

EUGEN IONESCU IN CONVERSATION WITH GOD: A LOVE WITH TROUBLE!

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The issue of belief in the case of Eugen Ionescu draws on the same common source of universal spirituality, yet it is inextricably related to his existential conception, to be retrieved now, in the absence of the knowledgeable subject, from the imprints left in his writing. What is sure, however, is that one cannot imagine a birth certificate of belief, as an issue of the Ionescian ego, although the author has never proclaimed his allegiance to Christianity, by making use of the external forms of belief, but sooner by internalizing this belief through images and Christian symbols. In Ionescu's case, the seeking of God seems to have no beginning and no end, being a permanent, metaphysical interrogation, such as the syntagm sprung from the Apostle Marcu's parchment: "I believe, God! Help my disbelief!". Therefore, going beyond the conventions implied in the classification of a playwright in a stream, in a filiation of thought, the mission we assume is that of fragmenting the author's religious experiences, by "enclosing" him in a confessional and making him journey again the narrow path of acknowledgement and denial of God.

Ionescu seen as a "homo religiosus" is not a score that has been totally ignored till now, and as a proof of that let us remind here the comments on the subject made by Matei Călinescu, Eugen Simion or Marie-France Ionesco¹, as well as a French researcher's² analysis, not spared by critical reviews. In spite of the named antecedents, this existential chapter has not been totally exhausted. Beyond the confessional register experimented in his plays, it remains to be seen to which extent the author, who was never ashamed of sharing his anxieties in face of death and the emptiness of

existence, may or may not have been a spirit dwelt-in deeply by Christian belief, a practitioner of this belief or just a mere skeptical and occasional believer.

Ionescu is not alone in this whole search, since just like the emotional insight of his epoch had embraced the existentialist stream, so did the other representatives of the absurd drama make multiple attempts at rising human consciousness to the reality of its condition, by taking into account the divine mystery or credibly arguing about existential anxiety.

Ionescu admits the fact that religion has an existential purpose, that two worlds, the sacred and the profane, only mutually can define themselves thoroughly: "it's not less true that the need for religion is the deepest human need. Without it, there's only disaster, despair, death."³

Generally, Ionescu is quite critical and phlegmatic about the past and contemporary playwrights. Very few are those whose works pass the test and positively stir his interest. Among these few chosen-ones, Samuel Beckett, mentioned many times in his interviews and confessions, gets selected precisely because he can offer details about the religious stance: "Samuel Beckett's work is an uninterrupted cry to God, an SOS, and this so visible fact went simply unnoticed. What's the main theme in *Waiting for Godot* if not the daily betrayed and daily reborn hope? In the extraordinary book entitled *Le Dépeupleur*, the characters try to rise to the light, but, failing, they remain to be just mere larvae. In *Fin de partie*, Ham and Clov long and suffer because of God's absence"⁴. Although Ionescu will end by stigmatizing Beckett, as in an invisible duel for the golden medal in absurd drama, the similar way in which both relate

themselves to God is alimanted by the rich flow of existentialist philosophy.

The road to belief seems to Ionescu an intermittent search, flanked by the battle between good and evil. The way in which he draws on the religious reflections of some brilliant predecessors, such as Freud, Jung or Malraux, proves the odyssey of his venture, his attempt to find „lawyers” as credible as possible in his argument about the world’s divine sacred.

Between believing and just having the illusion of that, what a great mess in this ontology of the sacred, by which Ionescu is almost subdued: “I am not at the height of those who know they believe, nor at that of the people who believe without knowing it. But maybe I am a believer, too, without believing that I believe, without being very sure if I believe or not!”⁵.

This dilemma, that has tormented Ionescu many years in a row, received from Nicolae Steinhardt the monach’s gentle blessing and the encouragement toward the path of faith, on which, in his opinion, Ionescu had already started: “I have allowed myself to write to Eugen Ionescu and tell him that the formula <but maybe I just believe that I believe> is Pascal’s sentence variant⁶ and Marcu’s text - 9, 24. <Maybe I just believe that I believe> is the same as <I believe, God, help my disbelief>. Eugen Ionescu has nothing to be afraid or ashamed of, he’s just joining several great artists and thinkers defeated by Christ...”⁷.

But the playwright is far from unconditionally assuming the belief, since just like Thomas, he is haunted by doubt and needs palpable proof: “I cling to my proofs: proven scientific truths (The Torino Shroud), incontrovertibleness of mystic testimonials, confirmation of these ones’ essentially identical manifestation in all spiritual traditions”⁸.

