

HETEROTOPIAS DISTURB: EUGÈNE IONESCO THROUGH THE 20TH CENTURY

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Not only in the theatre, but there also, the 20th century was the century of the disappearance of space and of time transfigured by massacre. Scientific progress did not produce moral progress. Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Nazism, the totalitarianisms, Vietnam present themselves as the incontrovertible historical evidence. In the words of Angelica Liddell:

El tiempo ya no ubica las acciones humanas sino la descomposición. Un minuto no es tiempo, es espacio, espacio desmoronado. Sería como decir este avión tarda en llegar tres hospitales bombardeados. Sería como decir un minuto son tres campos de exterminio. La definición de sufrimiento usurpa la definición del espacio y del tiempo (...) La realidad destruida hace que se recurra a la metáfora como generadora de realidades nuevas. El tiempo y el espacio son sustitutos por tanto por la gran metáfora: LA NADA¹

In fact, the undifferentiated death, massive annihilation, extermination camps and the staging of horror presupposed a belligerent and strongly individualistic dramaturgy, an act of resistance in the era of the failure of humanism. As if it was the only possible way to survive the 20th century. Formulating an unconventional language of anguish. Reasserting the contradiction of our time, that makes sarcasm the condition of truth.

If there is a common thread to the oeuvre of the Franco-Rumanian writer Eugène Ionesco it is that disturbing relation between biography and history mediated by nihilism and death. Dramatist, novelist, essayist and lecturer, born in Slatina, Rumania, but of French nationality, he constitutes one of the theatrical authors most emblematic of the 20th century, with works of such extraordinary relevance as *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951), *The Chairs* (1952),

Rhinoceros (1959), *A Stroll in the Air* (1962), *Exit the King* (1962), *Hunger and Thirst* (1966), *Jack, or The Submission* (1970), *Macbett* (1972), *Ce Formidable Bordel* (1973), *The Man with the Luggage* (1975), or *Journey Among the Dead* (1980), also the novel *The Hermit* (1973), the autobiographical diaries *Fragments of a Journal* (1967) and *Present Past, Past Present* (1968), and various collections of essays, aesthetic reflections, newspaper articles, marginal notes etc. Born to a Rumanian father and French mother, he moved to Paris aged one and lived in France until 1922, when he was reclaimed by his father and returned to Rumania, where he would continue his secondary and higher education. Later he achieved the post of cultural attaché of the Rumanian delegation of Vichy, definitively establishing himself in France, where he acquired French nationality in 1950.

The success of his dramaturgy led to him becoming a vital member of the French Academy from 1970. He died in Paris in 1994, having obtained grand recognition, winning the National Theatre Prize and the Grand Prize of Monaco in 1969, and the Austrian Grand Prize of European Literature in 1970. Honourable member of the French Union of Writers, his biography practically encompasses the 20th century, inaugurating a drama that testifies to its atrocities by means of the absurd and the grotesque, for him mere extensions of the unusual.

To defend himself from catastrophe, the author became ferociously individualist, he searched for intimate and quotidian truths in the expression of the incomprehensible. Writing for him was a way to exorcise his anxiety about death and nothingness, the evidence for which is found in, for example, the noisy verbal excess and empty spaces of his dialogues, in the empty

chairs of an auditorium supposedly expectant for a message that never arrives, in the words suffocated under unending furnishings that completely fill the apartment, bury the inhabitant in its interior, and gradually invade the staircase, entrance and the streets, in the insidious soup of Sundays that inundate the city or in the ceremonial recreation of ancestral rituals regarding the way in which a king dies. Death as living evidence.

In this sense it would appear incidental that, on his personal return to Ítaca at 26 with a grant from the French government, his funded research into the theme of death in French poetry never became a reality as a thesis, as he was never able to locate that sentiment in its pure state that so fascinated the French poets. He chose for his obsession, by contrast, the theatrical route, a form that he hated in its natural-realist aspect, but which had, through the staged image, the potential to disturb and to move, insofar as his post dramatic writing left aside the concept of the stage as a mausoleum of literature to instead transform itself into a laboratory of social fantasy. In this way he created a theatre of violence, violently comic, violently dramatic.

I. THE EROSION OF LANGUAGE

The mid 20th century was stunned by the force of a mendacious work, the fortuitous result of a desire on the part of the writer to familiarise himself with a foreign language. It was when he obtained an example of the *Assimil* method of language learning, which was amazingly to play an unthinkable role in respect to its original purpose: “en 1948, antes de escribir mi primera pieza: *La cantante calva*, no quería convertirme en un autor teatral. Ambicionaba simplemente aprender inglés. El aprendizaje del inglés no conduce necesariamente a la dramaturgia. Al contrario, me convertí en un autor teatral porque no logré aprender inglés” ².

