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A B S T R A C T

A Comedy of Anguish: A Study of the Plays of Eugene Ionesco by W.P.H. Stokes

The antithetical title A Comedy of Anguish has been selected to represent the ironic manner and tone in which Ionesco has sought to release from his subconscious fears, fears common to humanity in every age. His unmitigated anguish serves as a reminder of the consequences of that scientific discovery, made long before Nietzsche's cry "God is dead", that we are confined to the limits of time and hence desperately need to relate to a substitute for the Almighty, beyond those limits. Confronted with this dilemma, he continues to be suggesting, from La Cantatrice chauve to L'Homme aux valises, we need to reconsider our concepts of culture and reality itself.

This scepticism is reflected in the theatrical experience which he conceives of as being therapeutic and non-utilitarian. In his choice of themes (chapter 1), he reduces his material to fundamentals, attaching overwhelming significance to personal anecdotes, dreams and the irrational as these alone appear to him to be representative of mankind as a whole. He rejects the forces of rationalism as essentially perverted. "Marionettes" for the most part replace conventional characters (chapter 3), whilst causal necessities of plot are abandoned in favour of a rhythm of proliferation (chapter 4) and language based on rational logic is dismissed as the prerogative of concierges and corrupt politicians (chapter 5). Moreover, far from being dependent on any literary text, these plays have evocatively exploited all the resources of stagecraft (chapter 6).

Long after the iconoclasm of the early 1950's, his plays continue to enjoy success. His pessimism, traditionally associated

with humorists, has not wained, nor has the consistency of his thought. Within a concise thematic framework he has retained a child-like simplicity and sense of exaggeration, best suited to express the latent paradoxes and aspirations of the contemporary age.

A Comedy of Anguish

A Study of the Plays of
Eugène Ionesco

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

A cursory glance at an up-to-date bibliography of Ionesco's work will reveal both a critical and prolific writer, whose work first appeared in various Rumanian literary reviews in the early 1930's, as well as an active man of the theatre with a wide range of cultural interests encompassing the world of ballet, cinema and television. Though this survey will be restricted to his theatrical output over almost the last three decades from La Cantatrice chauve to L'Homme aux valises, on no account can we remain indifferent to the wealth of experience gained beyond the four walls of a theatre and at first sight appearing scarcely related to it. This is not just a question of common interest in an author's background, appropriate to any worthwhile study, but one which possesses special validity for one who started writing for the stage far later than the average playwright.

Our principal task initially is to discover a leitmotiv, a point of consistency, a common denominator running through his life and works. To locate it we must return to a collection of articles entitled Nu - Traité de la fusion des contraires published in 1934. In the aforementioned he begins by launching a systematic attack on three leaders of the Rumanian avant-garde, accusing them of hidebound provincialism and lack of originality, and then later on proceeds to retract all critical remarks in a grandiose eulogy of the self-same writers. Besides this, however, Nu provides for the first time evidence of Ionesco's constant fear of death. That the young writer's contempt and ridicule of critics and literature in general gave rise to relentless scandal is only of interest to us today in so far as his name acquired sudden fame

overnight. What remains significant is not the details of the case, soon to pale into oblivion, but the general spirit and tone of ambiguity in which Nu was written, for these were to germinate in the theatre. His many well-known plays as well as other writings including the novel La Solitude and diaries in the style of Présent passé passé présent all betray a note of anxiety linked with a restless spirit of contradiction. We are attracted to these works by the writer's ambivalent frame of mind; in the long term the playwright's achievements as one of the principal exponents of the avant-garde or his election to the Académie Française can be judged on a par with his Rumanian experiences as of comparatively minor importance. It is in order to elucidate this particular attitude that the present antithetical title "Ionesco, a Comedy of Anguish" has been selected.

Though these two terms are for the purposes of the following thesis designed to form an inseparable whole, each needs to be examined briefly on its own if a broad understanding of the complexity involved is to be gained. In an initial consideration of the concept of anguish or 'angoisse', we should refer to the following dictionary definitions:

'severe suffering (especially of mind)'

(Oxford Advanced Learner's
Dictionary of Current English)

'Malaise psychique et physique, né du
sentiment de l'imminence d'un danger.
V. Anxiété inquiétude, peur. L'angoisse
de la mort'.

(Micro Robert Dictionnaire
du français primordial)

For Ionesco, such mental suffering has clearly accompanied him since early childhood, reinforced by the memory of a dark autumn evening in a street near the Square de Vaugirard when, as a sensitive youth out shopping with his mother, he cast a frightened look at the fleeting shadows of pedestrians strolling along the pavement. Those figures of people shopping, he soon realized, would swiftly disappear never to be seen again. Such an experience amounting to a painful awareness of contingency and transience was, as we shall note later, to occur in a variety of forms elsewhere. It is both extremely personal and, as a quality he shares with several intellectuals of his generation, universal in its implications. Not only is it the fear of personal annihilation experienced by every mortal being but also a sensation of angst, that is, to use the precise dictionary term again and not one bandied about in popular jargon, "a feeling of anxiety caused by considering the state of world affairs". - (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). From day to day, the thinking individual in a modern technological society, cut off from former cherished values and civilization in the broadest sense, contemplates his every action as devoid of purpose.

Even if there is no prescribed remedy for this deep-rooted pessimism and fear, the very act of putting pen to paper and writing plays as a reflection of the meaninglessness of the times affords cursory alleviation. Whilst writers throughout the centuries have been driven by similar motives, a greater urgency to do so has been discernible in our own age. In practice, in the realm of comic writing, much of Ionesco's work endorses

Freudian belief in laughter as a form of release from subconscious anxieties:

Considérons alors que tout est comique, prenons le parti d'en rire. Ce serait faire offense à Dieu ou au monde. Nous ne pouvons planer, nous ne pouvons pas être supérieurs à la divinité, nous ne pouvons dominer le créateur, nous ne pouvons être plus forts que lui. C'est une abberation. Ayons l'humour. Nous ne pouvons pas rejeter le monde. Alors prendre tout au sérieux: c'est ridicule également."¹

Yet judging man's situation in itself as hilarious need not necessarily elicit uninhibited mirth. Modern comedy in particular is often concerned with serious material raising few to no laughs, at the most an ironic smile. Unlike anguish, comedy possesses several facets and defies any categorizing. In our endeavours to appreciate Ionesco's work we should recall the observation Anouilh made with respect to Beckett's En Attendant Godot: 'sketch des Pensées de Pascal joué par les Fratellini.'²

Implicit in Anouilh's statement is the dual existence of thinker and artist or entertainer. Comedy, like all drama, acts as a means of

1. Eugène Ionesco, Journal en miettes (Paris, 1967). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

2. Emmanuel Jacquart, Le Théâtre de la dérision (Paris, 1974), p.92.

disciplining the thinker into making his views and thoughts tangible to a real audience: 'Pour découvrir le problème fondamental commun à tous les hommes, il faut que je me demande quel est mon problème fondamental, quelle est ma peur la plus indéracinable. C'est alors que je découvrirai quels sont les peurs et les problèmes de chacun.'³ Not until Ionesco had reluctantly taken up an acting part himself and then settled down to scrutinizing the reactions of his audience to a performance of his first play was he able to shed an introvert's inhibitions and realise to what extent his own personal problems were shared. Hence any academic study of dramatic works will lose all sense of perspective if we overlook the playwright's preoccupation above all with a physically multi-dimensional experience, writing for the stage and therefore ceaselessly exposed to a group of spectators. For this reason, emphasis has been laid here on studying each work within the practical context of a live performance. After an examination of the major sources, themes and influences upon the playwright's work in chapter one, an attempt will be made in chapter two to situate it within a general context of comedy. Chapters three and four will point to the intricacies of character and structure respectively with examples of the iconoclastic nature of certain plays. In conclusion, chapters five and six will centre upon the questions of language and stage effects, the prominence of which cannot be overestimated in any appreciation of Ionesco's work.

3. Eugène Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes (Paris, 1966), pp.143-4. Further reference to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Chapter One

Sources, Influences and Themes

Like those of most modern French playwrights, Ionesco's intellectual and literary roots can be traced to a pronounced anti-rationalist current in the second half of the nineteenth century which reached a crescendo in the prose of Lautréamont and Rimbaud's '...un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens.'¹ A reaction against positivism and bourgeois conventions in general and utilitarian forms of art in particular also prevailed in the works of the Dadaists, of André Breton and the Surrealist movement. The philosophical definition of surrealism given in the Manifeste du surréalisme in 1924 is akin to Ionesco's outlook on life, his readiness to question and inability to answer or find solutions:

ENCYCL. Philos. Le surréalisme repose sur la croyance à la réalité supérieure de certaines formes d'associations négligées jusqu'à lui, à la toute-puissance du rêve, au jeu désintéressé de la pensée. Il tend à ruiner définitivement tous les autres mécanismes psychiques et à se substituer à eux dans la résolution des principaux problèmes de la vie.²

1. Lettre à Paul Demeny (Lettre du Voyant) dated May 15th, 1871.
2. André Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme (Paris 1924, text reprinted in 1972), pp.37-38.

