoir que sous cette forme » (*Du spirituel . . . 200, author's italics*). (“It is the language that speaks to the soul, in the form that suits it best, of things that are the soul's daily bread that cannot be perceived but in this form”[*my translation*]).<sup>47</sup>

The paradoxical symbolism of the column, and its variants, which ultimately embodies human's desire to fly, resides in its simultaneous signification of death (of the impossibility of the human to escape the dismal existence) as well as the desire to transcend it. Ionesco's quest for the lost paradise, materialized in the utopist radiant city, and the desire to fly, depicted in the imageries of the column, are rooted in archetypal dreams shared by people regardless of their political affiliation or social status.

Marthe, Bérenger's daughter, who follows her father's trajectory from the earth, brings a flickering light of hope to the abysmal revelation of his father, as she finds solution in unconditional love, echoing Emmanuel Levinas' notion of responsibility for the other. She exclaims: «Aime les gens. Si tu les aimes, ils ne seront plus des étrangers. Si tu n'en as pas peur, ils ne sont plus des monstres . . . Aime-les. Il n'y aura plus d'enfer» (*Théâtre complet 821*) (“If you love people, they won't be strangers to you anymore. If you stop being afraid of them, they won't be monsters anymore . . . Love them. Then hell will exist no more” [*A Stroll... 61*]). As I noted elsewhere, “this humanistic plea seems to be the resolution . . . of the hell and paradise dialectic; it reveals the incessant hope that accompanies Ionesco: hope in the human ability to empathize and love” (“Dialectics of apocalyptic imagery in Eugène Ionesco's works” 188). In his work *Poetry and Apocalypse* (2009), William Franke merges poetry and theology into what he

calls, an apocalyptic genre, defined by the shattering of our world or discursive order (58), marked by “a radical openness to what is other than all that can be represented” (25). The connotations of despair that accompany apocalypse are paradoxically connected with hope, which is revealed at the end of the play through Marthe’s apology for humanity. Franke notes: “The extreme imagery of the apocalyptic is undoubtedly an expression of despair, but it is despair that is connected with a hope for its transcendence into a radically new order of existence” (15). This new order of existence is translated in Ionesco’s imagery as the love for the other, as the desire of communion with the others.

## Notes

<sup>27</sup> Ionesco in his interview with Claude Bonnefoy : «J’accorde beaucoup d’importance au rêve parce qu’il me donne une vision un peu plus aigue, plus pénétrante de moi-même. Rêver c’est penser et c’est penser d’une façon beaucoup plus profonde, plus vraie, plus authentique parce que l’on est comme replié sur soi-même. Le rêve est une sorte de méditation, de recueillement. Il est une pensée en images. Quelquefois il est extrêmement révélateur, cruel. Il est d’une évidence lumineuse. Pour quelqu’un qui fait du théâtre, le rêve peut être considéré comme un événement essentiellement dramatique » (*Entretiens* 10).

<sup>28</sup> «Est valable ce qui, tout en étant dans l’histoire, est hors de l’histoire. Je parle des archétypes, je parle des mythes que l’histoire et les idéologies n’ont pas totalement réussi à défigurer, à dégrader : ainsi la révolution est la caricature d’un mythe que l’on peut à travers cette caricature reconstituer, c’est celui de la transfiguration, de l’apparition de l’homme nouveau ; chaque chef révolutionnaire devenu par la suite un tyran, aura été chaque fois un messie espéré et sa caricature ; on reconnaît très bien dans l’idée du progrès, le mythe ascensionnel, le mythe de la Rédemption . . . » (*Découvertes* 115-116).

<sup>29</sup> « [J’] en avais marre de la parole, marre des mots et j’avais besoin d’un art de silence » (*Eugène Ionesco* 252).

<sup>30</sup> «De lui [Van Gogh] on devrait retenir cette grande vérité: la peinture n’est pas une vision plastique du monde mais le monde plastique des formes, des couleurs dans une vision spirituelle» (« Un certain Van Gogh » 278).

<sup>31</sup> « Depuis Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Braque, Picasso, la peinture n’a fait qu’essayer de se libérer de ce qui n’était pas peinture : littérature, anecdote, histoire, photographie ; les peintres tentent de redécouvrir les schèmes fondamentaux de la peinture, les formes pures, la couleur en soi ». (*Notes* 68) “Since Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Braque and Picasso, painting has done nothing but try to shake off all that is not painting : literature, story-telling, history and photography. Painters are trying to rediscover the basic fundamentals of painting, pure form, color for its own sake” (*Notes and Counter Notes* 33).

<sup>32</sup> Kandinsky writes : « Il y a dans l’œuvre d’art la révélation d’une réalité supérieure inaccessible au discours de la raison et elle devient par une coïncidence inouïe dans le même mouvement le support d’une

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méditation métaphysique. Elle est à la fois le support de la méditation et l'image de l'itinéraire » (*Du spirituel* . . . 26).

<sup>33</sup> « Loin de n'être que des matériaux accidentels et secondaires de notre psychique, les images, dans leur variété, participant d'une totalité vivante, à travers laquelle nous prenons conscience de nous-mêmes et percevons le réel. C'est par elles que nous pouvons habiter un monde et donner un sens à notre vie » (*La vie des images* 7).

<sup>34</sup> In his intellectual debate with one of his critics, Kenneth Tynan, Ionesco is defending against an ideological work of art and argues for an art that has its own system of expressions and direct access to understanding reality: « A mon sens, une oeuvre d'art a un système d'expression qui lui est propre; elle possède des propres moyens d'appréhension directe du réel » (*Notes et contre-notes* 139).

<sup>35</sup> Marie-Claude Hubert remarks : « On note, dans la peinture de Ionesco, la même évolution que dans son théâtre, où l'abstraction initiale d'une pièce comme *La Cantatrice chauve* s'atténue peu à peu, cédant la place à l'onirisme. S'il commença par des compositions purement abstraites, son art, quoique toujours irréaliste, se fit assez vite figuratif » (*Eugène Ionesco* 224).

<sup>36</sup> « La vie spirituelle, à laquelle l'art appartient également, et dont il est l'un des agents principaux, est un mouvement compliqué, mais certain et facilement simplifiable, vers l'avant et vers le haut. C'est le mouvement même de la connaissance, qui, quelque forme qu'il prenne, garde le même sens profond et le même but » (*Du spirituel* . . . 58).

<sup>37</sup> Mircea Eliade notes in *Mythès, rêves et mystères*: «le grand mystère consiste dans le fait même que le sacré se manifeste ; car . . . en se manifestant, le sacré se limite et s' 'historicise'» (157).

<sup>38</sup> « Figurez-vous que je cherchais un assassin. Tout à coup, dans la pénombre, je l'aperçois. Je vais vers lui, c'est alors que j'aperçois son couteau... Ce couteau a coupé le fil de mon rêve. Mais, le matin même, j'écrivais une nouvelle, *La Photo du colonel*» (Emmanuel Jacquart's annotation in *Théâtre complet* 1625).

<sup>39</sup> « Il est possible que le souvenir même des grottes d'origine s'estompe dans l'esprit des générations futures, mais il n'y a d'ores et déjà plus de différence : le dédoublement suffit à les renvoyer toutes deux dans l'artificiel » (*Simulacres...* 21).

<sup>40</sup> In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco reiterates his view that ideologies contain reminiscences of myths : « Il y a de temps à autres des choses extraordinaires qui révèlent ce qui est derrière le marxisme. Alors on retrouve le mythe, c'est-à-dire une vérité profonde, essentielle, à travers l'idéologie qui est dégradation de la vérité mythique » (*Entretiens* 49).

<sup>41</sup> « Le vert, au milieu du blanc et de noir représente un espoir ferme » (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 19).

<sup>42</sup> First performance of the play takes place in 1980 at Guggenheim Museum in New York, then at Bâle, London. In France it was first introduced on the air, as a radio show on France-Culture, by Claude Roland-Manuel in 1982. Then, in 1983 Roger Planchon has put together a montage called *Ionesco*, where he has integrated Ionesco's last plays: *L'Homme aux valises* and *Voyages chez les morts*. The tour started at Lille, Strasbourg, Le Havre, Annecy, Villeurbanne (1983) and then Paris, at Odéon in 1984 (notice by Jacques Lemarchand, *Théâtre complet* 1857).

<sup>43</sup> «Dans un désert blanc, une croix triste, grise, seule. Dans un désert. Je n'ai voulu dessiner qu'une croix, sans rien y mettre. Pourquoi est-elle chargée d'affectivité ? Pourquoi si triste ? Je me demande, en blasphémant peut-être, s'il lui manque un crucifié» (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 13).

<sup>44</sup> Kandinsky notes: «Ce n'est pas pour rien que le blanc a été choisi comme parure de la joie et de la pureté immaculée; le noir comme celle du deuil, de l'affliction profonde et comme couleur de la mort» (157).

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<sup>45</sup> « Je pensais avec effroi à la mort future de ma mère, c'était une angoisse, une obsession permanente... » (*Journal en miettes* 27). ( "I was terrified at the thought that my mother was going to die, this was a permanent and agonizing obsession . . ." [*Fragments of a Journal* 20]).

<sup>46</sup> « La description de la mort de Socrate est tellement convaincante, beaucoup plus convaincante que les arguments de Socrate pour l'immortalité » (*Journal en miettes* 36).

<sup>47</sup> The translation of Kandinsky's work that I am using reproduces an earlier version published in 1914; therefore, I am using my translation for some fragments of the work that exist in the French translation (1954) but not in the English one.



**CHAPTER IV**

**HUMANISM AND THE OTHER: FROM LANGUAGE**

**ENTROPY, REBELLION TO THE SUBSTITUTION FOR**

**THE OTHER**

« . . . en tant qu'écrivain, le malheur universel est mon affaire personnelle, intime.»  
(Ionesco, *Antidotes* 318)

Just as for E.M. Cioran, whom Ionesco called the “philosopher of despair” («philosophe de la désespérance»), the response to the absurdity of life lies in an orthodoxy of quietness (*orthodoxie de la quiétude*), a human need to retreat, to detach from the world, for Ionesco and his anti-heroes a position of contemplation and wonderment before the world is vital. Yet Ionesco’s protagonists, notably Bérenger, the author’s embodiment on stage, move on from this somewhat passive stance and like *l’homme révolté* of Camus, without assuming any heroic qualities, they find meaning in the act of rebellion and ultimately sacrificing for the other.

As discussed in the second chapter, the theatre of the absurd has often been critiqued as being disengaged and uninvolved in the world affairs, due to its lack of message and its penchant for displaying chaos on stage. It is exactly in this very negation of logic—manifested in the aphasia that the protagonists experience, the proliferation of objects, the void expressed in themes of waiting and absence—that meaning can surface. Ortega y Gasset in his work on the *Dehumanization of art* reminds us that the survival of art and its essence rests in this ‘suicidal gesture’: “...its self-negation miraculously

bringing about its preservation and triumph” (48). This gesture of negation is pregnant in Ionesco’s plays, right from the beginning.

### ***The Entropy of Language***

Language, which is the prime material for literary works, is the first to go through the scrutiny, deconstruction and displacement, being shaken to its very structural core. Morphology, syntax and semantics are challenged and put into question. The demise of Logos, of words, which become just reminiscences of broken thoughts are the feeble signs of the profound longing to communicate, to belong. Marie-Claude Hubert, in her article “Ionesco et le bilinguisme” attributes this ontological malaise to the experience of bilingualism that the author experiences, which is linked to the parental conflict that he lived through (98). Ionesco oscillated between these two geographical spaces, Bucharest and Paris, which he associated with his father (Romania) and with his mother (France). Ionesco’s family moved to Paris when Ionesco was two years old. In 1938, he moved again to Bucharest with his father, who meanwhile abandoned and divorced Thérèse Ipcar, Ionesco’s mother. In 1938, Ionesco decides to move to Paris with his wife, Rodica Burileanu. The author is feeling this uprooting in both cultures. Yet, as he affirms in *Antidotes*, French is his first language, as he learned to read, write; his first books were French as well as his first authors. This prompts a profound and continuous reflection on language: its disarticulation, dislocation starts with his first play, *la Cantatrice chauve* and continues until his last play, *Voyages chez les morts*.

Ionesco’s first protagonists from *La Cantatrice chauve*, the dull couples Martins and Smiths, are incapable to relate to one another. Their conversations made of clichés, of disparate phrases that often turn into hysterical onomatopoeias, are empty and lack

meaning, expressing the absence of connection. Even the play's title, a tragedy of language in Ionesco's terms (*Notes* 248), is the result of a lapsus. How the first play was conceived illustrates the intention of the author to depict, through decomposing language the lack of communication that his characters experience. While trying to learn English, using Assimil's method from a text called *L'anglais sans peine*, which used characters and dialogues, Ionesco observed that the conversations were filled with clichés, idiomatic phrases, ignoring the aspect of communicating something. Mr. Smith, the husband of Mrs. Smith, protagonist of the grammar and conversation lessons (which later became protagonists in his play) was letting his wife know how many children they had, where they had lived, what their name was, that they had a maid Mary, etc. The caving in of language was depicted in this *tragedy of language* through proliferation of words that have no connections between them, word contradictions, and homophonies at the expense of meaning. For example Madame Smith utters a gastronomical tirade noting the different benefits of various dishes and food items; for example yogurt is "excellent for the stomach, the kidneys, the appendicitis and apotheosis" («excellent pour l'estomac, les reins, l'appendicite et l'apothéose» [11]) . A philosophical question that Monsieur Smith poses resorts to a comical procedure of meaning, but shows Ionesco's indignation with the progression of life's stages: «Il y a une chose que je ne comprends pas, says Mr. Smith. Pourquoi à la rubrique de l'état civil, dans le journal, donne-t-on toujours l'âge des personnes décédées et jamais celui des nouveau-nés ?» (12). ("Here is a thing I don't understand. In the newspaper they always give the age of deceased persons but never the age of the newly born" [*The Bald Soprano*11]). Ionesco states in his reflections that a

preferable chronology of life would be to start with death and then regressively return to childhood and in the end, to disappear in the moment of birth.

The author sketched his characters without having in mind an ideological purpose; they are void of psychological traits or spiritual desires, such as lifeless puppets, at the mercy of the puppeteer who directs them. In *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco describes the movement of the play within the parameters of a world without coherence, with no reference to a logical construction. While writing and during rehearsals, he noticed «une progression abstraite» which developed into a rhythm without any preconceived plotline (*Notes* 258).

In his monograph *Ionesco*, Giovanni Lista stresses that this incessant chattering (*bavardage*) depicts the characters' emptiness of mind.<sup>48</sup> Ionesco confirms this in *Notes*:

Les Smiths, les Martin ne savent plus parler, parce qu'ils ne savent plus s'émouvoir, n'ont plus de passions, ils ne savent plus être, ils peuvent devenir n'importe qui, n'importe quoi, car n'étant pas, ils ne sont que les autres, le monde de l'impersonnel, ils sont interchangeables. . . . (*Notes* 249)

The Smiths and Martins no longer know how to talk because they no longer know how to think, they no longer know how to think because they are no longer capable of being moved, they have no passions, they no longer know how to be, they can become anyone or anything, for as they are no longer themselves, in an impersonal world, they can only be someone else, they are interchangeable. . . . (*Notes* 180)

The ellipses, pauses, points of suspension, the unsynchronized dialogue of back and forth lines, not really following a logical sequence, reflect the void, the invading absence which in reality points towards a deep human need to commune. The stage performance directed by Jean-Luc Lagarce (fig.14), who, in the early nineties, revived this play from its fixed, almost obsolete performances that were (and still are) repeating continually at the theatre of Huchette, depicts the puppet-like, disjointed gestures of the

characters, the absence of real communication that defines all their conversations. Jean-Luc Lagarce noted the irony of the *Cantatrice* as being one of the revolutionary plays in theatre which was now constrained as it was performed almost uniquely at the theatre of Huchette, in its original *mise-en-scène* directed by Nicholas Bataille (1950), and became rather a commodified product of touristic attraction.



**Fig. 14.** Ionesco, Eugène. *La Cantatrice chauve*, dir. by Jean-Luc Lagarce, 1991-1993. boutique.arte.tv. n.d. Web. 28 April 2014)

In the disarticulation of language and search for a pure language, Ionesco is aiming to attain a theatrical essence, just as in the modern painting of Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Braque, Miró and others, there is the attempt to liberate painting from what it is not. This, clarifies Ionesco, is not just an aesthetic pursuit, a formalist revolution, but rather “the expression of reality in pictorial terms, in an idiom as revealing as the language of words and sounds” (*Notes and Counter Notes* 33). The same quest for a pure language of theatre is what motivates Ionesco:

Si l'on a pu croire d'abord qu'il s'agissait d'une certaine déségrégation du langage pictural, il ne s'agissait dans le fond, que d'une ascèse, d'une purification, d'un rejet d'un langage parasitaire. De même, c'est après avoir désarticulé des personnages et des caractères théâtraux, après avoir rejeté un faux langage de théâtre, qu'il faut tenter, comme on l'a fait pour la peinture de le réarticuler- purifié, essentialisé. (*Notes* 68)

Even if this first appeared to us as a disintegration of the pictorial idiom, fundamentally it was the ascetic pursuit of purity, the rejection of a parasitic idiom. Similarly, it is only when we have pulled apart the conventional characters in our plays, only when we have broken down a false theatrical idiom, that we can follow the example of painting and try to put it together again—its essential purity restored. (*Notes* 22-34)

The parasitic language in Ionesco's interpretation is the language marked by clichés, by a pretense of reality, of false coherence. In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco defines his characters from his first plays as being mechanical, lacking any psychology and who do not think: they are people who pronounce slogans, which spare them from thinking.<sup>49</sup> For Ionesco, this false reality is construed, and consequently artificial. The liberation of art came with the freedom from mimesis, from imitating a reality, which is, after all, just a representation of reality. As we know, in theatre the false language that Ionesco rejects is that which is subdued to external rules, either ideological or structural (such as Aristotle's golden rules and classical unities). When text is secondary to any sort of ideology, of imposed paradigm, it is already corrupted, suggests Ionesco, and cannot truly communicate. On the opposite side of the scale is the pure language, which can only be attained if artists refuse to obey imposed rules, by others or even by themselves, and regain their sincerity, honesty and extract the material and themes for their art from the inner core of their being:

La sincérité est profonde, on trouve en soi-même l'originalité de sa sincérité et non chez les autres. Pourtant, elle doit être reconnue par les autres qui s'y identifient. L'œuvre d'art ne peut être ni l'expression d'un cas trop particulier, ni une répétition, ni imitation. Telle est sa loi

paradoxale, tel est le paradoxe du critère artistique. C'est en soi-même que l'on trouve ce qui est profondément personnel et ce qui est impersonnel. (*Antidotes* 334-335)

To be expressed with originality, it [the work of art] must be sought within one-self; it cannot be borrowed from other people, though they should be able to recognize and feel they can identify with it. A true work of art cannot rely on imitation or repetition, nor be simply the expression of a far too special case. It is ruled by a paradox, the paradoxical law that governs art. Only in oneself can one find what is both impersonal and deeply personal. ("Why Do I Write?" 135)

The quality of pure language is its constant movement, continuously evolving and changing. Good and evil, artificial and true, parasitic and pure, sacred and profane are the binary oppositions that mark Eugène Ionesco's fictional works, conferring its unique dynamics. His strive for an idealistic morality is met by daily realities that he faces as a writer, and moreover, as a human being. Matei Calinescu, in *Recherches identitaires*, remarks that beyond the "pure exercise of style" that defines the structure of *La Cantatrice chauve* lies an explosion of the quotidian, an apocalyptic and grotesque uprooting of the present, a personal and real experience of nothingness (109).

A similar experience of language entropy is revealed in *Les Chaises* (1952), the tragic farce which brings on stage the old couple who invite (invisible) guests to an event culminating with a very important message. The accumulation of empty chairs on stage (fig. 15) accentuates the feeling of emptiness, of void in a space with ambiguous signification: a sanctuary where the sacred speech is to be delivered and a profane space, where small talk occurs and guests are invited for a party. The couple's attempt to pass on an important message and their wait for the Orator is derisory, as the messenger, similarly to Beckett's characters, turns out to be mute and deaf, unable therefore to communicate. The speech deliverer is incapable of transmitting the message. At the end

of the play, the long awaited and acclaimed Emperor arrives but he turns out to be a false messiah since he does not save the two protagonists who, in a desperate gesture, commit suicide in the end by jumping out the windows. As in the other first plays, language is deconstructed. Giovanni Lista notes that there is no dialectical argumentation of ideas, no discourse articulation signifying a position taken and followed by the characters (*Ionesco* 134). They are mumbling words that make no sense. Towards the end of the play, when the couple is greeting and thanking everyone for their presence at this great event, the words they pronounce become disjointed. The assonances are an eloquent example:

LE VIEUX. . . . mon épouse, ma compagne... Sémiramis! . .  
LA VIEILLE. . . . pouse...pagne... miss.... (*Théâtre complet* 179)

OLD MAN. . . . My wife, my helpmeet . . . Semiramis! . . .  
OLD WOMAN. . . . ife... meet... mis (*The Chairs* 156)

The Vieille is echoing her husband's speech, and the syllable she repeats do not only subvert meaning but create the comical effect of language, against the tragic background that is a prelude to their suicide.



**Fig. 15.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Les Chaises*, dir. by Jacques Mauclair, ORTF, Paris, 21 November 1962, Television. Author's screenshot.



In Ionesco's last written play, *Voyages chez les morts* (1980) Jean, the protagonist, gradually loses his ability to produce or comprehend words; his final monologue, which resembles Lucky's monologue from Beckett's *En attendant Godot*, is characterized by inarticulate stuttering of scattered, broken words. The monologue ending his quest for identity, after traveling through the labyrinth of death where he interacts with people from his past, closes on the ambiguous note: "Je ne sais pas" (*Théâtre complet* 1361). Paradoxically, in Ionesco's esthetics, the breaking apart of conventional language can confer the means, or an opening for genuine communication, avows Ionesco in his interview, reproduced at the end of Marie-Claude Hubert's book : «J'ai l'impression qu'on a cassé le langage conventionnel et qu'à travers ce faux langage, ces assonances, il y a une possibilité de vraie communication» (*Eugène Ionesco* 240). ("I have the impression that we've dislocated the conventional language, and that through this false language, these assonances, a possibility of true communication can exist" [*my translation*]). Ionesco is operating a reversal of the process of language learning and acquisition, by having his protagonists go backwards through the stages that a child undergoes when learning a language. This gesture could suggest an unlearning of what is conventional that has to take place in order for one to reach meaning in life. In the same interview with Marie-Claude Hubert, Ionesco reminds the reader that despite his belief in non-communication, there is in him a continual effort to communicate, to make himself understood: «Malgré ma croyance en la non communication, il y a en même temps, chez moi, un effort permanent de communiquer, de me faire comprendre» (241). ("Despite my belief in non-communication, I make a continual effort to communicate, to make myself understood" [*my translation*]).

Jean, the protagonist, is therefore using a child's limited words, disarticulated and fragmented, and through them he attempts to communicate his anguish and need to find answers. He describes his vision at the end of the play, of the sky obstructing green clouds («l'horizon encombrait les nuages verts»), streets that would walk about in invalids' pyjamas («Les allées se promenaient dans les pyjamas des malades »), old men's beards all along the streets («des barbes des vieillards jonchent les routes, s'enfoncent dans les ruelles et les marquises s'y les collent» [*Théâtre complet* 1357]). He realizes later that the language is weak and cannot render his vision justice: « . . . cela n'a rien à voir avec ce que je vois. Je n'ai plus mon langage. Plus je dis, moins je parle. Plus je parle, moins je dis. Que font les raisonneurs de jadis qui raisonnaient sans raison? » (1357-1358). (« . . . that has nothing to do with what I 'm seeing. I've lost my command of language. The more I say, the less I speak. The more I speak, the less I say. What do the old-time reasoners do, who reason without reason?» [*Journeys . . .* 62]).

This interplay between coherent language and child-like pre-language that Ionesco's protagonists experience reflects the intertwined Lacanian levels of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic that the human experiences. Although there are no clear-cut divisions between the three orders, since they continuously overlap each other in psyche's life, Jean and other protagonists of Ionesco's plays are sometimes communicating in the register of the Real, which is the order that precedes language and resists coherent formulations. It is the order of the non-representable, unsayable which, together with the Imaginary order (which belongs to the sphere of virtual, of what the *I* imagines herself to be), are opposing, although often times overlapping, the Symbolic order, ratified by language rules, the level where the *I* is entering under the governance of

language. In Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lacan, the Real "has to be totally de-substantialized. It is not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the fissure within the symbolic network itself"(72). Ellie Ragland provides her interpretation of the Lacanian order of the Real, in her article that analyses excerpts from Lacan's first seminar: The real is a "concrete and already full, a brute, pre-symbolic reality which returns to the same place in the form of need, such as hunger" ( 192). Moreover, she writes that "real enters discourse as a sign that something that has been repressed still functions" (193). In this interpretation the conundrums that make up the order of the Real can be read, from a linguistic stance, as a pre-language, as well as a post-language stage. Jean, from *Voyages chez les morts*, experiences the post-language level, the un-learning or repression of something that has been learned in order to access a reality that cannot be defined by words and language.

In *Découvertes* (1969), Ionesco is questioning the origin of language: does it precede or follow the cognitive process? In his interpretation, returning to the world of the *infans* is the way to access meaning (79). Returning to the innocence and wonderment characteristic of children, reestablishes the human in the center of the world, in a state of immobility, of openness to understanding and learning.

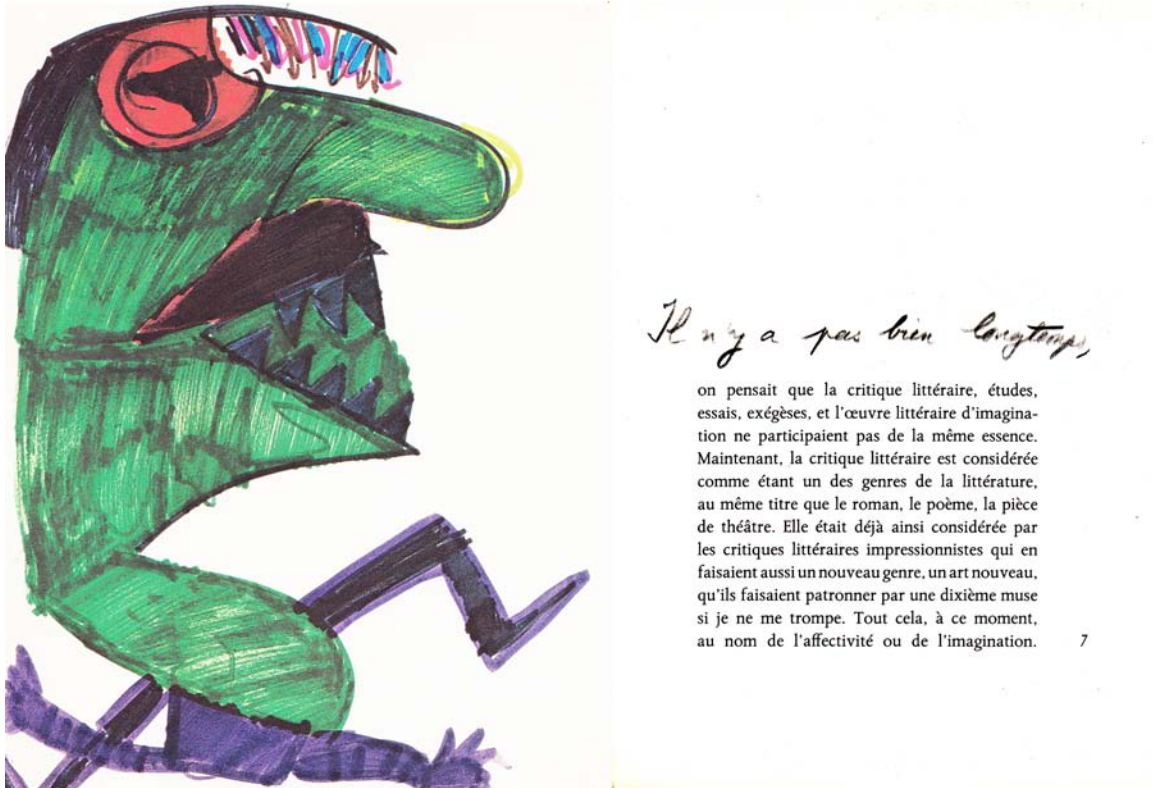
Ionesco observes, from his personal experience, that the child attempts to classify and understand things without having a name for them beforehand.<sup>50</sup> The author is asking himself: is there really thinking without language? Does language precede or follow thinking? In his remarks, Ionesco concludes that thought precedes language, and that language is the manifestation of thought; it is what helps solidify thought and cognition.<sup>51</sup> Refuting the premise that cognition precedes language is, in Ionesco's view,

a materialistic gesture and a denial of metaphysics. Equating thinking and language, presupposing that they are one and the same thing is, in Ionesco's view, an attempt to deny that spirituality, or that the dualism spiritual/physical exist.<sup>52</sup>

Tristan Tzara's adage that "thinking forms in the mouth" ("«la pensée se forme dans la bouche») finds its application in Ionesco's theatre. In this sense, the two entities content (thought) and form (language) meet: language is the expression, interpretation, reaction, manifestation of thinking. The lack of coherence points to an experience of transcendence that cannot be expressed. The veiling of discursive, logical speech which occurs in poetical or other literary text is indicative of the inability to represent experiences that cannot be grasped and related in conventional language. The theatre of the absurd is therefore not absurdist: the language is the "manifestation of thought" (*Journal en miettes* 42). Coherence is a mirage, since it is constructed with a certain aim in mind. Broken-apart language which more faithfully represents thoughts—the stream of consciousness, a narrative device that reflects the inner thoughts—invites to an opening towards another dimension that words cannot capture.