In fact, the text did not so much enable him to learn an alien language as to absorb a series of surprising enunciated truths that he must have known already, such as the week has seven days, the ceiling is above and the floor is below, etc,

questions that suddenly seemed to him as astonishing as they were jolting. It was then that the desire to learn English gave way to exhibitionism, showing to his contemporaries, without modesty, the true reach of the essential truths discovered in his Franco-English phrase book. And something genuinely unsuspected took place, as the literal transcription of this unexplored linguistic galaxy took on a life of its own; the simple and shining replicas were denatured, skilfully distorted into new and unthinkable predicaments.

The later appearance of the Martins, friends of the Smiths, pushes this unedited vision of reality further. Their perplexity grows over time, as until now unnoticed certainties are resurrected, not failing to surprise, therefore, when Mrs Martin, the woman stating these self evident truths, lets her husband know information that he undoubtedly must know already, such as that he works in a bank, and that they have two children and a maid. The fiftieth lesson goes even further, widening the ambit of axiomatic truths with others more complex, which allow us to observe the existence in the same space of antagonistic truths (“the country is quieter than a populous city” exclaims one character; “yes, but in the city the population is more dense, there are more businesses” comes the reply). Common expressions, stereotyped, trivial, become outlandish, the truisms invoke a sort of nihilism, conscious of the inefficacy of language as a useful instrument for communication. The verbal arabesque, sifted by a word-for-word logic, literal meaning or an irrational logic, sustains an ominous incommunicability that is genuinely unsettling.

It is when he felt this profound unease that he became aware that he had staged for the first time the tragedy of the language of his time, a sort of decomposition of reality. He was fully aware that to destroy language is to destroy the world. And it is at this point that *The Bald Soprano* is born, the title of which comes from a casual linguistic lapse in one of the actors performing from a copy of the script, and is totally alien to it, there is no soprano with or without hair, yet it was considered an excellent

title by the author. The play describes a meeting between two married couples from England – the protagonists of his *Assimil* method, of course – to eat dinner in one of their houses, as trivial an episode as one could find, but which soon takes on Kafkaesque proportions, as the hosts, the Smiths, at the moment the play begins, have already eaten without waiting for their guests. What is more, when these arrive they go away to change their clothes, but later return without any visible changes, assuring their guests that they had not eaten anything anticipating their visit that, in all other respects, has been totally unexpected. At the end of the play, everything starts again, but this time the Martins replace the Smiths, using identical linguistic registers.

This minimalist plot constitutes a support for a language that is broken up in ludic excitement, where words lose their meaning and characters their personality a, divesting themselves of their psychology. Talking machines, playful verbal icons; above them an empty plot slips over, shattering into multiple splinters when the incognito, the metaphysical absolute, emerges from the nihilism of the every-day. Sometime later, Heiner Müller would write *The Hamletmachine* (1977), an anti-drama that demonstrates the impossibility in our time of returning to write *Hamlet*. In the same way, Ionesco writes an “anti-piece”, as he liked to say, a stage performance of dramatic, rather than epic, presence – strictly speaking there is no narration, something more appropriate to the novel or cinema – about the impossibility of meaningful language, about the efficacy of the unusual, about the dislocation of reality with its undeniable connotations: in his words: “un incommunicable que comunica” (p.87).

The play’s premiere, on the 11th May 1950, at the *Théâtre de Noctambules*, caused one of those scandals so common in the Paris of the time. The audience felt swindled by the absence of a soprano, or even a bald character, and still less any dramatic conflict. The support of authors such as Raymond Queneau, Boris Vian or Saintmont would be fundamental in allowing the play to receive greater recognition. In fact, the piece has become a classic and has been

shown uninterrupted since 1957 on a double bill with *The Lesson* at the *Théâtre de la Huchette*, a record only surpassed by *The Mousetrap* in London.

According to the celebrated critical label popularized by Martin Esslin in his eponymous monograph of 1961, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, that translates in a certain way, from an existentialist approach, the European intellectual climate after Auschwitz in the immediate post-war period, Ionesco was considered, together with Beckett, Adamov, Genet, Tardieu, Pinter, Arrabal etc, one of the main representatives of the current in his Parisian dimension. Nevertheless, Ionesco did not consider himself an existentialist - his antipathy towards Sartre was notorious - but rather in the tradition of the radical avant-garde that transformed dramatic art at the beginning of the century into a new textuality.

In a time of weak codification, the new dramaturgies brought the antirealism of the visual avant-garde into the ambit of the theatre, giving rise to a destruction of the sense of the real. In dramatic language, this caused the dynamiting of the discursive in favour of the figural, of direct expression, naked, the asemantic as a purpose, as a phantasm that presents in itself a new, weightier feeling: “no se habla de la mentira, la crueldad, la locura, etc, sino que la obra teatral es este absurdo, este miedo. La literatura cede el paso a la fuerza teatral”³.