In his relentless attacks on the norms established by rational logic, André Breton has remained for Ionesco a father figure of literature as well as a mystic. In Présent passé passé présent, the leading Surrealist figure is referred to as follows: 'Ce théoricien de l'irrationnel élargissait, approfondissait, augmentait la raison, l'irrationalité apparaissait ainsi comme la face cachée de la raison que la conscience pouvait explorer, intégrer.'³ Ionesco shares Breton's credo that the subconscious is able to provide us with that much needed stability denied to us in our working state: 'Le rêve est naturel, il n'est pas fou. C'est la Logique qui risque de devenir folle; le rêve étant l'expression même de la vie dans sa complexité et ses incohérences, ne peut pas être fou. La logique, oui.'⁴ There is no hint of escapism in the dream process, rather of a much needed extra dimension which Surrealism had been able to evoke: 'Imaginer, c'est construire, c'est faire créer un monde...A force de créer des mondes on peut "recréer" le monde à l'image des mondes inventés, imaginaires. On ne redresse pas le monde, on en "dresse" un. (ibid., p.129). Though it will not be the object of this survey to develop the case either for or against an apology of the dream process, a brief note of clarification on this issue is requisite. Ionesco's aforementioned observations imply some kind of positive construction, indeed of co-operation, in the everyday business of the theatre. With the notable exceptions

3. Ionesco, Présent passé passé présent (Paris, 1968), p.274. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
4. Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco (Paris, 1966), p.106. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

of Apollinaire's Les Mamelles de Tirésias and Vitrac's Les Enfants au pouvoir, the Surrealists and before them, the Dadaists in Zurich and Paris, had failed to find a coherent, longstanding form of expression suitable for stage presentation. Breton and Peret had to wait until 1951 before admiring a genuine Surrealist play, La Cantatrice chauve, to be closely followed by others which Doubrovsky has qualified as 'a genuine expression of the irrational.'⁵

At this juncture we should not overlook the dramatic achievements of Strindberg who had largely anticipated much of what was to preoccupy the works of Expressionism and Surrealism, not to mention post-war theatre. His preface to A Dream Play is a seminal text:

Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; against an unimportant background of reality, the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experiences, free ideas, absurdities, improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds dominion over them all; that of the dreamer.⁶

5. 'Ionesco and the Comic^{of} Absurdity', in Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont (Englewood Cliffe, New Jersey, 1973), p.12.
6. Modernism, Pelican Guide to European Literature, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, 1976), p.524.

Ionesco is unable to explain from the onset what his plays are about. Coe points out the absence of a rationale of any given play's origin: 'It is, in nine cases out of ten, the result of a "vision" - that is, of an instantaneous experience in which thought plays no part whatsoever save in retrospect - and this "vision" is basically of something which has a real existence in another dimension, whether of time or space.'⁷

A play thus remains a revelation of the subconscious:

'révélation de choses monstrueuses, ou d'états monstrueux, sans figures, ou de figures monstrueuses que nous portons en nous.' (Notes et contre-notes, p.254). Conversely, in many plays it is the passion for "understanding" or "rationalizing" that makes the encounter with the Irrational, the Intuitive or the Absurd all the more bewildering. This is what caused the indignation of many influential theatre critics and dialecticians at the close of the première of La Cantatrice chauve in May, 1950. The totally gratuitous, nonsensical title typifies his approach to the writing of those early plays; "L'Heure anglaise" would have served as a useful signpost, but La Cantatrice chauve was adopted finally as a deliberate means of provocation. The encounter with the Irrational can be observed with respect to themes and characters' attitudes as well as play titles. In Victimes du devoir, the detective asserts: 'Je ne crois pas à l'absurde, tout est cohérent, tout devient compréhensible... grâce à l'effort de la pensée humaine et de la science....'⁸

7. Ionesco (London, 1971), p.118. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

8. Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i. p.227. Further references to plays are given after quotations in the text.

Yet the whole play, and many others later, makes utter nonsense of his words. There is no more obvious assertion of the Inexplicable or the Irrational, as Artaud and Thomas Mann amongst others well knew, than in the presence of an epidemic or plague; Rhinocéros and Jeux de massacre are cases in point. Nothing belies logical thought so much as the futility of Bérenger's arguments face to face with the Killer at the end of Tueur sans gages, the protagonist's deep shame and ugliness in contrast to the visual beauty of the pachyderms shortly before the end of Rhinoceros or Macol's opening speech as king in the last scene of Macbett. Continuously, from La Cantatrice chauve to L'Homme aux valises, the bastions of coherence and rationalism come under fire.

Moreover, this non-Aristotelian theatre makes active use of metaphor, myth and allegory as vehicles of expression. Claude Bonnefoy has described Ionesco's literary works as a search for 'la mystique ou la philosophie des grands mythes archétypiques' (Entretiens, p.51). Thoughts, obsessions and "phantasmes" are very often interpreted in terms of the visual metaphor. A belief in archetypal images and the evocation of primordial emotions as a reflection of a collective psyche, transcending the individual and finding a universal appeal, would seem to reaffirm Jung and the Greeks. Pierre-Aimé Touchard observes: 'Ionesco aime créer des mythes parce que précisément le mythe s'échappe du réalisme quotidien et en dépasse les contradictions, parce qu'il donne une dimension métaphysique à la psychologie,

parce qu'il permet le retour à l'insoutenable.'⁹ A strong force of suggestion permeates his theatre by means of symbols and "correspondances." Murky waters and mud, on the one hand, and light, on the other, are recurring images in his autobiographical writings and plays. Mud expresses anguish before decrepitude and death, whilst light, as we shall examine later, has mystical connotations. The physical or concrete is interconnected with the metaphysical or abstract. Les Chaises is fundamentally a metaphor of metaphysical Angst; the old couple's tale serves merely as a pretext to reinforce the strength of the symbol. At the time it was first performed, the play represented a conscious effort to go beyond the limitations of contemporary theatre. Writing of the symbolism in the play, Esslin notes: 'A play like The Chairs is a poetic image brought to life - complex, ambiguous, multi-dimensional. The beauty and depth of the image, as symbol and myth, transcends any search for interpretations.'¹⁰ An initial image, that is of chairs and people bringing chairs onto the stage as quickly as possible, preceded any further consideration. The same is true of the powerful visual metaphor of the corpse in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser: Delay asks: 'Que symbolise donc l'hôte macabre? Est-ce l'amour défunt, le rêve moisi, le destin manqué, le regret grandissant de ce qui aurait pu être, le vieux remords d'une faute ou d'un crime inexpiable? Est-ce un spectre, est-ce le Commandeur?'¹¹ Not without much premeditation was Ionesco inspired to write Tueur sans gages, after the short

9. 'L'Itinéraire d'Eugène Ionesco', La Revue de Paris, 67^{eme} année No. 7, juillet 1960, pp.91-102.

10. The Theatre of the Absurd (Harmondsworth, 1968), p.148.

11. Discours de réception de Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française (Paris, 1971), p.65.

story called La Photo du Colonel; the photograph in question has been interpreted as a symbol of men's existence, potentially harmonious and beautiful yet so often marred by his sheer curiosity culminating in violence. In Le Roi se meurt, crumbling palace walls and meteorological disturbances assume the same kind of significance as the aforementioned corpse and photo respectively; a poetic image symbolises the psychological climate. Disintegrating matter evidently suggests death and moreover in Le Roi se meurt, it evokes a series of metaphorical deaths suffered by King Bérenger before his actual physical obliteration from the planet. The encroachment of matter upon human vitality is constant - the eggs in L'Avenir est dans les oeufs and the furniture in Le Nouveau Locataire are two striking manifestations of "lourdeur".