As noted in the second chapter, art's essential trait, for Ionesco, is that it is interrogative: « Il exprime l'interrogation, la détresse et la joie humaine, c'est en cela qu'il est humain» (*Antidotes* 334). ("It expresses the questioning, the wretchedness and the joy of man; and in that it is human" ["Why Do I Write?" 134]). In *Un homme en question* (1979), Ionesco writes that the interrogative quality of art contains within itself a beginning of an answer: « Art est essentiellement interrogatif. Cette interrogation, c'est déjà un début de réponse »(61). ("Art is essentially interrogative. This interrogation is already a beginning of an answer" [*my translation*]). In *Découvertes* images are situated

in a dialogic, even interrogative, position within the text (Fig.16). The unifying principle of both writings and drawings is the notion that art is above all questioning and does not provide answers. Ionesco's works are a discovery (as the title of *Découvertes* confirms)



**Fig. 16.** Ionesco, Eugène. Drawing; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Découvertes*. Genève: Art Albert Skira, 1969; print;6-7)

rather than the reflection of a coherent, systematic construction. Ionesco refers to the influence of Benedetto Croce, for whom art is above all vision, intuition and contemplation (*The Essence of Aesthetics* 8). He gives tribute to Croce in *Découvertes*:

. . . [il] m'avait appris que le fond et la forme en font qu'une seule et même chose dans l'expression, une synthèse vivante . . . Croce m'avait appris également que la poésie est connaissance, non pas connaissance logique mais connaissance intuitive, intuition lyrique qui est la deuxième possibilité de connaître, après la connaissance notionnelle. (*Découvertes* 19)

. . . [he] had taught me that content and form are nothing but the same thing in the expression, a living synthesis . . . Croce has equally taught me that poetry is knowledge, not logical knowledge but intuitive, lyrical intuition

which is the second possibility of knowing, after conceptual knowledge.  
(my translation)

This view that poetic knowledge is an alternative to conceptual knowledge is essential in Ionesco's works and we see its influence in his protagonists, such as Bérenger, whose monologues are imbued with lyrical undertones. In *Tueur sans gages*, Bérenger describes through vivid metaphors and epithets, in simple but stunning poetics, the joy he felt at the moment of Manifestation, when he was seventeen- eighteen years old:

BÉRENGER. Brusquement la joie se fit plus grande encore, rompant toutes les frontières! La lumière se fit encore plus éclatante, sans rien perdre de sa douceur, elle était tellement dense qu'elle en était respirable. Comment vous dire l'éclat incomparable ? . . . C'était comme s'il y avait quatre soleils dans le ciel... (*Théâtre complet* 480)

BÉRENGER. Suddenly the joy became more intense, breaking all bounds! And then, oh what indescribable bliss took hold of me! The light grew more and more brilliant, and still lost none of its softness, it was so dense you could almost breathe it, it had become the air itself... How can I convey its incomparable brilliance? . . . It is as if there were four suns in the sky . . . (*The Killer* 22-23)

In the play *L'Impromptu de l'Alma* (1956), Ionesco, after turbulent experiences with his critics, stages himself and his critics and one of the main debates that animate is the opposition between the scientific theatre that the three Bartholoméus subscribe to and oneiric theatre, the theatre of images (427). In light of Benedetto Croce's aesthetical view that intuition is a form of knowledge, Ionesco's theater is a poetic theatre which bypasses rational language and addresses the affective side of his spectators.<sup>53</sup>

Bérenger embodies these lyrical qualities and is defined by his apparent naiveté—the capacity of continual astonishment. His malaise appears when he is no longer free to wonder and explore. Bérenger, to whom Ionesco lends his quests, doubts, reasoning, is the character of a tetralogy, appearing in *Tueur sans gages* (1959), *Rhinocéros* (1960), *Le*

*piéton de l'air* (1963) and *Le roi se meurt* (1962). He is, in Giovanni Lista's words, the first character truly endowed with the capacity to speak (144).

Bérenger rebels against the monotonous existence that he leads and wishes for something other than the gloominess of his life (*Le piéton de l'air*). King Bérenger (fig.17) is disrobed of all dignity as he is facing death; he is unable to distinguish colors,



**Fig. 17.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Roi se meurt*, dir. Jacques Mauclair. ORTF, Paris, 13 January 1963. Television. Author's screenshot.

to express his desires; he loses any control over his kingdom and himself. He refuses to accept the natural flow of living and human mortality: «je ne me résignerai jamais» (*Le roi se meurt*). Both these protagonists express an interior split, their rebellion takes place within themselves, whereas the two Bérenger from *Tueur sans gages* and *Rhinocéros* are facing outside obstacles, respectively the killer and the rhinoceros.

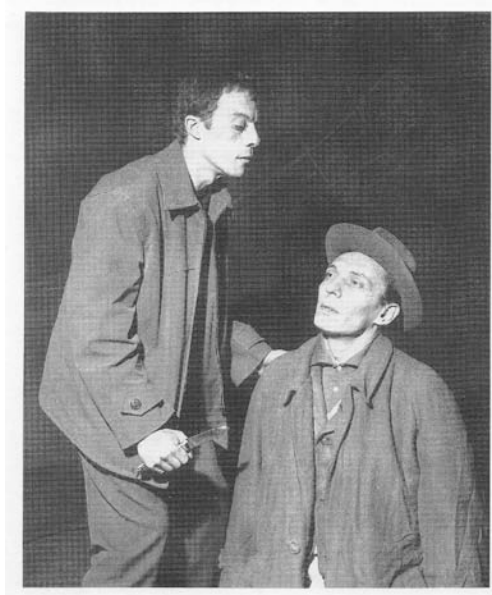
## ***Bérenger - A Hero in Spite of Himself***

Bérenger from *Tueur sans gages*, a play that we analyzed in more detail in the previous chapter, in his usual wanderings, finds a radiant city and in it, paradoxically, a monstrous killer. Since neither the administration nor the police seem to be interested in finding the killer, Bérenger takes this task upon himself, but his meeting with the one-eyed dwarf is a fateful one. Dwarfs, who, in Bakhtin's terms, belong to the culture of folk carnival humor, are symbolically associated with the "gods of the underworld". In the *Dictionary of Symbols*, these are depicted as figures of "the dark forces which are within us and which can so easily take monstrous shape" (Chevalier 321).

The killer, an on-stage incarnation of Ionesco's alter-ego, is in the author's view is a representation of the evil that exists in the world, and in humans; it is the result of the fallen human nature, of original sin (*Entretiens* 35). The killer's inability or unwillingness to speak and communicate adds another facet to his monstrosity. In this case, the inability to speak shows a regression to bestiality. When Bérenger advances different arguments for the significance of human values, defending a human essence, the killer responds with a shrug of the shoulders and a chuckle. Finding no hope or solace, disenchanted by his arguments in favor of life's meaning, Bérenger surrenders to the killer's force (fig. 18). He realizes that his two old-fashioned pistols, which he aims towards the killer without any effect, are useless: « Oh . . . que ma force est faible contre ta froide détermination, contre ta cruauté sans merci! . . . et que peuvent les balles elles-même contre l'énergie infinie de ton obstination? . . . Mon Dieu, on ne peut rien faire ! Mais pourquoi... Mais pourquoi... » (*Théâtre complet* 535). ("Oh, how weak my strength is against your cold determination, your ruthlessness! And what good are bullets even, against the resistance



of an infinitely stubborn will! . . . Oh God! There is nothing we can do. What can we do... What can we do... ” [*The Killer* 108-9]). He therefore succumbs; his rhetorical skills are ridiculous when faced with the killer’s grimace. Giovanni Lista notes an important nuance in Bérenger’s response that his resistance is not in the name of any ideology, but in that of the human nature and values.<sup>54</sup> Ionesco’s engagement is therefore different from that of Sartre and Brecht, for whom an artist has to be involved and react against the political and social climate of his or her period. Bérenger’s rebellion is for the human to be able to live out authentically his or her condition, which is confronting death.<sup>55</sup>



**Fig. 18.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Tueur sans gages*, rpt in Lista, Giovanni. *Ionesco* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1989; print; 79)

In the third act of the play, Ionesco parodies people serving and fighting for certain ideologies, using the grotesque character of Mère Pipe (recalling Brecht’s Mother Courage). The satirical display of decayed human values takes place when the protagonist encounters the political rally led by Mère Pipe and her geese. The delirium of progress is brought to a tragi-comical climax. In contrast to the solitary Bérenger who is

in his search for the killer, the mob that follows Mère Pipe is unified and electrified by her conniving speeches. Her promises are timeless since they are clichés of utopian political discourses such as we find even today in our political arena:

MÈRE PIPE. . . . Nous n'allons plus persécuter, mais nous punirons et nous ferons justice. Nous ne coloniserons pas les peuples, nous les occuperons pour les libérer. Nous n'exploiterons pas les hommes, nous les ferons produire. Le travail obligatoire s'appellera travail volontaire. La guerre s'appellera la paix et tout sera changé, grâce à moi et à mes oies. (*Théâtre complet* 520)

PEEP. . . . We won't persecute, but we'll punish, and deal out justice. We won't colonize, we'll occupy the countries we liberate. We won't exploit men, we'll make them productive. We'll call compulsory work voluntary. War shall change its name to peace and everything will be altered, thanks to me and my geese. (*The Killer* 77)

With his particular blunt sarcasm, Ionesco insists that the illusions disguised as promises are in fact the unveiling of what civilization promises to accomplish through the progress of technology. Bérenger's desire to bring about justice, to take the killer to the authorities, is looked upon with disdain by the police agents who are more preoccupied with the traffic caused by Mère Pipe's rally and with checking to see if Bérenger has his identity papers in order. To Bérenger's effort to raise awareness of a crime that concerns all, the police agent replies in a prompt, glacial tone: «Le salut public? On s'en occupe. Quand on a le temps. La circulation d'abord» (523). ("Public safety? We look after that. When we've the time. Traffic comes first" [*The Killer* 92]). The portrayal of the police agents could symbolize humans' superficiality, behind which one looks for an illusory comfort that does not require facing or confronting reality.

The mob symbolism is reiterated in *Rhinocéros* as well. The play's first premiere took place in 1959, in Dusseldorf, and was performed in France a few months later, in January 1960, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault. This play denounces, through the

zoomorphism of humans into pachyderms, affiliation with ideologies and their abuses, the crimes against nations or humans, crimes that take us to the atrocities perpetrated by Nazis, Stalinists and any oppressive regimes which hinder democratic rights, regardless of their ‘-isms’. The key to this allegory, in Matei Calinescu’s interpretation, is equating *rhinoceritis* with any ideology (*rhinoceritis* being the ideological contagion among people which then leads them to the metamorphosis). In a preface written in 1960 for an American school edition, then published in *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco reflects on the play’s symbolism:

*Rhinocéros* est sans doute une pièce antinazie, mais elle est aussi surtout une pièce contre les hystéries collectives et les épidémies qui se cachent sous le couvert de la raison et des idées mais qui n’en sont pas moins de graves maladies collectives dont les idéologies ne sont que les alibis. . . . (Notes 274)

*Rhinocéros* is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are none the less serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies. . . . (Notes 199)

By inserting the element of strangeness, of a regressive metamorphosis of the human, Ionesco introduces the *topos* of fantastic literature. In his seminal work, *Ionesco*, Giovanni Lista notes the power of myth (narrative space in which the fantastic can emerge) to deliver a message, not by demonstrating, but by revealing (150). Ionesco’s engagement, therefore, is not didactic or prescriptive, in the Brechtian sense, but rather revelatory. In *Notes* Ionesco explains his goal: « . . . à montrer l’inanité de ces terribles systèmes, ce à quoi ils mènent, comme ils enflamment les gens, les abrutissent, puis les réduisent en esclavage » (Notes 275). (“. . . to reveal the inanity of those terrible systems, what they can lead to, how they stir people up, stupefy them and then reduce them to slavery” [Notes 199]). The spectator has to draw his or her own conclusions about its

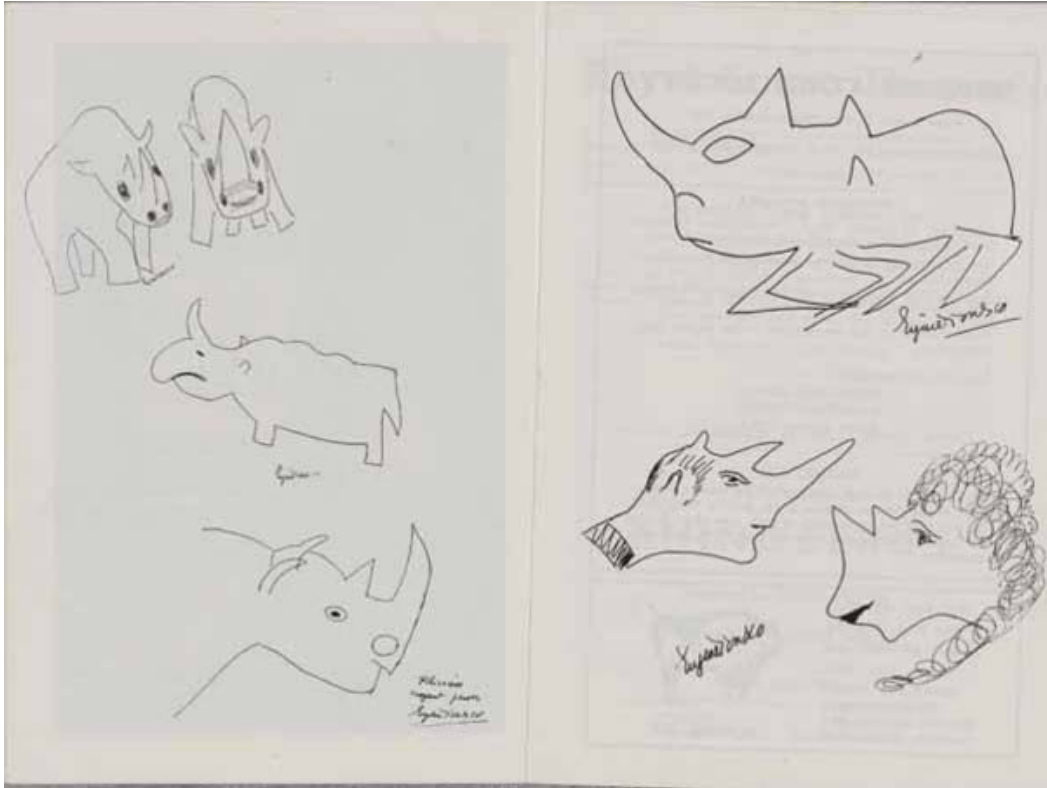
meaning rather than having it already digested. It is perhaps one of the reasons why Ionesco encountered such fervent (either positive or negative) critique. The spectator-reader can choose to interpret the text based on his or her individual circumstances, background, preferences.

At its origin, *Rhinocéros* (fig. 19) emerges out of the author's horrifying experience during his youth, his Romanian years in the 1930s, where he witnessed the lure of Legionarism (with fascist influences) among many of his intellectual friends, who, as noted in one of his journal pages, were adhering to this new ideology.<sup>56</sup> Another source of inspiration is Denis de Rougemont's account of witnessing, while in Germany, how the masses were entranced by Hitler's electrifying speeches. Kafka's short story, "Metamorphosis", in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning as one big insect is another precursor of the play. However, in Kafka's short story, the protagonist undergoes a solitary metamorphosis, whereas in Ionesco's play, the characters experience the transformation collectively.

The imagery of the mob (*la foule*) and its enchanting powers recalls Sartre's flies from the play *Les Mouches* (1943). In that play, the flies' omnipresence contributes to the charged atmosphere of Argos—an isolated city, without any ties with the exterior. Everything is dark and somber: windowless houses and 'blind' streets. Unlike Ionesco, who does not give any clues regarding the invasion of the rhinoceros, Sartre gives his audience the reason for the flies' appearance: the crime against the king Agamemnon. The stench of remorse that weighs upon the people of Argos, silent accomplices in the crime, brings about the apparition of the flies—a physical projection of their guilt. The flies in this context are an extension of the psyche of the people of Argos; they are the

materialization of the Sartrean *mauvaise conscience* that Orestes, the avatar of the free man, avoids. Although their actions are different, Orestes and Bérenger have a similar quest, in that they both rebel against the conventionality of their times and position themselves, solitarily, at the margins of society.

Some sixty years before Sartre's play, Nietzsche draws the portrait of the flies as representing the uncontrollable mob preoccupied with petty things; they are "the heroes of the hour" in contrast with *Übermensch*, the superhuman whom Nietzsche calls "lover of truth", an independent human who cannot be influenced by the mob's baseness. Nietzsche, in the episode "Of the Flies of the Marketplace" from *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), exposes the mentality of the crowd which is shaped in the marketplace. Anyone who spends time in this public space which fosters the flies and their constant buzzing will eventually be inoculated with their poison. The flies are inflexible, cowardly, filled with wickedness; they are "flatterers and whiners" and their apparent innocence is just a shield concealing the poison they carry. Zarathustra's advice for the "profound man" is that he should retire into solitude (*Thus spoke Zarathustra* 79). If for Nietzsche the *Übermensch* is never in danger of falling prey to group mentality, due to his intellectual sophistication, Bérenger is portrayed as vulnerable to the mob mentality and the social and ideological changes around him—his uncertainty and hesitance reveal his closeness to every human. Unlike Sartre's and Nietzsche's symbolism for the mob mentality, Ionesco chooses a rhinoceros, which in its natural habitat is a solitary animal (fig.19). He does not give any ideological or philosophical attribution to the rhinoceros; it is not affiliated with any ideological agenda. The rhinoceros do not invade the city through forced propaganda; they rather seduce its inhabitants. Even subtle ideologies that



**Fig. 19.** Ionesco, Eugène. Sketch for *Rhinocéros*; rpt. in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco : exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 59-60)

may appear to be good are dangerous, in Ionesco's view, since any fixed system of thinking calcifies and dies. He thus writes in *Notes et contre-notes*: « Dès qu'une idée, une intention consciente veut se réaliser historiquement, elle s'incarne en son contraire, elle est monstrueuse » [*Notes* 311]. ("As soon as an idea, a conscious intention, tries to find its realization in history, it becomes something monstrous, the very incarnation of its opposite" [233]). The result of such ideologies cannot be life-giving nor have any power when facing life's fundamental questions. Just as the killer from *Tueur sans gages* symbolizes a deeply rooted inclination towards evil of every human, monsters—generic for rhinoceros—can also emerge from within us. In his interview with Marie-Claude Hubert, Ionesco reminds us of the numerous faces that our monstrosity can take; they can be collective or individual, dependent sometimes on the historical period we live in.<sup>57</sup>

In *Rhinocéros*, the only metamorphosis represented on stage, is that of Jean, Bérenger's friend (fig.20), who has a character diametrically opposite to that of the protagonist. Bérenger is not comfortable in his own skin. He confesses to Jean : «Je sens à chaque instant mon corps, comme si j'étais de plomb, ou comme si je portais un autre homme sur le dos» (553). He is agoraphobic and claustrophobic and cannot find his place among people. He continues: «La solitude me pèse. La société aussi» (534). ("Solitude seems to oppress me. And so does the company of other people."[19]). Jean, on the other hand, has strong moral principles, is moderate, poised, sophisticated, appreciative of culture, and does not drink (in opposition to Bérenger who drinks so that he can forget his loneliness). Yet, despite his irreproachable moral character, Jean succumbs to the strong influence of *rhinocerotitis* that is gradually gripping on the city.



**Fig. 20.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Rhinocéros*, dir. by Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, 2004 ; rpt in Giret, Noëlle. *Eugène Ionesco : exposition, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2009; print; 58)

The symptoms of *rhinocerotitis* are the external representation of an inner disintegration. The initial signs of the metamorphosis are similar to “a touch of flu”: a

cough, which develops into a hoarse voice, then a lump on the head appears which ultimately grows into a horn, a greenish hardened skin, heavy breathing and lastly the inability to speak. These external signs reflect the internal dehumanizing struggle which starts with the breaking of human bonding. When Bérenger expresses his empathy and concern at the first signs of his friend's metamorphosis and goes on to affirm their friendship, Jean denies the possibility of this human bond: «L'amitié n'existe pas. Je ne crois pas en votre amitié» (597). ("There's no such thing as friendship. I don't believe in your friendship" [63]). What follows is then the abandoning of moral principles: «Si je comprends, vous voulez remplacer la loi morale par la loi de la jungle». ("Are you suggesting we replace our moral laws by the law of the jungle?"), Bérenger hesitantly asks. To this, Jean replies: «J'y vivrai, j'y vivrai» (601) ("It would suit me! It would suit me fine!" [67]). To Bérenger's insistence that humans have an irreplaceable set of values (601), Jean responds: « Démolissons tout cela, on s'en portera mieux » (601) ("When we've demolished all that, we'll be better off" [67]). Later, when Bérenger brings up the value of the human and human essence, Jean exclaims: «L'humanisme est périmé! Vous êtes un vieux sentimental ridicule» (601) ("Humanism is all washed up! You're a ridiculous old sentimentalist [68]). His last words reflect total disintegration, a total disregard for human life: «Je te piétinerai, je te piétinerai» (602). ("I'll trample you, I'll trample you down" [69]), he warns Bérenger, the last stage of his dehumanization manifested in aggression towards the other.

Jean's metamorphosis has been widely interpreted by different stage-directors. The technique suggested by Ionesco in his stage directions is Jean's frequent exit from the stage: as he goes into the bathroom and comes back, his transformation is gradually



visible. His voice becomes hoarse, his skin greenish, then a horn appears on his forehead.<sup>58</sup> Some directors have focused on the external transformation, showing rhinoceros' heads projected. This is the case with the first stage adaptation in France by Jean-Louis Barrault (at Odéon, in 1960). People metamorphosing into rhinoceros would slowly embody characteristics of the rhinoceros. Other interpretations focus on the inner transformation. One example is that of the Romanian film and stage director Catalina Buzoianu, who in her stage adaptation of the play, uses Vsevolod Meyerhold's indications of biomechanics, in which the body of the actor, with its contortions, ability to stretch and transform itself, is the locus of the transformation. If Artaud emphasizes the importance of the director in a play, Ionesco gives priority to the author, Meyerhold attributes this privileged place to the actor. He emphasizes that "*Above all, drama is the art of the actor*" (Braun 53, author's emphasis). The actor should use as models the statues, plastic art, in order to represent the three dimensionality of theatre (Braun 57). In her book, *Les grandes théories du théâtre*, where Marie-Claude Hubert presents a panorama of the important drama concepts from Aristotle to Brecht, she writes about the importance of sculpture, as opposed to painting (which in Meyerhold's view is one dimensional) for an actor's inspiration. Biomechanics is also inspired from the music-hall, and circus demanding from the actor a particular physical training that allows him to perform a wide range of gestures and movements.<sup>59</sup> In Catherina Buzoianu's interpretation, no external changes deemed to be necessary: no masks, horns, skin color changes. Ionesco's view on how the play should be performed was many times at odds with the perspectives of his directors. He criticizes an American director who depicted the tense relationship of Jean and Bérenger into a match of boxing. Ionesco is clarifying

that his text is not only made of dialogue, but it also includes the stage directions (*Notes* 208). In the same essay, Ionesco points out the goal of his play, that is to show the stages of the phenomenon of fanaticism: « . . . il s'agissait bien, dans cette pièce, de dénoncer, de démasquer, de montrer comment une idéologie se transforme en idolâtrie, comment elle envahit tout, comment elle hystérise les masses, comment une pensée, raisonnable au départ, et discutable à la fois, peut devenir monstrueuse . . . » (*Notes* 286) (“ . . . the aim of this play was to denounce, to expose, to show how an ideology gets transformed into idolatry, how it seeps into everything, how it reduces the masses to hysteria, how an idea, which was reasonable enough for discussion at the start, and become monstrous . . . ” [*Notes* 209]).

Dudard, the relativist in the play, considers it his duty to be loyal to his friends and co-workers. When Bérenger confesses his fear of becoming someone else due to this fast-spreading disease, Dudard reassures him that some illnesses are in fact good. His last words: « Il faut suivre son temps » (621). (“One must move with the times”) point to an existential crisis. Dudard loses his skeptical qualities and gives in to the seductive enchantment of the rhinoceros. In his autobiographical writing, *Journal en miettes* (1973), Ionesco describes the chameleonesque nature of people who search for meaning in fashionable ideologies. They, according to Ionesco, cannot experience *being* in its plenitude:

Les petits malins réussissent, qui se plient aux événements. Ils suivent le courant le plus fort. Ainsi, ils sont toujours gagnants. Ils sont gagnants mais ils n'existent pas, ils ne sont pas puisqu'ils ne s'identifient qu'à des courants; ils adoptent des formes; ils sont informes. (40)

Success is to the cunning, who bow to circumstances. They follow the main stream: so they always win. They win, but they don't exist, they have

no being since they merely identify themselves with the stream; they adopt shapes, they are shapeless. (28)

Adherents to ideologies that serve personal interests and agendas, they become spectral beings, in Ionesco's interpretation, devoid of individuality, essence and form.

The last metamorphosis, which has the strongest impact on Bérenger, is that of Daisy the secretary with whom he falls in love. Their passion and romance quickly fade as Daisy becomes entranced with the rhinoceros. She scoffs at Bérenger's sentimentalism, when he pleads for a chance to regenerate the human race with her. She switches allegiances by turning her admiration towards these beautiful, god-like creatures and gives in to their tremendous energy (104). The bond of love, a sublime human value, becomes in Daisy's eyes a morbid feeling, a human weakness: «J'en ai un peu honte, de ce que tu appelles l'amour, ce sentiment morbide, cette faiblesse de l'homme. Et de la femme. Cela ne peut se comparer avec l'ardeur, l'énergie extraordinaire que dégagent tous ces êtres qui nous entourent» (635). ("I feel a bit ashamed of what you call love—this morbid feeling, this male weakness. And female, too. It just doesn't compare with the ardour and the tremendous energy emanating from all these creatures around us" [103]). The last stage of this transformation depersonalizes the human; it strips him or her of the basic, natural human feeling—love. As his most important companion leaves him, Bérenger experiences the utmost solitude and almost succumbs to this contagious fascination.

Bérenger fights strongly against the temptation to change. In Margareta Gyursick's view, his internal schism, torn between the desire to recognize himself in others by undergoing the metamorphosis and the desire to remain human, reflects a problematic of subjectivity. The human subject is not self-sufficient, as is the case with

the Sartrean subject. The subject has meaning in movement, in the interaction with others. The relationship with otherness is crucial, and well expressed in Bérenger's ambivalent struggle. On the one hand, he wants to resist the transformation into an ideologue, because he does not want to lose his identity, and on the other hand, he wishes, because of his desire for community, to be assimilated into the group. This intersubjective ambivalence, characteristic of postmodernism, defines Bérenger's inner schism. The last words of his final monologue illustrate this ambivalence:

BÉRENGER. . . . Hélas, je suis un monstre, je suis un monstre. Hélas, jamais je ne deviendrai rhinocéros, jamais, jamais! Je ne peux plus changer. Je voudrais bien, je voudrais tellement mais je ne peux pas. Je ne peux plus me voir. J'ai trop honte ! . . . Comme je suis laid! Malheur à celui qui veut conserver son originalité! . . . Eh bien tant pis ! Je me défendrai contre tout le monde ! Ma carabine, ma carabine ! . . . Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu'au bout ! Je ne capitule pas! (107)

BÉRENGER. . . . Now I'm a monster, just a monster. Now I'll never become a rhinoceros, never, never! I've gone past changing. I want to, I really do, but I can't, I just can't. I can't stand the sight of me. I'm too ashamed! . . . I'm so ugly! People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end! . . . Oh well, too bad! I'll take on the whole of them! . . . I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating! (107)

Bérenger is the everyman who stands for the values of the regular human, but his will almost capitulates as he barely resists the seduction of the rhinoceros which, towards the end of the play, become more and more attractive.