Expressionism, for example, that projected the stage as a canvas for an interior landscape, a product of the distorted perspective of the protagonist, lent said deformation to the anti-pieces of Ionesco, where objects acquire the appearance of dreams or are transformed to the point of taking on grotesque proportions. Kafka resounds in the incommunicability, the anguish and the peculiar metamorphosis of *Rhinoceros*, in the same way that Pirandello is projected in a spectator condemned to find himself exposed by a sarcastic version of himself, all that overwhelmed with the sensuality of the 20th century theatre of images, in which the discredit brought on the word had tinged the scenic ambit

of sensuality and diffuse atmospheres with direct expression of the mental, beyond the traps of reason, dramatic causality and discursive developments.

Dislocation of reality, the resurrection of the anodyne, enables its reintegration in a sort of propitious distancing from ontological perplexity – that is not social, contra Brecht – that removes mental laziness, of habit, the everydayness of the working week, and returns to us a kind of “virginity of the spirit”. From the point of view of Ionesco’s personal poetics, to write a work was to unleash a struggle to say what others had not been able to and to translate new constellations of feeling, recreating in this way a self-contained personal universe, the projection of an interior world, a theatre without an audience, through which the true event of drama occurs not in the work, nor concerns the characters, but fundamentally in the spectator: “espero fastidiar a mi público. No hay separación más perfecta que la que produce el fastidio. De esa manera habré realizado el distanciamiento de los espectadores en relación al espectáculo. El fastidio es la lucidez” (p. 171).

The crisis of thought brings with it a crisis of values and through this, of the capacity of language to tell the truth about the world or other forms of language. The author himself affirms that *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* are “tentativas de un funcionamiento en el vacío del mecanismo teatral” (p. 159). In the same way that the visual avant-garde had stripped the work of art bare of anecdotes and figurative motives, the theatre of Ionesco, in its intranscendency, its symbolism and speculative play, in the outlandish, concerns the elaboration of an abstract or non-realist theatre, where the comic and tragic give way to the absurd and grotesque as new aesthetic categories:

Teatro abstracto. Drama puro. Anti-temático, anti-ideológico, anti-realista-socialista, anti-filosófico, anti-psicológico de *boulevard*, anti-burgués, redescubrimiento de un nuevo teatro libre, Libre, es decir, liberado, es decir, sin una posición adoptada de antemano, instrumento de indagación: único en poder ser sincero, exacto y en poder mostrar las

evidencias ocultas (p. 152).

This has subsequently been widely projected, found even in stage directors as formalist and iconoclastic as Robert Wilson, who met Ionesco at the *Festival de Nancy* in France in 1972 when he staged *Deafman Glance*. There they showed their mutual admiration. In fact, Act III of *A Letter from Queen Victoria* can be considered pure Ionesco, a satire on language among five couples suddenly silenced by a burst of gunfire heard from offstage.

In the same way, *The Lesson* (1951) illustrates this iconoclastic attitude towards language, if even more virulently, as here it is used to manipulate and intimidate, to create and destroy. The work, delicious and disparate, develops according to Ionesco’s habitual formula through which a trivial anecdote takes on dreamlike dimensions. The play depicts a private class imparted by a professor to a student about diverse study materials. They begin with arithmetic and then move on to languages, until the point at which the pedagogic realism of the professor leads him to demonstrate the meaning of “knife” by murdering the young boy, who is regrettably afflicted by toothache, and who will constitute, as we discover from the maid, the fortieth corpse that day. Meanwhile, another student awaits his class.

The professor teaches languages, all languages, presumably, to his student. What is surprising is the method with which it is taught, comparative linguistics, with which he traces an incestuous genealogy encompassing all languages, past and present. According to him, all languages come from Spanish, including Latin, whose differences are, at the final analysis, “ineffable”.

On the other hand, the accumulative irrationality of the dialogue admits other connotations: “it is not enough to know how to add”, declares the professor during the maths lesson, frustrated by the inability of his student to carry out the contrary mathematical operation of subtraction. In the work of Ionesco, the knife will represent both functions, unifying the language while suppressing its differences. The knife may be seen as a phallic and fatal symbol

of reductionist ideology and the universalisation of power. Semantic anarchy equals moral anarchy. That is why philology is the worst, as the maid warns, because from the nationalist connotations of language to its saturation point as a founding myth, the cacophony of voices in conflict and of differences are silenced. In this case, the knife is the weapon that translates the censorship of totalitarianism to linguistic heteroglossia and the bubbling multiplicity of language.⁴

Totally opposed to aesthetic realism or to ideological theatre, of a thesis of any nature, the work of art goes beyond any ideological proselytism, having its own rules, its own content. This approach led to accusations of solipsism from some quarters, for example from Kenneth Tynan, initially a defender of his aesthetic but soon to become a polemical opponent of the social irrelevance of his writing. The controversy, quite heated for its time, which took place on the pages of *The Observer*, had a wide impact, drawing in eminent participants such as Philip Toynbee and John Berger. Over the course of the debate he was accused of formalism by such a colossus as Orson Welles, who perspicaciously denounced the real ideological affinity of neutrality, related to this artistic practice, with the concentration camp. The celebrated auteur deduced in conclusion that his logic is ultimately dangerous, insofar as one cannot prove the failure of language without also demonstrating at the same time the failure of man.