A tension between the presence of matter and evanescence is discernable in every play: 'Deux états de conscience fondamentaux sont à l'origine de toutes mes pièces; tantôt l'un, tantôt l'autre prédomine, tantôt ils s'entremêlent. Ces deux prises de conscience originelles sont celles de l'évanescence ou de la lourdeur, du vide et du trop de présence, de la transparence irréaliste du monde et de son opacité, de la lumière et des ténèbres épaisses....' (Notes et contre-notes, pp.230-31). In considering one aspect of this polarization, namely "lourdeur", we have already pointed to certain examples. But "lourdeur" is not just accountable in terms of activity, such as the devouring of a hard crust of bread (Victimes du devoir) or the frantic serving of hungry monks (La Soif et la faim), for it largely reflects a sinister frame of

mind. The genesis of Rhinocéros will be useful in this respect. Not only had Ionesco as a young man in pre-war Rumania been an eye-witness to a young officer's brutality towards a defenceless citizen, but he had also read Denis de Rougemont's convincing description of fanaticism at the Nürnberg Rally. The adaptation of an anecdote and given material into a stage play, and above all its ensuing international success, has greatly puzzled its creator. Rhinocéros, subtitled "nature against mind", has often been interpreted as an attack on Nazi ideology. This is to confine the play's scope to narrow limits - political allusions to totalitarian regimes are forcefully presented, but "lourdeur" is not simply political in nature: 'Les gens la comprennent-ils comme il faut? Y voient-ils le phénomène monstrueux de la "massification"? En même temps qu'ils sont "massifiables", sont-ils aussi, et essentiellement au fond d'eux-mêmes, tous des individualistes, des âmes uniques?' (ibid., p.292). A similar expression of opacity is the subject-matter of Jeux de massacre, drawn largely from Daniel Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year written in 1722, much of which is founded on historical fact. Defoe's description of the Lord Mayor of London's regulations during the Plague is horrific; bitter irony lies in the power of real life horror to confirm the revelations of one's nightmares. Similar themes predominate in parts of La Soif et la faim, Macbett and Ce Formidable Bordel! respectively. Tripp and Brechtoll are compelled into accepting the opposite of their beliefs without too much difficulty, because they are already said to have ideological tendencies as political extremists. A fascination

with paranoiac political power, i.e. libido dominandi, already referred to in Présent passé passé présent, finds expression in Macbett. Even the revolutionary forces' appearance in scene X of Ce Formidable Bordel! alludes to the ubiquitous presence of the forces of opacity. "Lourdeur", as we shall observe later, is in a sense a by-product of language and bourgeois family life. To understand fully the meaning of this heaviness and its antithesis in a theatre rebounding with poetic images, we need to consider the genesis of other plays.

In most cases, Ionesco's plays can be found to originate in either his dreams or personal anecdotes. Every play of significance he has written is to a certain degree autobiographical. As the short stories in La Photo du Colonel were written in the first person, their dramatic adaptations were to become "first-person" plays. Such a deeply personal note is elucidated by the actor assuming the part of Ionesco in L'Impromptu de l'Alma, words which have now become almost proverbial: '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 la matière théâtrale.' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.57). This sense of empathy is associated with numerous visions. Many plays are transcriptions of these visions, that is of either dreams or quasi-mystical illuminations, or a combination of both. Choubert's uneasiness and anguish in Victimes du devoir is based on a dream about lying down in an open railway truck as it runs

into a dark tunnel. In Jacques ou la soumission, an initial dream about a galloping horse that caught fire becomes the dream about the little Indian pig. The nightmare features of an invading corpse in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser spring from an imaginary corpse found to be lying in the long corridor of a house the playwright used to inhabit; as for the story itself, it has dismissed in Notes et contre-notes as banal. A dream about flying, interpreted as an act of liberation, provides the starting-point to Le Piéton de l'air. Apart from the Biblical connotations of hunger and thirst, La Soif et la faim exploits three different dreams; the first concerns a woman in flames, the second a deceased relative who turns up as a visitor in strange clothes and the third is the vision of a cellar in a house which may at any moment collapse, and this is strongly identified in the author's mind with a tomb and his mother. Again and again, it is as the result of an emotional if not spiritual shock that Ionesco finds himself motivated to write. The experience of illumination described in Notes et contre-notes, together with a heightened awareness of language, led him to communicate fundamental truths in La Cantatrice chauve. Similar quasi-spiritual experiences, at the age of eighteen in a street of a provincial town and later impressions of solace and euphoria in the commonly drab surroundings of "rue Claude Terrasse" in Paris serve as the central image for Tueur sans gages. The contrast between visions of light, evoked by the memory of the two aforementioned events and their antitheses, anguish and death, is not only central to

an understanding of Tueur sans gages but to the whole of Ionesco's theatre and will be examined later.

The significance he attached from an early date to events in the world of the imagination, combined with a readiness to relate these in semi-autobiographical writings, partly explains why Ionesco, a born introvert, began writing plays at a comparatively late date. Added to this was a basic mood of dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the French cultural scene. He had condemned outright most of what twentieth century French theatre had presented in the period up to the Second World War as being either commercial theatre or smacking of the school of social realism. (Notes et contre-notes, p.89).

Besides the aforementioned Surrealist plays, his main sources of inspiration in modern drama were Jarry and Artaud; a common interest in dramatic form and a strong desire to reform the theatre and its relation to public life may account for his affinity to them.

Artaud had expounded in Le Théâtre et son double that a thick layer of artificiality obscured the intrinsic quality of human nature. Art, and in particular drama, had to expose the core of reality again which was pure emotion, freed of the hypocrisy of social norms. Vociferous protests against realism and the discursive psychology of middle-class theatre had been made by Jarry, and the founding of "Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry" in 1926 was meant as an attack on the superficialities of those conventions he so abhorred. Behind the iconoclasm lay a spirit of renewal.

Artaud wanted the stage to enjoy the freedom of innovation taken for granted in music and painting; his thoughts are echoed in Notes et contre-notes: 'Mais je veux, moi, faire paraître sur scène une tortue, la transformer en chapeau, en chanson, en

cuirassier, en eau de source. On peut tout oser au théâtre, c'est le lieu où on ose le moins.' (ibid., p.84). Ionesco goes on to draw analogies between plays and cathedrals in a manner reminiscent of the Symbolist *l'art pour l'art* and Jarry's De l'inutilité du théâtre. Both Jarry and Artaud contested utilitarian attitudes steeped in the spirit of materialistic determinism. Ionesco's revolt, in many ways an inheritance of the *poètes maudits*, is orientated towards those self-same aspects of modernity which have today become even more pronounced.

Yet propagating an art form of total spontaneity and condemning much of Western culture as inauthentic are insufficient in themselves to bring about anything even approaching reform. Ionesco shares Artaud's belief in a metaphysical theatre. The concept of theatre as a secular church, a theatre of cruelty which awakens us to the problem of evil and the mystery of life has influenced and continues to influence modern playwrights. Fundamental questions of life and death, and not socio-political problems limited to a historical context, formed the essence of Artaud's view; this became a subject of controversy between Ionesco and Kenneth Tynan. Ionesco put forward the proposition of 'un théâtre extra-social' (ibid., p.155) unrepresentational of social and political problems. What we ought to remember of this argument is not Tynan's unwarrantedly accusing Ionesco of solipsism but the following: 'No ideology has yet abolished fear, pain or sadness. Nor has any work of art. But both are in the business of trying. What other business is there?' (ibid., p.161). Fears of death and guilt are common to both Artaud and Ionesco; the title

of the latter's unfinished thesis The Themes of Sin and Death in French Poetry since Baudelaire is self-explanatory. For Artaud, the revelation of 'latent guilt' became a bond between the theatre and the plague. If, apart from Jeux de massacre, plagues as such do not feature in Ionesco's plays, there are numerous images of latent guilt. He has written of Kafka's Metamorphosis as representing for him an image of latent guilt and monstrosity; Kafka's influence on the writing of Rhinocéros is well-known (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.45). Again, what more vivid expression of death and guilt than the corpse in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser. All of this is closely linked with his main objective, i.e. 'extérioriser l'angoisse'. (Notes et contre-notes, p.159). Deep-rooted and repressed fears and anxieties in any particular audience must be released if they are to come into contact to any extent with metaphysical truths. According to Artaud's theory, the cruelty or violent forces present both in the universe and the individual must discharge themselves into the audience so that audience sensibilities can in turn be discharged: 'Le plus urgent ne me paraît pas de défendre une culture dont l'existence n'a jamais sauvé un homme du souci de mieux vivre et d'avoir faim que d'extraire de ce que l'on appelle la culture des idées dont la force vivante est identique à celle de la faim.'¹² Ionesco's views are not dissimilar for he is of the opinion that humanity will be saved if hatred is in some way exercised and the energies released by aggressive action be rechannelled in a positive direction (Journal en miettes, pp.156-7).