Deeply autobiographical, this play represents Ionesco and his resistance to any prescriptive ideologies. In a lecture given in the United States, Sartre underlines the undeniable kinship between Berenger and Ionesco. Sartre notes that Bérenger symbolizes Ionesco, who remains alone in defending the humankind, adding that Ionesco does not let the spectator or the reader know whether being a rhinoceros is good or bad.<sup>60</sup> In his

collection of reflections, *Présent passé passé présent*, Ionesco describes his feeling of solitude during his youth while in Romania and the terrifying exile that is not only geographic (France was the country of his soul at that time) but also ideological:

Seul, seul je suis, entouré de ces gens qui sont pour moi durs comme pierre, aussi dangereux que les serpents, aussi implacables que les tigres. Comment peut-on communiquer avec un tigre, avec un cobra, comment convaincre un loup ou un rhinocéros de vous comprendre, de vous épargner, quelle langue leur parler ? . . . En fait, étant comme le dernier homme dans cette île monstrueuse, je ne représente plus rien, sauf une anomalie, un monstre. (169)

I am alone, all alone, surrounded by these people who are hard as stone to me, as dangerous as snakes, as implacable as tigers. How can one communicate with a tiger, with a cobra, how can one get a wolf or a rhinoceros to understand you, to spare you; what language can you talk to them in? . . . In fact, since I am something like the last man in this monstrous island, I no longer represent anything, I am only an anomaly, a monster. (113)

From the ethics of rebellion, as revealed in the Bérenger tetralogy, Ionesco takes his spectator/reader even further in his last work, to his extreme understanding of humanism, the substitution (in the form of sacrifice) for the other. If his fictional characters do not attain the desired level of ethics, with *Maximilien Kolbe*, Ionesco brings to center stage the highest level of ethics—the sacrifice in place of the other.

### ***In Place of the Other***

The substitution for the other, epitomized in the story of father Maximilien Kolbe, lies at the genesis of Eugène Ionesco's work. The responsibility for the other, an a priori gesture, an orientation that emerges, as if instinctually, before thought, is completed in the selfless act of Maximilien Kolbe.

Following the first representation of *Maximilien Kolbe* at Rimini Opera in Italy (1988), Ionesco, when asked by a RAI television reporter about the reasons for his choice of representing a saint, responded that he felt compelled by the need to glorify this gesture of sacrifice. In his article «Un certain Van Gogh », Ionesco writes that depicting suffering represents truth in art. When analyzing Van Gogh's portrayals of suffering, Ionesco expresses that this aptitude of suffering confers to art its truthfulness. Without this truth, nothing else has value.<sup>61</sup> In a time when athletes and stars dominate the media and capture the public's attention, Ionesco, as usual, goes against the flow and puts on stage a hero who, as Marguerite Jean-Blain notes, reverses the values of the star-system (62). Ionesco's admiration for the life of the Franciscan priest goes back to ten years before the first performance of the opera. At the conference at C erisy-la-Salle dedicated to his work, the author avers that the only existence worth living is that of Maximilien Kolbe: « Peut-on dire que je suis jaloux de Maximilien Kolbe? Pour moi, c'est la seule existence enviable, la seule existence qui m erite d' tre v ecue qui justifie aussi bien la vie que la mort » (22-23). (“Can I say that I am jealous of Maximilien Kolbe? For me, it is the only enviable way of life, the only existence worth living which justifies not only life but also death” [*my translation*]). Marguerite Jean-Blain calls this libretto, which is Eug ene Ionesco's last work (at least among his works of fiction) the true testament of Ionesco («le v eritable testament de Ionesco»). She thus concludes:

*Maximilien Kolbe* est une v eritable anamn ese de toute l' uvre d'Ionesco qui met en sc ene pour la derni ere fois, c'est- -dire qui 're-pr esente' cette question qui a taraud e le dramaturge toute sa vie et qui a fait se lever des milliers de jeunes   la fin de la repr esentation de Rimini pour l'applaudir: pourquoi si ce n'est parce que ce spectacle, comme tout le th eatre d'Ionesco depuis *La cantatrice chauve*, les renvoyait   la question fondamentale du sens ? (*Maximilien Kolbe* 128-129)

*Maximilien Kolbe* is a true anamnesis of all of Ionesco's work which stages for the last time, that is 're-presents' this question that haunted the playwright all his life and which prompted thousands of young people raise at the end of Rimini's performance to applaud him: Why else, if not because this show, just like all Ionesco's theatre since *The Bald Soprano*, was pointing to the fundamental question of meaning? (*my translation*)

Ionesco writes as a witness to a century where appalling acts of horror against a people have taken place right in the heart of Europe. Through his work, as well as his engagement for the Jewish people, denouncing anti-Semitic actions (reflected not only in his plays, but also in his essays, conferences, journals), the author can legitimately be qualified also as a writer of the Shoah.

In his essay "Witnessing and Ethics" (April 23, 1976), Emmanuel Levinas inscribes the act of witnessing in the field of ethics. The relation with the other is the relation with the Infinite, since the other cannot be appropriated and reduced to anything fixed. For Levinas, "the ethical intrigue" appears in this overflowing of the Infinite in the finite:

The Infinite has glory only through the approach of the other, through my substitution for the other, or through my expiation for another... Ethics is the field sketched out by the paradox of an Infinite in relation, without correlation, to the finite. A relation such that there is no encompassing but rather an *overflowing* of the finite by the Infinite, which defines the ethical intrigue. (200)

The complete witness is the one who substitutes or expiates for the other, who gives himself or herself in place of the other. In Emmanuel Levinas' view, this gesture that qualifies the extreme stretching of boundaries occurs when, in the encounter with the Other, the self becomes self-less, abandoned, emptied of his or her agency. Giorgio Agamben defines this as desubjectivization: "only in this complicated gesture, in this looking to oneself in distancing oneself from oneself, can something like identical self be

constituted” (*Remnants of Auschwitz : the witness and the archive* 110). This distancing from the self is in fact a move towards the Other. Derrida’s notion of *différance* undoubtedly resonates with Levinas’ ideas, in which the relation with the other is not consummated in an appropriation or absorption of the other, a robbing of his or her identity, but rather requires a response to the other, a remembering. The gesture of remembering through the act of witnessing the sacrificial act of Maximilien Kolbe contradicts the notion that the theatre of the absurd is self-absorbed by its own inclinations to destruction, not concerned with external events and without any influence. Although Ionesco qualifies his theatre as apolitical, he acknowledges in *Un homme en question* (1979), one of his last essay collections, that despite his zeal to remain apolitical, he engaged in political action.<sup>62</sup> To be against politics does not exclude acting politically. Through *Maximilien Kolbe*, Ionesco ensures his reader and spectator that, even though he refused to take a right or left political stand, he was all along concerned with human rights. *Rhinocéros* finds a paradoxical response in *Maximilien Kolbe’s* narrative of the extreme substitution for the other. Similar to other writers of the Shoah, such as Jorge Semprún, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi and many others, Ionesco faces the problematic at the core of the Shoah literature: : how to portray Auschwitz on stage? The aporia is three-fold: not only the text, but also the performances, and the music are affected by this impossibility of telling, representing, and singing. The librettist, the director and the composer all find themselves at an impasse.

The opera relates the last fifteen days of the Polish priest who perished in August 1941 in an Auschwitz bunker, killed by the German SS officers through the administration of a lethal injection. Father Kolbe and nine other prisoners are thrown into



the death bunker and die slowly of hunger, with the exception of Father Kolbe who is executed before the eyes of the absolved prisoner.

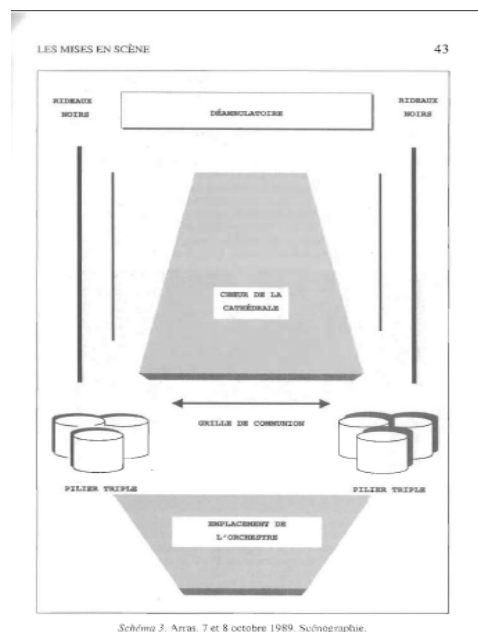
Ionesco's testimony is different from other works, since instead of the *I/eye* of the witness who lends his or her voice to the voiceless, Ionesco's narration takes the form of a dialogue. In the text, the narrator's agency dissipates into the plurality of voices embodied by his characters. The story is therefore presented from the perspective of the prisoners and father Kolbe, the subaltern and the persecuted. The layers of symbolism are increasingly more complex with each dimension that constitutes the opera: the stage performance, the text in itself, and the music.



**Fig. 21.** Arras Cathedral (view from the nave); rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Maximilien Kolbe*, éd. Marguerite Jean-Blain (Paris: Champion, 2005; print; 42)

The performances at Rimini, in Italy and in the Arras cathedral, in France, were of a sober symbolism, as Marie Jean-Blain puts it (Fig.21). The poverty of means corresponds to the final words that reiterate the biblical beatitudes. The choice of a cathedral, in France, might surprise for its obvious opposite signification, but the space of the cathedral-camp embodies the complexity and paradoxical nature of the opera: the presence of the sacred epitomized in the sacrifice of father Kolbe within the

concentration camp system, which mocked the very notion of morality. The narrative space is the cave or the bunker in which the prisoners are thrown and left to die. The narrative and stage spaces reflect the double symbolism of the cave- at the same time functioning as burial site (referencing the imagery of house-tomb that is prevalent in Ionesco's works) and as paradisiacal space where saints dwell (Fig. 22). It is, as Marguerite Jean-Blain writes, at the same time catacomb and bosom, the last dwelling, an opening towards the realm of beyond (97).



**Fig. 22.** Arras Cathedral, stage design for Maximilien Kolbe; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Maximilien Kolbe*, éd. Marguerite Jean-Blain (Paris: Champion, 2005; print; 43)

Jean-Blain who has put together a carefully organized critical edition of the libretto (with the three versions of the ending), in which she offers not only her insights, but the contexts, and the transformations that this libretto suffered through, notes that the lack of financial means contributed even further to the symbolical soberness. This opera was even called *l'opéra des pauvres hommes* (62). The performance could be interpreted as a reiteration or rather illustration of Jerzy Grotowski's notion of "poor theatre" as developed in his work *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) in which the actors are the main

locus of symbolism. This gesture of “humanizing” the performance, in which the actor or the singer offers himself or herself to the audience, thus establishing an intimate relation carries an ethics of the theatrical performances. They are put together for the spectator, the embodiment of the other. *Maximilien Kolbe* represents even more so this principle weaved in its theme of the reversal of the hero image into the martyr who truly exists and dies for the other.

In the director’s notes, written on a palimpsest (parchment) on which the libretto from Rimini was presented, Tadeusz Bradecki (the director) underlines the paradox of the miracle that the opera encapsulates in an era where goulags, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and other atrocities are weighing heavily on our consciences.<sup>63</sup>

The performance can therefore be seen as a reversal of the theatre of the absurd, a return to the mysteries of the medieval age, to the religious theatre, representing biblical and mystic themes. The narrative of the libretto avoids any artifice, but is symbolist in nature as, in its narrative simplicity, it bridges what is being said and the signification or the symbolism of that utterance. In this libretto, the poetical, rhetorical devices such as metaphor, analogy, parables have allowed space for a simple, almost sterile discourse. It is precisely this simple style that renders the opera powerful.

The narration mirrors the sober structure of the stage performance. The dynamic of the dialogue is accentuated in the alternation between the choir and individual voices. There are three main categories of voices: the prisoners, whose spokesperson is Pouchovsky, Maximilien Kolbe and an anonymous (not by chance) SS officer, an android-like entity, speaking in a rhythmic and metallic voice for the repressive SS

machine. The reader is introduced into the reading by an invitation to listen to the other, as well as a criticism of the “egoistical” activities that characterize intellectuals.<sup>64</sup>

Just as the book starts with this blunt criticism, the opera, too, starts with a daunting call of the trumpet, an inverse symbolism of the Judaic Shofar, announcing that a prisoner has escaped from the camp. This prompts the implementation of the camp law, which requires that ten prisoners from that unit die of starvation: «Vous avez été sans doute ses complices, thunders the voice of the SS officer, vous serez punis cent fois pour cela»(134). (“You were undoubtedly his accomplices, you will be punished ten times for that”[*my translation*]). Among the ten prisoners, a family father, Gajowniczeck pleads for his life. At that moment father Kolbe, a Franciscan Polish priest, intervenes and offers himself in place of the prisoner. Surprisingly, the SS officer agrees and sends father Kolbe along with the others into the bunker. Ionesco’s libretto concentrates on the last fifteen days in the bunker of death.

Pouchovsky, in a lamenting monologue tries to make sense of why this evil exists. This is one of the questions that incessantly haunts Ionesco and is posed again in one of his essays from *L’homme en question* (1978): «Pourquoi y a-t-il du mal plutôt que du bien?» (190). (“Why is there evil rather than good?”[*my translation*]). Although Pouchovsky does not find an answer to this question, the human being paradoxically goes on fighting for survival. Is there a justice, a God? Pouchovsky addresses Maximilien Kolbe:

POUCHOVSKY. Mourons-nous pour être sauvés? Que faire? Je ne comprends rien et nous n’y comprenons rien. Que veut dire cet énorme cauchemar, ce monde infernal dans lequel nous sommes plongés ? Qui peut nous expliquer, qui peut nous éclairer ? Oh mon père, expliquez-nous, éclairez-nous, consolez-nous avant notre fin si proche, si proche . . . (142-143).

POUCHOVSKY. Do we die in order to be saved? What is to be done? I do not understand anything and we do not understand anything. What does this enormous nightmare mean, this infernal world in which we are thrown? Who can explain to us, who can clarify this for us? Oh, my father, explain to us, illuminate us, comfort us before our so very close end, so close . . . (*my translation*)

Without assuming a heroic nature, Maximilien Kolbe, with the psychopomp qualities of a Greek god accompanying the moribund into the realm of death, replies with unconditioned, authentic humility : «Je ne puis donner aucune explication car moi-même je ne suis qu'un pauvre homme» (143). (“I cannot offer any explanation because I myself am but a poor man” [*my translation*]). In Marguerite Jean-Blain’s analysis, this humble, unassuming quality sets Maximilien Kolbe apart from the other shamanic beings that guide their characters into the realm of the dead. He is powerless, cannot provide answers, and suffers the same destiny as the other characters.<sup>65</sup> Emptied of himself, he gives his life for the other (fig.23). Just like Bérenger, Maximilien Kolbe is a hero, with anti-hero qualities. Maximilien Kolbe’s inability to speak mirrors, on the narratological level, Ionesco’s incapacity to grant his character words. He confesses to the opera’s composer, Dominique Probst, his difficulty in lending words to the priest, to make him speak. He finds himself in the lacuna of the testimony that precedes language or any articulation, as described by Giorgio Agamben in his work *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999): “Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation” (130).



**Fig. 23.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Maximilien Kolbe*, Second Act, Rimini 1988; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Maximilien Kolbe*, éd. Marguerite Jean-Blain (Paris: Champion, 2005; print; 37)

Maximilien Kolbe’s last words reiterate a fragment of Francis of Assisi’s (1182-1226) prayer. This prayer portrays a reversal of the cruel law of the camp and reveals the meaning of substituting for the other: «Là où est la haine, que je mette l’amour; là où est l’offense, que je mette le pardon... O, Seigneur, Que je ne cherche pas tant/d’être consolé que de consoler/ d’être compris que de comprendre, / d’être aimé que d’aimer/ parce que c’est en donnant que l’on reçoit, / c’est en s’oubliant soi-même, que l’on se retrouve soi-même... » (145). (“Where there is hatred, let me sow love. /Where there is injury, pardon.../Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not /so much seek to be consoled as to console;/ to be understood as to understand;/to be loved as to love; /for it is in giving that we receive...”).<sup>66</sup> The prayer—a reiteration of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew:5) who said that those who selflessly give themselves for the sake of the other experience true happiness—is a complete reversal of the “law” of the camp.

The opera ends with a Polish children’s choir singing *a cappella* the *Beatitudes* in Polish: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in

heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew:5). The Sermon on the Mount sums up the libretto’s significance of living and dying for the other. The final image stages the moment when Maximilien Kolbe is killed by a lethal injection administered by the SS officer and dies standing.

In Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the lacuna from which testimony emerges, the complete testimony takes place in the impossibility of speech. Yet this impossibility of speaking is challenged by the urgency to give voice to the other that has not survived, who has no voice. An impossible task in Giorgio Agamben’s view, since in *Remnants of Auschwitz* he notes that the “true witness”, the “complete witness” is the one who did not bear and could not bear witness ( 34). He reinterprets Primo Levi’s notion of *Muselmänner* , as described in the chapter “The drowned and the saved”: the living dead, dehumanized, the defenseless, not worthy to look at, those whose will revolved around the biological needs for survival: their only concern was how to get another portion of bread. All that would qualify them as humans has been ripped off from them by the degrading laws of the camp.<sup>67</sup>

In the musical composition this lacuna is faithfully represented by the wordless singing of the choir. After being thrown in the underground cell, the nine prisoners sing with their mouth closed («bouche fermée»)—a plastic view, if we may call it that, of the a priori language, the “before articulation” that Giorgio Agamben qualifies as “lacuna”. The expression of the suffering is therefore translated into the mute song, as if this wordless song suggested the unsayable (in Levinas’s terminology) and ends with the

*lamento* of Pouchovski's monologue. Giorgio Agamben elaborates on the analogy of lacuna with the non-language in which testimony is born.

Perhaps every word, every writing is born, in this sense, as testimony. This is why what is borne witness to cannot be a language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness. And this is the sound that arises from the lacuna, the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born. It is necessary to reflect on the nature of that to which no one has borne witness, on this non-language. (Agamben 38)

The voice of the oppressor rings in the metallic sound of the megaphone: a monotonous rhythm which inspires fear. His accelerated, accentuated tone represents the ineffable law of the camp, while the voices of the prisoners are sung by baritones in a smooth, almost inaudible, undulating, melancholic melody. The rudeness of the voice of the SS officer, metonymical figure of the camp, contrasts with the human voices of the condemned.

The SS officer actually shows that the law of the camp is the space of no-law; morality cannot define it as evil, since it breaks all grounds of good and evil. It is what Primo Levi calls in one of his chapter titles from *Survival in Auschwitz*, “[o]n this side of good and evil”, reversing, as Agamben notes, Nietzsche's syntagm beyond good and evil.

Levinas' notion of responsibility, of substitution for the other, comes a priori any thought. In his view, the good chooses you, therefore the ethical responsibility is beyond, or before, the realm of a juridical or civic obligation. We see in Maximilien Kolbe's gesture an answer to a call—it is as if he answers it before the call was even made. This predisposition to answer, the readiness to sacrifice himself for the other is an illustration of what Emanuel Levinas calls an absolute obedience that activates once we hear the voice of the other. He gives the Biblical example of Isaiah, where God is searching for



someone to send to earth to sacrifice for its people. The passive subject answers unconditionally in an obedience that precedes understanding: this is the “here I Am” answer of the prophet Isaiah to the call of God. The reply precedes the explanation of the call. Levinas considers this gesture as the basis for ethics: “The obedience that precedes listening to the other is the anachronism of inspiration ... It is the singular obedience to the order to surrender prior to hearing an order” (“Witnessing and Ethics” 201). The obedience and substitution for the other that has no voice epitomizes the extreme position of the witness. In his pedagogical article, where he develops some of the Levinasian core concepts, Anthony Beavers notes:

Substitution is then recognizing myself in the place of the other, not with the force of a conceptual recognition, but in the sense of finding myself in the place of the other as a hostage for the other. Substitution is the conversion of my being as a subjection *by* the other into a subjection *for* the other. (7)

If the two Bérengers from *Rhinocéros* and *Tueur sans gages* are standing up for human values and risk either losing their identity in the face of ideology, or losing life, the protagonist in *Maximilien Kolbe* offers himself in a gesture of expiation for the other. In this supreme act of love, the self transcends his or her own desires, will, and ultimately life, and offers himself or herself in place of the other. Giorgio Agamben’s notion of witnessing is defined by the dialectical movement that characterizes the witness: the incapacity to tell the story (since the absolute witness is one that cannot bear witness, the non-survivor) and the urgency to tell it.<sup>68</sup> Through this ultimate sacrifice Ionesco again portrays the climactic imagery of his metaphysical humanism, which can be simply defined as the intersection of two dimensions: vertical (contemplation before the world) and horizontal (community joined together in suffering). In *Journal en miettes*, Ionesco

reminds us of the simple syllogism that justifies through love the responsibility for the other: « Je constate que pour vivre j'ai besoin d'amour. J'en conclus que, pour vivre, les autres ont besoin d'amour» (*Journal en miettes* 127). ("I realize that I need love in order to live. I conclude that others, in order to live, need love." [*Fragments of a Journal* 88]). Later on in his *Journal*, Ionesco writes about the teachings of Hasidic rabbis who were masters of the "science of love".<sup>69</sup> The experience of epiphany that the author is referencing numerous times in his works is made manifest in *Maximilien Kolbe* in the sublime affection for the other, in spite of the utmost dehumanized space that the bunker signifies. Marguerite Jean-Blain captures this beautiful contradiction of the miracle encapsulated in experiences of suffering that the opera portrays:

L'opéra montre merveilleusement comment il est encore possible d'aimer dans la situation la plus inhumaine et la plus intolérable sans que pour autant il y ait un changement miraculeux à l'intérieur de cette situation. Le miracle était précisément de pouvoir chanter l'amour dans l'enfer, devenu l'antichambre du paradis. (*Eugène Ionesco : mystique ou mal-croyant* 120-121).

The opera marvelously shows how it is still possible to love amidst the most inhumane and intolerable situation without any miraculous change of the situation. The miracle manifests in precisely the strength of chanting love in hell, which became an antechamber of paradise. (*my translation*)

The double movement of disengagement (contemplation of the world) and engagement (love for the other that gushes out at the sight of the other's suffering) reflects the author's own wavering and questionings that define his intricate view of humanism. In *Journal de miettes* Ionesco confesses his hesitations : «Je suis partagé entre l'amour de moi-même et l'amour de l'autre. C'est cela mon drame, c'est cela mon enfer. Incapable de renoncer à moi en faveur des autres...» (182). ("I am divided between love of myself and love of the other. That's my drama, that's my hell. Incapable of giving

myself up for the sake of others...” [*Fragments* 126]). Later on in his *Journal* Ionesco offers his definition of what loves means, which he situates at the antipode of Valéry’s definition for whom loving is a way of appropriating someone to satisfy an imaginary desire or need:

Amour: aimer cela veut dire se laisser aimer, c’est accepter d’être la propriété de quelqu’un, c’est renoncer plus ou moins à soi-même, accepter que quelqu’un dispose plus ou moins de vous, non point par goût de la soumission, ni par masochisme, mais pour ne pas déposséder l’autre puisque l’autre en souffrirait, plus ou moins, ou en mourrait, plus ou moins. (210)

Love: to love means letting oneself be loved, consenting to belong to someone, it means more or less renouncing oneself, allowing someone else to have control over me, not out of a liking for submission nor out of masochism, but in order not to dispossess the other person, for whom this would mean suffering and, more or less, death. (*Fragments* 146)

This selfless act chimes in with Levinas’ notion of the subject as an hostage to the other, in total vulnerability in face of the other: « Personne ne peut rester en soi: l’humanité de l’homme, la subjectivité, est une responsabilité pour les autres, une vulnérabilité extrême » (97). (“No one can stay in himself; the humanity of man, subjectivity, is a responsibility for others, an extreme vulnerability” [67]). The absolute subject whose condition, or, as Levinas calls it, *incondition* of hostage exists in a space of radical passivity, in which there is no agency: the subject is not acting but it is rather moved at the sight of the other.

In the plays that we analyzed at the beginning of the chapter, the destruction of language is teleological since it performs the explosion and implosion of morphological and syntactical rules in order to cause a fissure and an opening towards a transcendent reality. In Ionesco’s last work, *Maximilien Kolbe*, the muteness, non-language is the response to suffering; it is a lacuna, already an opening in itself. The quality of artistic

language, in Ionesco's view, resides precisely in its malleability because it is not pre-determined:

En réalité, il se fait que le langage le plus complexe, le plus chargé de signification est souvent le langage de la création artistique ; loin d'avoir à être déterminé, par ce je sais quelle pensée qui lui est extérieure ou qui lui serait supérieure . . . , c'est souvent le langage de l'artiste qui propulse, engendre la pensée des autres ; c'est lui aussi qui crée les nouvelles façons de voir, donc la nouvelle mentalité (*Journal en miettes* 187).

In actual fact, the language of artistic creation is often that which is the most complex, the most charged with meaning; far from having to be determined by some system of thought which is extrinsic or superior to it . . . , it is often the artist's language which stimulates and engenders the thought of others, which creates new ways of seeing the world, hence a new mentality. (*Fragments of a Journal* 130)

We can therefore see a progression in Ionesco's view on the redemptive quality of language from the earlier plays to his last opera libretto. If in the earlier plays, *La Cantatrice chauve*, *La Leçon*, *Les Chaises* there is no clear indication (but rather subliminally suggested) that language, and implicitly art, can be redemptive, in the last opera, it seems that language is liberating (redemptive) in the context of testimony. As we noted, testimony has meaning when it voices the suffering of the other and testifies to the death of the other. Language, as the expression of the suffering of the other, is ultimately a vital component in Ionesco's interpretation of humanism, as it is the binding element which creates the community. Its transcendent quality, as it operates an opening towards another reality that cannot be expressed, fulfills the contemplative aspect, essential in Ionesco's outlook on humanism.

A similar progression can be seen in the themes of revolt (whether symbolic or factual) to the sacrificial substitution for the other. If Sartre's Orestes and Camus' *homme révolté* live alienated, marginalized and cannot sacrifice themselves for humanity,

Bérenger, although his sacrifice is not taken to the end, risks losing his life when he confronts the killer. Similarly, Bérenger from *Rhinocéros*, through his hesitant resistance to metamorphosis, aware that he is in danger of being crushed by others does not capitulate. In *Maximilien Kolbe*, the sacrifice is no longer veiled or suggested—it is graphically displayed in the text and on stage. It seems in this case that both axes that define Ionesco's humanism, contemplation and community are joined in this final act: from the moments of contemplation that the Franciscan priest has dedicated his life to, flows the insatiable desire to love the other to the point of ultimate sacrifice; contemplation and engagement are not incompatible.

## Notes

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<sup>48</sup> « le vide des mots n'est autre que le vide de l'esprit » (Lista 136).

<sup>49</sup> « ... les personnages de mes pièces sont aussi des gens qui prononcent des slogans ce qui leur épargne la peine de penser » (*Entretiens* 133).

<sup>50</sup> « Je pensais des choses sur les choses, sans connaître le nom des choses » (*Découvertes* 29)

<sup>51</sup> « La pensée semble précéder le langage. Le langage ne faisant que la manifester, qu'à aider à mieux penser ce que je pense, puis à la préciser. Le cri est langage, réaction, interprétation » (*Découvertes* 23).

<sup>52</sup> «...lorsqu'on dit que le langage et la pensée sont une seule et même chose, que le langage n'est pas le moule trouvé, inventé par une pensée qui le précède, on veut dire, en somme, que l'on refuse toute métaphysique, que l'on est matérialiste : identifier le parler et le penser, c'est parfois vouloir nier la spiritualité, ou tout dualisme» (*Découvertes* 44).

<sup>53</sup> Giovanni Lista highlights the importance of Croce for Ionesco's *ars poesis*: « En misant sur une communication qui, sans la médiation du langage rationnel, s'adresse au psychisme affectif de chaque spectateur, le théâtre de Ionesco s'élève au rang d'une poétique de l'art, la théorie esthétique de Benedetto Croce sur la poésie comme identité subjective d'intuition et d'expression » (Lista 135).

<sup>54</sup> « Mais au nom de quoi Bérenger décide-t-il de résister ? Aucune valeur sauf une : rester humain, autrement dit rester ce que l'on est » (*Ionesco* 150).

<sup>55</sup> Giovanni Lista sheds light on Bérenger's ethics : «Quelle est l'éthique correspondante à l'action de ce personnage? Cela apparaît précisément dans cette révolte. Faire face à la mort est, chez Ionesco, la seule possibilité pour l'homme de vivre son authenticité. C'est alors que l'homme devient pure conscience d'être en laissant derrière lui les simples contingences, c'est-à-dire le quotidien, l'histoire, la lutte politique, la parole des autres » (Lista 144).

<sup>56</sup> « Il existe en Roumanie une société philosophique portant le nom d'un professeur fasciste qui groupe soixante jeunes philosophes. Nous savons combien sont dangereuses, efficaces, ces sociétés de pensée. Ces

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. . . idéologues se réunissent, discutent, se préparent : ils sont « mystiques », légionnaires, ou pré-légionnaires. . . des germes, des ferments, ils sont soixante-dix, ils deviendront cent, deux cents, mille, ils envahissent les journaux, les revues. Ils donnent des cours à la Faculté, des conférences, écrivent des livres, parlent, parlent, leurs voix couvrent tout » (*Présent passé passé présent* 168).