It is possible that Ionesco would acknowledge this hypothesis. In the final analysis, his theatre lacks social significance in a way that benefits its metaphysical operation, which directs itself at the guts of man, at his loneliness, the pain of living, the fear of death, at his existential angst, at the thirst for the absolute, at the constant desire for meaning in all the things that do not have it, and ultimately to man staring into the abyss. In the end "las ideologías son falsas, y el arte y la ciencia, verdaderos" (p.191) or, in the other words, "en la neurosis reside la verdad" (p.211).

II. IDENTITARY SPLIT

For his part, Calinescu⁵ has broached the subject from the perspective of identitary conflict, the legacy of an author who was the son of an extreme nationalist Romanian father and a French mother of probable Jewish ancestry. Ionesco frequently referred to the confessional character of his theatre, centred on the search for answers about himself. This enabled him to process in an absolutely personal way, for example, the ascent of fascism and the consequent ideological atrocities and delirious chauvinism that surrounded his youth in Romania. In this sense, we can analyze as symptomatic one of his most emblematic dramas, *Rhinoceros* (1959), recognising it as his most social drama, as well as establishing the multilayered and open character of this incomparable allegory of denunciation.

Rhinoceros dramatizes the stupefaction of Bérenger – an everyman citizen of a nameless French city – when he observes how its inhabitants are gradually being converted into rhinoceros. In fact, he and Daisy, his lover, are the only human beings that remain, although she will vanish, perhaps also transformed into a rhinoceros. The powerful image of human beings being transformed into wild beasts, gigantic and prehistoric, brings us inevitably back to Gregor Samsa in *La Metamorfosis*. If in the Kafka story (1915) the metamorphosis of an individual into a spider has a distressing and asphyxiating character, experienced in the first person, in this work the monstrosity of the individuals is produced in a collective form, as the effect of a silent plague, and is transmitted in a caustic and hilarious form. Faced with this prevailing irrationality, the rhinoceros and the phenomenon of rhinocerosisation, Bérenger will resist, concluding the work with his cry of defiance: "...I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!" A similar heroism, albeit of a different nature, to that of the martyr of Auschwitz of one of his final works, who offers to die voluntarily in place of another (*Journey among the Dead*, 1980).

There have been substantial hermeneutic derivations from the allegory and the polysemy inherent in the symbol is present in its multiplicity of interpretations, for example in the reading of the work as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France, communist activity in the Parisian left during the Cold War, the French persecution of the Algerians, etc. When it was performed on 22nd January 1960 at the *Odeón* with Jean-Louis Barrault as the director and actor (Bérenger) fascism would unmistakably form its backdrop. Still able to understand the work as a tragedy, Ionesco praised the interpretation as “a terrible farce and a fantastic fable.” Even the green skin of the beasts could be considered an allusion to the Nazi uniforms of the Vichy regime. The docile transformation of the humans into rhinoceros, almost passively, without violence, echoes the reaction of the Parisians in the first months of occupation.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the declarations of the author himself, it would be useful to understand the play as an indication of the identitary split that resulted from the alleged fascisation of the Romanian intellectual environment in which he was formed. In this way, Anna Quinney⁶ makes clear that the work can be understood as a personal settling of accounts with friendship, political idealism, and a literary community betrayed. To this can be added an additional connotation to which we make reference above, that of the Jewish ancestry of his French mother, Thérèse Ipcar. In fact, this question could not be irrelevant given the milieu of aggressive anti-Semitic fascism so well established in the Romanian intellectual climate in the twenties and thirties, at the time of the *Iron Guard*.

In any case, after his French infancy, the return to his country of birth, aged thirteen, at the request of his father, who had fraudulently obtained a divorce and custody of his children from his first wife, caused him an enormous setback. He hated Bucharest and its inhabitants. Without being Jewish, his French accent meant that he was taken to be so, and he suffered beatings until his accent changed. He felt different and isolated, in a hostile environment.

Historians such as Leon Volovici have established that fascism in Romania was not, even from a strictly intellectual perspective, a peripheral movement, underground, as has often been claimed. It not had only a considerable political influence, especially after 1930, but also an ideological and spiritual impact that would remain operative even after the Second World War. As a member of this intellectual ambit, Ionesco was sadly familiarized with the situation of friends suddenly transformed into filthy beasts, brainless and governed by slogans. The rhinoceros may well be compared to the dogmatic, racist and anti-Semitic members of the cultural and political environment of Bucharest in the thirties, where Ionesco was formed and later defined as an intellectual.