12. Antonin Artaud, Le Théâtre et son double (Paris, 1938 reprinted 1964), p.9.

He admired Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow as creating a "communion in anguish". Whether or not audiences are purged of latent aggression and hatred, as we shall observe later, is open to question. Yet in the light of the plays of the 1950's in particular, we can appreciate the reluctance Ionesco and many genuine playwrights felt at making any concessions in their art of provocation.

The evocation of anguish on the stage is however not confined to Artaud and the playwrights he influenced. Ionesco is after all the child of an age which produced La Nausée and L'Etranger. His relationship with Existentialism is not without disharmony on certain issues. He is for instance far from sharing the Existentialist abhorrence of science; he acknowledges the complementary roles of science and fiction and would endorse Raymond Queneau's view: '...all of science, in its completed form, might be conceived both as a technique and as gratuitous activity, in other words quite simply in the same way as the "other" human activity, art, is conceived.'¹³ What he is attacking is the unquestionable belief in material progress initiated in the Industrial Revolution and not the revelations of modern science which point to inherent contradictions in its assumptions, as expounded in Lupasco's Logique et contradiction, a work which exercised great influence upon him. A deep-rooted fear of sophisticated machines, of the encroachment of inorganic matter in whatever form, gave rise in the 1930's and 40's to the

13. David Mendelson, 'Science and Fiction in Ionesco's "Experimental" Theatre', in Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont. (See Note No.5), p.75.

phenomenon of "chosisme"; Roquentin's awareness of a pebble is amongst the best known illustrations of this. Sartre's qualitative representation of "chosisme" in the sensation of viscosity was to correspond to a quantitative impression in Ionesco's theatre in the proliferation of matter on the stage. What lies behind the supremacy of Matter, as expressed in Sartre's L'Être et le néant, is the nothingness at the centre of our being. Describing Ionesco's theatre as ontological, Doubrovsky remarks, 'L'auteur semble l'un des premiers dramaturges à prendre au sérieux l'affirmation que la pensée n'est pas une région de l'être mais qu'elle est, au contraire, non-être dans le plein du monde.'¹⁴ Whether it be in the detective's efforts to fill the void in Choubert's mind in Victimes du devoir or elsewhere, we are continually reminded of Man's incapacity to lend substance to thought. Vital energy and spontaneity are overwhelmed by the ubiquity of objects. In his interview with the dramatist, Claude Bonnefoy has commented on the theme of Les Chaises: 'Par la prolifération des chaises, vous étendez l'absence à tout l'espace scénique qui est la représentation de tout l'espace du monde.' (Entretiens, p.84). This comment is applicable to Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, L'avenir est dans les œufs, Le Nouveau Locataire, La Colère and every episode in any of the plays which underlines brute material force. For the first time, in Jeux de massacre, the proliferation of matter and death are successfully united. In trying to come to

14. 'Le Rire de Ionesco', in NRF, 1 February 1960.

to terms with this cycle of abundance and void, Sartre in his plays, novels and essays adopted a philosophical, rationalistic approach. His encounters with absurdity differ from those in the works of the so-called a-literates:

The a-literates reject reason and try to express, as it were directly, the experience of this meeting with nothingness. They try to express the primeval relationship (or non-relationship) of Man, with an irrational universe before the invention, of God or of reason.....It is life in the present with no past and no future. But this present is quite different from our present....which is a minute transition from past to future, a continuous flux in the broad current of a known, intentional life. But the present of the animal is an overwhelming, all-comprising present, cupped in darkness, a present where there is no consciousness of either birth or death. It is a present so stable, so immobile that it is all but identical with permanence, with eternity.¹⁵

Becket and Ionesco express this perennial divorce between human consciousness and inanimate object.

15. Greshoff, C.J. : 'A Note on Eugène Ionesco', in French Studies XV, No.1, January 1961, pp.30-40.

We should remember that these a-literates are first and foremost playwrights who think in terms of images, and not philosophers or thinkers. Like Beckett and Genet, Ionesco is preoccupied by the intuition and not the intellectual concept of the absurdity of existence. His anguish at times assumes quasi religious overtones. For Weightman,¹⁶ he represents a common latter-day type, a religious temperament divorced from any religious conviction. A dramatist, he feels, should attempt to unfold the mystery of life and evoke the dreams absent from a godless society. He is a follower of Job, one of the first to grieve over the absurdity of existence (a parallel is drawn in Notes et contre-notes (p.96) between The Book of Job and Beckett's Fin de partie). Continual efforts are made on his part to escape the dilemma of "perpetuum mobile" and find some ersatz for God. The innumerable references made to La Chapelle Anthenaise in Journal en miettes, which he once depicts in another context as 'un lieu désangoissant' (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.45) remind us of the sense of timelessness this earthly paradise exuded. Like the house of Père de Fournier in Le Grand Meaulnes, a work he greatly admired, La Chapelle Anthenaise became synonymous with the nest and the security of the Ptolemaic universe. Sequestration from the immobility of that cosmic village is reminiscent of Pascal's conclusion at the end of the first part of Pensées: 'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.'¹⁷ The disappearance of the medieval,

16. John Weightman: 'Death and the Dream', Observer, 24 March 1968.

17. Pascal, Pensées, (Paris, 1962), p.60.

geocentric outlook had been a prerequisite for scientific evolutionism, the implications of which were already being felt in the Enlightenment long before Nietzsche's outcry "God is dead". Ionesco's problem is close to that of most modern "thinkers" - to come to terms with the notion of human life as a process in time unrelated to anything that might exist outside its confines such as God. Sensations of angst are all too common in his writings, aroused by less than by Borges's La Bibliothèque de Babel, Chirico's image of the labyrinth and the demonic features of Kafka's universe. Forces of habit or speed are thus repudiated as leading towards a holocaust: 'Dès que nous sommes dans la dimension ou dans la durée, c'est l'enfer' (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.45). The search for a firm identity has preoccupied him ever since those idyllic childhood days.

A feeling of ontological insecurity became particularly acute in his work before 1956; Richard Schechner has explained it as follows: 'Ontological insecurity is the realisation by the individual that he does not know who he is and, lacking this central firm sense of identity, the world around him crumbles, becomes insolite, and his relationship with others is only a means of survival, not gratification.'¹⁸

This experience of insecurity finds expression on the stage for the first time in Les Chaises, which introduces a metaphysical

18. Richard Schechner, 'Inner and Outer Reality', in Tulane Drama Review Vii No.3, spring 1963, p.202.

dimension into his drama. In Victimes du devoir, Choubert, in his desperate search for Mallot without a "t", undergoes a quasi-mystical trance. A loss of innocence, or the Fall, and a spiritual longing to return to a paradisiac state, act as a source of conflict: the timid Choubert and the "omniscient" detective in Victimes du devoir, Béranger's flight and his family's bewilderment in Le Piéton de l'air; Jean's restlessness and Madeleine's sense of willing acceptance in the first episode of La Soif et la faim. Jean's search for absolute freedom from fears and passions has been called: 'la vaine recherche d'un aliment pour le coeur.'¹⁹

That the search should turn out to be futile is of minor importance. What matters is not the isolation of Jean, or the two Béranger figures in Tueur sans gages and Rhinocéros respectively, but their sense of basic insecurity, their "classicism" as Ionesco has called it, their "profound identity"²⁰ to quote Schechner. Apart from union with the Mystical One and ontological insecurity, a metaphysical and irrational dimension is a subconscious need of the citizens of "a brave new world". With the plague in Jeux de massacre in mind, Coe has written of it as being: '...the re-intrusion of a force of Divine or ~~St~~anic Destiny into a world from which such unassimilable forces had been all too rigorously excluded.' (Ionesco, p.140). What is written of the plague in Jeux de

19. Robert Kanters, 'Interview avec Eugène Ionesco', L'Express, 3 October 1970.

20. Richard Schechner, 'Inner and Outer Reality', in Tulane Drama Review Vii No.3, Spring 1963, p.202.

massacre is valid for the rationally inexplicable in every play, where the gulf between the earthbound and the ethereal is pronounced.