<sup>57</sup> «C'est-à-dire, ce qui est monstrueux en nous peut prendre le dessus ; les foules, les peuples se déshumanisent d'ailleurs périodiquement : guerres, jacqueries, pogroms, fureurs et crimes collectifs, tyrannies et oppressions. Ceux-ci ne sont qu'une partie des aspects de la révélation de notre monstruosité, les aspects qui me viennent à l'esprit parce qu'ils sont courants, aujourd'hui, ou dans l'histoire. Notre monstruosité a d'innombrables visages, collectives ou non, frappants ou moins frappants, évidents ou moins évidents» (*Entretiens* 46).

<sup>58</sup> Ionesco's stage directions indicate this gradual metamorphosis : « Bérenger s'interrompt, car Jean fait une apparition effrayante. En effet, Jean est devenu tout à fait vert. La bosse de son front est presque devenue une corne de rhinocéros » (*Théâtre complet* 602). And later « Grand bruit dans la salle de bains, barrissements, bruits d'objets et d'une glace qui tombe et se brise ... Tandis que la porte s'ébranle sous la poussée continue de l'animal, et que le vacarme dans la salle de bain continue et que l'on entend des barrissements mêlés à des mots à peine distincts, comme « je rage », « salaud », etc., Bérenger se précipite vers la porte de droite » (602-603).

<sup>59</sup> « Comme Craig, Meyerhold est convaincu que l'acteur peut trouver des modèles de postures stylisées dans la sculpture, art qui se déploie dans les trois dimensions, plutôt que dans la peinture figée dans le plan. . . . Meyerhold, qui s'inspire parfois du music-hall et de l'art du cirque qui exigent, de la part de l'interprète, virtuosité, agilité et maîtrise, attache beaucoup d'importance à l'entraînement physique de l'acteur, « la biomécanique » (*Les grandes théories du théâtre* 242).

<sup>60</sup> Giovanni Lista reproduces a part of Sartre's speech in his book on Ionesco: « [le rhinocéros] représente Ionesco qui dit : je résiste, et voilà qu'il reste au milieu des rhinocéros, seul à défendre l'homme sans que nous soyons sûrs s'il est bon ou non d'être un rhinocéros. Rien ne nous prouve le contraire » (Lista 152).

<sup>61</sup> « Cette perception, cette intelligence de la souffrance, c'est précisément cela la vérité dans l'art... , vérité sans laquelle rien n'a de valeur » (279).

<sup>62</sup> « Par souci d'antipolitique, j'ai fait... moi-même de la politique, parce qu'être contre la politique, c'est encore faire de la politique » (*Un homme en question* 9).

<sup>63</sup> « Maximilien Kolbe est donc un opéra à part entière mais un opéra qui représente un vrai travail d'équilibriste, "un événement littéraire et musical" en effet, qui tient du "miracle", peut-être du miracle médiéval, donné à « l'époque d'Auschwitz, du Goulag, de Hiroshima, du Cambodge de Pol Pot et de la mort administrative de centaines d'hommes qui pèsent lourd sur nos consciences, comme l'écrit Bradecki dans le livret de Rimini » (63).

<sup>64</sup> « Nous autres, nous nous agitons dans les cafés littéraires, / Nous nous acharnons à combattre/Pour notre gloire et notre vanité personnelle, /Nous nous enivrons de paroles creuses, /Des livres creux, de livres de littérature». (this is also an excerpt from Ionesco's lecture at the Colloque Cérisy-la-Salle given in 1978, printed in *Ionesco, Situations et Perspectives* [22-23]).

<sup>65</sup> « Maximilien Kolbe n'a aucun pouvoir, aucun savoir qui le rendraient supérieur à tous les autres hommes. Il ne rentre pas en transes. Il subit le même sort qu'eux et ne comprend pas davantage qu'eux le mystère du mal absolu dans lequel ils sont plongés » (*Maximilien Kolbe* 120).

<sup>66</sup> Translation borrowed from [http://wahiduddin.net/saint\\_francis\\_of\\_assisi.htm](http://wahiduddin.net/saint_francis_of_assisi.htm).

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<sup>67</sup> Primo Levi's description of the *Muselmänner*: "All the *Muselmänner* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea... Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, from the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. ... They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen" (Levi 90).

<sup>68</sup> It is important to note the difference between Emmanuel Levinas and Giorgio Agamben in what the role of testimony is concerned. Whereas Levinas supports the idea of the "glory" of testimony, Agamben focuses on the "lacuna" of testimony. In analyzing Primo Levi's works, Agamben punctuates Levi's conclusion that the *Muselmänner* ("the one we cannot see" (162), the one that has not survived) is the complete witness, therefore in his view, pure testimony cannot be expressed, cannot exist. The paradox rests in Levi's declaration that he was a *Muselmänner*, therefore testimony is possible through this rite of passage from being *Muselmänner* (who cannot bear witness and speak) to survivor and consequently witness. ("Not only is the *Muselmänner* the complete witness; he now speaks and bears witness in the first person" [*Remnants of Auschwitz* 165]) Both ideas, which may seem opposite, join in Ionesco's illustration of testimony: the impossibility to bear witness (depicted in the mute song of the children) joins the glory of the testimony (revealed in the ultimate sacrifice of Maximilien Kolbe). If for Agamben the notion of human dignity has been lost in the Nazi Camp, for Ionesco and Levinas, human dignity is still recoverable and shines through the selfless act of love for the other.

<sup>69</sup> « ... il y a l'enseignement de ces admirables rabbins hassidiques qui savaient ce qu'était l'amour, qui savaient comment on pouvait parvenir à lui, qui pourraient nous le réapprendre si nous n'étions sourds et aveugles. La science de l'amour. Ni détruire les ennemis, car au fond il n'y a pas d'ennemi, il n'y a des ennemis que par erreur, ni fuir la terre, mais la purifier, c'est-à-dire rendre aux hommes une conscience éveillée » (Journal 150).

## CHAPTER V

# THE HUMANISM OF LAUGHTER: AWARENESS AND REDEMPTION

« Où il n'y a pas d'humour, il n'y a pas d'humanité »  
(Ionesco, *Notes* 179)

If suffering is one of the two dimensions that we identified as defining Ionesco's view on humanism, humor, in Ionesco's view, is what brings awareness of the tragic and derisory condition of the human being.<sup>70</sup> Humor serves as a diagnostic tool and at the same time it is a response to this condition.

Although it might seem incongruent that what has been typically named as absurd theatre, considered hermetic by some critics, could have any attempt or pretention to a world beyond, showing the absurdity through humor is in fact opening towards a world that is not subjected to the entropic force, but free from it. The comic devices that humor employs, paradoxically, operate what is referred to as a *dépaysement*, a detachment, which in its literal sense means being removed from one's element, country, region, familiarity. In his collection of essays and reflections, *Notes et contre-notes*, the author of *La Cantatrice chauve* highlights the importance of humor as the unique way of distancing ourselves from the human condition: « . . . l'humour est l'unique possibilité que nous ayons de nous détacher—mais seulement après l'avoir surmontée, assimilée, connue- de notre condition humaine, comico-tragique, du malaise de l'existence » (Notes 201). (« . . . [humor is] the only opportunity we have of detaching ourselves from our tragi-comic human condition or the sickness of living; assuming of course it has been recognized, assimilated and experienced » [Notes 143]). He emphasizes, in his interview with Edith Mora, published in



*Notes*, that this detachment from himself is what makes him a comedy author: «Et je crois que c'est à cette faculté, non pas seulement d'observation, mais de détachement, et de dédoublement vis-à-vis de moi-même, que je dois d'être auteur comique » (*Notes* 176). (“And I believe I am a comic writer thanks to this faculty, not only for observation, but from detachment, for being able to stand outside myself” [*Notes* 121]). In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco defines humor as being the antidote and the means to react to the absurdity and tragedy of the human condition. Humor generates the necessary clarity of conscience or awareness about the vanity of our desires and their absurdity, without denying their existence and importance for our daily living.<sup>71</sup> Humor is what allows humans to surpass their condition, and it is, in this sense, redemptive.

Because of its complex nature, defining humor has not been an easy task for critics. Luigi Pirandello's interpretation of the term is pertinent in our context, and I will start first by presenting his concept as defined in his work *On Humor* (written initially in Italian in 1908 and translated into English in 1960). In his first chapter, Pirandello analyzes its etymological and semantic connotations. He starts from Benedetto Croce's premise that it is impossible to grasp the word's meaning, which can rather be defined by what it is not than by what it is, because of its countless variable elements (3). Croce claims that humor cannot be defined on a philosophical level, but its definitions can be accepted on the empirical level. Having had that theoretical premise, Pirandello sketches his definition, or rather “an explanation of the inner process which takes place... in all the writers called humorists” (111). In his treatise, Pirandello defines humor as follows:

... a fundamental “contradiction” which is usually said to derive principally from the discord which feeling and meditation discover either between real life and the human ideal or between human aspirations and human frailty and miseries, and whose main effect is a certain perplexity

between weeping and laughing; the skepticism which gives color to all humorous observations and descriptions; and, finally, the minutely and even cunningly analytical process of that skepticism. (109)

Humor encompasses the essential contradiction between life and human perceptions or ideals, which results in an ambiguous state suspended between laughing and weeping. This state is then followed by a reflection, an analysis of the skepticism provoked during this observation. Pirandello comments then on the difference between comic and humor. Comic is based on the initial “perception of the opposite,” which is perceiving the incongruity between life and the human ideal and simply laugh at it, whereas humor goes one step further and through reflection arrives at the “feeling of the opposite” (113).<sup>72</sup> This “feeling of the opposite” that characterizes humor arises from a state of perplexity, which is described by Pirandello as such: “I feel as if I were suspended between two forces: I feel like laughing, and I do laugh, but my laughter is troubled and obstructed by something that stems from the representation itself” (118). Humor has physical connotations in its original form *humor* in Latin; it also encompasses the four moods that characterize the human being and the mind disposition of a person,<sup>73</sup> therefore, in Pirandello’s interpretation, humor extends beyond the limits of the comic. The comic relies on an initial perception of the situation, whereas humor provides deeper insight into the situation it depicts. In this interpretation, humor reflects an ethical, therefore humanist side.

Ionesco’s definition of humor follows the same path as the Pirandellian concept. In Ionesco’s view, humor prompts an awareness of the human being’s predicament but it contains ways of coping with, and even surpassing it. Laughter, which is one of its effects, breaks the barriers between humans; in that sense, it is metaphysical, because it

extends beyond the limits of the self. It is not a distant humor, separating the one who laughs from the object of his or her laughter. Although sometimes sarcastic, the sarcasm is like the double-edged sword: laughing about the other automatically becomes laughing about oneself. Ionesco emphasizes that laughter is the only medium that does not respect any taboos, the only one capable of giving humans the strength to endure the tragedy of existence: « Prendre conscience de ce qui est atroce et en rire, c'est devenir maître de ce qui est atroce » (*Notes* 202). (“To become fully conscious of the atrocious and to laugh at it is to master the atrocious” [*Notes* 144]). Ionesco’s laughter is complex, as Marie Claude Hubert notes, as it resonates over the chasms of our anguish (*Eugène Ionesco* 227). Giovanni Lista qualifies Ionesco’s laughter as derisory but also redemptive (158).<sup>74</sup>

Laughter has been the object and subject of Henri Bergson’s treatise, *Le rire* (first published in 1900) and it also held a central place in Bakhtine’s definition of the term carnivalisation, which he explored in his work on Rabelais, *L’œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance* (written in Russian in 1940 and first published in French in 1970). The more recent works of Peter Berger, especially his study *Redeeming Laughter* (1997) have been useful in sketching a definition of humor that can be applied to Ionesco’s works.

Henri Bergson defines laughter as having a social signification, since, in his view, “laughter is always the laughter of the group” (6). Laughter causes an internal and an external separation. First, there is the internal schism that occurs between feeling and laughter. They cannot occur at the same time—laughter operates a certain internal scission; the person who laughs cannot feel anything in that moment (6). The second divide is between the person who laughs and the object of his or her laughter. This is

what Bakhtine calls satiric laughter, a laughter which scorns and humiliates its object (20). It is the laughter that Pirandello associates with the Romantic period, in which the artist considers himself or herself detached, or even superior to his or her protagonists. Satiric laughter is cold, detached and presupposes a superior attitude towards its object. In his book on Rabelais, Bakhtine identifies another kind of laughter, the grotesque laughter that he describes as being the emblematic laughter that takes place in carnival festivities. This is the liberating laughter that does not differentiate between the agent and the object of laughter. Indeed, agent and object are often one and the same entity. This laughter is not merely the feeble echo of an internally torn soul, but is rather the outburst of infinite joy and, as such, it helps people transcend their condition and unites them. The principle of the carnival is that it operates a superposition between life and theatre, where the frontier marked by the stage is effaced.<sup>75</sup> This overlapping allows for the renewal of theatre and its principles. Laughter, the primary means of relieving the burden of existence, which is the principle focus of the carnival, is also taken beyond the limits of understanding: it becomes ambiguous, grotesque, and universal. Laughter is joyful, but can also be sarcastic, since it simultaneously negates and affirms (« [le rire] nie et affirme à la fois» [Bakhtine 20]).

In his preface of the book *Redeeming laughter*, the sociologist Peter Berger notes that humor is universal, although its effect varies from culture to culture, from generation to generation. It is “an anthropological constant,” defining all human beings, but is also “historically relative” (x). He goes on to write about the transcendental nature of the comic that “conjures up a separate world, different from the world of ordinary reality, operating by different rules. It is also a world in which the limitations of the human

condition are miraculously overcome. The experience of the comic is, finally, a promise of redemption” (Berger x). This redemption dwells in the promise of a world that is complete, where “the miseries of human condition have been abolished” (Berger 205). The difference, in Berger’s view, between religious faith and comic is in the conviction implied by faith that such a world exists, whereas the comic opens the way to the promise (not fulfilled), or the anticipation of redemption. If in the Pirandellian view, humor is what brings about awareness regarding the human condition, comic in Berger’s interpretation contains within itself an anticipation of a world where the limits of this condition will have been overcome. Ionesco’s works reflect a combination, or rather an oscillation between both views, which are complementary rather than incompatible. In this chapter, I will analyze different facets of Ionesquian humor: some of the prevalent comic relief techniques that Ionesco employs in several of his plays, and notably in *Macbett*, where he depicts the travesty of power, the parody of the ritual, in *Le Roi se meurt*, concluding with the liberating laughter in *Ce formidable bordel*.

### ***The Comic, a Dramatic Construction***

It is important to note that for Ionesco, the comic is not only an end, but it is also a method, a way that Ionesco employs for his dramatic constructions, “a tool used to counterpoint the dramatic action” (*Notes* 118).<sup>76</sup> It is, in Ionesco’s view, one of the languages specific to theatre, and especially to comedy.

Some of the techniques the author uses are reminiscent of the comic tradition such as the automatism of humans, antagonisms through counterpoint, acceleration,

accumulation of objects on stage and interruptions. All these are the usual mechanisms of comedy employed from the times of Aristophanes.

These techniques, since they rely mostly on gestures, music, scenery—the language of theatre that is not dependent solely on words, are constitutive of what Emmanuel Jacquart calls the *rhétorique de l'anti-théâtre*. This anti-theatre rhetoric includes not only the word (*la parole*) but also the performance language (*le langage scénique*). In his analysis (*Le théâtre de dérision*, 1974), Jacquart notes that the verbal and non-verbal components of this rhetoric provoke a shock reaction (265). The technique of counterpoint is often used by Ionesco, to cushion, with comical elements, the pathetic and dramatic. This association of contraries, constitutive of counterpoint, is key in the humoristic work of art, in Pirandello's view, and it is the cause of the apparent disorganization and disconnection of humoristic works (Pirandello 119). As noted by the Italian dramatist, "humor is art with a characteristic of its own ...; its source is a special activity of reflection, which decomposes the image created by an original feeling in order that from this composition a contrary image may arise..."(121). The antagonisms that are at the core of Ionesco's works assure, in Giovanni Lista's view, the vitality of the work of art, its breathing, its rhythm and its dynamics. This dialectic remains antagonistic at its core, and it is not resolved in the Hegelian sense of a synthesis, in a reconciliatory, conclusive reflection. The antagonisms are relevant through their acceleration, densification and intensification<sup>77</sup> rather than a formulated idea patterned after a dialectic procedure.<sup>78</sup>

Ionesco's technique of modifying the dramatic by infusing a touch of burlesque may be found in the tragic-farce, *Les Chaises*. In this play, which dramatizes the theme of

waiting, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, an elderly couple and their invisible guests desperately await the important message of the Orator, which is supposed to bring about redemption to all. The Orator, who is mute and deaf, arrives but his message contains incomprehensible syllables and disparate vowel sounds. The frantic anguish of the couple culminates with them jumping out of the windows and ending their life. Yet, before this dramatic event, the Vieux dedicates to his companion a love poem infused with morbid undertones. The burlesque and the pathetic meet in these dark, with romantic undertones, verses: « J’aurais pourtant/voulu tellement/finir nos os/sous une même peau/dans un même tombeau/de nos vieilles chairs/nourrir les mêmes vers/ensemble pourrir... » (*Théâtre complet* 181). (“Above all I had hoped/ that together we might lie/ with all our bones together/ within the selfsame skin/ within the same sepulcher/ and that the same worms/ might share our old flesh/ that we might rot together . . . [*The Chairs* 158]). The pathetic declaration elicits laughter, which soon turns acidic because it reminds the spectator of his or her own tragic human condition and about the imminency of his or her death. Moreover, the automatic gestures of the elderly couple as they frantically bring empty chairs on stage serve as a comic relief, in contrast to the tragedy of their existence. In Bergson’s definition of humor, gestures (non-verbal language) are comical in the way that they make reference to mechanical movements: « Les attitudes, gestes et mouvements du corps humain sont risibles dans l’exacte mesure où ce corps nous fait penser à une simple mécanique » (*Le rire* 23). (“The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” [*Laughter* 29]). The stage directions indicate this intensification of

movement, a farcical illustration of the elderly couple's anguish, as well as the absurdity of their agitation:

Puis, un long moment, plus de paroles. On entend les vagues, les barques, les sonneries ininterrompues. Le mouvement est à son point culminant d'intensité. Les portes s'ouvrent et se ferment toutes à présent, sans arrêt, toutes seules. . . . Le Vieux reçoit les gens, les accompagne, mais ne va pas très loin, il leur indique seulement les places après avoir fait un ou deux pas avec eux ; il n'a pas le temps. La Vieille apporte les chaises. . . . Puis, enfin, la Vieille s'arrêtera, avec une chaise à la main, qu'elle posera, reprendra, reposera, faisant mine de vouloir aller elle aussi d'une porte à l'autre, de droite à gauche, de gauche à droite, bougeant très vite la tête et le cou; . . . [L]eurs mains, leur buste, leur tête, leurs yeux s'agiteront, en dessinant peut-être des petits cercles. (*Théâtre complet* 166)

Then a long moment, without words. We hear waves, boats, the continuous ringing of the bell. The movement culminates in intensity at this point. The doors are now opening and shutting all together ceaselessly. . . . The Old Man receives the people, accompanies them, but doesn't take them very far, he only indicates seats to them after having taken one or two steps with them; he hasn't enough time. The Old Woman carries in chairs. . . . Then, finally the Old Woman stops, with a chair in one hand, which she places, takes up again, replaces, looks as though she, too, wants to go from one door to another, from right to left, from left to right, moving her head and neck very rapidly . . . [T]heir hands, their chests, their heads, their eyes are agitated, perhaps moving in little circles. (*The Chairs* 141-142)

A similar example of counterpoint may be found in *Le Nouveau locataire* (1953), where Monsieur, the protagonist of the play is moving into his new apartment and brings his many belongings, which end up almost suffocating him, since, at the end of the play, he is somewhere up high in his apartment, cornered by furniture and boxes which cover even his windows, only source of natural light and communication with the exterior. The counterpoint is suggested in the contrast between the text and the performance recorded in the stage directions. With mechanical gestures, the two movers transport the fragile, apparently light luggage with enormous effort, whereas the heavy furniture is transported with the greatest easiness: «A mesure que les objets apportés seront plus grands et



sembleront lourds, les déménageurs auront l'air de les porter avec plus de facilité ; finalement en se jouant et en jouant » (*Théâtre complet* 358). (“The larger and heavier the articles that the furniture movers bring on, the easier they seem to carry them, until finally it looks like child's play” [*The New Tenant* 253]). This traditional technique of counterpoint contains a subversive gesture in Ionesco's interpretation because the aim is not only the comic alleviation of the Monsieur's tragic, materialistic existence through this rhythmic contrast, but it is also an undermining of the naturalist performance of the play used in the traditional theatre.

The counterpoint between text and performance could be paralleled with what Bergson describes as the discrepancy between gesture and speech: «Jaloux de la parole, le geste court derrière la pensée et demande, lui aussi, à servir d'interprète» (*Le rire* 24). (“Jealous of the latter [the speech], gesture closely dogs the speaker's thought, demanding also to act as interpreter” [*Laughter* 31]). In the eighth scene of *La Cantatrice chauve*, the fire chief, seeking a fire in the neighborhood, interrupts the discussions of Madame Smith and her guests the Martins. Ionesco renders *La Cantatrice chauve*, this tragedy of language, comical through counterpoint techniques. The fire chief enunciates what he wants to do while his gestures do the opposite: « Je veux bien enlever mon casque, mais je n'ai pas le temps de m'asseoir. (Il s'assoit, sans enlever son casque) » (29). (“I should like to remove my helmet, but I haven't time to sit down” [ 27]). The stage instructions indicate the opposite movement: “He sits down, without removing his helmet” [*The Bald Soprano* 27]).

The parodical gestures of the elderly couple in *Les Chaises*, the movers from *Le Nouveau locataire*, the fire chief in *La Cantatrice chauve* all illustrate what Emmanuel

Jacquart defines as the « hétérogénéité du code », specific to the theatre of derision. It is a theatrical language that embraces anomalies (such as the contrast between text and gestures) and positions itself in reaction to the traditional theatre where there is a tendency towards homogeneity, which presupposes that the text and the play should complement each other. The difficulty of decoding the text and the performance, experienced by both the reader and the spectator, opens the way to laughter, a response to the inexplicable and a different kind of knowledge that does not translate into words or logic. Laughter maintains a mysterious allure, as it creates connections among people that expand beyond conceptual knowledge. Emmanuel Jacquart notes a significant difference between what he calls traditional theatre and the theatre of derision in the connection of the theatre with the audience. In traditional theatre, language is the medium of communication with the spectators, whereas in the theatre of derision, it is the sensorial that overrides the conceptual.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Macbett - A Travesty of Power***

In *Macbett*, a mix between Shakespeare and Jarry, Ionesco dramatizes the *ubuesque* folly of power and unpacks the hidden motivations behind *libido dominandi*. The play, inspired by Shakespeare and particularly by its reading of the Polish critic Jan Kott in *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1964), was performed in 1972 at the theatre Rive Gauche, under Jacques Mauclair's direction with innovative costumes and scenery created by Jacques Noel. In Ionesco's depiction, history is not linear, nor progressive, and does not lead to civilization. Ionesco was influenced at one point in his life by the German philosopher and historian, Oswald Spengler, who wrote at the beginning of the

twentieth century *The Decline of the West*, in which he unravels the disasters brought upon by the Faustian man. In his pact with the devil, the Faustian Man has elevated the machine to a divine status. The disenchantment with civilization begins with the cruel reality of role reversal: man becomes the slave of his creation, the machine (*The Decline* 503). In Ionesco's play it is not technology, but rather the thirst for power which is the driving force that leads to destruction. Laughter turns sour as the nightmare presented on stage reveals the real anguish of the spectator who watches the terror unfold behind frightening masks, metamorphoses and bloodshed. Whether it is Macbett or Macol or any other duke, they are all blinded by their lust for power and blood. Ionesco is using parody in Alfred Jarry's style, as Paul Vernois writes in his work *La dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco*, with the intent to debunk the appeal of power.<sup>80</sup> Just as Jarry's *Ubu Roi* declares that he does not see a greater person than himself, Macbett is also overtaken by megalomaniac tendencies and instead of bringing relief to his people, he reveals his lust for power.<sup>81</sup> The automatism of exchanges between characters, reminders of circus and music-hall performances along with accelerations and accumulations of objects subvert the legitimacy of his dominance.

In Vernois' view, Ionesco replaces the Shakespearean processes of conscience and remorse with parody (287). The scene at the beginning of *Macbett*, where thanes Candor and Glamiss are plotting the Archduke Duncan's assassination, serves as the comic springboard and sets off the events that follow. The mechanism of repetition, which Bergson classifies as one of the comic procedures, animates the dialogue of the duo Candor-Glamiss and fuels the gradual accumulation of rancor harbored in their hearts against Duncan's usurpation. The play opens with their theatrical dialogue filled with

clichés and absurdities. The spectator becomes aware from the beginning that this is a comedy:

GLAMISS. ... Bonjour, baron Candor.  
CANDOR. ... Bonjour, baron Glamiss.  
GLAMISS. Écoutez-moi, Candor.  
CANDOR. Écoutez-moi, Glamiss.  
GLAMISS. Cela ne peut plus durer.  
CANDOR. Cela ne peut plus durer. (*Théâtre complet* 1039)

GLAMISS. ... Good day, Thane of Candor.  
CANDOR. ... Good day, Thane of Glamiss.  
GLAMISS. Now listen, Candor.  
CANDOR. Now listen, Glamiss.  
GLAMISS. It can't go on like this.  
CANDOR. It can't go on like this. (9)

And their derisive dialogue continues with one of the characters echoing the other's replies and finishing each other's sentences. The comedy of language is revealed in this rhetorical use of anadiplosis, the doubling back of words:

CANDOR.... Duncan, l'archiduc Duncan bien-aimé, ah, ah!  
GLAMIS. Ah oui! Bien-aimé. Trop aimé.  
CANDOR. Trop aimé. (1039)

CANDOR ... Duncan, our well-loved Archduke Duncan, huh!  
GLAMISS. Ah yes! Well-loved. Too well loved.  
CANDOR. Too well loved. (9-10)

Macbett and Banco overturn the rebellious plot of the two thanes. The dark undertones of this comical parody are emphasized by the overwhelming bloodshed that takes place. If in Shakespeare's plays the victims of the rebellion reached a few hundred, in Ionesco's interpretation victims amount to millions—an allusion to the genocides, holocausts, gulags that left their mark on the twentieth century. The comic emerges against the somber background of the killing of Glamiss' and Candor's partisans in the progressive multiplications of guillotines and the mechanical movements of the soldiers

who rush by themselves on the scaffold and place their heads under the blade of the guillotine. The spectacle takes place before the eyes of the audience, the Archduke's entourage and lady Duncan, who is having tea. The stage instructions indicate the derisory puppet-like movements of the anonymous soldiers who die one after the other, stripped of their humanity and without any dignity: « Les uns après les autres- en fait les mêmes comédiens- passant et repassant rapidement, dans le fond, les soldats de Candor se font couper la tête sous la guillotine » (*Théâtre complet* 1061). ( "One after the other- the same actors in point of fact- Candor's soldiers pass rapidly across the Rear of the stage to lose their heads beneath the guillotine" [*Macbett* 38]). Banco is the executioner and his exclamation "Quick!" prompts the killings and accelerates the spectacle: «Après chaque 'vite!' le couperet tombe. Têtes dans le panier» (1061). ("After each 'quick!' the blade falls. Heads in the basket. " [39]) The rapid movements and repetition, punctuated by Banco's pressing on a button, and by lady Duncan's counting of the victims, render the spectator immune to the avalanche of fallen heads.

The spectacle of horror, illustrated on stage by light and sound effects—a red tragic sky with flashes of flames, flaring lights, and storm and lightning sounds amplified by the cries, gasps and groans of the wounded—is amortized by the interruptions that bring about comic relief to the heavily charged atmosphere.

The spectator's expectation is undermined by the comic relief that interrupts the horror imagery. Like Brecht's *Mère Courage* who profits from the war to save her children from it, the Limonadier (Lemonade Seller) in *Macbett*, takes advantage of a brief truce, the suspension of hostilities and sells lemonades "to cast out fear, ... to cheer your heart" (19). The anaphora and assonance that is not translated in the English version but

exists in French («pour la peur ... pour le coeur» [*Théâtre complet* 1045]) accentuates the lightness of these advertising lines that counterpoint, bringing a comic relief, to the audience. Similarly, Le Chasseur de Papillons (The Butterfly Collector), reminiscent of a Chekhovian character who appears and then disappears in *The Cherry Orchard*, crosses the stage interrupting any attempt by the audience to be enthralled by the plot. He enters when the stage is empty, between Macbett's and Banco's soliloquies (fig.24).