Various facts point to this interpretation, beyond the attack on fascist rhetoric. For example, the character of the logician and the parodic nature of his syllogisms (which were however real, as in spite of this formula having been used profusely by philosophers and theologians for its probative character, it was not until the 20th century when Bertrand Russell discovered some formal errors in the doctrine), who describes the epidemic of pachydermosis as a form of logic as false as it is incontrovertible. Inevitably, the allusion to Emil Cioran, and his *Syllogismes d'amertume* (1952), published barely seven days before this work, would appear obligatory.

In related fashion, the myth of racial superiority is present in *Rhinoceros* in one way or another throughout the play. In the first act, for example, the form it takes is that of a debate between the characters about whether the rhinoceros are Asiatic or African based on the number of horns they possess. As those who lived the occupation can testify, a frequent stereotype of Jews as horned men, an almost demonic image, was a widely recognized as anti-Semitic. On the other hand, the character most intimately reflective of fascist discourse, Jean, the civil servant friend of Bérenger, may be considered a reference to Cioran and his anti-Semitic and xenophobic diatribes, such as those

expounded upon in his book *The Transfiguration of Romania*, never translated into French.

Marxist discourse is caricatured in its turn in the most populist character of the group, Botard, and, of course, Dudard, the alter ego of Satre, as the author himself had it. The rhinocerotisation of society therefore constitutes a social allegory of infinite applicability; in Germany the allusion to the Nazis was inevitable, in Moscow they wanted to censor it, in Buenos Aires the military government took it to be an attack on Peronism. The plasticity of the word rhinoceros was particularly fortunate, moreover. The word, in French as in English, refers to both the individual and collective animal, its singular form is identical to the plural. In other words, one is indistinguishable from the herd, a suitable breeding ground for totalitarianisms:

Rinoceronte es, sin duda, una pieza antinazi pero también, sobre todo, una pieza contra las histerias colectivas y las epidemias colectivas que se ocultan al amparo de la razón y de las ideas, pero que no dejan de ser por eso grandes enfermedades colectivas cuyas ideologías no son sino coartadas (p.86)

It is obvious that the reach of this process of metamorphosis, of rhinocerotisation, that has as its counterpart the attitude of resistance of the militant and conscious protagonist, in the words of Ionesco, "el desasosiego del que naturalmente alérgico al contagio, asiste a la metamorfosis mental de su colectividad" (p.17), which even brought him adverse criticism from those who, such as Pierre Macabru, considered this piece to be an expression of reactionary individualism, or for those who consider neutrality to be a bluff, as no clear alternative is defended. Ionesco opts for the vacuum and leaves the spectators to resolve their questions themselves.

On another note, a further impulse to this identity conflict resulted from his French acclimatization. At the time of *The Bald Soprano's* premiere in 1950, Ionesco was totally unknown in literary Paris, in spite of being a mature writer. He was approaching forty and had left behind in his country of birth, which had become a Soviet satellite, a considerable literary body of work in a hidden and strange language, Romanian.

Writings which moreover were hidden by an implacable censorship until the implosion of the system in December 1989, such as a volume of essays titled *No* containing polemical articles about reputed Romanian writers of the age, that did not see the light of day until 1990, or a compilation of journalistic articles from the period 1927-1946, *En Guerra contra todo el mundo*, unedited until 1992. His unstable Romanian literary identity, strangely tied up in the hated figure of his father, whose infidelity, in a traumatic episode, was the cause of a frustrated suicide attempt on the part of his mother, soon gave way to identification with his maternal French identity. This was much more comfortable and promising, and would finally allow him to be recognized as a French dramaturge translated into multiple languages and shown in the great theatres of the world. It can be said, therefore, that Ionesco has two identities that, at least in the realm of fantasy, are opposed yet are overlaid by episodic moments of reconciliation. Nevertheless, France was always his spiritual homeland, the country of his mother's family and the place where he found his rural paradise (the *Chapelle-Anthenaise*), lost in an irrecoverable past but alive in his memory, as he observes in his diaries.⁷

It is in the name of this France of his infancy that he felt himself exiled in his native country, above all after it became a prisoner of a bloody ideological delirium, until he managed to return to his longed for France as cultural attaché to the Romanian delegation of Vichy. The atmosphere he encountered was asphyxiating, but nevertheless he attempted to detach himself insofar as his objective was to edit the principal works of contemporary Romanian literature and thought. He would become an inescapable reference in the historiography of modern French theatre, a member of the Academy from 1970, recognized and honoured throughout the world.