In ~~the Preface to~~ the Preface to *Der Fall*,²¹ Nietzsche wrote that art and not ethics was man's proper metaphysical activity. Ionesco shares this view; in his thematic analysis of the plays, Paul Vernois draws our attention to the emphasis attached to metaphysical questions.²²

We can refer to the aforementioned meaning he attaches to realism, quite opposed to Tynan's interpretation (Notes et contre-notes, p.274). His belief in a pre-existing ideal has patently Platonic overtones. At the same time though, he is closely indebted to Byzantium and the East as well as the Greeks. Byzantine manuscripts held a great attraction for him in so far as they evoked a powerful light, a quasi mystical light which was to find expression in many plays. He was attracted by the reluctant acceptance if not outright rejection of the world of the senses for the Beyond in the figures of Dionysius the Areopagite and St. John of the Cross. The Philokalia took thought one step farther than conventional philosophy. His interest in these thinkers and their work can be explained in terms of a rudimentary form of psychoanalysis they had conceived and not in any strictly theological sense. Yet ironically the innumerable references throughout his works to "étonnement", "insolite" or

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke in drei Bänden (München, 1960) pp.19-21.

22. Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco (Paris, 1972), p.128.

"solitude" appear to relate to modern epistemological thinking:

Bachelard's main prerequisite for the discovery of truth is a state of innocence and receptivity which implies a kind of continuously newly-born consciousness, and whether it works in the light of reason or in the night of dreams or "réverie" from which intuition or imagination shapes its formulations in art, consciousness is what matters.²³

Light, as opposed to water and mud, reveals a hidden layer of consciousness. The observation that the most trivial of conversations can make for an extraordinary, indeed amazing experience motivated him to write La Cantatrice chauve: 'c'était une mise en lumière de l'être, de l'insolite de l'être en bloc dans mon étonnement devant l'existence' (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.133). This sense of wonder in a transfigured world (ibid., p.133), this mystic light symbolic of freedom, had fascinated him in a Soviet film version of the Pinocchio story. The revelation which is at the source of the "cité radieuse" of Tueur sans gages, subsequently to be qualified as "l'attitude fondamentale" (ibid., p.146) assumes greater importance as the initial impression of wonder in the play than the remainder of the plot. Though more forcefully expressed in Tueur sans gages

23. J. Chiari, Twentieth Century French Thought (London, 1975), p.158.

than in other plays, attempts to evoke this so-called "attitude fondamentale" lie at the heart of his vocation as a dramatist:

C'est ainsi que je passais de l'étonnement
à l'angoisse, de l'ennui à l'éblouissement,
de découvertes en découvertes, de lumières
en lumières dans un monde ruisselant de
lumière.....C'est pour parler de cette lumière,
c'est pour parler de cet étonnement, d'une
lumière, d'un ciel, d'un étonnement plus fort
que l'angoisse, dominant l'angoisse, que j'ai
fait de la littérature.²⁴

Hence the short scene of calmness and joy in the café in Ce Formidable Bordel! and the reason why so often stage lighting is of greater consequence than the stage sets. Moreover, a sensation of weightlessness accompanies the discovery of euphoria in many plays; Choubert's tendency to levitate, Amédée's flight and Bérenger's yearning to be airborne in Le Piéton de l'air serve as examples of this. Weightlessness, as well as luminosity, suggests a spiritual potentiality in Man and retains a certain ambivalence: 'La légèreté, c'est l'évanescence euphorique qui peut devenir tragique ou douloureuse quand il y a angoisse. Quand il n'y a pas angoisse, c'est la facilité d'être'. (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.41).

24. Eugène Ionesco, Découvertes (Paris, 1970), p.70.

These aforementioned allusions to freedom and spiritual solace in individual plays recall Zen Buddhism. In this respect, we can refer to the ~~Zenist~~^{Zen Buddhist} whose mind, once liberated and illuminated by transcendental wisdom, can attain mental tranquillity. 'Je m'enfichisme métaphysique' (Journal en miettes, p.84) is for him synonymous with Zen, as a means of facing up to the absurdities of material existence. Revelations such as those which led to the writing of La Cantatrice chauve, or the trance-like states of dissociation from material reality experienced by Choubert and Berenger, have strong Zenist overtones. Of La Soif et la faim, he remarked in one interview²⁵ that he thought he had written a Zen play. We may note that he^{is} too embedded in the Western post-Renaissance tradition to be actually converted to Buddhism; the point is largely irrelevant, since Buddhism represents for him no more than a confirmation of certain intuitive experiences in childhood. A child's freedom remains amongst his most previous attributes. Zen Buddhism and Freud in his later years were concerned to break down all barriers set up between the Self and freedom. The five major obstacles to freedom are listed in Journal en miettes - anguish, sympathy, disgust, hatred and aggression. Not simply by chance do all five obstacles appear in one form or another in his plays.

Buddhism of course affirms the presence of the instinct of Nirvana or death. Ionesco's preoccupation with the death theme

25. Interview with Jean-Marie Serreau, Nouvel Observateur, February, 1966.

is extreme; nonetheless an equivocation characteristic of its author is retained. As early as 1934 in Nu, he wrote: 'J'ai peur de la mort. J'ai peur de mourir. J'ai peur donc du désir que j'ai de mourir' (Clause Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.84). He has always been fascinated by what may lie beyond the Wall separating him from his true Self. In contemplating death he can reach a state of spiritual exaltation. Primarily self-abhorrence and instinctive fears of death incite people to kill themselves in others; his plays show us creatures caught in the wheel of Time, yet bent on annihilation - 'des animaux malades de la mort.'²⁶ Predominant in his theatre is the death theme, stripped of any sociological or political colouring. A marriage, only made tolerable on the basis of self-delusion, ends in a double suicide in Les Chaises. As for Tueur sans gages, it has been called 'la pièce de la mort cachée dans la cité radieuse comme le ver dans le fruit' (ibid.) By the end of the play, Béranger has lost all strength of inner conviction and seriously begins to question his basic rights to exist. Disillusionment is the keynote at the end of Macbett, when the power-drunk tyrant is tormented by a vision of Duncan, he says: 'L'histoire est rusée. Tout vous échappe. Nous ne sommes pas les maîtres de ce que l'on a déclenché. Les choses se retournent contre vous. Tout ce qui se passe est le contraire de ce que vous vouliez qu'il arrivât. Régner, régner, ce sont les événements qui règnent sur l'homme, non point l'homme sur les événements.' (Macbett, p.89)

26. Robert Kanters, 'Ionesco, côté mort, L'Express, 28 septembre - 4 octobre 1970. pp 42-3.

These lines speak for every protagonist in the later plays. Our lives are somehow unreal on our "island of stability and happiness"; we are reminded of this in Le Piéton de l'air where hell and death, in the shape of a daily apocalypse somewhere on the globe, are never distant. Of La Soif et la faim, the unreality of Jean's existence and the subsequent process of disintoxication, Ionesco has written: 'The subject of my play is the destruction of chimeras through multiple demystification.'²⁷ As for the demystification process itself, we are told it takes place in hell: '....c'est encore de l'enfer qu'il s'agit. Ou peut-être du purgatoire. Le purgatoire est le lieu où l'on souffre parce qu'on est privé d'amour. L'enfer est le lieu où l'on ne sent même plus la privation de l'amour'.²⁸ Visions of hell are common in Ionesco's theatre.

At the same time, many plays concern themselves with the question of facing up to the absurdity of life in the knowledge of imminent death. Emphasis lies in the affirmation of life and not in a morbid interest in death for its own sake. Occasional hints are found in his works as to the evasion of death - from the child's conviction that people need not die if they just took sufficient care to Roi Bérenger's declaration of would-be omnipotence: 'Je pourrais décider de ne pas mourir'

27. Rosette C. Lamont, 'An interview with Eugène Ionesco', in The Massachusetts Review X no.1, winter 1969, pp.128-48.

28. Eugène Ionesco's, 'Ma cage, c'est l'enfer. On ne l'a pas compris', in Arts et Loisirs, No.23, 9-15 March 1966.

(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv., p.54). In parenthesis, we may be drawn to Duckworth's study²⁹, where he points to one of the essential differences between Ionesco and Beckett concerning this theme; whilst the former is preoccupied with "the validity of selfhood at the moment of death" the latter's attention is drawn to the endlessness of eternity subsequent to that moment. Written initially as an attempt to free himself from the fear of death which had haunted him all his life, it was the occasion of his serious illness and actual physical closeness to death that prompted him to develop Le Roi se meurt as a potentially "therapeutic" play about learning how to die. It may have proved a source of relief to Ion Vinea, its Rumanian translator, shortly before his death, in the same way that Montaigne's Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir may have been consoling to some. The deterioration and death of King Berenger form the nucleus of the play; all we are left with in conclusion is a note of acceptance, namely "on ne peut espérer une mort exemplaire" (Théâtre Gallimard, vol.iv, p.52). As we have already suggested, there is an intense involvement with the notion of time and a state analogous to immortality. In his Journal en miettes, he puts forward the impossible proposition of the abolition of death as the sole pre-condition for universal love. He is obsessed by the concept of immortality and the irreversibility of time. Perhaps the most outstanding illustration in the theatre is to be found in Le Piéton de l'air in the representation of two distinct worlds; much of the play bears the influence of Jarry's Book Eight of Dr. Faustroll.