**Fig. 24.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Macbett*, dir. Trebouta, Jacques. *Temps libre*. ORTF, Paris, 3 March 1975, Television. Author's screenshot

The mirroring effect of Macbett and Banco's replies, is not only another comic device, but it also illustrates Ionesco's ideas that the thirst for power is essentially the same and that *libido dominandi* affects every ruler who is bound to slide down the same spiral of events. Their almost identical soliloquies illustrate that although minute details

can change, the invariable blood thirst that marks every tyrant does not change. Macbett is enthralled by the hypnotic dances that end in a seductive striptease (alluding to the temptation of power) and incantations of the two witches, who, in the end, are revealed as lady Duncan and her Gentlewoman. The witchcraft scene, in which Macbett is seduced and convinced to kill Duncan is also derisive: parodies of incantations in Latin are accompanied by a staccato rhythm and by the anti-climactic, comico-grotesque dance of the witches. The scene accelerates as the rhythm intensifies, and as Macbett is caught up in the trance-like ritual, repeating robotically the incantations: “Video meliora, deteriora sequor” (60). The stages of seduction are gradual, climaxing with Macbett’s capitulation and Lady Duncan’s captivating discourse, chanted with a siren’s voice:

LADY DUNCAN. (À Macbett, lui tendant le poignard :) ... Voici l’instrument de ton ambition et de notre ascension. (Avec une voix de sirène :) Prends-le, si tu le veux, si tu me veux. Mais agis résolument. Aide-toi, l’enfer t’aidera. Regarde en toi-même comme le désir monte et comme l’ambition cachée se dévoile et t’enflamme. C’est avec ce poignard que tu vas tuer Duncan. Tu prendras ta place auprès de moi. Je serai ta maîtresse. Tu seras mon souverain. Une tâche de sang indélébile marquera cette lame pour que tu te souviennes de ton succès et pour que cela t’encourage dans l’accomplissement d’autres exploits plus grands encore, que nous réaliserons, dans une même gloire. (*Théâtre complet* 1078)

LADY DUNCAN. (To Macbett, offering him the dagger): ... This is the tool with which to further your ambition, our advancement. (With the voice of a siren) Take it, if you want it, if you want me. But act with resolution. Help yourself and Hell will help you. See how desires rises within you, how ambition stands revealed and ignites your purpose. With this dagger you will kill Duncan. You will take his place beside me. I shall be your mistress. You will be my Sovereign Lord. One spot of blood will stain this blade indelibly, to remind you of your triumph and encourage you to further action, greater exploits still, which accomplished jointly, will bring glory to us both. (61)

At the end of the play, Macol, Duncan’s son who comes to avenge the murder of his father and kills Macbett, brings on his apocalyptic prophecy of doom, and promises to

be a worse tyrant than his predecessor. This reiterates Ionesco's often-expressed idea that revolutions and wars do not bring about a socio-politic improvement; they rather satisfy the human's dark thirst for blood. In his interview with Emmanuel Jacquart, Ionesco points out that: "Generally, anarchists turn into tyrants. All revolutions do nothing but establish more firmly the system they had attacked.... People have noticed that revolutions only restore an old archetypal structure which is and can only be order" (*diacritics* 48). The comical dialogue between Glamiss and Candor at the beginning of the play conveys the same notion, through an inversion of a logical causality: Duncan (generic for any ruler) is a tyrant because he is in power.

CANDOR. Duncan, est-il un tyran, le croyez-vous vraiment?

GLAMISS. Un tyran, un usurpateur, un despote, un dictateur, un mécréant, un ogre, un âne, une oie, pire que cela. La preuve, c'est qu'il règne. (1044)

CANDOR. You really believe Duncan to be a tyrant?

GLAMISS. A tyrant, a usurper, a despot, a dictator, an infidel, an ogre, an ass, a goose, or even worse. The proof is that he reigns. (16-17)

Similarly, Macol unveils without any scruples, in a reversal of normal political speech, the hidden reasons that provoke the human being's thirst for power:

MACOL. Mieux vaut Macbett qu'un souverain tel que moi. Outre cela, il y a dans ma nature composée des plus mauvais instincts une avarice si insatiable que, pendant mon règne, je trancherai les têtes de tous les nobles pour avoir leurs terres ... Je forgerai d'injustes querelles avec les meilleurs, avec les plus loyaux et je les détruirai pour avoir leur bien. Je n'ai aucune des vertus qui conviennent aux souverains, la justice, la sincérité, la tempérance, la stabilité, la générosité, la persévérance, la pitié, l'humanité, la piété, la patience, le courage, la fermeté, je n'en ai même pas l'arrière-goût. Mais j'abonde en penchants diversement criminels que je satisferai par tous les moyens. (*Théâtre complet* 1112)

MACOL. Better Macbett than such a one to reign. With this, there grows, in my most ill-composed affection, such a staunchless avarice, that, were I king, I should cut off the nobles for their lands; desire his jewels, and this



other's house: and my more-having would be as a sauce to make hunger more; that I should forge quarrels unjust against the good and loyal, destroying them for wealth. The king-becoming graces, as justice, verity, temperance, stableness, bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude, I have no relish of them; but abound in the division of each several crime, acting it many ways. (105)

The deconstruction of a coherent idea of history is realized through the dark humor that leaves the spectator perplexed: the laughter provoked is overshadowed by the sadness of the atrocities committed at the beginning of the century and continued in many countries ruled by totalitarian regimes. «La raison du vainqueur est toujours la meilleure» (“Right is always on the victor's side” [36]) affirms Candor, justifying the killings (1058-1059). Without any artifices, Ionesco shows the true face behind wars, conflicts, the sadistic pleasure to rule and humiliate of his anti-heroes. His approach echoes Pirandello's view that the role of the humorist is not to sketch heroes or fabricate legends. It is, in Pirandello's view, the role of the humorist to not recognize any heroes but to deconstruct their mythical narrative: “For his part, he [the humorist] knows what a legend is and how it is created, what history is and how it is made: they are all compositions, more or less ideal; the greater the pretense of reality, the more idealized they are. The humorist amuses himself by disassembling these compositions...” (*On Humor* 143). A similar concept of deconstruction is used by Ionesco in his description of the physiological regression of the king Bérenger from *Le Roi se meurt*, as well as in the destructuralization of the king's death ceremony.

### ***Le Roi se meurt – The Parody of the Ritual***

Despite its apparently disorganized structure, Ionesco's theatre is interwoven with ritualistic elements. Since, as Yves Moraud maintains, ritual is “a response to the tragedy

of existence” («une riposte au tragique de l’existence» [91]), humor confers to the human being the possibility of surmounting or appropriating the obstacles his mortal condition entails. Ritual, although subverted in Ionesco’s plays, creating therefore a comical effect, is the space where myth is revived; it is the external manifestations of the sacred. The gestures and the objects that refer to the sacred often find their meaning in ceremonies and festivities that accompany rituals.

In Ionesco’s plays, ceremony is almost always parodied. Bergson maintains in his treatise on laughter that the ceremonial aspect of social life holds a latent comic quality, which waits for the opportunity to be exposed (34). He also notes that the transposition of solemn into trivial can have the effect that parody has: « Dès que nous oublions l’objet grave d’une solennité ou d’une cérémonie, ceux qui y prennent part nous font l’effet de s’y mouvoir comme des marionnettes. Leur mobilité se règle sur l’immobilité d’une formule. C’est de l’automatisme » (35). (“For, as soon as we forget the serious object of a solemnity or a ceremony, those taking part in it give us the impression of puppets in motion. Their mobility seems to adopt as a model the immobility of a formula. It becomes automatism” [*Laughter* 45-46]).

Parody does not strip the ceremony of its liberating effects: the human can still experience freedom through the medium of laughter. In *Le Roi se meurt*, a play that, as Ionesco confesses to Claude Bonnefoy, is an apprenticeship of death (*Entretiens* 124) the tragedy of death is being exposed through a parody of rituals surrounding the accession of a king. Emmanuel Jacquart notes that the play was initially entitled *Cérémonie* (*Théâtre complet* 1724)—an important detail, which suggests that there is an organizational principle configured on the structure of ceremonies.

Mircea Eliade writes that the king's enthronement ceremony is a ritual that imitates creation: «À l'avènement d'un souverain, la cosmogonie était symboliquement réitérée» (*Les aspects du mythe* 56). (“On the accession of a sovereign the cosmogony was symbolically repeated” [*Myth and reality* 39]). In the Indian tradition, the crowning of the king imitated a re-creation of the universe: « En effet, les différentes phases du rituel accomplissaient successivement la régression du futur souverain à l'état embryonnaire, sa gestation d'une année et sa renaissance mystique en tant que Cosmocrator... » (*Aspects du mythe* 56). (“In fact the various phases of the ritual successively brought about the future sovereign's reversion to the embryonic state, his gestation for a year, and his mystical rebirth as Cosmocrator...” [39]). The three phases of the *rajasūya* (installation of the Indian king) mirrored the maturation of the Universe: the first phase was related to the ripening of the crops, whereas the second phase, the divination of the king's body, was equivalent to the universe's divination. The third phase formed of a series of rites for the renewal of the Cosmos that the king performs: « Le roi lève le bras; il symbolise l'élévation de l'axis mundi. Lorsqu'il reçoit l'onction, le roi reste debout sur le trône, les bras levés : il incarne l'axe cosmique fixé dans l'ombilic de la Terre- c'est-à-dire le trône, le Centre du Monde- et touchant le Ciel » (57). (“The king raises his arms; he is symbolizing the raising of the axis mundi. When he is anointed he stands on the throne, arms lifted; he is incarnating the cosmic axis fixed in the navel of the Earth (that is the throne, the Center of the World) and touching the Heavens” [*Myth and reality* 40]). This *imitatio dei* gesture is not merely a formal ritual empty of significance. Eliade has noticed that despite the difference in the socioeconomic structures and cultural contexts, « . . . les peuples archaïques pensent que le Monde doit être annuellement renouvelé et que ce renouvellement s'opère selon un modèle : la cosmogonie ou un

mythe d'origine qui joue le rôle d'un mythe cosmogonique » (60). (“ . . . the archaic people believe that the World must be annually renewed and that this renewal is brought about by following a model- the cosmogony or an origin myth that plays the role of a cosmogonic myth” [42]). The coronation of the king is one of such myths because “[t]he king was believed to renew the entire Cosmos” (41). In its germinal state, the play depicted several kings returning to their infant, embryonic state ending with their return into the nothingness that preceded their birth (Giovanni Lista 78). This inverse view of life's chronology is a concept that Ionesco reiterates in his reflections and essays. Subsequently, the draft morphed into a play about the agony of the king before death. The play depicts the degradation of the king's body (symbolic of universe). It is therefore a reversal of the stages of the coronation of the king. The humor lies in this reversal; the tragedy of death, which every human goes through, is parodied.

The king's entrance on stage, which happens briefly at the beginning of the play(fig.25), on the rhythm of “a derisive rendering of regal music reminiscent of the King's Levee in the seventeenth century” (*Exit the King* 6) («musique dérisoirement royale, imitée d'après les «Levers du Roi» du XVIIe siècle» [*Théâtre complet* 739]) is later followed by the somber announcement made by Marguerite, one of the queens, that the king will die: «Sire, on doit vous annoncer que vous allez mourir» (*Théâtre complet* 749).<sup>82</sup> (“Sire, we have to inform you that you are going to die” [*Exit the King* 21]). The prelude to this brutal pronouncement shows both the king's universe and his body decay. The divination of the body, which takes place at the king's installation to throne is replaced, in Ionesco's imagery, with the king's degradation. Instead of celebrating the ascent to the throne, the play evokes in tragi-grotesque rhythmic tones the king's gradual

loss of power and his kingdom's decrepitude, symbolizing the stages of anger, rebellion, desperation and finally acceptance of death that any dying person goes through.

Moreover, the king's continual degradation leads to the disintegration and the disappearance of his entire kingdom. The portrayal of the king as the human at the pinnacle of power deviates from this symbolic connotation. The king is no longer the embodiment of maximal human potential but rather of his own as well as his kingdom's decay. In Eliade's rendition of the rituals surrounding the crowning of the king, the king is shown to be the facilitator between human and divine; he has prophetic, visionary powers and is seen as the representation of God among humans. But in *Le roi se meurt*, when the king raises his arm, it no longer implies the verticality that permits access to the divine - the Axis Mundi projection- mediating access to divinity.



**Fig.25.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Roi se meurt*, dir. Mauclair, Jacques. ORTF, Paris, 13 January 1963. Television. Author's screenshot.

As the king loses his connection with divinity, his kingdom disappears. The comic emerges from this very fact: Ionesco is showing us the world through the eyes of the dying person for whom everything disappears. The horrifying last moments of the moribund are comical when they are displayed as a spectacle for others to see. The spectator/reader thus lives the double effect, of terror and laughter, of this lyrical comedy.

What remains of the Ionesquian king is the fading and desolate shadow of what once was and the nothingness that awaits him after death. The anguish is accompanied by the comical spectacle, ridiculing the drama of dying. The ceremony of death, extended over the real time of the play itself, lasting one hour and a half, is punctuated by the queen Marguerite's remarks: «Tu vas mourir dans une heure et demie, tu vas mourir à la fin du spectacle» *Théâtre complet* 751). (“You are going to die in an hour and a half, you're going to die at the end of the show”[24]) and then reiterated by the Guard: «La cérémonie commence!» *Théâtre complet* 757). (“The ceremony is about to commence!” [35]). In the clock-like cadence of this incantation, the king's, and implicitly the spectator's, anguish is aggravated. The king is no longer the embodiment of eternal power, but rather the simulacrum of his crumbling kingdom. When the Guard cries: «Vive le Roi! . . . Le Roi est meurt» (*Théâtre complet* 772), (“Long live the King! . . . The King is dead!” [58]) the comical inversion of the ritual phrase used at a king's coronation, sarcastically marks the death of the king reestablishing the natural chronology of life. The Guard's remark, due to its constant reiteration throughout the play alleviates the gravity of the situation, rendering it humorous. The ceremony of death is symbolized by the falling of the crown and scepter from King Bérenger's head and hand. Instead of them being offered to him, they are taken away, thus becoming symbols of instability and

weakness (*Théâtre complet* 754). The inversion of the natural occurrence of events is comical, although tragic undertones are sensed throughout the play. Destruction invades from all sides: spiders, worms that creep around, cows that stopped giving milk, heat that does not work, holes that grow larger and larger (741). The king's subjects are no longer obeying him: they are like the corroded walls that surround him, deaf and mute, perishing with the kingdom. In a burlesque repetition of anaphors, rendering the tragic situation humorous, the king gathers his last forces and attempts to use his divine powers: «Que la tête du Garde tombe, que la tête du Garde tombe!», « Que la tête du Médecin tombe, qu'elle tombe tout de suite! », « Que la couronne de Marguerite tombe à terre, que sa couronne tombe » (*Théâtre complet* 755), (“Off with that guard's head, off with his head !”, “Off with that doctor's head, off with it at once!”, “Off with Marguerite's crown ! Knock it on the floor!” [31]). This repetition ends with the king's crown falling from his head. The progression of the king's agony is rhythmically in tune with catastrophes that happen all over the kingdom, ending with the palace's fissure and its vanishing in a black hole. The final stage instructions indicate the slow installation of oblivion on stage:

Le roi est assis sur son trône. On aura vu, pendant cette dernière scène, disparaître progressivement les portes, les fenêtres, les murs de la salle du trône. Ce jeu de décor est très important. Maintenant, il n'y a plus rien sur le plateau sauf le roi sur son trône dans une lumière grise. Puis, le roi et son trône disparaissent également. (*Théâtre complet* 796)

The King is seated on his throne. During this final scene, the doors, windows and walls of the throne room will have slowly disappeared. This part of the action is very important. Now there is nothing on the stage except the king on his throne in a grayish light. Then the king and his throne also disappear. (*Exit the King* 95)

The play was written in two phases: the first part was written in ten days, after which the playwright became very ill for two weeks. During his convalescence Ionesco took up his pen and finished the play in ten days. In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco notes that he observed, first by rereading the play and then at the performance, the two rhythms that animate his play.<sup>83</sup>

The Brussels performance directed by Robert Postec was one of Ionesco's favorites because the director emphasized this rupture point, the moment when the king exclaims: «Je pourrais décider de ne pas mourir! » (*Théâtre complet* 781), (“I could decide not to die” [72]). On this cue, the stage lights up and the actors take their original places, just like at the beginning of the play, in the corners of the stage. From then on, the accelerated rhythm intensifies, signifying the fleeting hours before the king's death (*Entretiens* 115).

Towards the end of the ceremony, the king is deprived of everything, including his memories: «Ne tourne pas la tête pour regarder ce que tu ne pourras plus jamais voir » *Théâtre complet* 794), (“Don't turn your head to see what you'll never see again” [92]) advises queen Marguerite, who guides him through the tenebrous moments. Once the king loses his sight, he becomes more and more solitary, forced to activate his inner sight and analyze his life: «J'ai un miroir dans mes entrailles, tout se reflète, je vois de mieux en mieux, je vois le monde, je vois la vie qui s'en va » (*Théâtre complet* 790), (“There is a mirror in my entrails where everything is reflected, I can see more and more, I can see the world, I can see life slipping away” [85]). Later on he continues: «Je me vois. Derrière toute chose, je suis. Plus que moi partout. Je suis la terre, je suis le ciel, je suis le vent, je suis le feu. Suis-je dans tous les miroirs ou bien suis-je le miroir de tout ? » (790),



“I see myself. Behind everything, I exist. Nothing but me everywhere. I am the earth, I am the sky, I am the wind, I am the fire; am I in every mirror or am I the mirror of everything ?” [85-86]). The king’s body is the synecdoche, a microcosmic universe; he is the every-human facing death, dethroned from the center of all his or her possessions. The metaphor of the king’s deconstruction is used by Pirandello when he remarks that the humorist’s perception unmask the king’s composed image represented by the majesty of his throne, crown and scepter, mantle of purple and ermine and deconstructs it in order that a deeper analysis of the reality take place (143).

The allegory human-king has been represented by Ionesco in his visual works as well. In the lithographs reproduced in *Le Blanc et le Noir*, there is a caricatured illustration of a king with his crown and his universe of things surrounding him (Fig.26).



**Fig. 26.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Lithograph*; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 31).

After reflecting on the possible symbolism of the lithograph, Ionesco confesses that he is surprised to find this figure, which resembles a King, so miserable and abandoned, in spite of the presence of all his counselors that surround him.

Humor erupts against this somber background, sustaining the dynamics of the play. Giovanni Lista remarks that for Ionesco laughter is also a protective reflex, a way to diffuse the feelings stirred up by the pathos in the play (157). The comic interruption of scenes imbued with serious and tragic undertones attenuates the pathos. The king in *Le roi se meurt*, on the threshold of death, clings to life and desires to continue to exist and be adored by his people. He desperately resists the series of actions that accompany dying, such as embalming:

LE ROI. Horreur! Je ne veux pas qu'on m'embaume. Je ne veux pas de ce cadavre! Je ne veux pas qu'on me brûle ! Je ne veux pas qu'on m'enterre, je ne veux pas qu'on me donne aux vautours ni aux fauves. Je veux qu'on me garde dans des bras chauds, dans des bras frais, dans des bras tendres, dans des bras fermes. (767)

KING. Horror! I don't want to be embalmed. I want nothing to do with that corpse. I don't want to be burnt. I don't want to be buried, I don't want to be thrown to the wild beasts or the vultures. I want to feel arms around me, warm arms, cool arms, soft arms, strong arms. (49-50)

To this sad lament, Juliette, the maid responds, creating the counterpoint effect. The king's agony is amortized by Juliette's trivial remark: « Il ne sait pas très bien ce qu'il veut » (*Théâtre complet* 767). ("He is not too sure what he does want" [50]). She thus breaks the pathos and interrupts any process of identification of the spectator with the character. The identification process is provoked by the author, as he warns his spectator and reader, through Marie, the beloved queen, that the king is a human being like everyone else: «Ce n'est qu'un roi, ce n'est qu'un homme» (*Théâtre complet* 760). ("He is just a king. He's just a man" [40]). This analogy permits identification with the

suffering of the king before death, while the comic relief that interrupts such scenes operates a sort of detachment; it is a *distanciation* different than the *Verfremdungseffekt* envisaged by Brecht. The spectator, instead of being invited to ponder the social context or existent inequalities, is invited to reflect upon his or her own mortality and human condition. Instead of providing the lesson, Ionesco lets his reader/spectator draw his or her own conclusions. In *Antidotes*, Ionesco remarks that his general state of mind when he writes is anguish and despair, but that sometimes, there is a flickering hope, «l'éclairage de l'humour». (315) (“In black anguish I write, with an occasional shaft of humor” [“Why Do I Write?” 120]). Humor represents not only a cathartic effect but it can have redemptive, almost in the religious sense, qualities.

### ***Ce formidable bordel - The Redemptive Laughter***

Faced with the incongruence of life and its unresolved enigmas, Ionesco's characters experience the laughter similar to that of the Zen master. After realizing that full knowledge of life's meaning is inaccessible, the Zen master begins laughing out loud as a response to the anguish before the unknown that existence entails. Such is the case with the Personnage from *Ce formidable bordel* (a dramatization of Ionesco's only novel, *Le Solitaire*), a nameless character who inherits a fortune from his uncle in the United States, quits his job and visits one last time the business where he worked for fifteen years. Everyone gives their opinion about how he should spend his money, while trying to ingratiate themselves to him by showing their affection and backstabbing one another. The satirical criticism is pungent, as Ionesco, like a seventeenth-century moralist, exposes the hypocrisy and flattery of people avid for material gains. The accumulated dialogues

revolving around the Personnage who rarely intervenes and who, when he does, poses unrelated questions, reflect a world in a state of vertiginous disintegration. In his long monologue, the Monsieur describes this infernal world, ruled by the evil demiurge:

LE MONSIEUR. . . . Le monde est mal fait. Celui qui l'a fait n'a pas réussi . . . . Ne croyez-vous pas que nous vivons en enfer ? Que l'enfer est ici ? Nous sommes tous des assoiffés, des affamés, des désireux et quand nous aurions comblé notre faim, comblé notre soif, satisfait nos désirs, il y aura d'autres désirs, il y aura d'autres faims, il y aura d'autres soifs. . . . Nous vivons dans une sorte de prison qui est une boîte. Cette boîte est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, qui est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, qui est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, emboîtée dans une autre boîte, et ainsi de suite, à l'infini. Et l'infini, je vous le disais, on ne peut pas le concevoir. (*Théâtre complet* 1146-1147)

GENTLEMAN. . . . Whoever made the world got it wrong. It is a mess. . . . Don't you agree that we're living in hell? That this is hell! We're all hungry, thirsty and unsatisfied but when we've appeased our hunger, quenched our thirst and satisfied our desires, desire hunger and thirst will still be with us. . . . We inhabit a kind of prison, like a box. A box that goes into a box that fits another box that goes into a box that's in a box that's in a box, and so on *ad infinitum*. And infinity, as I said, is beyond our comprehension. (*Oh What a Bloody Circus* 41-43)

Despite Monsieur's warning that the infinite cannot be conceived, the Personnage experiences an episode of hierophany. During the tenth scene, after a parade of characters holding discourses about the world's inconsistencies, while the Personnage is in a restaurant, a spotlight shines on the tablecloth (*Théâtre complet* 1157). Everything turns as in a frenetic dance on the rhythm of the street noises, which slowly develop into a harmonious melodic sound. The acceleration in the conversations between the Révolté and the other characters who are advocating for a merciless revolution is contrasted with the self-centeredness of the Personnage. In the middle of the uproar, the Personnage, after being punched in the face by another character, maintains his usual calm. Agnès, the waitress, proposes to him that they start a new life together in the midst of the frenzy:

« Ils s'entretuent, ils se déchirent les uns les autres, ils s'exploitent les uns les autres. Nous pouvons être un exemple pour tous » (1174). ( “ Other people, they kill one another, tear each other apart, they're jealous and they exploit each other. We can be an example to them all” [*Oh What a Bloody Circus* 69]). The episode is short-lived, although continued by Agnès' reverie of idyllic places with silver ladders, limpid lakes, vividly colored flowers, people the color of light (*Théâtre complet* 1183). The Personnage lives in the expectation of an *ouverture*, an escape from the nonsensical life, but in the last scene of the play, the Concierge relates the disappearance of the other characters, killed in the battle and advises the Personnage to remain cheerful «Il faut prendre ça avec joie, avec bonne humeur!» [*Théâtre complet* 1191]). Although the revolution in the street has ended, the disputes continue in the domestic sphere, where a husband kills his wife and children, a French man who married a Japanese woman commits hara-kiri when she leaves him for a German, and so on. (1193-1194). The void installs itself onstage as the scenery slowly disappears. At the very end, ghosts from the past appear: Lucienne, the Personnage's ex-wife who passed away forty years before, the son of the Révolté. This parade of ghosts brings the Personnage to the brink of exasperation and he yells to be left alone (1200). The stage is invaded by light from all sides, while the Personnage stands alone. This accumulation of events not organized in a plotline, are preparing the stage for the Personnage's last culminating experience, his hysterical laughter, baffled by the incomprehensible existence. His last lines are addressed to the audience:

LE PERSONNAGE. Quelle bonne blague, mes enfants! Quelle blague messieurs-dames. A-t-on pu imaginer une blague pareille ! Une blague pareille ! Quel bordel ! Ah là là, quel formidable bordel ! (1201)

CHARACTER. We've been taken for a ride, boys and girls! Ladies and gentlemen, we've been had! Was there ever anything like it! Who could have imagined such a trick! What a circus! . . . What a bloody circus! (95)

A tree, whose leaves and flowers start to fade and fall appears on the empty stage and alluding to Beckett's tree from *En attendant Godot*. The reversal of *axis mundi* symbolism takes place in this context as well. The tree does not bear fruit; it is rather lifeless, without any promise of hope. The stage directions describe the final scene where the Personnage laughs uncontrollably at the lack of meaning, at the nothingness of existence, represented in the metaphor of the lifeless tree.

On voit un grand arbre surgir dans la lumière du fond, dans le décor vide. Des cintres tombent des feuilles et des fleurs de l'arbre. Le Personnage se penche, les ramasse, les regarde, se relève, laisse tomber les fleurs et les feuilles, regarde vers le haut, regarde vers le fond, vers la droite, vers la gauche. . . . Il va d'un bout à l'autre du plateau se tenant le ventre, se tordant de rire, riant aux éclats. Il regarde encore une fois vers le haut, toujours en riant, fait un signe du bout de la main et du doigt vers le haut (1201).