Nevertheless, his identity remained hybrid in moments of lucidity, particularly until the fall of Ceaușescu, the last Eastern European Stalinist. Then he would discover his Romanian self and show signs of wanting to return, albeit from an

idealized remembrance of Romanian society from his youth that compares to the French, postulating an ultimately indefensible anachronistic nostalgia for the constitutional monarchy abolished by four decades of communism. In *The Intermittent Searching*, one of his last writings, we find what can be considered a document of complete overcoming of his identitary-cultural conflict. In this piece of voluntarily uncontrolled writing, we find that Romanian words and memories appear tinged with nostalgia and affection for a fatherland wounded by totalitarianism.

In a way, his identitary conflict, his Romanian and French linguistic identity – Ionesco was perfectly bilingual – reveals an unequivocal parallel, albeit with a diametrically different approach, to the career of Samuel Beckett, an Irish man who chose French as his pet language of exploration and discovery, writing in France in self-exile from his native Ireland. He consciously abandoned a strong language for another more minoritarian, although one indeed with added connotations of precision and rigorous clarity that corresponded to a certain calling for intellectual asceticism in a writer obsessed with writing as a process of progressive purification emanating from a Joycean stimulus. In any case, he did not abandon English, immersing himself in the difficult task of self translation, another form of asceticism, from a vehicle, the English language, that was inevitably complicit, for the Irish Beckett, with scabrous colonial clutches.

In the case of Ionesco, the situation seems to have formed itself in an inversely proportional way. The French cultural colony that Romania became in the 19th Century, maintained its neo-Latin language inundated with numerous Slavic, Turkish and Greek elements, over which a French lexical gloss was simply applied to enrich, from a civilizing perspective and one of assumed cultural superiority, specialized ambits such as politics, the judiciary, economics and philosophy.

The fact is that Ionesco had written until almost forty years of age in a delimited, marginal language that he manipulated perfectly but in

which he had the feeling – expressed in *No* (1924) – of addressing himself to a public of three-hundred readers. The step to French could not be, for him, a form of asceticism, as it had been for Beckett, but the opposite, an enriching, a broadening of his horizons of expression, an opening to new possibilities for his literary genius, a creative game. From this perspective, he was situated in the antipodes of Beckett. Nor did he feel it necessary to translate himself into Romanian because at the time in which he produced his French work, Romania was an occupied country, first militarily and then ideologically, by Soviet and national communism until 1989. The meaning of self-translation for Ionesco was precisely inverted in comparison to Beckett, as his Romanian writings were the object of translation in this case.

Nevertheless, recognizing his literary tradition impelled him to translate *Urmuz* to French and to champion Caragiale, adopting and translating him, together with Mónica Lovinescu. Moreover, he would approve of the publication of the Romanian version of *The Bald Soprano* in 1965 and, during the period of relaxation of communist censorship in Romania, between 1964 and 1972, texts written in Romanian directly about colleagues such as Mihai Ralea and Tudor Vianev and, after the fall of the Ceaucescu regime in 1989, he authorized the publication of his until then banned writing (*En guerra contra todo el mundo* and *No*).

III. THE DISSECTION OF REALITY

In general, the *Theatre of the Absurd*, and that of Ionesco in particular, contributes an unedited vision of reality, a way of looking differently at what we have never stopped seeing, and this new perspective provokes a sort of destruction of the sense of the world, in the same way, we would suggest, as Picasso, Dali or Chagall. In the same way, the *Theatre of the Absurd* appeared as the anti-play to classical theatre, to the epic Brechtian system and to the realism of popular theatre. The recurring technique that clears this fabulous universe, beyond the rupture with the Aristotelian principles, tends towards the

constant reiteration of a situation, to a rupture in the logical-rational functioning of events, to the temporal paralysis that impedes the normal passing of chronological time, to the dreamlike atmosphere that envelops the succession of scenes and the endowment of symbols with dynamism. Something that we may nonetheless acknowledge from precise references, since the avant-garde had brought about an aesthetic disorder proceeding from the subconscious, from angst, delirium, incommunicability and nightmare in the dismantling of the presumed coherence of the real world, and under the form of distorted staged images that project this interior landscape.

In the theatre of Ionesco the dramatic approach is projected from antagonism as a paradigm that instrumentalises the problem of a lack of meaning, as his theatre invokes tragedy and farce, the prosaic and the poetic, realism and fantasy, the quotidian and the unusual. The loss of the semantic dimension is observed, for example, in the structural plane, the use of proliferation as an accumulative linguistic and objectual value, while in the thematic plane it signals rather an inquiry into the ego – a nihilism of otherness – that accentuates the introspective-personal character of his more confessional works, particularly those written in the Sixties.

The proliferation of objects is a frequent technique in his plays. A minimalist set design, atemporal, is inundated with objects that acquire life and suffocate the characters beneath their unlimited growth. Invading everything, they concretise loneliness, abandonment, the hypertrophy of the material, the victory of anti-spiritual forces. This is what happens in *Amadeo or How to Get out of Trouble* (1954): the protagonists have been unable to rid themselves of a corpse that has grown little by little for fifteen years but which suddenly begins to suffer from “geometric progression”, threatening to break the furniture and the walls and force the inhabitants from their apartment.