29. Colin Duckworth, Angels of Darkness (London, 1972), pp.26-27.

Commentaire pour servir à la construction pratique de la machine à explorer le temps, where the present is interpreted as a point in the past or the future, extending in three different directions. No other play reaches such a level of abstraction, so close to the universe of Beckett. One of his more recent plays, Jeux de massacre, deals like the majority of his plays with problems facing life in the present. Jeux de massacre is exceptional too in reversing the usual pattern and, as Coe observes, asking the following: 'How can I explain the inevitability of Death in terms of the evil, the mystery and the absurd-indescribable miracle of Life?' (Ionesco, p.142). Perhaps a love of life in the broadest sense may act as a guarantee of death without anguish. What we are shown in Jeux de massacre, as an interview with Ossia Trilling brought out, is a central interest in humanity and nothing beyond its limits: 'I want people to laugh at death the way Zen Buddhists laugh at the sight of a corpse. I show people meeting death in all sorts of ways: bravely, in self-hate, in anguish, in love. Of course death is horrifying but it is the end to which we all must come. Vanity of vanities, as King Solomon said'³⁰.

30. Interview with Ossia Trilling, quoted by Tom Bishop in 'Ionesco on Olympus', Saturday Review, 16 May 1970.

Chapter Two

The Meaning of Comedy and the Comic

Despite growing interest (in the West of late) in Eastern traditions and theology the subject of death still remains taboo in societies dedicated to technological progress and material growth. In his plays, Ionesco has sought to reverse this state of affairs by drawing attention to the problem of the ultimate means and ends of human existence. On the surface, his digs at bourgeois society would suggest a satirical touch, and such an argument gains strength if we think of L'Impromptu de l'Alma or the fierce objections the Marxist Left took to the final episode in La Soif et la faim, or a typically French primary school teacher incorporated in the figure of Betard ~~Betard~~ in Rhinocéros. Ce Formidable Bordel! is not without its albeit indirect allusions to the events of May 1968 on the Parisian boulevards. But these examples act as an exception to the rule, for a backdrop revealing a society with a rigid, balanced set of norms as a precondition for pungent satire is clearly absent from most plays. There is nothing exclusively French about the 'petite bourgeoisie': 'Bourgeoisie is that aspect of humanity which accepts and cultivates the illusion of material realism as being the equivalent of the whole of reality, which renounces the perception of "total reality" (inner life) and prefers the superficial comfort of rational logic as displayed in the forms of social order'.

(Richard Coe, Ionesco, pp.65-66.)

When politicians and administrators are ridiculed as is often the case, it is owing to their presumption that they alone are capable of dispelling the greatest scandal of all, death itself: 'Je ne promets pas la disparition du mal mais je promets que la signification en sera différente' (Jeux de massacre, p.75). Though in actually attacking people's beliefs in ideology and propaganda the playwright is putting across his own political point of view, it is not his deliberate intention. Besides, the argument about committed and non-committed drama has been shown to be false.¹ "En Attendant Godot" holds as many political implications for the prisoners of San Quentin as for the people of Poland, to mention but two isolated groups, as any example of overtly committed theatre in Adamov's later plays or Brecht in his middle years. From the optional swastika band on Marie's sleeve in La Leçon by way of Rhinocéros, long recognized to be one of the easiest plays to understand, to Macbett and its unwritten subtitle, absolute power corrupts absolutely, a cogent case can be put forward as to political colouring in Ionesco's theatre. There is no stronger condemnation of political oppression than in these plays. His sympathy is extended, in a truly Christian sense, to his enemies and oppressors: 'Les vrais prisonniers ce sont les juges, prisonniers de leur code, de leurs dogmes. Ils n'ont même pas la liberté de leur subjectivité puisqu'ils sont soumis aux critères juridiques' (Notes et contre-notes, p.169)

1. Martin Esslin, An Anatomy of Drama (London, 1976), pp.116-7.

Far from remaining indifferent to politics, his is a socially conscious theatre. The real revolution in his view however can only take place in the mind and not on the streets. His plays indirectly condemn overt political activity and the current use in many countries of theatre as a propaganda machine. Instead, he is by implication pleading for a new social order orientated towards non-utilitarian values, simplicity and bonds of close fellowship. His social criticism and attention to the problem of means and ends is meaningful and positive if it induces us to question the importance of what politicians and reformers of all shades tell us is important. In view of the inevitability of human extinction, Ionesco seems to be saying, we should be rethinking our whole standard of values and not blindly condoning a system which sooner or later will transform us into the yokes of some paranoiac leader. Much so-called committed literature will in his view pale into insignificance.

If the current notion of politically committed theatre scarcely appeals to the Rumanian born playwright who at the same time claims in Notes et contre-notes to identify himself with few contemporary writers, his attitude to life and work reflects a long comic tradition in France. What he calls "anti-théâtre", spectacularly put into practice throughout the plays of the early 1950's and still largely influential in longer works since Tueur sans gages, is paradoxically based on a firm understanding of what constitutes a genuine theatrical performance; hence his admiration for Pirandello: 'son instinct

purement théâtral qui fait que Pirandello est aujourd'hui encore vivant' (ibid., p.56). The astonishing success of La Cantatrice chauve is partly due to theatrical "jeu" for its own sake and a negation of anything approaching "good literature" or didacticism. Unfortunately, such expressions of pure theatre are later marred at times in a trend towards verbosity and interpolations on stage theory. With his first play however he made an impact comparable to that of the young Molière and the "commedia dell'arte" in an assault on the canons of classical French drama who introduced a note of youthful ebullience, accompanied by the precedence of gesture and motions over words. Several features of those seventeenth-century farces have survived to the present day. For the purposes of this survey we can restrict these to a fixity of character and quickness of rhythm. The emergence of stereotyped individuals promoted by both Molière and the Italian finds a parallel in the recurring figures in Ionesco's theatre: the nagging wife; the garrulous concierge; the sharp-witted maidservant prone to repartee; the policeman figure as a constant reminder of impersonal Authority; the Romantic artist unable to complete his "literary work" and misunderstood by those around him. Bérenger for his part in assuming the centre of attraction in no less than four plays, performs a similar function to Sganarelle. Closely associated with this is a rejection of verisimilitude in favour of portraits bordering on caricature and the frequent use of stage masks: all the figures in Jacques ou la soumission except the protagonist can wear them; an enormous judge wearing crimson and a doll's head appears in Le Piéton de l'air; stage directions at the beginning of the first scene of Jeux de massacre read as follows:

'S'il n'y a pas suffisamment de figurants, on peut tout aussi bien et ce serait même mieux les remplacer par des marionnettes ou de grandes poupées (mannequins).' (Jeux de massacre, p.7). The legacy of the Italian players is evident. At the same time here are the beginnings of what was to be developed and perfected in the works of Labiche and Feydeau.

Ionesco's absence of character delineation with respect to the majority of the figures in his plays as well as a bias towards brevity and acceleration for its own sake are the same qualities Labiche adopted in writing for the stage:

Le comique naît d'abord des coups de théâtre, de la rencontre imprévue de séries d'événements jusque - là disjoints de quiproquos savamment préparés qui ne cherchent ni à être vraisemblables ni à être profonds, mais d'abord à être drôles.