A huge tree springs out of the light at the back on the empty stage. Leaves and blossoms from the tree fall softly from the flies. The Character bends down, picks them up and looks at them; then stands up again, drops the flowers and the leaves, looks up above him, looks to the Rear, to the Right and to the Left. . . . Then he starts laughing, quietly at first, then louder and louder. He stands up. He walks from one end of the stage to the other bursting with laughter, holding his sides, crumpled with laughter. Once again he looks upwards, still laughing, and makes a sign with his hand, pointing upwards. (95)

For Ionesco the reference to the theme of waiting from Beckett has a different role: laughter as the antidote to the unbearable wait, the ineffable meaning of life, a conscious state of rebellion which, in Zen tradition, is not an end in itself but an opening towards another reality. In his article «Quand le terrible éclate de rire» Jean Onimus presents the steps that the Zen monks follow. The ultimate step of laughter, the Koan, which is a

meditation on a paradox that forces the Buddhist monk to abandon reason, is followed by a revelation of another dimension of existence:

On oblige le novice à méditer indéfiniment sur un problème radicalement insoluble, sur une absurdité, jusqu'au moment où le sérieux éclate en mille morceaux, jusqu'à ce qu'explose le rire, le rire libérateur que le sérieux portait obscurément en lui. C'est l'épreuve du Koan. Quand le novice accède au rire, une révélation se produit, celle d'un ordre supérieur ou le sérieux n'a plus cours. . . . (Onimus 154)

The novice is forced to meditate indefinitely on a problem that is radically unsolvable, on an absurdity, until seriousness breaks in thousands of pieces, until laughter bursts, the liberating laughter that seriousness carried mysteriously within itself. It is the test of Koan. When the novice accesses laughter, a revelation of a superior order occurs, where seriousness does not have access. . . . (*my translation*)

Ionesco writes in *Antidotes* that he has been influenced by the story of the Zen monk who spent his life searching for meaning, and, as the old age arrived, he had a sudden flash of illumination: «Regardant autour de lui avec un regard neuf, il s'écrie: "quelle leurre!" et rit aux éclats» (*Antidotes* 324). ("Looking around with newly-opened eyes, he exclaims: 'It is a snare and a delusion!' and rocks with laughter." ["Why Do I Write?" 127]). The demystification of the world is freeing as one becomes less focused on the absurdity of life and accepts it as it is. In his chapter "Laughing Monks", Peter L. Berger notes the components of a comic philosophy that exists in both Taoism and Zen in which laughter emerges from a stance of rebellion and derision which, in the end, bring freedom: "The diagnosis of the world as a mass of incongruence. The radical debunking of all pretensions of grandeur and wisdom. A spirit of mocking irreverence. And, in the result, a profound discovery of freedom" (43). Laughter emerges and liberates the human being; it is cathartic as it purges the human of his or her anxiety. It is an antidote to desperation

and comes as liberation, even if temporary. Ionesco stresses the importance of laughter as cathartic in his interview with Edith Mora:

Rire...rire..., certainement, je ne peux pas dire que je ne cherche pas à faire rire, toutefois, ce n'est pas là mon propos le plus important ! Le rire n'est que l'aboutissement d'un drame, qu'on voit, sur la scène, ou qu'on ne voit pas quand il s'agit d'une pièce comique, mais alors il est sous-entendu, et le rire vient comme une libération : on rit pour ne pas pleurer. . . (Notes 173)

Laughter...laughter... certainly I cannot say I do not try to arouse laughter; however, that is not my most important object! Laughter is merely the by-product of a dramatic conflict that one sees on the stage- or that one does *not* see if the play is a comedy, but then it is still implied- and laughter becomes as a reprieve: we laugh so as not to cry. . . . (Notes 117-118)

Laughter is set off by the awareness of the dreadfulness of existence and its continuous menace of nothingness. Humor brings humans together and laughter helps them transcend their sorrows; it solidifies the community. In this sense, laughter is metaphysical. Bergson notes: « On ne goûterait pas le comique si l'on se sentait isolé» (*Le rire* 4) (“You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others” [*Laughter* 5]). Through laughter, Ionesco establishes a new connection with his audience and reader. It is through laughter that the absurd is transcended, or, in a sense, appropriated without being explained, and a community is created. In Giovanni Lista’s view, it is the humor that assures that Ionesco’s theatre, despite its sometimes obscure imagery, communicates.<sup>84</sup> Laughter, and especially laughing about one-self, which is Ionesco’s approach, is the space that connects the author and his or her reader. In his interview with Edith Mora, Ionesco notes that he has always made fun of himself in his writings.<sup>85</sup> For him, just as for Pirandello, an author cannot create a perfect character, since he or she is not perfect: “. . . he is a fool, like the rest of mankind” (*Notes* 123)



remarks Ionesco echoing Shakespeare.<sup>86</sup> If there is caustic sarcasm, such as is the case with Ionesco's satire of the intellectuals of his time (especially his critics), this is soon transformed into a comical self-critique. The play *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*, staging Ionesco and his critics, is filled with puns, fallacious syllogisms, and awkward wordplays—all these usually attributed to his critics. The audience, complicit in the ironic laughter, is drawn in. When the comedy reaches its climax and the voyeuristic cord of the public is tickled to the maximum, as the audience participates in the humorous “critic bashing,” Ionesco, in the epilogue, does one of his usual pirouettes and turns the tables on himself by donning the symbolic garb of one of his critics and begins to lecture:

IONESCO. . . . Voyez-vous, Mesdames et messieurs, je pense que le langage de la peinture ou de la musique moderne, aussi bien que celui de la physique ou des mathématiques supérieures, la vie historique elle-même, sont bien en avance sur le langage des philosophes qui, loin derrière, essaient de suivre, péniblement. . . . Les docteurs sont toujours en retard, car, comme le dit le savant bavarois Steiffenbach et son disciple américain Johnson . . . . (*Marie, qui est arrivée tout près de Ionesco pendant qu'il prononçait cette dernière phrase, met brusquement la robe sur les épaules de celui-ci.*) (*Théâtre complet* 465)

IONESCO. . . . You see, Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe the language of modern music and painting, as well as the language of physics and higher mathematics and the very essence of history itself are well in advance of the language of the philosophers, who, far behind, painfully struggle to keep up . . . . Scholars are always behind the times, because, as we are told by the eminent Bavarian Steiffenbach and his American disciple Johnson . . . . [*Marie, who has come right up to Ionesco during the last sentence, suddenly throws the gown over his shoulders*] (151).

Marie, the maid, who, such as Molière's maids, is usually the moralist, draws the conclusion and informs the audience of the irony of Ionesco's sudden metamorphosis from persecuted writer into persecutor. Ionesco thus destroys any sympathy or identification with the main character through this turn of events and ends the play with a fine self criticism that is articulated by Bartholoméus II: «Vous détestez qu'on vous

donne des leçons et vous-même vous voulez nous en donner une». . . (*Théâtre complet* 466). (“You hate us to give you lessons and now you want to give us one” . . . [151]). Ionesco is again ridiculing the artificial, the false, the petty aspects in human lives, but this time the critique is turned towards himself as well: he is also a part of this absurdity.

Although suffering is the condition at the foundation of the community that links people together, in Ionesco’s view, laughter is the temporary alleviation and has an amnesic role as one forgets to think about the mystery of evil, the absurdity of existence. Barriers that exist are torn down through laughter, which, as Bakhtine notes in his exploration of *carnavalisation*, creates a diverse, heterogeneous body that embraces its differences without the attempt to homogenize or assimilate. In his analysis of the *Chaises*, Matei Calinescu concludes that Ionesco’s humor is a moral imperative. If the Aristotelian catharsis is accomplished through fear (terror) and pity, for Ionesco, it is laughter, often times cruel, which liberates (*Recherches identitaires* 150). Laughter communicates the anguish experienced by the author. Marie-Claude Hubert, in her last sub-chapter of the book on Ionesco, entitled suggestively, «De la machine à rire à la quête mystique» puts it very bluntly:

C’est par le biais du burlesque que Ionesco nous communique son angoisse face à un monde où tout n’est que « bruit et fureur », où disputes privées et catastrophes cosmiques apparaissent comme les deux faces du satanisme. Le rire est l’expression d’un étonnement permanent devant un monde incompréhensible. (229)

It is by way of burlesque that Ionesco communicates to us his anguish in front of a world where everything is nothing but “sound and fury,” where private disputes and cosmic catastrophes emerge as the two faces of Satanism. Laughter is the expression of a permanent stupefaction in front of an incomprehensible world. (*my translation*)

The cathartic quality of laughter is what allows the spectator to come to terms with his or her own condition. For Antonin Artaud and his Theater of Cruelty, catharsis is

not only a reflection of the derision of the world, but it has an inherent redemptive weight. This is the conclusion of the first chapter of his study, “The Theater and the Plague”:

. . . l’action du théâtre est comme celle de la peste, est bienfaisante, car poussant les hommes à se voir tels qu’ils sont, elle fait tomber le masque . . . ; et révélant à des collectivités leur puissance sombre, leur force cachée, elle les invite à prendre en face du destin une attitude héroïque et supérieure qu’elles n’auraient jamais eue sans cela. (*Le théâtre et son double* 46)

. . . the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall . . . ; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it. (*Theater and Its Double* 32-33)

Ionesco emphasizes the transcendental, redemptive power of humor: « . . . je réussis dans l’angoisse et malgré l’angoisse, à introduire l’humour, --symptôme heureux de l’autre présence, —l’humour est ma décharge, ma libération, mon salut » (*Notes* 228). (“I manage in spite of the anguish to introduce into the anguish, humor—which is a happy symptom of the other presence—this humor is my outlet, my release and my salvation” [*Notes* 164]). In this sense, Matei Calinescu’s analysis of Ionesco’s humanism in which the individual drama becomes the metaphysical drama of every human being, whose “obsessions, failures, desires, nostalgias and interrogations now face up to the absolute (absent or present), in the tragic and at the same time infinitely comical human condition” (*Recherches identitaires* 151, *my translation*).<sup>87</sup>

The quest that Ionesco pursued in his plays is continued in his drawings, lithographs and gouaches: «Je vis dans l’espoir insensé d’un aboutissement», writes Ionesco in *Le Blanc et le Noir* (19). (“I live with the foolish hope of an outcome” [*my translation*]). Yet, this striving for closure, for completion, is vain, concludes the essayist.

He often oscillates between belief and disbelief; he defines himself in the paradoxical syntagm: an unbeliever filled with faith («un incroyant plein de foi» [*Le Blanc et le Noir* 20]). The author expresses his frustration of not being able to express in his drawings and lithographs the laughter of faith or of unbelief, the laughter that transcends the present:

Peut-on, on ne peut certainement pas, doit-on essayer d'arriver à quelque chose? Finalement, je ne le pense plus vraiment. Il reste à dire où l'on en est . . . . Des états présents, suivis d'autres états présents sans aboutissement autre, ou sans espérance d'aboutissement autre que le rire. Le rire malgré tout. Ou le rire naturel, le rire jaillissant naturellement. Le rire des morts en sursis. Le rire de la foi. Le rire de l'incroyance. Mais oui, c'est à cela que je veux aboutir. Je n'arrive qu'à des rires grinçants. Des rires diaboliques. Plutôt des rires de pauvre diable. (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 19)

Can we—certainly we cannot—, should we try to grasp something? In the end, I don't really believe that anymore. What's left to say is where we are at . . . . Present states, followed by other present states, without any other end, or without the hope of any other end but laughter. Laughter in spite of everything. Or natural laughter, laughter that gushes out naturally. Laughter of moribunds. Laughter of faith. Laughter of unbelief. Yes, this is what I want to realize. But I can only get to sarcastic laughter. Diabolic laughter. Or rather the laughter of poor devils. (*my translation*)

The grim frozen smiles of his figurines (fig.27) are rather more comical than tragic.

Ionesco admits in *Le Blanc et le Noir* that he is a comedy author despite his initial desire to write tragedy.

With his first play, he set himself to write a tragedy of language, but the outcome was comic-burlesque. His figurines follow the same path: rather than being solely pessimistic or morose, their frozen smiles and stupefied looks render them comic.

In his speech in Chicago, at the reception of the T.S. Eliot-Ingersoll prize, in the presence of Mircea Eliade and Saul Bellow, Ionesco mentioned the critical need for meaning, without which, a human being is nothing but a derisory puppet and he concluded by underlining the importance of humor and the redemptive role it plays:



**Fig. 27.** Ionesco, Eugène. *Lithograph*; rpt. in Ionesco, Eugène. *Le Blanc et le Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; print; 34-35).

Si j'ai montré les hommes dérisoires, risibles, ce ne fut nullement par souci de comédie. Mais, comme on ne peut guère en ces moments de déchéance mondaine de l'esprit, proclamer la vérité, on peut toujours au moins, montrer ce que l'homme devient ou peut devenir quand il est coupé de toute transcendance. . . . Telle fut ma démarche, j'ai essayé de mettre en évidence ce néant qui est l'absence de foi, l'absence de vie spirituelle. Si je fus donc parfois comique, c'est par souci de pédagogie: le comique n'est que la deuxième face de la tragédie, l'absence n'est qu'une des formes de l'appel ou de la présence de Celui qui attend derrière la porte qu'on la Lui ouvre. (*Théâtre complet XCV*)

If I depicted human beings in their derisory, risible states, it was not for the sake of comedy. But, since in these moments of mundane degeneration of the mind we can hardly proclaim truth, we still can, at least, show what human beings become or can become when they are cut off of all transcendence. . . . This was my approach: I tried to emphasize the nothingness which is the absence of faith, absence of spiritual life. If I was sometimes comical, it was for the sake of instruction (teaching): the comic is but the other facet of tragedy, the absence is nothing but a form of call, or of the presence of Him who waits behind the door that one opens. (*my translation*)

Like the absence which is symbolic of the desire for a divine presence, so is comedy—an opening, a call for a different reality, of truth, as Ionesco calls it in *Le Blanc et le Noir* (27). To return to Peter Berger's comments, humor presupposes another dimension which bypasses the natural laws and rules of ordinary life:

[The comic] transcends the reality of ordinary, everyday existence; it posits, however temporarily, a different reality in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended. . . . But . . . at least certain manifestations of the comic suggest that this other reality has redeeming qualities that are not temporary at all, but rather that point to that other world that has been always the object of the religious attitude.” (Berger 205)

The double effect of this humor is crucial. Although Ionesco would prefer the adjective “sacred” to “religious,” since in his view the religious sometimes poses barriers between us and the sacred (*Le Blanc et le Noir* 21), he would agree that humor is not only the appropriate response when faced with the ontological condition of the human being, but that it also has the power to assume tragedy and surpass it.

Humans, in their need for meaning and coherence, fabricate illusions about themselves and the reality that surrounds them. The humorist’s duty, in Pirandello’s view, is to tear away the veils that mask the true reality and be a reminder of human’s dire condition (*On Humor* xiii). In *Macbett*, as well as in *Le Roi se meurt*, the spectator bears witness to this deconstruction of the ultimate reality of death and of the mad desire to dominate, of what Eugène Ionesco calls *libido dominandi*. The other facet of humor, which Ionesco explores in his works, is that which sees humor as an opening towards another dimension, similar to the revelation that Zen monks experience during Koan. It is the laughter that initially mocks or scorns, but then ends in the contemplation of a world that is indescribable merely by words. It is the example of *Ce formidable bordel*.

Ionesco’s view on humor can be thus associated with his conception of humanism: the two axis, suffering and contemplation, are identifiable in the context of humor. On the horizontal line, humor breaks socio-economic, demographical and even spiritual barriers and it brings humans together to an awareness of their condition, and on the vertical

orientation, humor, through one of its responses, laughter, can be an opening towards a vertical, transcendent reality that the human being can access.

## Notes

<sup>70</sup> «L'humour fait prendre conscience avec une lucidité libre de la condition tragique ou dérisoire de l'homme. . . . » (Notes 201).

<sup>71</sup> « Qu'est-ce que l'humour? Rire du malheur et de son propre malheur, peut-être. . . . C'est aussi une dénonciation de l'absurdité, un dépassement du drame. L'humour suppose une conscience lucide. Il suppose un dédoublement, une conscience lucide de la vanité de ses propres passions. On continue alors de vivre ses passions tout en sachant qu'elles sont absurdes, ou stupides même si on ne peut très bien lutter contre. » (Entretiens 152)

<sup>72</sup> Pirandello illustrates this with the example of an old lady with dyed hair, dressed as a young girl. Laughing at this image is, in his view, perceiving the opposite (she is the opposite of what a respectable old lady should be) illustrating comic. After reflection, which involves an empathic identification (she may conceal her age in order to hold the love of her much younger husband), laughter turns into a stage of awareness and possible empathy, into a *feeling of the opposite* (On Humor 113).

<sup>73</sup> See Littré's definition of *humeur* (from which derives the English word humor) in <http://www.littre.org/definition/humeur#var8>

<sup>74</sup> « . . . le rire qui court dans ces pièces tient à la fois de la dérision et du salut . . . . Il relève de la catharsis car il réussit à nous faire supporter une vision de nous-mêmes qu'il nous serait sinon impossible d'accepter » (Lista 158).

<sup>75</sup> « . . . la vie même . . . joue et interprète alors . . . sans rampe, sans acteurs, sans spectateurs, c'est-à-dire sans les attributs spécifiques de tout spectacle théâtral- une autre forme libre de son accomplissement, c'est-à-dire sa renaissance sur des meilleurs principes » (Bakhtine 16).

<sup>76</sup> « Le comique, dans mes pièces, n'est souvent qu'une étape de la construction dramatique, et même un moyen de construire la pièce. Il devient de plus en plus un outil, pour faire contrepoint avec le drame . . . » (Notes 173).

<sup>77</sup> In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco emphasizes this : « Le théâtre est une sorte de succession d'états et de situations allant vers une densification de plus en plus grande » (167).

<sup>78</sup> « Dans le théâtre de Ionesco, l'antagonisme devient seulement l'un des mécanismes possibles devant assurer la respiration de l'œuvre, son rythme et son dynamique. Aucune idée n'y apparaît 'formulée' selon un processus dialectique qui s'incarnerait dans le dialogue entre les différents personnages » (Lista 135).

<sup>79</sup> «Alors que dans le théâtre traditionnel, le contact s'établit au niveau du langage—décors, costumes, bruitages et éclairages ayant plus fréquemment un rôle d'atmosphérisation qu'une fonction symbolique— dans le Théâtre de Dérision, il y a prééminence du sensoriel sur le conceptuel grâce à l'effet conjugué d'éléments affectifs. Dans la mesure où il est porteur de signification, le contact est donc *d'abord physique et spécifiquement théâtral* » (Jacquart 274, *author's emphasis*).

<sup>80</sup> « Dans la parodie du drame, on demanderait à l'esprit de Jarry d'inspirer une démystification systématique des raisons de l'exercice du pouvoir. La dérision ionescienne atteindrait de plein fouet les idoles infatuées d'elles-mêmes en dénonçant l'hypocrisie de leurs allégations » (*La dynamique théâtrale* 287).

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<sup>81</sup> « Je ne vois d'ailleurs ici de grand homme que moi » (*Ubu cocu* 203).

<sup>82</sup> Ionesco confided to Emmanuel Jacquart that he thought of the musique of Jean-Baptiste Lulli (1632-1687).

<sup>83</sup> « . . . je me suis aperçu en relisant la pièce ensuite à la représentation, qu'il y a avait un rythme dans la première partie qui n'était plus le même dans la seconde . . . , comme s'il y avait eu deux morceaux distincts collés l'un à l'autre. Juste au milieu, on sentait une cassure». (*Entretiens* 90)

<sup>84</sup> C'est là la preuve que ce théâtre communique, malgré l'hermétisme des images et l'indétermination des situations qu'il met en scène (Lista 158).

<sup>85</sup> « . . . je me suis toujours moqué de moi-même dans ce que j'écris.» (*Notes* 177).

<sup>86</sup> Il [le personnage] doit être aussi comique qu'émouvant, aussi douloureux que ridicule. D'ailleurs, on ne peut pas faire jaillir de soi un personnage parfait, car l'auteur n'est pas parfait : il est un sot, comme tous les hommes » (*Notes* 178).

<sup>87</sup> « Le drame individuel devient, finalement, le drame métaphysique de l'homme, dont les obsessions, échecs, désirs, nostalgies et interrogations se confrontent maintenant à l'absolu (absent, présent), au sens tragique et en même temps infiniment comique de la condition humaine » (*Recherches identitaires* 151).



**CHAPTER VI**

**IONESCO AND AFTER: MEMORY, ABSURD AESTHETICS**

**AND HUMANISM IN MATÉI VIȘNIEC AND SAVIANA**

**STĂNESCU'S PLAYS**

« Tous les écrivains roumains rêvent d'égaliser Ionesco » (“Every Romanian writer dreams to be as great as Ionesco”) <sup>88</sup> utters the PhD student in Matéi Vișniec’s play, *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsqu'on marche sur des cadavres* (99), <sup>89</sup> written in 2009 for Ionesco’s centenary. In this supplementary scene that Vișniec added as a variant for his ending, during a heated discussion at a dissertation defense with the members of his committee, the PhD student dares to expose the reason for the current paralytic state of Romanian literature and its incapacity to surpass those representatives of the post-war literary scene: the infernal trio of Eugène Ionesco, E.M. Cioran and Mircea Eliade. This inferiority that haunts the Romanian imaginary can only be obliterated, according to the student, if these authors are killed, symbolically of course, or if embargo would prohibit the reading of their works: « Je suis sûr, the PhD student continues, que si nous oublions, pour une dizaine d’années, par exemple, Ionesco, Cioran et Eliade, la culture roumaine pourrait redémarrer » (100). (“I am certain that if we forget for a dozen of years, for example, Ionesco, Cioran and Eliade, Romanian culture could pick-up again”). The dissertation defense ends in bloodshed, with the slaughtering of the student, a *clin d’œil* to Ionesco’s play, *La Leçon*, in which the Professor kills his students.

This parable with which Vișniec so humorously delights his audience is by no means just a fantasy of a warped imagination. Behind it, there is a real complex that

Romanian writers have faced, manifested in the desire to be recognized by the Western canon. Younger generations of writers have had to meet the Sisyphean challenge of searching for an identity worthy of that of their predecessors. Burdened by the feeling of being the epigones of their times, how can the post-1989 writers define themselves without falling into the trap of pastiche and plagiarism of their illustrious precursors? The problematic condition of the writer, especially of the one who, as E.M. Cioran notes, is born in a peripheral, minor culture, is therefore further accentuated by the difficulty of writing in a language that has a limited circulation range.

These questions continue to plague Romanian intellectuals, and the artist's identity begs to be investigated, especially in the wake of the 1989 events, after the fall of Communism. How can the writer find his or her own form of expression after an era in which socialist realism, whose didactical function was supposed to lead the masses in the direction desired by the governing regime, was the approved norm for artists? Writers who opposed the regime had to resort to allusions in their satirical critiques. The censorship during Communism left no room for criticism and playwrights had to cunningly insert subversive clues and gestures, *clin d'oeils* that the public would decode. In the terms of Beate Hein Bennett, who has written an article based on an interview conducted with Vişniec in April 2003, "nothing could be said directly, especially relating to matters of politics, everyday life, sex and death" (20). The same style of allusions (a reaction to socialist realism) permeated the writings after 1989, as if there lingered a paralytic fear that froze any attempt to critically analyze and address the pressing issues of the time. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of imposed barriers, the

artists found themselves at an impasse. What aesthetics, what themes to choose, what essence, if any might define the artist living in those Eastern European lands?

In this chapter, I am proposing an analysis of two prolific Romanian writers of the diaspora, who, in their own ways, struggled with these questions, but needed the geographical distance from Romania to better explore the themes important for them and create their complex, sometimes indefinable styles. These two playwrights now write from two different geographical spaces: Matéi Vişniec, in Paris, since 1987 and Saviana Stănescu, in New York, since 2001. Their alterity, marked by this choice of living in-between as strangers (not only to others, but to themselves, as Julia Kristeva's syntagm defines so well in *Strangers to Ourselves*), is the condition that permeates the themes of their works. Their place in this dissertation is justified by not only their association, direct or indirect, with Eugène Ionesco's universe, but also by their differentiation from their precursor. Although their writing styles are different, as are the languages that they adopted (Vişniec writes in French, Stănescu in English), they are both playing with their own notions of absurd. While Vişniec establishes himself in the tradition of Chekhov, Ionesco, Beckett and Kafka, his literary inspirations, Stănescu breaks away from the postwar absurdist style, embracing a psychological realism mixed with absurd undertones; her writing is anchored in a raw, visceral, earthy reality. In their status as immigrants, or foreigners in a broadly accepted connotation, memory plays a crucial role in their identity as writers and, implicitly, in the identity of their characters. Their unique take on the absurd is defined by how memory, either redemptive or traumatic, informs the identities of their protagonists. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will address and illustrate with these two playwrights' works, their historicized approach to the absurd, as

well as a few of the aesthetic techniques they employ, and how their art is linked with their views on humanism.

Vişniec is a contemporary playwright “of Romanian origin and French expression” as he describes himself in 1995 during an interview with Constantin Coroiu. Just like Ionesco and Stănescu, he began his career by writing poems. In 1977 he started writing for the theatre. Even though his plays were circulating in intellectual circles, they were banned from being performed on stage due to their incisive criticism of the Communist system. In 1987 he received political asylum in France, where he began working for *Radio France Internationale*. He received many awards for his plays that are currently staged worldwide. After the 1989 Revolution in Romania, which brought about the fall of Communism, Vişniec became one of the playwrights belonging to the Romanian diaspora whose works were most frequently performed.

For Vişniec, as for Ionesco, “poetry and literature are means of understanding the human,”<sup>90</sup> a belief that attributes to art an epistemological as well as a humanist role. For Stănescu, on the other hand, writers are “artist-citizens who respond to the immediate history and are ready to laugh loudly, shouting their worries and stories” (“After the Curtain . . .” 324). The artist’s role, in her view, is to understand the historical momentum and express it through art.

The characters created by both Vişniec and Stănescu are the authors’ embodiments on stage. In a short advertising clip of her play, *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, Stănescu affirms that we are, after all, writing about ourselves.

Stănescu’s characters are haunted by their Romanian past, and are unable or unwilling to escape it. We see this in her play, *Waxing West (a Hairy Tale in Four*

*Seasons*), completed in 2003, a comic, socio-politically oriented drama, for which the author won the 2007 New York Innovative Award for Outstanding Script. Stănescu's protagonist, Daniela, is struggling with her sense of belonging and her identity, dogged by her Romanian past through the spectral appearances of the two dictators, now vampires, who do not let her get her bearings in her newly adopted country, the United States. Similarly, the young Moldavian woman, Nadia, protagonist in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, is fighting her own ghosts, two immigration officers, who constantly harass her, making it impossible for her to make a life for herself in New York.

The Poet, Vișniec's protagonist of *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsqu'on marche sur des cadavres*, is incarcerated in a notorious Communist prison for not conforming to the ideological postulates of his time and for desecrating Stalin's statue. For him, and the other imprisoned intellectuals, redemption comes from reciting by memory Ionesco's *Cantatrice chauve*. If for Stănescu's protagonists, memory is the constant reminder of past trauma, painful yet necessary in their identity formation, Vișniec's protagonists are saved by reiterating from memory works from the censored cultural repository. Memory in this sense has a cathartic effect. Le Poète is also his author's avatar, since Vișniec notes that reading Ionesco, in a period where the oppressive tentacles of Communism had a strong grip on every aspect of life, purged him of all fears. He writes in the short preface of the play : « Après avoir lu les pièces de Ionesco, je n'ai jamais eu peur de rien dans ma vie. Plus que tout système philosophique ou livre de sagesse, c'est Ionesco qui m'a aidé à comprendre l'homme et ses contradictions, l'âme humaine, la vie et le monde » (*De la sensation... 7*). (“After reading Ionesco's plays, I was no longer afraid of

anything in my life. More than any philosophical system, it is Ionesco who helped me understand the human being and his or her contradictions, the human soul, life and the world”). Art, for Vişniec, has the redemptive quality that Ionesco often not only alludes to, but directly emphasizes, in his reflections. Memory, directly tied to art, is either an anamnesis (as in Vişniec’s play) or a traumatic reiteration of a past that needs to be either exorcised or appropriated (as is the case of Stănescu’s protagonists) in order for the protagonists to forge their identity. What role does memory, the agent in piecing together the past as well as in shaping a new present, play in the works of these two artists?

### ***Memory: Cathartic or Destructive***

In his discussion of the distinction between history and memory, Pierre Nora offers a definition that highlights memory’s spontaneity and movement, its lack of any pretense or assertion to validity. He emphasizes that memory is not only collective and plural but also utterly individual:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. (“Between Memory and History” 8)

Memory has a power similar to that of myth in the sense that through its constant reiteration it is assimilated into the present and becomes an eternal present. Unlike myth (or the interpretation of myths that Mircea Eliade elaborates in his works, notably in *Aspects du mythe*), memory is flexible, open to myriad interpretations, conversations, and contestations. On the other hand, its similarity to myth resides in its almost religious, cathartic allure, a spiritual patrimony that a community shares. In Vişniec and Stănescu’s

works, memory is this eternal present, but in different ways: for Vişniec it is redemptive, intrinsically tied to art whereas for Stănescu, the collective memory related directly to a traumatic past is rather the incarnation of anguish and despair. In both cases, however in very different ways, memory is an antidote to the failure of history to encompass and reiterate the “truth” of the past, especially in Communist countries, where the representation of History was tailored to fit certain standards and ideologies. Relying on individual stories and memories provides these authors the freedom to reinterpret and rewrite their history. The attempt of history to claim a wholeness and unification—as in Pierre Nora’s explanation of the historiographical process in France, which served the idea of the nation—is subverted by the memory that maintains no allegiance to a higher, unified institution, but rather to individual people. Pierre Nora emphasized the importance placed on History, from the chroniclers of Middle Ages to today’s historians, as a *milieu de mémoire*, representing a complete, infallible storyline:

History, especially the history of national development, has constituted the oldest of our collective traditions: our quintessential *milieu de mémoire*. From the chroniclers of the Middle Ages to today’s practitioners of “total” history, the entire tradition has developed as the controlled exercise and automatic deepening of memory, the reconstitution of a past without lacunae or faults... [E]ach historian was convinced that his task consisted in establishing a more positive, all-encompassing, and explicative memory. (9)

The notion of a unified, all-inclusive memory is replaced in the two playwright’s works by the idea that memory, and therefore history, cannot be represented as a whole; memory is made of individual accounts, sometimes fragmented and disjointed, seemingly incoherent. In the same essay, Pierre Nora further explores the relation between humans and history and the question of history’s representation: “Our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of a

representation—in the original sense of the word—radically different from the old ideal of resurrecting the past” (17). History, therefore, is no longer the mediator, or the authoritative figure, between human beings and their past. Memory, open to multiple subjectivities, angles and perspectives, can, due to its complexity, mediate this relationship. In Vişniec’s play, memory is linked to a collective repository of art, and the process of anamnesis, of remembering those *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), such as the censored plays during Communism, is not only subversive (as it defies the system) but also redemptive, as it is the anchor into an imaginary that many artists aspired to be able to explore, but were not allowed to by the regime.

In the epigraph of the play *De la sensation d’élasticité lorsqu’on marche sur des cadavres*, Vişniec cites Ana Blandiana, one of the emblematic poets who, after the Revolution of 1989, rose from the ashes of censorship. This quote by Blandiana reiterates the juridical importance of memory: « Quand la justice ne parvient pas à être une forme de mémoire, seule la mémoire peut être une forme de justice » (epigraph of *De la sensation de l’élasticité lorsqu’on marche sur des cadavres*) (“When justice doesn’t turn out to be a form of memory, only memory can be a form of justice”). Poet, essayist, and political figure Blandiana is one of the founders of the Memorial at the Sighet prison; thus, by using her quote at the incipit of his play, Vişniec is inscribing his play in the testimonial realm. Although not explicitly mentioned in the stage directions, Sighet prison, one of the first of its kind, a place where the elite members of the opposition to the Communist regime were incarcerated and tortured, is the main locus for the action. In the introductory remarks that preface the play, Vişniec gives a short account of the



significance of this prison. One of the cruelest Communist spaces of torture, this prison currently hosts the Memorial of Resistance and Victims of Communism (4).