In a similar way, in *The New Tenant* (1955) the recently rented room does not have space for the enormous quantity of furniture of the

protagonist and this results in their blocking the stairs, the patio and the street, traffic and the metro are prevented from passing, the Seine is stopped. At the end of the play, the tenant is hidden beneath a gigantic accumulation of furniture and we only hear his voice. By way of comparison, in *Victims of Duty* (1953), Madelaine, from whom a policeman has just ordered a cup of coffee, lays a huge quantity of cups on the table, although nobody comes to take one, while in *The Chairs* (1952) two elderly protagonists bring numerous chairs for their invisible guests until the stage is full and movement impeded, or in *Anger*, one of the episodes of the film *Seven Deadly Sins*, Ionesco shows us the absurdity and superfluity of a world that generates its own extinction. For example, the soup of Sundays that inundate the city, a symbol of the anger that drowns humanity, the cholera of nations.

Here we observe a characteristic of enormous interest in the Ionesquian universe, proceeding from the fact that his dramaturgy is closely tied to scenic plasticity, the importance of images. Objects are not interesting for their use value or as an aid to action but rather seem to reach the status of characters: the object is self-moving, it metamorphosises, resists, inundates the space and threatens the character embodied by the actor. In an inversely proportional way, the actor can find himself degraded to the category of an amorphous object or mannequin, a mere physical support of logos.

Regarding its representation of an inquiry into the ego, this autobiographical and confessional temptation, defined as a constant in his oeuvre, is particularly relevant in those texts centred, not only on the conflict of the individual against society such as *Jack, or The Submission* (1955), *The Assassin without Work* (1958) or *Rhinoceros* (1959), but also in those more metaphysical and nihilistic, such as *Exit The King* (1962) or *Hunger and Thirst* (1964). In this way, the comical formula of going against the current is highlighted in the dramatic surrealism of *Jack, or The Submission* where we find ourselves in the company of a Béranger-esque sort of alter ego of the author who appears recurrently in his plays

– young and weak, unable to resist the pressure of his family, and will end up surrendering to social convention, as ridiculous as it may be. Ultimately he bends his desire to be faithful to himself and exclaims “I adore hash brown potatoes”.

The protagonist of *Hunger and Thirst* will also feel disoriented, albeit for different reasons. Jean, in the same way as his friend Bérenger, is unable to get used to life, he feels himself different to the rest, does not know how to live. In this he is different from his wife Marie-Madelaine, who, similarly to all women in the oeuvre of Ionesco, is jovial and affable, has adapted herself to the conditions of her life, and tries in vain to convince her husband that everything is going to change. In fact they end up moving to a basement, and while his wife attempts to make it bright and comfortable, he gives himself up to desperation, complaining constantly: he is “lucid” and “this is incurable”. Jean finally leaves his home, just as a beautiful garden appears on the back wall. Marie-Madelaine regrets that Jean never saw it, convinced that this would have dissuaded him from his intention to flee. In the end his nomadic wandering makes him a prisoner of a kind of monastery-cum-inn, where he longs for the life he might have lived together with his wife and daughter, the only earthly paradise, that in his ignorance he scorned.

Exit the King (1962)⁸ merits special mention: one of Ionesco’s most obstinate testimonies on his personal obsession with death and without doubt the most intimate play of his entire legacy. When the production of the author is examined from the point of view of the great myths of universal literature – *Rhinoceros* and *Ulysses*, *A Stroll in the Air* with *Icarus*, *Victims of Duty* and *Oedipus*, *Hunger and Thirst* and *Faust* etc – in the case of *Exit the King* the character of Bérenger has been assimilated to the mythological figure of Prometheus.⁹ The peculiar universe of King Bérenger would re-examine his attitude towards death as ceremonial fulfilment, following a sacralising initiation ritual that sublimates the threat to mortality as a devastating and incomprehensible existential disintegration:

Escribí esa obra para aprender a morir. Debía ser una lección, como una especie de ejercicio espiritual, una marcha progresiva, etapa por etapa, que intentaba que fuese accesible, hacia el fin ineludible¹⁰

In it we observe again the most characteristic aspect of Ionesco’s art, the inflation of a situation until it achieves a dramatic effect. The dramatic situation seen from all angles replaces the plot. And so, for two and a half hours we are present at the slow but tenacious disintegration of not only the King Bérenger but also all that belongs to him, the palace, the kingdom, his subjects. We could imagine that there are methods, some subterfuge to avoid death, or that a powerful man would adopt an attitude more resigned or positive. This is not the case, however. “Everyone dies for the first time”.