Ionescu is aware of the fact that the road he started on in his search for God isn’t the least difficult of all, and that’s why he alludes at his contemporaries’ religious authority, such as Eliade’s: “I talk to God. Yet I am more concerned with literary glory, with what I want to leave to the living, to the dying of tomorrow. I should prepare myself for an <other way of being>, as

Eliade put it”⁹. The scholar, who has gained his worldwide reputation through the history of religions, is not the advocate of a philosophy of solace, or the spreader of religious dogma; on the contrary, he believes in the similitudes between different religions, in the depth of myths hiding ancient esoteric mysteries, in the fact that the history of religions may offer answers to the modern man’s crises, which are basically religious crises.

An essential part in the Ionescian religious conception structuring was played by the readings he took especially after his settlement in France. Among these readings – the work of the Jesuit Henri de Lubac, *Le drame de l’humanisme athée*, read and annotated by the playwright, helping him on one hand to understand the atheist basis of some modern philosophies, such as Marxism and National-Socialism, and on the other to fathom diferently, in a religious vision, the meaning of Dostoievski’s work. At the same time, Ionescu also read volumes from the patristics collection, founded by Jean Daniélou, cardinal of France and collaborator in his youth with Lubac, who, by the thorough work of a Jesuits’ team, tried to offer for knowledge the richness of these Church Fathers’ texts. The editions kept in his library preserve the margin annotations of the future playwright, revealing his horizon of interest, his search for a living religion, as well as reflections on his personal experience, on his lived history¹⁰.

Examining the Ionescian work, insisting especially on his drama, one does not intend to comment his religious reactions, but rather to retrieve them. The read pages enable us to draw a profile of Ionescu as *homo religiosus*, to emphasize the way the author is searching for God, even though he’s not a doctrinaire, and finds Him in the Ecclesiastes, at Saint John of the Cross, in the great Russian mystics or anywhere else.

As he allows us to read him through his work, Ionescu is not a genuine mystic, but he is not a bigoted believer either. His existential discourse keeps taking the place of the mystic one, the fear of spiritual search blending with the religious one, both being fed by the fear of death.

The Ionescian wanderings through the maze of belief and religious imaginary undergo several stages, each of these being flanked by existential meditations. In a first stage, Ionescu seems to suggest that the individual can neither rule his peers, nor be their humble subject, since in the end, the final stake is to rule the Universe. This is an illusion to the human being, who eventually becomes victim of the dark forces. The individual's need to rule is not a simple ambition, such as Icarus', who, in his desire to touch the sun with his wax wings collapsed into the void, but it is owed to the rising against the human condition. Ionescu frames this rebellion in the most frequent clichés, either as a protest against love (like in *Amedeu* or *How to Get Yourself Rid*), or as a tool digging at the bottom of death, whom he can't endorse (like in *Killer without Pay*).

Swept by the meanders of the dark chaos, the individual has no escape from becoming a sure victim, although the road he'd ventured on was that leading him to solve life's mystery. The rebellion against love drives him to death, unlike the characters that would rather feed on the source of love, consequently acquiring the halo of ageless youth, as it happens to Maria in *The King Is Dying*¹¹.

Protected by this uplifting feeling, the Ionescian characters defy death, for them death doesn't exist, because they are part of the universal truth where everything is given to them, in exchange for unconditional love. Therefore, from such a perspective, Ionescu seems to admit that the only way the human being can take is that of self surrendering to belief and complete love. This is the only place where people can find the light to drag them out of the darkness, with the cost of unconditional love.

Even a human with a grim consciousness, darkened by the sins he has committed, as is the Killer, could experience self liberation through belief and divine love. As proof of that, here is Bérenger's plead in the play *Killer without Pay*, when facing this Mephistophelian character: "oh, yes, yes...maybe you don't know: Christ died on the cross for you, Christ loves you. You

certainly need to be loved! You think that you're not loved! You have my word that saints are shedding tears for you, waves and oceans of tears!"¹².

Ionescu's relationship with God is not a uniform, linear one, as during his life, the playwright tried to look at the divinity either with the irony of a rope walker, or with the pride of that who had got to face some more other temptations, or with the resignation and fear in front of the existential void. A relationship beginning from the effort to believe, that the author has never gotten rid of.

The assuming of belief, arguing about it seem to Ionescu an exercise that may dissolve the magic wrap: "again the fear of being mystified, the fear of being a mystifier, of believing while not daring to believe; I'm writing all these not to make things about myself clear to myself, and even less to clarify things with God. But to make things clear for the people... Do I really believe that I believe? It's already important to be able to believe that you believe"¹³.