The play *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsqu'on marche sur des cadavres*, evokes Ionesco's universe intertwined with the dire conditions of intellectuals who did not let themselves be dragged into the propagandist praises of the Communist system. The absurd of Ionesco's world became the palpable reality that many Eastern European writers endured, because they refused to bow down to the "official art," sometimes at the expense of terrible suffering. The twenty-four scenes in Vişniec's plays are hybrid in texture as they incorporate oneiric structures in a surrealist style, metatheatre and poetry. There are references to characters and images inspired by Ionesco, yet particularized to Vişniec's style. The main character, Sergiu Penegar, known as the Poet, a writer blacklisted by the Communist intelligentsia, is arrested after being caught urinating on Stalin's statue (scene 7). From scene ten on, the reader-spectator is drawn into a sort of a labyrinthine, nightmarish incursion into the world of Sighet prison. The itinerary of the poet reminds the reader and the spectator of Jean Cocteau's experimental film, *Le Sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*, 1930) in which the poet, synecdoche for the artist, wanders, half-asleep, through a maze-like space, suspended between reality and imagination, life and death. The orphic symbolism, imbued with surrealist imagery, such as the moving lips on the hand of the poet, references the artist's struggle and suffering for his or her art. Vişniec's Poet and the three other detainees, with whom he is incarcerated, maintain their sanity by performing from memory Ionesco's *Cantatrice chauve*. This scene (scene 10) is in fact inspired by the real prison experience of Nicolae Balotă, writer and political dissident, who recounted in 2008 at a colloquium dedicated to

Ionesco, that while in prison, he and other prisoners performed their version of the play. Not allowed to have any books, not even Marx's *Capital*, a foundational book for the Communist system, the detainees in Vişniec's play are performing Ionesco's tragedy of language, *La Cantatrice chauve*—reiterating, by reciting lines from the play, the absurd that they are living through in prison:

Le POÈTE. Madame Smith, qui est anglaise, raccommode les chaussettes anglaises de son mari anglais, Monsieur Smith, qui lit son journal anglais. On entend la pendule anglaise qui bat treize coups bien anglais. Madame Smith dit : « Tiens, il est neuf heures ! » Et Monsieur Smith dit : « Pourquoi ? Parce qu'on a sonné à notre porte anglaise ? » Et ici, Monsieur Smith fait claquer sa langue anglaise. (43)

THE POET. Mrs. Smith, who is English, is mending the English socks of her English husband, Mr. Smith, who is reading his English newspaper. The clock strikes thirteen English beats. Mrs. Smith says: "Listen, it is nine o'clock!" And Mr. Smith replies: "Why? Because someone is ringing our English doorbell?" And here, Monsieur Mr. Smith clicks his tongue.

The comic reiteration as well as rearrangement of the disparate and absurd lines from Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* is the antidote to the absurdist realm that the incarcerated intellectuals were suffering through. The play, which is both inspired by and a commemoration of Ionesco's work: « une pièce librement inspirée de l'œuvre d'Eugène Ionesco, reads the preface ("a play freely inspired by Eugène Ionesco's work") drawn from the artistic repository, is what helps the detained intellectuals rise above the horrid reality of prison. Unlike Stănescu's ghosts, the invisible characters that Vişniec brings on stage are political detainees, such as Nicolae Steinhard (Christian Orthodox hermit and writer sentenced to 13 years of forced labor in Communist prisons), Constantin Noica (philosopher, essayist and poet who spent six years at Jilava, one of the most infamous prisons, renowned for its cruelty). Moreover, some of the invisible guests (reference to Ionesco's play *Les Chaises*) are Surrealist French writers (some of their works translated

by Vişniec into Romanian), blacklisted by the Romanian Communist Party, including Lautréamont, a precursor of this literary movement, Radiguet, Gide, Tzara, Queneau, and Breton.

The most famous of all characters is in fact Ionesco's Bald Soprano, who appears in Ionesco's play only indirectly in a quick, awkward and abrupt exchange between the Fireman and Mrs. Smith (*Théâtre complet* 38). In Vişniec's play, the *Bald Soprano* is no longer an empty referent, but is given corporeal form, although imaginary, with her presence comforting the protagonist as he suffers through the long and painful interrogations. In scene seven, she appears while the Poet is sitting in a « bistrot surréaliste » (“Surrealist bistro”), as a mere shadow with a calming allure (73). She stops the poet when he is on the brink of breaking a vodka bottle over the head of the director of a publishing house who would not publish his translations (19). The Bald Soprano surfaces during difficult times, and is visible only to the Poet, nonexistent to the rest of the characters. In a later scene, she is the Poet's counselor, helping him write an apologetic letter to the First General Secretary of the Communist Party, pleading for the Poet's freedom and explaining his abnormal behavior of desecrating Stalin's statue. At the end, in a surrealist twist, the Bald Soprano is metamorphosed into a woman whose hair is on fire—reference to Dali's painting depicting flaming giraffes: she is the one who holds the Poet's arm and leads him out of his cell (fig.28).

She liberates the Poet, breaks the clock (so significant in Ionesco's play since its sporadic and incongruent beats mark the irregularity of time) and hands the remaining pieces to the character saying: « Voici votre temps brisé, Monsieur... Maintenant vous

êtes libre...» (*De la sensation...* 84) (“Here is your shattered time, sir. ...Now you are free...”).



**Fig. 28.** Dali, Salvador. *Giraffes en flames*, 1935; rpt. in Descharnes, Robert. *Salvador Dalí, 1904-1989: The Paintings*, 25th ed. ( Köln; London: Taschen, 2007; print;6).

The metaphorical gesture unveils a two-fold meaning: it indicates the shattered, wasted time in prison as well as the beginning of the Poet’s freedom.

The intermittent existence of the Bald Soprano, who is as absent as she is present, is a metaphor, in the Poet’s view, for ideology. He says: « J’aime tellement votre absence. Vous représentez pour moi, en quelque sorte, l’idéologie » (84). (“I love your absence so much. You somehow represent ideology for me”). Vişniec is echoing Ionesco’s definition of ideology as any repeated idea given an absolute quality. Its paralyzing effect has been strongly felt during Communism, since ideology does not embrace flexibility of thought.

Memory does not only consist in the *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory)—places “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora 7), that the cultural patrimony

embodies for the imprisoned intellectuals, but also in the *milieux de mémoire*, “real environments of memory” (Nora 7), displayed in monuments, streets, places that the protagonist describes as dear to him. In scene 7, where the Poet has his first encounter with the Bald Soprano, he pays homage to the Romanian capital, called little Paris at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As he is strolling around the city, accompanied by the soprano, the Poet describes its Balkan rhythms interwoven with its French cultural heritage. In scene 11, the Poet evokes the city of Paris, with its terraces and intellectual corners that hosted the great minds of the twentieth century. The geographical space bears the same energy and has the same effect as its illustrious inhabitants.

LE POÈTE.... Mais lorsque je ferme les yeux, je me retrouve tout de suite à Montparnasse... ou à Saint-Germain-des-Prés... En fait, c'est là que je vis. Quand je veux rencontrer Gide, Saint-Exupéry, Malraux ou Camus, je vais chez Lipp. Quand j'ai envie de boire un coup avec Beckett, Man Ray ou Giacometti, je vais à La Coupole. Et lorsque j'ai envie de bavarder avec Matisse, Dali ou Picasso, je traverse la rue, je vais au Dôme. Vous savez, pour nous, les Roumains, Paris est en quelque sorte notre patrie mentale. (45)

THE POET.... But when I open my eyes, I immediately find myself in Montparnasse...or Saint-Germain des Prés ... In fact, that is where I live. When I want to meet Gide, Saint-Exupéry, Malraux or Camus, I go to Lipp. When I feel like drinking with Beckett, Man Ray or Giacometti, I go to the Coupole. And when I feel like chatting with Matisse, Dali or Picasso, I cross the street and I go to Dôme. You know, for us, Romanians, Paris is, in a certain way, our spiritual country.

Places are not significant in themselves, but gain significance in their connection with cultural figures who contributed to the image of France that many Romanian intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth century adulated. Intertextuality—the rewriting literary device that Vişniec brilliantly uses—is understood in this context not only as a strict ontological condition of the text, in which the text derives its meaning from other texts - as Julia Kristeva defines it in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and*

*Art* (66), but in its larger spectrum of meaning.<sup>91</sup> It is, as Gerard Genette coined it, a hypertext. In his analysis *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Genette defines hypertextuality as “any relationship uniting a text B (... the hypertext) to an earlier text A (... the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (5).<sup>92</sup> The intertextuality, rich in Vişniec’s plays, is revealed through references to other texts or images. This interplay of memory and art, since intertextuality could be a materialized expression of memory, has epistemological value in Vişniec’s play. References to other texts do not solely provide an aesthetic satisfaction but are means of reaching an understanding of the world. Referencing the Surrealist, Post-Surrealist, Absurdist, Avant-Garde writers and painters, the playwright is placing himself and his protagonists in a literary lineage that overthrows and subverts traditionally accepted clichés about art. Consequently, the scenes are imbued with references and imageries that allude to paintings by Salvador Dali, as seen earlier (*Giraffe en flammes*), and by René Magritte (*La Trahison des images*), in the allusion to Ionesco’s presence through the appearance of a lighted cigarette that floats on the set (fig.29). The reiteration and references to art, especially to a certain art that the intellectuals of the period after the World Wars tried to emulate, is what provides relief and strength to Vişniec’s imprisoned protagonist.

**Fig. 29.** Magritte, René. *La Trahison des images*, 1929. [www.magritte-gallery.com](http://www.magritte-gallery.com). Web. 5 June 2014.



Conversely, in Stănescu's work, memory is represented as subversively playing the role of the evil alter-ego that, although impedes the protagonists' integration in their newly adopted country, is also crucial in the formation of their identities. In Stănescu's blog post from April 30, 2008, she reproduces the speech she delivered during the conference on "Immigrant Literature" in Brussels, organized by EUNIC (UE) which gathered immigrant artists who write in a second language. Here, the playwright provides an explanation of the theme of her play, *Waxing West*:

[It is] about the Romanian Revolution and the collective traumas and the ways in which they affect the individual. It is a dramatic but funny meditation on the fact that we cannot get rid of our Past, we are conditioned by the circumstances of our birth and upbringing. Wherever I go or live, I cannot actually escape from Romania, Romania is imprinted in my DNA, it is distilled in my blood. (<http://saviana.blogspot.com>)

This type of "condition[ing]" is apparent in Daniela's behavior, the protagonist of the play who is constantly harassed by the atrocious couple Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu. Daniela is young, and if we consider the historical placement of the play, around 2001, she might not have experienced the horrors of Communism. Yet, the collective trauma that the Romanian people endured, embodied by the Ceaușescu couple, affects Daniela's life in a very tangible way, as she is struggling to move forward. The audacity of the playwright in bringing these characters to the stage, in the form of vampires, in a punning reference to Bram Stoker's famous novel (converted by Hollywood into a box office hit) is striking. The historical bloodshed of the Romanian Revolution led to Romanians channeling their hatred towards the most horrific representatives of the torturous years the people lived through, the Ceaușescu couple. Although there have been allusions and indirect references to them, their names—painful reminders of the Romanian traumatic past—do not appear in fictional writings published after 1989. Due to the grotesque

proliferation during Communism of the Ceaușescu name and image, omnipresent in publications, even in school textbooks, they became the taboo that Romanians tacitly agreed not to enunciate. Stănescu breaks this silence and not only gives them the privileged spot of being among the eight characters in her play, but also gives them the right to speak, thus unveiling “how the specter of Ceaușescu’s regime, personified by the return of the Ceaușescus as vampires, haunts the unconscious memory as an indelible phantom of the collective mind”.<sup>93</sup>

Stănescu privileges Daniela’s own patchy representation of the past, rather than a unified account of the historical event that was for so long the “official” version. Pierre Nora’s analysis reveals this trend in modern (or we might say, agreeing with Stănescu’s own appellation, postmodern) history which is “bound not by the idea of resurrecting the past, but by its fragmented, discontinuous representation” (17).

Stănescu’s approach to exorcising the demons of the past is through head-on confrontation. While Vișniec and other Romanian writers of an older generation make numerous veiled references to the atrocities committed during Communism, Stănescu bravely allows the dictators’ grotesque characters to appear and unravel under the gaze of the audience. She is not afraid to tackle the delicate but vital issues that are actual and pressing not only on the American, but also on the global scene. This head-on analysis and criticism goes against the habitual trend of addressing political situations in Romanian theatre. Much of the theatre before ‘89 was based on reinterpretations of the classics, which could not be censored by the state because it wanted to maintain a certain dignity of cultural competence. In her blog, Stănescu talks about the particular aesthetics that dominated the theatrical scene during Communism:



Fifty years of Communism created a particular aesthetic in our country: things could not be told directly as they were, so writers and actors developed metaphorical and encoded ways of addressing social and political issues we were concerned about. For instance, we had our own idiosyncratic Hamlets, sunk in their subtext, philosophically declaiming that something was rotten in the country...  
(<http://saviana.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00:00:00-05:00&updated-max=2009-01-01T00:00:00-05:00&max-results=23>).

Such allusive aesthetics, that she names: “The Aesopian Language Syndrome” (Bennett 20), were no longer satisfying for the new authors who were in search of their identities, and who proposed an exploration of authentic themes to address pressing issues. Stănescu and other artists—such as Andrea Valean (*When I want to whistle, I whistle*), Vera Ion (*Vitamins*) and Ștefan Peca (*Romania 21*), whose works appear in the anthology *roMania after 2000: Five New Romanian Plays*, edited by Stănescu and Daniel Gerould—were searching for a new way to respond to history, marked by a feeling of urgency, of the need to be promptly reacting to the times—a reaction to the contemplative and nostalgic response that characterized the previous generation. But this quick reaction came with a price for Stănescu, who realized that in order to gain the panoramic and perceptive critique that she aspired to illustrate in her plays, she needed the geographical distance from Romania. In her article “After the curtain...,” the playwright addresses the possible explanation as to why Romanian plays written in early 1990s fail to explore and dramatize the turmoil of December 1989: “Romanian playwrights ... were too busy with the dramatic living to be able to focus on dramatic writing. Distance in time or space is often necessary for such soul-searching identity-reshaping undertakings” (319).

This was the case for the playwright herself. In the preface of *The New York Plays* representing Stănescu’s earlier work written in the United States, John Clinton Eisner states that the author was influenced by the British playwright Caryl Churchill, whose

arrival in Bucharest with a group of students from the London School of Drama after the Revolution, changed the direction of her writing. He notes: “Saviana was amazed at what Churchill, partly because she was an outsider, could see about circumstances in Romania that most people inside Romania could not see” (14). She realized that in order to make acerbic, perceptive criticism, she needed to distance herself geographically and experience other cultures in order to have a fresh and a more accurate perspective on her own culture. This distance allowed her to start to chisel a new identity, not linked to a certain nation or origin, but rather, as she calls it, to “a global foreigner” identity. In her article “Home where?: Global Foreigners in the Plays of Saviana Stănescu” Elena-Adriana Dancu explores this notion and defines Stănescu’s protagonists as characters who, although “tend to focus more on the traumatic past they are unable to escape” nevertheless achieve “a heterogeneous and empowering identity” (188-89). The term “global foreigner” is borrowed from the title of the anthology of plays edited by Carol Martin and Stănescu: *Global Foreigners: An Anthology of Plays*, which gathers international playwrights living in the United States, including Stănescu . In the preface of the anthology, Martin tackles this new notion of ‘foreignness’ which, according to her is “a question no longer solely about being an émigré or an immigrant but also about the state of multiple identifications as well as dislocation”(x). Memory contributes to and accentuates the dislocation the characters experience. This dislocation is not only external, geographical, but also internal, emotional, as the characters are uprooted from everything that defines them.

The “voices of the past won’t allow the heroine to move on and start a new life” notes Stănescu in her article “After the Curtain: Dark Humor in New Romanian Drama”:

“It is as if Romania is still there, under her skin, ready to show its hidden head” (323). Paradoxically, these memories are also the constant companion to Daniela’s struggle for identity. She must allow these memories to surface in order to find herself. In her blog, Stănescu emphasizes the importance of exorcising “the past and the grim realities in order to move forward. As we do move forward” ([www.savianablogspot.com](http://www.savianablogspot.com)). The constant negotiation between past and present is what defines the fluid, fragmented, complex identity of a human being, and in this case of an immigrant. The complex condition of the immigrant is a powerful, reinforced illustration of the exile that any human being suffers even if he or she remains in the same geographical space. The exile of the mind, another valence of the absurd, which in Camus’ terms is the divorce between a human being and his or her surroundings, is accentuated by the geographical exile that Stănescu’s protagonists experience.

Daniela moves from Bucharest, the capital of Romania, to New York. She tries to make sense of her new world, to piece together the conundrum of her new identity, but her alter-ego companions, the Ceaușescu duo, are invading her imaginary as they try to trap her into a past from which she is trying to escape. As we noted earlier, these modern inheritors of Rabelais and Jarry are the Ubuesque dictators, lusting for bloodshed, still looking to sculpt a legendary image for themselves. Their vaudeville numbers are ridiculously funny, as well as grotesque, as they appear as “singing and dancing vampires, performing raucous musical numbers to crush Daniela’s Confidence” (Bennett 30). Their appearance as vampires is a play on a nickname that was attributed to Ceaușescu, namely *Vampirescu*, derived from the word vampire and the suffix *-escu*, very common in Romanian names, alluding to the dictator’s policies which sucked the

country dry during his quarter-of-a-century rule. The couple, representative of a collective traumatic memory, haunts Daniela's subconscious, not letting her move on with her life:

DANIELA (*to the audience*). "Don't laugh at other people's dreams or nightmares"- I read this in "Introduction to Chinese Wisdom." It is not a stolen book. I found it in the trash, on our street. I had to take it home! This is how I learned that I was born in the year of the Horse.... One can find so many great things in the garbage here, in New York.

CEAUȘESCU. Shut up, horse!

DANIELA. It is like they wait for us there, in the rubbish, feeling sad, lonely and rejected...

ELENA (CEAUȘESCU). On! On! Move on, pig!

CEAUȘESCU. Horse. She's a horse.

ELENA. Whatever.

CEAUȘESCU. We shouldn't have taken her here. Everybody left their pets at the door.

ELENA. She is not a pet. She is a servant.

Stănescu unearths from the collective memory of Romanians those memories associated with shame, such as the killing of its leaders, regardless of how atrocious they were, while sending the painful reminder, with a humorous twist, that their shadows still linger despite the constant succession of political colors on the Romanian political scene. The continuous images of the killing of the dictators that monopolized the TV sets in December 1989, feeding the avid desire of humans for violence and retribution, were replaced in this play with the appearance of the dictators as vampires. Despite the notion that by repeating these images Romania is reassured that it got rid of its monsters, Stănescu's staging of them confirms that they continue to exist, even nostalgically in people's minds. But it also suggests that, although these monsters cannot be entirely exorcised, they can be appropriated, assimilated, accepted by adopting a humorous outlook. In a somewhat uncanny reversal of roles, the omnipresence of the Ceaușescu couple grants them the role as protagonists. Similar to Ionesco's use of proliferation,

Stănescu grants the couple a Rabelaisian allure, revealing through dark humor their grotesque personas. They play a central role in Daniela's life, not allowing her to adjust to her new space.

In her desperate desire to belong, to fit in, Daniela, like many immigrants, is struggling to find any work. The bleak impediment to her situation is the fact that she does not have a work permit. Her arranged marriage with Charlie does not have the Hollywood charm to which Romanian cinephiles are accustomed. Although Daniela's mother hopes that this relationship will bring Daniela a brand new life, free of any of the household duties that she has to put up with daily, the reality is harshly different. Daniela works as a hair waxing lady, removing the unwanted hair on people's bodies. As Stănescu puts it: "Waxing the unwanted hair on people's bodies is for her an idealistic and humorous fight against Death and an affirmation of Life and Beauty..." (324). The dark humor that the playwright displays is coupled with a romanticized notion of a United States as the realm of dreams, a notion that often finds its way into an immigrant's imagination. As the feminine counterpart of Bérenger, Ionesco's idealistic, and sometimes naïve protagonist, Daniela is endowed by her author with paradoxical qualities: she is constantly dreaming of a better world and life for herself despite the daily struggle she faces, especially in her position as a new immigrant.

Stănescu exploits the widespread feeling that many immigrants have that in the United States everything is possible, that willpower can overcome any external circumstances. Therefore, Daniela, like Bérenger, is relentlessly searching for ways to experience happiness. She is naively asking if one can purchase instant happiness in American stores (81), as she is avidly taking notes from the self-help books that

prescriptively promise a new life. Some of the titles that Daniela cites are illustrative of this trend: “Master Your Panic and Take Back Your Life, Twenty-One Ways to Stop Worrying, How to Control Your Anxiety Before it Controls You” and the list grotesquely proliferates over an entire page. Despite the catchy titles, nothing seems to match Daniela’s complicated identity. Although she tries to apply the precepts from these books, she still has the uneasy, uncertain feeling of living in the BEFORE rather than the AFTER, the state one is promised if the prescribed steps are followed.

DANIELA. But I’m afraid I’m still in the BEFORE stage. I still have emotions, feelings, confusion, anger... Those AFTER people! They must be so happy. So peaceful. So empty... This is gonna be difficult! You don’t have the references to our complicated Romanian Dacian Tracian Roman Ottoman Byzantine Balkan communist post-communist anti-communist pro American history, all you know about us is Dracula-the-vampire, Ceaușescu-the-dictator, and Nadia Comăneci-the gymnast. (99)

The temporal overlapping at the end of the play, brings on stage the collapse of the Communist regime, as Daniela chases the ghosts of the dictators away, with the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. This autobiographical detail refers to Stănescu’s arrival in the United States two weeks before the terrorist attack. Daniela, a mail-order bride, is grieving for the loss of Charlie, her sponsor and life partner, whom she had not seemed to love up until this point; at least that is how her apathetic and arid relation with him could be read. In this bizarre juxtaposition of past memories and present trauma, Daniela, as she fights the ghosts of her past, recovers a piece of her identity, revealed in her empathy and love for Charlie:

DANIELA: Stop this! I’ve had enough of this! Enough! (The other characters start pushing and pulling Daniela in different directions, she gets rid of them). I haven’t done anything wrong. I don’t owe anything to you... You ghosts have waxed the soul out of me. But you know what: there’s still something left. A tiny little piece of me. ... (69)

Similar to Daniela, Nadia, the protagonist of *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* (2008), having arrived in New York on a clown visa, which she later finds out is fake, is confronting her demons, two INS officers who constantly interrogate her, questioning the legitimacy of her residence in the United States.<sup>94</sup>

Following a similar pattern, the protagonists' psyches are invaded by memories (either real or imagined) that do not allow them to move on and to settle in this new land of promises. The grim realities faced by many members of the Romanian diaspora are bluntly revealed by Stănescu: the struggles to fit in are doubled by the cruel memories of a past that traps them in a sickening imaginary, which, although apparently destructive, is paradoxically constitutive of their identities. *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* showcases Nadia, a young woman in her early twenties, "from [Moldova,] the unhappiest country in the world." The play opens with Nadia performing for children and using balloon animals as props. The allegorical story of the dog who wants to marry a squirrel, and who, in order to reach the squirrel's nest, grows wings that help him fly to his beloved in order to live happily ever after, reveals the innermost dream of every immigrant: the pursuit of happiness. The dog, however, is continually afraid of losing his wings, reiteration in a parable language of the fear of deportation that the protagonist experiences throughout the play. This phobia is illustrated on a narratological level in the form of dreamscapes. These "incisions" in Nadia's mind, as the narrator names them, feature two INS officers that appear at the most inopportune moments. The first INS dreamscape, as the playwright delineates these psychological and textual intrusions, illustrates the xenophobic discourses provoked by the implementation of the Patriot Act during George Bush's regime. The INS officers interrogate Nadia:

INS 2. Have you ever been convicted of a felony in your country or in America?

NADIA. No!

INS 1. Have you ever plotted crimes against the United States of America?

NADIA. Never!

INS 2. Have you ever taken part in terrorist activities in your country or in America?

NADIA. I am not a criminal! All I want is a normal life. (276-77)

At the end of the interrogation, Nadia explains the desperate reasons for her flight from Moldova: “I couldn’t make them laugh anymore. They’re too poor to be happy” (267). Not only does this comment reflect the people’s meager living conditions in many of the countries under the Soviet rule, but it also reveals the artist’s precarious situation. Nadia, a clown, represents not only the artist, but the artist who, via comical devices, can entertain as well as criticize society. The clown is reminiscent of the king’s jester. The flight of the clown suggests a crisis that is deeper than the economic one; this is a spiritual, moral and artistic crisis, where not even humorous criticism is allowed. Nadia does not display the superior intellectual mind of Vişniec’s protagonist, the Poet. She belongs to the circus, traditionally considered inferior to other forms of art, such as theatre; she is a woman and her ideals are as simple and at the same time as humanist as one of the rights laid out by the Founding Fathers in the United States constitution: the pursuit of happiness. Stănescu does not idealize her character; her struggles and endeavors are those of every person. In her nightmarish altercation with the INS officers, she reiterates her somewhat naïve quest: “You must understand this! Don’t send me back. I want to be like you, I want to be happy! It is written in your constitution. Your country is about happiness. I know that!” (278). This quintessential quest for immigrants is nuanced by Nadia’s personal history. In her struggle to have a normal, happy life, the



traumatic rendering that invades her mind is no longer a memory of the past, but, in a certain way, an expression of phobias about the future. This is what defines her as an “alien,” a woman immigrant, living in New York in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The apparently destructive memories play the subversive role of informing her complex, hybrid, and almost indefinable identity as a foreigner. Kristeva’s analysis of the term “foreigner” sheds light upon the intricacies of this word. Her analysis, based on a mechanism of negation, presents the foreigner as an obliterated self:

[É]tabli en soi, l'étranger n'a pas de soi. Tout juste une assurance vide, sans valeur, qui axe ses possibilités d'être constamment autre, au gré des autres et des circonstances. Je fais ce qu'on veut, mais ce n'est pas « moi » - « moi » est ailleurs, « moi » n'appartient à personne, « moi » n'appartient pas à « moi », ... « moi » existe-t-il ? (*Étrangers à nous-mêmes* 19)

[S]ettled within himself, the foreigner has no self. Barely an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to others' wishes and to circumstances. I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not “me”—“me” is elsewhere, “me” belongs to no one, “me” does not belong to “me,” ... does “me” exist? (*Strangers to Ourselves* 8)

This is one of the stages that Stănescu’s characters experience, the emptiness of the self, the abolition of who they are at the core of their being, but this very negation opens the possibility of a new self, conferring an empowering identity.

For Stănescu, memory plays into the formation of the complex identity of her characters through the traumatic reiteration of the past, apparently destructive, but necessary in the creation of a new identity as foreigner. These memories are woven into the tapestry of her protagonists’ identities. Stănescu’s characters establish a global identity not only to gain distance from their geographical origins and the accumulated cultural and historical baggage, but also to gain a certain freedom through accepting

change, a living in-between, as an alternative to being forever rooted in a certain geographical space. The constant movement of characters allows them to sort out and work through the collective trauma and post-Communist haunting and, as Elena-Adriana Dancu emphasizes, it allows them to patch up their broken, heterogeneous, but also empowering identities (189).

For Vişniec's protagonist, on the other hand, memory is directly related to knowledge of art, which plays a redemptive role in his survival. It is through anamnesis, retracing and reiterating from memory Ionesco's plays that the incarcerated intellectuals confront the tragedy of their absurd existence. The forms of expression that these two authors employ reveal an aesthetic of the absurd that differs from Ionesco's style. The historical circumstances impose a model that relates to the time and space of the play.

### ***Absurd and Humanism- A Historicized Approach***

In his *Notes et contre-notes*, Ionesco writes that "drama clearly reflects the anxiety of our present period" (126). If Ionesco refuses to give to his 'absurd' a particular political shape or color and uses it to denounce any ideological system, the absurd takes on a different quality in the works of writers of later generations. The absurd in Vişniec's play is anchored in a historical period at the end of 1960's, a period where Leninist principles were implemented in order to forge a utopian New Man (the individual absorbed into the collective in order to fit the ideological image of the State). Surrealist aesthetics, where dreams are overlapping with reality, are inscribed in a concrete temporality and space. The reader knows, for instance, from the beginning of Vişniec's play that the locus for the action is Sighet prison, in Romania. It seems that for Vişniec,

there is a careful choice of references in the text: the trials that the Poet goes through are reminiscent of Kafka's trial.