Men know that they are going to die, but they forget. King Bérenger, instead of preparing himself for death, avoids the subject, and although Marguerite, his first wife, warns him that he has an hour and a half of life left, he does not acknowledge this. He refuses to abdicate, he ties himself to the vital sensuality embodied by his second wife Marie, he tries to give orders that will never be carried out, he implores the sun, writes literature, invokes the dead, even those who have committed suicide: “Vosotros, los suicidas, enseñadme lo que hay que hacer para adquirir el asco de la existencia. Enseñadme el cansancio. ¿Qué droga hay que tomar para eso?”.

The force of the drama derives from this step from rebellion to acceptance, from unease to impotence, from a feeling of tremendous pain for his disappearance to total resignation. Only when a quarter of an hour of life remains for the king does he cease his sterile struggle. Bérenger, like Ionesco himself, does not have the consolation of religion. Death is nothingness, which makes the play an allegory of humanity and its ambiguous transcendental inquiry.¹¹ The rite of preparation for death is brought about under the spiritual guide of Queen Marguerite, a rite inspired, as the author himself makes clear, by the Tibetan book of the dead *Bardo Thödol*, where as in the Christian rites of *commentario*

mortis he is invited to divest himself of the burdens of existence and of his clothing. Symbolically, he cleans his cloak of dust and impurities, and is invited to take his seat on the only everlasting throne of death and of peace. A confessional play, symptomatic, although "insufficiently religious" in the words of the author, of the secularized ritual value of the word. Powerful in its problematic, its staging by the *Teatro de la Abadía*, directed by José Luis Gómez, in 2004, was highly praised and followed in the footsteps of the staging brought about by José Luis Alonso in 1969 in the *María Guerrero*.

Provocative, satirical, dreamlike, theological, metaphysical, apolitical, multifaceted: the personality of Ionesco has characterized the wide spectrum of his critical reception. His powerful individualism and free thinking have been cause, perhaps, of a greater ignorance of his oeuvre than that of kindred spirits. But his legacy is unique. Because it is useless, as he affirmed, to offer a message that has already been given. Because any valuable work of art, in his opinion, is the expression of a native and unique intuition, as "al crear un mundo, al inventarlo, el creador lo descubre" (p.66).

In the background, there is an attempt to restore a pristine vision of our universe, as overwhelmed beings in the absence of feeling, from the conviction that artistic truth is more profound, more full of meaning than commonplace reality, given that realism goes beyond reality, insofar as it concerns the universal condition of man: love, incommunication, fear, death, astonishment. In this way alone, in the forensic dissection of the real, might we realize the strangeness of the world, the powerful antidote that must precede innominate reintegration. This enables Ionesco to formulate in a unique way his intransferrable poetics of amazement:

Siempre pensé que la verdad de la ficción es más profunda, está más llena de significado que la realidad cotidiana. El realismo, socialista o no, está del otro lado de la realidad. La limita, la atenúa, la falsea, no

toma en cuenta nuestras verdades y obsesiones fundamentales: el amor, la muerte, el asombro. Presenta al hombre en una perspectiva reducida, enajenada; nuestra verdad está en nuestros sueños, en la imaginación; todo, a cada instante, confirma esta afirmación, La ficción ha precedido a la ciencia. Todo lo que soñamos, es decir, todo lo que deseamos, es verdadero (...) todo lo que soñamos es realizable (...) ha sido posible volar porque hemos soñado que volábamos (p.14)

As Foucault put it in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, an approach, in another context, that could be assimilated into the abrupt freezing of reality and to the inedited lucidity of the Franco-Romanian playwright's creations, "Utopias console. Heterotopias disturb." Although we barely survived the long twentieth century.

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Endnotes

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- 2 Eugène Ionesco (1962) *Notas y Contranotas. Estudios sobre el teatro*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1965, p.147.
- 3 Marta Glukman , *Eugène Ionesco y su teatro*, Santiago de Chile, El espejo de papel, p. XX
- 4 Jeannette Patterson "language, Violence and the Totalitarian Ideology of Origins in Ionesco's *La Leçon* and Césaire's *Une tempête*", *Au Pire*, French Forum, Winter/Spreing, 2008, ½, pp. 195-213.
- 5 Matei Calinescu, *Ionesco. Recherches identitaires*, Paris, Ocus, 2005.
- 6 Anne Quinney "Excess and Identity: The Franco Romanian Combats Rhinoceritis", *South Central Review*, Autumn 2007, pp.36-52
- 7 *Fragments of a Journal* (1967) and *Past Present, Present Past* (1968) published in Spanish as *Diarios, Paginas de espuma*, Madrid, 2007.
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- 9 Dolores Bermúdez, *Análisis simbólico del teatro de Ionesco*, University of Cádiz, 1989, p.116
- 10 Eugène Ionesco, *Diarios*, Páginas de espuma, Madrid, 2007, p.
- 11 Marguerite Jean-Blain, *Eugène Ionesco Mystique ou mal-croyant?*, Lessius, Bruxelles, 2005.