Le miracle, dans les bonnes pièces de Labiche, c'est que cette "drôlerie" n'est pas gratuite: si elle n'est pas, comme dans le théâtre classique, subordonné à la peinture des personnages, si elle commande au contraire l'invention et le rythme des pièces, du moins Labiche évite-t-il qu'elle détruise le minimum de vie stylisée qu'il prête à ses héros.....Labiche place, en principe fondamental de son théâtre l'exigence de rythme, et ce rythme est d'abord celui de l'invention comique.²

2. Pierre Voltz, La Comédie (Paris, 1964) p.149.

An exploitation of stage movement therefore takes precedence over all else. Attention is focussed on the mechanics of farce, not its subject-matter which, in the long term is dismissed as irrelevant. Besides Labiche, Feydeau's La Puce à l'oreille with its hectic pace and the utter madness of stage action represents for Ionesco the quintessence of comedy. A traditional element of farce is recaptured in Ionesco's plays in the accumulation of chairs and teacups and the introduction of more and more matter onto the stage. Feydeau's spirit is reborn in the hilarious chases involving the Keystone Cops and the chaotic onrush of more and more passengers into a tiny cabin on an ocean liner in the Marx Brothers' A Night at the Opera. When Chaplin appears in Modern Times, we are made aware of the ridiculous plight of twentieth-century man, no less puny and vulnerable than his predecessors, and in addition unable to keep in step with the demands of a technological age. Whether we refer to robots, i.e. unthinking individuals in Ionesco's one-act plays or to such figures in the world of farce before him, either on stage or on screen, we are constantly reminded of Bergson's 'Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant.'³ Comic automatism, in its similarity to the automatism of dreams and leanings towards caricature, has considerably influenced twentieth-century Absurdist. Guicharnaud without doubt took this into consideration on selecting such an appropriate title to his study of Ionesco's plays:

3. Henri Bergson, Le Rire (Paris, 1969), p.29.

'Un Monde hors de contrôle'.⁴

Though Bergson's theories have been proved thoroughly inadequate as an overall definition of comedy, they are central to an understanding of Ionesco's theatre. Like all children he had been fascinated by Punch and Judy shows; what differentiates him from others is the intensity of the initial feeling of wonder he experienced which was never quite to leave him: 'C'était le spectacle même du monde, qui, insolite, invraisemblable, mais plus vrai se présentait à moi sous une forme infiniment simplifiée et caricaturale, comme pour en souligner la grotesque et brutale vérité' (Notes et contre-notes, p.53). The phrase "brutale vérité" is echoed later during a newspaper interview in America in which he asserts his conviction that cruelty and hatred are dominant factors in human affairs. Nowhere else does this ring so true as in Chaplin's silent films. Whilst laughing at the plight of the Little Man in Modern Times as he revolves around the cogs of giant machines, it is easily forgotten that such time-saving gadgets can ultimately kill those whose time they are designed to save. Ionesco's attitude towards such objects and their proliferation, whether in films or in his own plays remains characteristically ambivalent: '....the objects are the concretization of solitude, of the victory of the anti-spiritual forces, of all that against which we fight.

4. Jacques Guicharnaud, Cahiers de la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, février 1963.

But I do not give up.....If I succeed in introducing the element of humour.....happy symptom of the other presence... into this anguish, and in spite of this anguish, then, humour is my relief, my liberation, my salvation.'⁵ Twentieth-century theatre as well as cinema has been affected by the notion of relativity as much as any other branch of artistic or literary life; I. L. Styan has elucidated this in his study "Types of Comedy":

As a psychologist, (R.H. Thouless, General and Social Psychology (London, 2nd ed., 1937) has written, "If members of a social group (p.209) observe that their own objects of laughter do not produce laughter in another social group they are inclined to express this fact by saying that the second group has "no sense of humour". From the world of the theatre we might add that what will seem laughable on Monday may be damned on Tuesday. It is, moreover, a nuisance that what is comic to one age is not to another..... Fashions in laughter change too readily, and we are in some doubt today whether to laugh at or sympathize with a Falstaff or Tartuffe or a Sir Peter Teazle.⁶

Modern audiences can no longer laugh as heartily as their ancestors either in Victorian England or Second Empire France for they are

5. R. Coe, 'Eugène Ionesco and the Tragic Farce', Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, vol. ix, March 1962, p.233.

6. I.L. Styan, 'Types of Comedy', in R.W. Corrigan (ed.), Comedy: Meaning and Form, (Scranton, 1965), p.231.

only too aware of being on the receiving end of the laughter aroused on the stage. In L'Umoreismo, Pirandello reveals the thought patterns behind this mood of ~~casiness~~^{unease}. There are no longer any intellectual or moral nooks and crannies to take refuge in, but instead just a vague feeling of "right you are if you think you are!" There is always a two-way process. Concealed behind the laughter is a staunch belief in man's inhumanity to man and in the business of farce as essentially serious:

La farce est une méthode quasi mécanique d'obtenir le rire, abstraction faite de toutes autres données. De toutes les formes littéraires, la farce est la moins sentimentale. Par définition, elle est impitoyable.....Dans un sens, c'est une sorte de soupape de sécurité; la violence et la haine refoulées en chacun et la brutalité d'une imagination impitoyable. C'est l'interprétation du rire par Freud, interprétation que reprend le critique américain Eric Bentley: Dans la farce, comme dans les rêves, l'offense est permise sans qu'on ait à craindre les conséquences.⁷

7. Richard N. Coe, 'La Farce tragique', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, No.42, février 1963 (traduction de Claude Clerge).

But this acute sense of objectivity remains for Ionesco in no way peculiar to the writing of farces. Besides finding his own deep-rooted fears and pre-occupations confirmed in readings of Hamlet and Othello, Shakespeare's plays in general recall for him King Solomon's clairvoyance:

'Tous les hommes meurent dans la solitude, toutes les valeurs se dégradent dans le mépris: voilà ce que me dit Shakespeare.

(Notes et contre-notes, p.67). Amongst the few other writers

who have appealed to him in this respect he lists Chekhov,

Proust and also Flaubert in relation to Bouvard et Pécuchet

and L'Education sentimentale. A cursory glance at the

literary output of the aforementioned figures and others

Ionesco admires, in particular that of dramatists, will reveal

a shared interest in common humanity and enable us to discern

an immediate link with the modern playwright in our attempts

to situate him within a broader context of comedy, i.e. an

expression of total freedom and naturalness. This is what

he refers to as "le flot imaginatif" (ibid., p.182), which in

his view distinguishes the greater part of the literature of

the last two centuries from Elizabethan times: 'Cette liberté

absolue d'imaginer, les esprits tristes de notre temps la nomment

fuite, évasion alors qu'elle est création.....L'homme est peut-être

l'animal qui rit, comme on l'a dit. Où il n'y a pas d'humour

(cette liberté prise, ce détachement vis-à-vis de soi-même) il

y a le camp de concentration' (ibid., p.182). What many writers

lack as a precondition for comic writing is a certain lucidity

and sense of comic detachment: 'Quand j'arrive à me détacher du

monde et à pouvoir le regarder, il me paraît comique dans son invraisemblance....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' (ibid.,p.179). This is perhaps curiously reflected in the following passage taken from the novel Le Solitaire which finds its dramatization in the luminous restaurant scene in Ce Formidable Bordel!

Je voulais retrouver cette éstrangeté
du monde qu'il m'arrive parfois d'obtenir.
C'est comme si on se trouvait à un spectacle,
c'est-à-dire comme si j'étais à l'écart, distancé,
ne prenant plus part, n'étant plus cet acteur ou
ce figurant que je suis, que nous sommes d'habitude,
par d'habitude. Entouré par le monde mais pas
au monde. Quelquefois cela accroissait mon angoisse
mais le plus souvent cela la faisait disparaître,
au contraire.⁸

In attempting to realize his aim of objectivity Ionesco has had to develop that sense of exaggeration, or enlargement of effects, peculiar to any theatrical experience, as far as physically possible. Renouncing the Brechtian alienation effect as not taking matters far enough, he could only draw spectators to the absurdity of life by subjecting them totally to its various

8. Eugène Ionesco, Le Solitaire (Paris, 1973), p.59.

manifestations. Some of these manifestations, as we shall note in the next chapter, can be traced to a lack of identity between audiences and figures on the stage. Equally significant and often inter-connected is the resort to parody as a means of coming to terms with life's absurdities: 'Rien ne venge mieux un idéaliste déçu que la parodie de ses mésaventures et qu'est-ce que le théâtre de l'absurde sinon une riposte au désespoir métaphysique par le rire du clown'. In his early plays Ionesco has made conspicuous use of sub-titles which serve to ridicule any differentiation between conventional genres whilst permitting us to follow events on the stage at a number of different levels. 'Une comédie de la comédie' (Notes et contre-notes, p.252), La Cantatrice chauve together with Vitrac's Victor ou le pouvoir aux enfants probably still remains the best example of parody of the boulevard theatre in post-war French drama. In his second play, subtitled 'drame comique' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. i., p.57), straightforward comic as well as disturbing material has caused a great deal of unease in audiences who would rather have turned a blind eye; the playwright's intentions being the following: 'pousser le burlesque jusqu'à son extrême limite' (Notes et contre-notes, p.256). Conventional bourgeois values are systematically devalued in Jacques ou la soumission