The author's troubled conscience due to those horizons unfathomable by reason is also transferred in his own drama work. Thus, God's monologue from *What A Tremendous Mess!* closes with the recording of the absurd, settling everywhere, in the daily monotony and routine, in life's triviality, even in the Creator's attitude: "He doesn't even care whether I can or not admit such a thing, since He made us ignorant. He deliberately made us so. And yet here we are, building, sir, doing and making, raising houses, making planes, cannons and shells, producing electricity, making rocket engines and crossing the cosmic space. We're tinkering. We're making little things, tinkering in the inextricable. In the inextricable. What a mess!"¹⁴.

If we may speak of a guiding thread in the way Ionescu sits face to face with divinity, then this is the need for belief as an ideal solution of protection against the surrounding darkness. His arguments are far from the theological model and won't be restrained by biblical quotations. However, one can find in the playwright's texts fogged proofs about his acquiring some of the Evangelic teachings. For

example, the way in which he pushes us toward solving the logic of chaos, in which the human being is captive, like in *The Air Walker*, and not afar from the desire of saving one's life, yet eventually the character is driven to death, swallowed up by criminal powers. This sends us to the tragic vision upon the human existence, as it is depicted in *John's Gospel* (12, 24-25), where one's care for one's self becomes a troubling obstacle in man's road to salvation.

Sometimes, the proper names the playwright used in his work account for the religious imprint left on the respective text. The clearest proof is found in *The Thirst and the Hunger*, where the main characters have all names with biblical resonance: John (Jean), Mary Magdalene and Martha, their daughter. John – a name of Jewish origin, from Yohanan, which means “the one chosen by God”, become Ioannes in Greek, has at least two exemplary correspondences in the biblical text: John the Baptizer, priest Zachariah's and Elisabeth's son, Jesus' predecessor, and Apostle John, son of Zebediah, fisher on the Galilee lake¹⁵. The name Mary Magdalene makes us think about a character whose faith cannot be doubted, the woman that was healed by Jesus and then joined Him, following Him until the moment of His death and burial. In the *Bible*, nor is Martha less a believer, since she is Mary's and Lazarus' sister¹⁶.

There are also other proofs of the playwright's internalization of the Christian belief, for example, the religious imaginary, firstly through the miraculous gardens where the two characters with Evangelical names, Mary Magdalene and Martha live. Aren't these marvelous places by any chance the very Gardens of Eden? In this environment, divine love is capable of amazing transformations; it is what changes Mary Magdalene, giving her back her youthful shining face: “Beyond the bars one can see the garden at the end of the first episode, “Escape”: bright, with a clear sky, with lots of vegetation, blooming trees, with the suspended ladder in the same place, everything bathed in an intense dark blue light. Martha wears a light color dress, Mary Magdalene wears blue. Old age was wiped out off her face and she seems

very young”¹⁷. And the suspended ladder, as Ionescu explains in the stage directions, isn't precisely Jacob's ladder? Since it's a bright, silver ladder whose end we cannot see”¹⁸, which clearly evokes *The Ladder of Paradise*, the famous treatise written by John the Scholastic or John the Ladder man in the VII- th century, the ladder metaphor suggesting the spiritual life evolution, with its steps as emblems of the efforts of Christians aspiring to reach God, in an ascendant or a descendent way.

The Hell imaginary is also included by Ionescian projections, since in the third act from *The Thirst and the Hunger* Jean gets to the imaginary space of the world beyond, inhabited by false friars denying God, that make Jean aver he never saw anything in the world, as creation's a failure, that he can find nothing in his memories, as everything is just abyss. The comedy of the examination to which Jean subjects himself is a confession of his journey. The character reminds Ionescu's searches, in which the author, who had already written *No*, was talking about the stake of the memories, which must be captured, just like lost waves, in the shape of images.

The emperor that appears at the end of the play *The Chairs* enriches the play symbols, being associated with power, success, ruling, with intelligence triumphant over material and temporal order. The playwright himself warns us about the religious charge of the play: “Precisely in my last play, *What A Tremendous Mess!*, or in *The Chairs*, it's about God, but in such an obvious way that no one realizes that”¹⁹. He might as well be Demiurge, the architect of the world and of the Universe, especially through his attitude, impassible, still, yet domineering. In fact, this image belongs to the reach symbolism of a unique god, toward which converged all the cultural epochs, from the origins of Christianity.

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the way in which appears the Emperor from *The Chairs*, in the all-bathing light, in a triumphant posture, that suits just fine the orthodox tradition of divine representation: this sovereign, wrapped in the brightness of imperial purple, is just the

equivalent in the Oriental Christianity of King Christ from the Catholic tradition, where He is Jesus Pantokrator. The invisible emperor gives an impulse to the two old people's souls, who allow God's genuine elation to pervade them. Thus, we can read under this religious imprint too, their last wish, condensed in the cry: "let's die in blazing *glory*". Because *glory* is a word that stands for God's power and exultation in Eastern and Latin Christianity²⁰.