The non-historical absurd in Ionesco's plays has its palpable correspondent in the cruel life of the dissident intellectuals and political figures from Vişniec's play, ostracized by the petty system with its torturous and meaningless experiments. The trial that the Poet goes through when he is interrogated about his "crimes" resembles the Kafkaesque trials that we find in Ionesco's plays as well (for example in *La Soif et la Faim*) where the sentence is random and changes continuously. In the trial scene (scene 10), there is a ridiculous back and forth between the Poet and the judge, debating what the Poet has actually done. The Poet requests that he be condemned for what he actually did: urinating on Stalin's statue, but since there is no sentence for this behavior, the judge brings forth other accusations: such as the Poet's relation with enemies of the state, his cosmopolitanism and his possession of prohibited books and documents (scene 10, 46). The judge drinks, and the trial looks rather like a mockery, with no real consequences. He is more interested in the sensational details of the poet insulting the great socialist poet, Vengola Cormoreanu. There are references to dossiers of the *Securitate* (the Secret Police of the Communist Regime), where almost every move of those considered 'the black sheep,' the pariahs of the society, was recorded. The Poet's political jokes are recorded as well. The demagoguery of the judge is shown in his condemnation of the Poet's writing of political jokes, even as he wants to listen to a new joke during the trial. The ambiguous juridical accusation is matched by an even more ambiguous sentence which looks like a game of negotiating between the Poet and the judge: « Bon, qu'est-ce que je fais avec toi, camarade Penegar? Pour toutes ces têtes d'accusation la loi prévoit entre trois ans et sept

ans de prison. Je ne peux pas ne pas te condamner, Serge, parce que je risque moi-même la prison... Trois ans, ça ira? » (scene 11, 50). (“What am I to do with you, comrade Penegar? For all these accusations the law stipulates between three and seven years of prison. I cannot not condemn you, Serge, because I risk being imprisoned myself... Three years, would that suit you? ”).

In another scene, the prison’s warden is punishing the detainees for laughing while they are reciting Ionesco’s *Bald Soprano* from memory. When they are asked to repeat the scene, the grotesque from Ionesco’s play overlaps with the absurd remarks of the prison director. Throughout the play, Vişniec marks typographically, with quotation marks, the lines directly reproduced from Ionesco’s works:

LE POÈTE. “Tiens, il y a neuf heures anglaises!”  
(*Tous les quatre pouffent de rire*)  
LE DIRECTEUR DE LA PRISON. Pourquoi vous riez ?  
LE POÈTE. On rit à cause de... à cause de l’horloge anglaise.  
LE DIRECTEUR DE LA PRISON. Quelle horloge ?  
LE POÈTE. C’est dans la pièce. Il y a une horloge anglaise qui frappe des coups anglais. (*De la sensation...scene 12, 56*)

POET. “There, the clock strikes nine English beats!”  
(*All four of them burst into laughter*)  
PRISON WARDEN. Why do you laugh?  
POET. We laugh because of... because of the English clock.  
PRISON WARDEN. Which clock?  
POET. It is in the play. There is an English clock that strikes English beats.

After a second performance of the first part of the scene, the prison’s warden cannot take it any longer: « Vous vous moquez de notre régime » (“You are mocking our ruling regime”); and later « Vous vous moquez de notre république populaire » (scene 12, 57) (“You are mocking our people’s republic”). This shows the incompetence and at the

same time the thirst for power of the Communist Party's officials, who were banning anything that they would consider an offense to the state.

In these scenes, Vişniec depicts the absurd that the intellectuals and people were living. Ionesco's fictional absurd was in fact the very real, palpable reality of everyday life, which could only be purged through art. In the preface of the play, Vişniec writes that he discovered Ionesco's plays at a moment when the daily absurd rivaled with the fictional one. Fiction then became an instrument for battling reality:

A l'époque où je découvrais les pièces de Ionesco, dans une Roumanie communiste où l'absurde quotidien rivalisait avec le théâtre de l'absurde, je découvrais en effet la liberté absolue et un outil extrêmement efficace de lutte contre l'oppression, la bêtise et le dogmatisme idéologique. (07)

At the time when I was discovering Ionesco's plays, in a Communist Romania where the daily absurd rivaled with the theatre of the absurd, I was indeed discovering an absolute freedom and an extremely efficient tool to fight against ideological oppression, stupidity and dogmatism.

Another example of a parody of the system, using absurd paradigm takes place in scene 23. This scene occurs towards the end, after the liberation of the Poet, when Ionesco is reestablished by the Ideological Commission and allowed to come out of the « cabinet de monstruosités » (“cabinet of monstrosities”), archive which gathers anomalies of what was considered decadent, and was therefore censored literature. The speech of the Ideological Commission Secretary is similar Mother Pipe's in *Tueur sans gages*, whose ideological discourse and Marxist propaganda, against the “decadent literature of the occident” recalls the aberrations that characterized the Communist period. The Ideological Commission Secretary is the initiator of the « cabinet de monstruosités » and he lists the writers that this cabinet includes, thus providing an analogy with the anomalies kept in medical laboratories as an example of deviancy. Amongst the works

included in this category are Ionesco's and Beckett's anti-plays, Kafka and Gide's sub-novels (« *sous-romans* »), Tzara and Breton's sub-poems (« *sous-poèmes* ») (scene 5, 24-25).

*Rhinocéros* is removed from the « cabinet de monstruosités » because of its potential as a critique of Nazism, against which Communism defined itself. The censor, who is also the director of the theatre, soon realizes that the critique is double-edged: it not only criticizes Nazism but any ideology. In scene 23, a troupe of actors is finishing dress rehearsal of *Rhinocéros* and Bérenger's last words can still be heard: « Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu'au bout! Je ne capitule pas » (scene 23, 88). ("I am the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I am not capitulating" [107]). The anemic applause of the director gives away his dissatisfaction with the fact that despite the assurances of the Poet, the play is not sufficiently anti-Nazi. He then begins to propose changes which result in a ludicrous *mise en scène* with rhinoceros wearing Hitler-like mustaches, to clearly indicate a targeted criticism, an immobile actress unable to point anywhere when she spots the rhinoceros, in order to not offend different institutions of the Communist party (scene 23, 89). She cannot point towards the public, nor to Stage Right (*coté jardin*), since it is the building of the Communist Party Committee, nor to Stage Left (*côté cour*) since it is the Embassy of the Soviet Union, nor the end of the stage, since there is the seat of the Department of Defense. Finally, the Poet asks if the actress Mirela can point towards the sky. This is also impossible in an atheist country. With all the cuts that the director requests, the scene ends with the actress Mirela in a statue-like position, immobile, unable to point anywhere, with her eyes closed. The Director explains this performance: «Finalement, c'est une pièce historique, non? Le

fascisme a été vaincu. . . . Donc elle se souvient d'une histoire du passé. . . . » (Scene 23, 92). (In the end, it is a historical play, isn't it? Fascism was defeated. . . . So she is recalling a story from the past. . . .” )

Vişniec's notion of humanism is close stylistically and thematically to Eugène Ionesco's. For Ionesco, dreams have a vital role in a human's life as they are not only revelatory of the future but they can also have an equal epistemological role, in acquiring knowledge, as reason does. Dreams are not only structural illustrations of the absurd (in Ionesco, Vişniec and also Stănescu's works) but they also contain the antidote to absurdity. For Vişniec, dreams take a psychological twist; they are mere hallucinations, pathological scars from a torturous past. Ionesco's metaphysical humanism contains the idea of contemplation, illustrated by episodes of illumination that the characters experience. Vişniec, on the other hand, transforms this ecstatic, divine experience into an idolatrous one. For the imprisoned Poet, it is Ionesco himself who redeems him and gives him the strength he needs in order to carry on. While in prison, the Poet is allowed to take short walks in the gloomy prison yard, fenced in by high lugubrious walls topped with barbed wire. The experiences of epiphany interwoven into Ionesco's texts are nuanced in Vişniec's play. In scene 13, the experience of *satori* so often reiterated in Ionesco's plays, is replaced with the experience of the Poet's meeting with Ionesco. Lines from Ionesco's plays give the Poet the meaning for his existence. The Poet recounts this moment:

LE POÈTE. Je ne peux pas vous dire à quel point j'ai été troublé. Ionesco se promenant avec moi dans la cour de la prison ! Mais quel cadeau précieux ! Quelle forme sublime d'extase ! Brusquement, ses paroles, ses répliques ont envahi mon cerveau. . . . Tout autour de nous je voyais un énorme essaim de répliques, mille répliques que j'adorais d'une façon viscérale, qui m'avaient libéré l'esprit et qui tournaient maintenant en cercle, au-dessous de nos têtes. . . . [J]e trouvais quand même cela extrêmement drôle, le fait que Ionesco avait réussi à briser toutes les

limites de la réalité et de la fiction pour faire irruption ici, dans la cour de ma prison, pour donner un sens à mon univers minable. (*De la sensation...* 59)

THE POET. I cannot tell you how moved I was: Ionesco strolling with me in the prison yard! Oh what precious gift! What sublime form of ecstasy... Suddenly his words, his replies invaded my mind. ... I saw all around me an enormous multitude of lines, thousand of lines that I used to adore viscerally, which liberated my soul and which were spinning around in circles, above our heads. ... I found that extremely funny, the fact that Ionesco had managed to break all limits of reality and fiction in order to burst (appear) here, into my prison's yard, to give meaning to my deplorable universe.

If for Ionesco's anti-heroes the experience is revelatory of another order of existence, for the Poet, Vişniec's character, the illumination is rather rational. Whereas for Ionesco the inexpressible revelation has freed him from his existential anguish, for Vişniec, it is the logos, Ionesco's literary universe, which gives meaning to his dire existence. Humanism, in this perspective, is primarily understood as the relationships among the members of the community, which is the horizontal axis, whereas the vertical dimension comes from the relationship between humans and art.

While the absurdist style in Vişniec's play emerges in the hybrid structure of the scenes, and the overlapping of the historical reality of the absurdity of the Communist regime and Ionesco's absurd world, for Stănescu, the absurd is closely connected to the present traumatic experiences of her characters. Her women protagonists are struggling with issues of displacement and survival as they experience some of the effects of a globalized world. They are in search of a new life, in other geographical spaces, struggling with the reality of the absurd life that they do not understand, and haunted by collective memories that render their lives even more nonsensical. The absurd takes on a grotesque, vaudevillian tone imbued with a sense of a psychological drama that the



characters are experiencing. The difficulty of matching the idealized image of their adopted country with the reality of meeting the primary needs for survival is what defines their complicated personalities.

Stănescu's absurd is anchored in the raw, cruel reality of illegal immigrants and their trials and attempts to belong. In the preface of Stănescu's New York plays, John Clinton Eisner, the Artistic Director of Lark Play Development Center in New York, points out her appropriation of the absurd, tempered with a combination of comic theatricality and psychological realism (29).

The absurd turns into the grotesque in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* where Nadia in the same attempt to belong is faced with the life of a new immigrant in New York. The grotesque emerges in the collision between Nadia's high hopes to find "happiness," as proffered by the Constitution (scene 2), holding on to the adage on her first mug purchased in the United States that reproduced Eleanor Roosevelt's words: "The future belongs to those who believe in the future of their dreams" (271), and the grim reality that a new immigrant in New York, without documentation, must face.

In Stănescu's work the absurd is accompanied by comic relief that is unconstrained in the stage performances. During *Dreamscape 2* Nadia is touring the New York City when suddenly her guides metamorphose into INS officers. She hides in the audience and her aside remarks to the public have comical reverberations as Stănescu is overtly criticizing the xenophobic atmosphere that enveloped the United States after the events of 9/11. The spectators, who, at this point become characters in the play, are interrogated by the INS officers who warn them that it is a felony to hide an illegal alien. The altercation ends with the arrest of one member of the audience. With a Brechtian

twist, Stănescu is inviting her audience to reflect on and react to the critical issues provoked by the fear of the Other and the xenophobic discourse that emerged in both political and civic contexts. The grotesque absurd is also revealed in the scene where Nadia and Boris, her clown friend, with the same status as her, are performing an advertisement for McDonald's (fig. 30). The derisory absurd lies in the discrepancy of their status as outsiders, promoting products that are a result of the imperialist and globalized practices that have caused them to be in their current precarious situation, as undocumented immigrants.



**Fig. 30.** Rosegg, Carol. “Aliens with Extraordinary Skills”. [www.saviana.blogspot.com](http://www.saviana.blogspot.com), 23 March 2008. Photo. 5 June 2014

Stănescu empowers her characters with strength to move on and continue despite the trauma that they have undergone. She addresses topics that affect women and are rarely addressed on the stage. For example Nadia is fighting for the strength to move on

after a violent gang rape. In her fight for survival, and desperate need to find money to pay her expensive rent, she had gone to a party where, vulnerable because of her lack of experience, she was drugged and raped. The traumatic event leaves her half-dead.

Stănescu does not shy away from directly addressing this critical issue which is no longer veiled by poetical figures of speech, such as in Ionesco's *La leçon*, where the killing of the student by her Professor has often been represented in performances through indirect imagery of rape.

The author's desire to diverge from the abstract surrealist world derives from her feeling of responsibility toward her parents and their ostracized, censored, intellectually amputated generation. Bennett reproduces Stănescu's thoughts on her theatrical approach and the reasons for and meaning of her work:

In my new plays, I am interested in coming out of the abstract surrealist world and getting into the psychological reality of their [parents] lives... I feel responsible for my parents. What does it mean to live all your life in a small powerless country between two super powers? My parents and friends are still looking for a daddy, a powerful daddy, a model from the outside. I wish they could develop their own value system and value themselves more. (21)

The responsibility for the other in Stănescu's view is intrinsically linked with a sense of immediacy, or urgent responsiveness and an attempt to mend and attenuate as much as possible the dreadful effects of the Communist regime. The author is striving to be "an active of [her] times," a witness that refuses any tagging. She affirms to Bennett: "I consider myself a witness compelled to tell stories" (Bennett 27). She merges the two terms of artist and activist in the hybrid *artist*, a label that she agrees to wear ([www.saviana.com](http://www.saviana.com)). In the wake of 21<sup>st</sup>-century events, in a globalized world that has brought its share of troubles, being an artist cannot be dissociated from activism. If Ionesco refused in theory the merging of these two notions, in practice he was a very

active proponent for peace: he gave speeches to promote peace in different regions of the world and helped liberate Romanian intellectuals from the communist gulags. For Stănescu, as well as for Vişniec, as witnesses of their times, these two notions are inseparable. This is part of Ionesco's legacy despite his refusal in theory of activism.

For Stănescu, humanism is linked with activism and theatre. If before the 1989 events that caused the fall of Communism, socialist realism entailed submitting works to the Communist propaganda machine, after 1989, the prevalent style that dominated the Romanian literature scene still relied on metaphorical discourse. Stănescu, as she grew up in the same house as Urmuz, one of the notorious Romanian Surrealist poets, was influenced initially by the Surrealist, absurdist style. The generation of 1927 with Cioran, Vulcănescu, and Eliade was also an inspiration but, as she notes, they had their own failings. Stănescu, quoted by Bennett, notes: "... we couldn't go back to that time of cultural activity, we have to move on, be synchronic with our own times" (20-21). Establishing a cultural identity was one of the challenges that artists and intellectuals in the wake of the Revolution faced.

Through their styles and choice of themes, Vişniec and Stănescu both attempt to redefine or at least to sketch their new identities through continuities and discontinuities with earlier writers. Geographical distance seems to have been pivotal for these writers of the diaspora in creating their own aesthetics and themes to address the issues pertinent to a twenty-first century audience. Despite the geographical distance, the invisible, intellectual, emotional ties with their country of origin remained and it is reflected in the imagery, motifs, and loci of action in their works.

A significant period in Vişniec's life was marked by the end of the Communist era in which oppression was at its apogee. His biographical accounts reveal that he lived through intellectual censorship and persecution (these circumstances compelled him to flee and ask for political asylum in France), therefore his approach entails an inclination, even a need, for a redemptive medium. For him this was art. Many of his works entail imaginary dialogues with writers that he admired. For example, in 1987, year that coincides with his exile in France, Vişniec wrote *Le dernier Godot* (*The Last Godot*), a play in which the author allows his audience to assist to a fiery debate between Godot and Beckett that revolves around the role of theatre and the meaning of art, in general.

Through the creative literary device of rewriting, that Vişniec is a master of, the absence is made present. The rather allusive, indirect absurd of the 1950's is replaced with a historicized perspective, reflecting the pinnacle of absurd reality of the 1980's. Ionesco and Beckett's prophetic renderings of a future in which language loses its purpose and meaning have a redemptive effect in Vişniec's works. Their words or silences become the playwright's prime material, which he transforms in a unique way into remedies against the intellectual oppressions and censure of the system. His humanism is closely linked to an almost idealized art and to the condition of the writer. As we have seen in the example of *De la sensation...*, the Poet's dreadful path through imprisonment was alleviated by the magical appearance of the Bald Soprano as well as his and his fellow prisoners' rendering from memory of Ionesco's plays. Stănescu, on the other hand, belonging to a younger generation, was not so strongly affected by Communism itself, but rather by the confusion that followed; therefore, her style reflects a rupture and a distance from an allusive, abstract approach, and a preference for an

almost visceral, raw, absurd approach that addresses from a personal viewpoint universal themes of foreignness and displacement, pertinent to the twenty-first century setting.

Thus her protagonists, global foreigners, embrace their fragmented identities in spite of an oppressive past that constantly pursues them.

### *Notes*

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<sup>88</sup> All quotes from Matei Vișniec's plays are my translation.

<sup>89</sup> *Of the Feeling of Resilience when Walking on Cadavers*

<sup>90</sup> As he confessed in an interview with Ciprian Marinescu.

<sup>91</sup> Kristeva takes Bakhtine's notion of heteroglossia, dialogism and affirms that every text has meaning in reference to another text.

<sup>92</sup> Genette's text published in English in 1997, was written in the original French version in 1982.

<sup>93</sup> Excerpt of the Brussels speech, [www.savianablogspot.com](http://www.savianablogspot.com)

<sup>94</sup> The play was originally commissioned when Saviana Stănescu was playwright in residence at the New York Women's Project, an organization commissioning and promoting plays written by women. Some staggering statistics noted by Julie Crosby, the Artistic Director of the organization, shows that in 1908 only 12% of the plays professionally produced in New York were written by women. The same percentage persists almost a century later, in 2004, indicating that virtually no progress has been made on this front. The Women's Project is aiming to reduce this disproportionate gap.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSION: ART, BETWEEN DESPAIR AND REDEMPTION**

... une œuvre littéraire de valeur est à l'intersection du temps et de l'éternité.  
(Ionesco, *Entretiens* 141)

“Most of the time, the sky is dark; most of the time I live . . . in a habitual state of anguish” confesses Ionesco (“Why Do I Write?” 122). This anguish emerges on the one hand from the sight of suffering inherent to the world, and on the other, from the personal experience of the author’s own suffering. In Eugène Ionesco’s view, the apogee of suffering, and therefore anguish, is, the fear of death. In the gloominess of existence, the author witnesses moments of illumination, where mystery manifests itself. It is that light, or the longing for it, that counterbalances the experience of unbearable existence—and it is the purpose of Ionesco’s aesthetic quest.

Since art is the expression of being, or as Heidegger defines it, “the truth of being setting itself to work” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 162), it is a projection of the author’s inner universe, with its contradictions and antagonisms. Ionesco’s quest is animated by the ardent desire to authentically reveal his raw, profound, uncensored inner experiences, stripped of any artifice. Although this introspective approach may appear as a self-reflective, isolating practice, it is, in fact, a way to connect with others. The absurd is held to be more than an appropriate philosophical approach, but also a suitable artistic style expressing the tidal pulse or undulation of thinking and emotions profoundly experienced by humanity—or soul—in its weight and immediacy. Its heterogeneous

nature is beautifully captured by E.M. Cioran's oxymoronic expression to explain how one can experience true catharsis only by tasting the "poisoning sweetness of the absurd," because through the absurd, negation is pushed to its final expression (*On the Heights of Despair* 10). This spirit of negation, which is contradiction taken to its absolute, has been embodied in Ionesco's writings since the beginning, seen in his collection of essays and articles published in Romania and titled simply *Nu* (1934). But what other style could be possible, asks E.M. Cioran, when all systems of reference—moral, esthetic, religious and social—can no longer provide any guidance? (10). Art arises as an authentic expression of being, and can follow the seemingly deconstructionist (or even destructive) path of negation, of absurdity, only to later rise from its ashes. "The Passion for the absurd," writes Cioran (at 22 years of age), "is the only thing that can still throw a demonic light on chaos" (10). The absurd is not merely a self-detrimental aesthetic choice but it has an epistemological function: It aids the artist, hence the human being, to arrive at otherwise unattainable knowledge. In order to reach that point, Ionesco believes that the human being—and surely the artist—should return to a state of astonishment, the wonderment at which a child naturally arrives «sans rien comprendre au monde» ("without understanding anything of the world" [*my translation; Découvertes* 28]). It is, in the author's view, the purest metaphysical state (metaphysics is understood here as an uncompromising interrogation of the world, about why things exist and how they come into being). In his autobiographical reflections, *Découvertes*, in which the author is charting his life experiences since childhood, he recalls through text and drawings, his *infans* period, i.e., before language. He writes, « . . . sans vocabulaire, j'avais donc inventé la métaphysique, l'étonnement tout à fait gratuit, tout à fait désintéressé devant le



monde» (28) (“ . . . without words, I had invented metaphysics—a spontaneous astonishment, completely unbiased before the world” [*my translation*]). As Ionesco clarifies, metaphysics in this context is not the heavily charged term whose etymology would overwhelm the reader; it is rather a sincere interrogation before the mystery of the world. Children are the best models for that. As humans age, this capacity for unchecked curiosity and wonderment may be too easily lost or ignored. The way to find meaning beyond the absurd is to return to this state of naiveté, to the beginning. The author continues his reflection in *Découvertes*: «[S]i on veut retrouver le sens de quelque chose à travers le non-sens ou au-delà du sens, c’est vers tout le début qu’il nous faut revenir» (79) (“[I]f we want to find the meaning of something through senselessness or by going beyond meaning, we must return to the beginning” [*my translation*]). To arrive at meaning, one has to undergo a negation of all reference points that are typically learned and non inherent, and thereby recover a state of innocence and curiosity.

It is no surprise that Ionesco’s protagonists—as well as his pictorial figures—exude childlike distortions and grotesqueries. His humorous dismembered characters with disproportionate heads are incongruent with a mimesis of what is perceived as reality, but they are very much like a child’s projection of the world. The one-eyed creatures with immense heads but no bodies, made of geometrical, abstract forms, compel the viewer to challenge his or her own perceptions by accepting the questions that the work of art evokes, rather than thematize and interpret using typical methods and symbols. Art emerges from this interrogation, and, in Ionesco’s view, it is because of this interrogative posture that art can intersect with philosophy. The author asks, «N’est-ce pas philosophique de prendre conscience d’être face au monde et de se poser la question

‘qu’est-ce que c’est que cela?’ ... L’art est philosophie en tant que la philosophie est exploration, problème, question, attitude» (*Découvertes* 145). (“Isn’t philosophy the human’s awareness of standing before the world and asking ‘what is that’? ... Art is philosophy as long as philosophy means exploration, problem, question, attitude” [*my translation*]). This is the same path that humanism, which is historically philosophical at its core, should follow. «La culture humaniste», writes Ionesco, «n’a fait que nous renvoyer à nous-mêmes. C’est justement ce qu’il fallait éviter. Tout cela nous retombe sur la tête» (*Un homme en question* 67). (“What humanist culture did was to send us back to ourselves. It is precisely what needed to be avoided. All that turned against us” [*my translation*]). Instead of being centered on the individual as an isolated entity, humanism should convey, in Ionesco’s perspective, this interrogative posture before existence and at the same time foster an intersubjective relation, in which the Self devotes himself or herself to the wellbeing of the Other.

The interrogative quest of Ionesco’s pictorial art intersects with that of Joan Miró, whom he appreciates for his “metaphysical playfulness” («jeu métaphysique»). In an article on Miró, whose title is as irreverent as it is illustrative of Ionesco’s admiration for the artist («Miró, le seul peintre qui ose démontrer à Dieu qu’il s’est trompé»; Miró, the only painter who dares to show God that He was wrong [*my translation*]), Ionesco writes that Miró’s fantastic humor is displayed especially in the ‘inexplicability’ of his plastic works, works best suited to explain the world (“c’est l’inexplicable de Miró qui nous paraît le mieux expliquer le monde” [*Un homme en question* 198]). Humor, as one of the qualities that characterizes humans, has the power, through art, to bring the human being to the awareness of his or her derisory condition,

perhaps redeeming him or her from it. Ionesco suggests that humor encompasses within its structure redemptive qualities in that it helps the human surpass, through detachment, this deplorable condition. Through his creation, the artist is, in Ionesco's concept, the bridge between the profane world—nurtured by the routine of daily existence—and the sacred. The latter is epitomized in ecstatic moments through which the person experiences a world outside of time, where the mystery of the universe unravels briefly before his or her eyes. The artist has the power of a demiurge because he or she creates, unveils, paints, dances, and speaks worlds into existence.

This *imitation dei* gesture is expressed in both Ionesco's pictorial and written representations. The multiplicity of mediums is inspired by the same exploration of authenticity. Sonia de Leusse-Le Guillou remarks that when drawing became one of Ionesco's most engrossing activities he broke the pact of silence he'd made (*Eugène Ionesco* 207). In fact, he never stopped writing. Ionesco's pictorial endeavors, similar to his plays, are accompanied by reflections, interrogations, and explanations. Besides illustrations, *Découvertes*, *Le Blanc et le Noir*, *La Main peinte* incorporate written reflections to accompany his drawings. These reflections are neither mere descriptions nor analyses of his pictorial works, but rather a series of confessions concerning the inner spiritual and emotional journey of the author, his state of mind when he created the works, and his quest for meaning.

To his question «Pourquoi est-ce que j'écris?», the title of one of Ionesco's essays, the author replies : «J'écris pour retrouver cette lumière et essayer de la communiquer » (316). (“I write in order to capture this light, which I then try to communicate” [“Why Do I Write??” 121]) Does this painter of the absurd succeed in his

goal? Any answer to this question is insufficient as it is both confirmed and denied by the author. In *Un homme en question*, the author's penultimate collection of reflections, Ionesco hesitantly attempts to answer the question, «Si l'art ne nous donne pas la clé, car aucun effort humain ne peut la donner ni aucune méthode, l'art nous entrouvre la porte sur la vie, au-delà de la vie, par-delà le néant» (61). ("If art does not offer us the key, since neither any human effort nor method can do so, art half-opens the door towards life, beyond life, on the other side of the abyss"[my translation]). In this sense, art is redemptive; it can be a medium, an opening. If not the key to the mystery, art can bring the human before it. Like Beckett's *Innommable*, this mystery is, for Ionesco, beyond name (*Antidotes* 244). He undertakes the same gesture as the apophatic mystics for whom the knowledge of God is obtained through negation: God is addressed in terms of what he is not, and not of what he is. Despite the ineffability of God, Ionesco's quest is relentless. The last words that close Ionesco's *Intermittent Quest* (*La quête intermittente*) are also engraved on his tombstone. They speak of his life-long quest to find an embodiment of such mystery: «Prier le Je Ne Sais Qui, j'espère Jésus-Christ» ("Praying to I Don't Know Whom, I hope Jesus-Christ" [my translation]).

The quest differs for the writers who come after Ionesco. Living in an absurd beyond any absurdity shapes the interrogation that permeates their works. In Saviana Stănescu's depictions, the absurd prompts her to consider the role of the artist as an engaged witness of his or her era, responsive to pressing issues of the time (she merges the terms artist and activist in a hybrid definition "artist"). On the other hand, in Matéi Vişniec's plays, it is art itself—the collective patrimony that humans have access to—that can elevate the human being above his or her circumstances.

Matéi Vişniec's approach echoes that of Ionesco's. Despite the disillusioning realities, Ionesco is incessantly advocating for humanist values, and art, because it is witness to and the expression of its time, seems to be the catalyzing force, the hope for humanism. It is art, affirms Ionesco, that reveals the human to him or herself («qui révèle l'homme à lui-même» [*Un homme en question* 60]). Whereas ideologies and politics divide people, art unifies them. It is through art that one crosses boundaries and seeks answers to the profound questions on the human condition and existence. In that sense, as a motivating force creating universes, art is metaphysical because it takes us beyond ourselves (“l'art nous mène au-delà de nous-mêmes” [*Antidotes* 193]).

## APPENDIX

### TRANSLATIONS OF IONESCO'S PLAYS' TITLES

*La Cantatrice chauve: The Bald Soprano*

*Les Chaises: The Chairs*

*Ce formidable bordel: What a Bloody Circus*

*Jeux de massacre: Here Comes a Chopper*

*La Leçon: The Lesson*

*La Soif et la Faim: Hunger and Thirst*

*L'Homme aux valises: The Man with the Luggage*

*L'Impromptu de l'Alma: Improvisation at Alma or the Shepherd's Chameleon*

*Le Nouveau locataire: The New Tenant*

*Le Piéton de l'air: A Stroll in the Air*

*Le roi se meurt: Exit the King*

*Rhinocéros: Rhinoceros*

*Tueur sans gages: The Killer*

*Voyages chez les morts: Journeys Among the Dead*

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