Divine judgement as a religious theme has by no means less representations and meanings. On the contrary, in Christian tradition it is perceived as a kind of superior deliberation, unlike the injustice ruling the human relationships, as a solace in devotion and in a partial justice after death. The scene of Judgement, as it is depicted in *The Thirst and the Hunger*, or in *Journey into the Realm of the Dead*, supposes the end of the trial, mistake redemption, conciliation, healing, restoring the balance. Both scenes use the sign of divine presence, as for one to be able to be truly reborn one must hear the call of the golden trump by means of which the divine will is conveyed. It is not accidentally that the main character from *Journey into the Realm of the Dead* appears in this judgement scene, at the judge's right, as if he had reached the highest level of initiation. And in the final judgement of this play, when in the dock we have the second wife of the Father and her brothers, the main artisan seems to be The Old Lady, together with Jean – her right hand – who pronounces a verdict according to the same Christian principles: "The only absolution for the dead is to leave them alone"²¹.

Ionescu's plays are an interesting mixture of wonder and nightmare, implying criticism of the politic systems on one hand and the revival of symbols, on the other. Not accidentally, the wall appears in the Ionescian scenes as a symbol of separation between two worlds, as well as of creating a protective space, since it provides limits for a territory, yet it also can offer shelter. This semantic ambivalence is used by Ionescu to project the separation between God and the human being, between others and self. The wall stands undoubtedly as a proof of a cut

communication, with a double psychological incidence, as the wall may serve for defense, protection or concentration. The wall which separates worlds and beyond whose limits we can infer the intangible realm of divinity appears also on the road Jean takes in *The Thirst and the Hunger*, where Ionescu briefly decodes its meaning:

"The young man (to Jean): You cannot go past this wall. It's a real wall. In any case, I myself can't. (*He pushes strongly the wall, so as to prove its strength*). And so you know, it's not the only wall around here. Just that it's the biggest"²².

The wall, in the playwright's imaginary, marks the interruption of communication between the intellect and infinite God, who transcends any limitation, but at the same time can be the evoker of imprisonment situations, of all borders that left their imprint on the XX- ieth century, or a symbol of the nights filled with anxiety.

The Ionescian drama is a drama concerned with transmitting the most difficult details and experiences of the human emotions²³. We may imagine the relationship of the playwright with God as some confetti full of color in which ecstatic emotions, the rustling exuberance at remembering divine light mix, inseparably, with the fogged anxiety, with the fear of facing death and the finiteness of any human project. The religious horizon Ionescu remained faithful to is somehow one that is in continuous motion, to which he added or from which he wiped nuances, in the elapsing years; yet it remains a horizon that doesn't make a pact with an institutionalized belief, although he used to go to churches now and then, but rather with an individualized belief.

If we were to listen to the voices of some familiarized with his religious feelings, then let us mention here also the point of view of the other great skeptic who has chosen France as refuge, the Latin Quarter Bohemian, Emil Cioran, who thinks Ionescu's belief may have been stronger than his: "anxiety lies at the core of his writings; he's more religious than I am..."²⁴. Just as in Lucian Pintilie's opinion, we can find in the Ionescian drama different

imprints of his religious ideology: - "because I still believe that not only the Devil has multiple faces, but God, too - so does Ionescu's nihilism may be inspired by a similar God, more playful and less canonic"²⁵.

He almost tricked us and convinced us that the old times skeptic had finally bowed in front of God. And yet.... A little time before his death, Eugen Ionescu wrote to the Pope John Paul the Second, to share his fear in facing death, closing the letter with a peculiarly Ionescian postscript: "Your Sanctity, I am infinitely anxious"²⁶. The desperation and anxiety that had accompanied him decades in a row seemed more acute now, when he was still tormented in his searches and invited the clerical authorities to a debate: "Since I find the world incomprehensible, I'm waiting for somebody to explain it to me". Unfortunately, the Pope's answer was a rather purely conservatory one, according to the belief in the force of biblical revelation, but at the same time it stated the Saint Chair's refusal to engage in a debate or a dialogue on this subject: "Read the Bible and die in peace!"²⁷.

Persistent or perhaps overly anxious, the playwright then also addressed the Archbishop of Paris, Jean-Marie Lustiger, who unfortunately would solve his "case" and trouble in administrative terms: "Call my secretary, here is the number; I commission him to give you the answer you want"²⁸. Case closed!

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