9. Discours de réception de Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française et réponse de Jean Delay (Paris, 1971), p.53

where the playwright has moulded the stock plot pattern of vaudeville, the return of the prodigal^l son and ensuing marriage, to suit his own needs. Here as elsewhere something familiar is changed into a strange, disturbing experience. To make the impact even more forceful, shock techniques in the form of Roberte's mask, reaching a climax in the "chat" orgy, are applied as an attempt to elicit a negative, disconcerting response in the audience: 'Tout cela doit provoquer chez les spectateurs un sentiment pénible, un malaise, une honte' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.127). All this adheres to the principal aim of establishing as great a distance as possible between stage and audience by arousing disgust: 'Il n'y a pas de plus parfaite séparation que par le dégoût' (Notes et contre-notes, p.284). How far-reaching an effect this has on playgoers brought up on Genet and Arrabal is a moot point. Physical obnoxiousness, when all is said and done, is not sufficient in itself in this day and age to stir us out of mental sloth. It is only when the imagination gets to work that we can really be stirred by a theatrical performance. Few would contest Ionesco's basic design: 'Pour être égale à la vie, la littérature devrait être mille fois plus atroce, plus terrible. Si atroce qu'elle puisse être, la littérature ne peut présenter qu'une image très atténuée, très amoindrie de l'atrocité véritable' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. iii, p.127). The crux of the matter lies moreover in the question of method and degree. Such is the difference between Rhinocéros and Les Chaises that whilst the weakness of the symbol (due to obvious man-beast analogy) largely explains a tendency to melodrama,

the air of isolation at the end of the latter evokes an unprecedented sense of failure without parallel in any other work: 'Nous aurons notre rue' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.1, p.177). This phrase alone possesses a greater force of suggestion than any number of material objects. As a grim parody of the Philemon and Baucis legend it is quite bereft of any sympathy or sentimentality. Such a level of estrangement is difficult to match in later plays. Victimes du devoir and Tueur sans gages can be singled out as Agatha Christie thrillers in reverse. Whilst in the former the detective makes all the typical movements and gestures required of his rôle, there is no Mallot to be found but only Nicolas, the familiar "raisonneur" figure of bourgeois drama. Furthermore, the police interrogation scene resulting in the 'Avale! Mastique!' (ibid., p.229) torture scene, reminiscent of mathematics and toothache in La Leçon, is to be repeated in one form or another in later plays (i.e. the brainwashing or "le spectacle didactique" in La Soif et la faim and the comic cynicism of Philippe and Paul towards the protagonist in L'Homme aux valises). Torture as a revelation of sado-masochism is closely linked to the arousal of disgust in an audience.

In a theatre orientated towards the comic deflation of death nothing can be taken at face value any more. As the curtain rises on a play heralding the imminence of death, the stage directions read: 'Avant le rideau, pendant que le rideau se lève et quelques instants encore, on entend une musique dérisoirement royale, imitée d'après les Levers du Roi du XVII siècle' (Théâtre Gallimard, vol. iv, p.9). In the first scene of Macbett, no apology needs to be made for mistaking the

opening gambit by Glamiss and Candor as a light entertainment feature. Increasingly the question arises as to what kind of theatre we are watching. Grotesque juxtapositions such as executions taking place against a background of tea and cakes in Macbett, the death of an old woman being followed by a funeral hearse drawn by two clowns in what amounts to a pantomime act, or Choubert's childish: 'Ça sent mauvais.... (Au policier.) Ce n'est pas beau de faire dans ses culottes! (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.I, p.233) just before being stabbed, have become all too familiar. Again and again in Ionesco's case, a sardonic, macabre sense of humour is prevalent, that is macabre with its original meaning of "pertaining to death" as well as its modern connotation of gruesome fun. When Ionesco defines black humour in Notes et contre-notes (p.206) as the only true form of "demystification" he is following in the footsteps of a long tradition of writers including Swift, in particular A Tale of a Tub and continuing in Beckett's Comment c'est and En Attendant Godot. Jewish jokes are called to mind as well as David Rousset's description of life in a concentration camp: 'Les camps sont d'inspiration ubuesque. Buchenwald vit sous le signe d'un énorme humour, d'une bouffonnerie tragique'.¹⁰ Sick humour in its alienating effect bears a close affinity to the world of parody and farce; you are never the prisoner of even the most horrible subject you laugh at. Bonds between stage and audiences are difficult to establish partly as a result of a general air of imperviousness marking the relationship between different figures on the stage: Madeleine in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser

10. David Rousset, 'L'Univers concentrationnaire' referred to by D.J.Greshoff, French Studies, January 1961, pp.30-40.

regrets above all that the murder had to happen in their flat of all places; the architect-detective is reluctant to come to the rescue of the beggar's fresh victims, though he can hear their cries (Tueur sans gages) and in the same play the stunted, sickly-looking Edouard leafs through a diary of horror with total nonchalance; the reaction of the waitress to "post-revolutionary" carnage in Ce Formidable Bordel! is symptomatic: 'La Serveuse, au Personnage: Allons viens, on peut passer, les blessés et les mourants ne sont pas dangereux. Il y a des flaques de sang sur les pavés, ne t'en fais pas, tu ne saliras pas tes chaussures, je te guiderai. Là où il y a du sang, des fleurs vont pousser' (p.92)! As for the soldier who threatens the lemonade seller in Macbett, (p.18) he is even more explicit. Whether we refer to Bobby Watson as the best looking corpse in Britain (La Cantatrice chauve - (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.1, p.22), the undertaker's "sad" news of Josephine's father's resurrection in Le Piéton de l'air (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, pp. 129-31), John Bull's preventive euthanasia 'Mieux vaut trente ans plus tôt que deux secondes trop tard' (ibid., pp.187-8), taken up again in L'Homme aux valises 'une euthanasie à l'envers' (p.58) or Duncan's address to those who have fallen for his cause '....muets mais vivants que vous êtes.....' (Macbett! p.33), comic ^{treatment} ~~exploitation~~ of what had for so long remained taboo, is ^{striking} ~~ripe~~ in these plays. Getting rid of a corpse is synonymous with removing a nuisance, "une tuile" (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.264), and nothing else - it could have been selected from Joe Orton's Loot or T.S. Eliot's The Burial of the Dead: 'That corpse you

planted last year in the garden. Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'. That corpses should be carted off in "fournées" and "paquets" (Jeux de massacre, p.37) is not sufficient - a sober, quasi philosophical discussion about the merits of eating one's next of kin later takes place in the same play (ibid., pp.103-4). With the Siege of Leningrad in World War Two in mind, "la nécessité objective" here in its most literal sense cannot be dismissed as pure fantasy or simply bad taste. In his films, Bunuel also depicts carniverous tendencies beneath middle-class respectability. Gone is the optimism which gave rise to a powerful expression of human solidarity in Camus's La Peste and in its place a "cartoon film" on death. Originally intending to entitle the play The Plague in the City, he abandoned it in favour of Jeux de massacre, deriving the name from a game practised at a funfair where all the skittles in a particular shy have to be knocked down; here was the right blend of the playful and the horrific he had been seeking so much to convey.

Jeux de massacre could easily be dismissed as a kind of automatic death machine were it not for the moving scene involving the elderly couple, where the Old Woman's words strike a note of hope in adversity and peaceful resignation to one's lot. Here lies the dilemma to be found in much of Ionesco's work. Despite the frequency of various estrangement effects there is no doubt that all these plays represent a very personal kind of theatre, a form of therapy and self-knowledge. Anyone doubting the playwright's sincerity should consult his

diaries or, to take one specific example, consider his ideas on writing Victimes du devoir, which is something more than just a parody of psychological inquiry as critics have been only too quick to acclaim: '...ne pas écrire une comédie, ni un drame, ni une tragédie, mais simplement un texte lyrique, du "vécu", je projetai sur scène mes doutes, mes angoisses profondes, les dialoguai; incarnai mes antagonismes; écrivis avec la plus grande sincérité; arrachai mes entrailles; j'intitulai cela Victimes du devoir. On me traita de fumiste, de petit plaisantin' (Notes et contre-notes, p.132). This sense of antagonism, the essence of any drama, by extension applies noticeably to Le Roi se meurt, La Soif et la faim and L'Homme aux valises. Whilst the critic's task centres on motives and unhappily all too often in the labelling or bracketing of genres, an audience at a live performance faces the familiar but acute conflict between involvement and "chose vue". Paradoxically, the playwright finds himself in the same situation as those watching the play. In a world where the machinery of cause and effect has collapsed, anything can happen; hence the playwright's fondness of the term "insolite". Hence also an ironising, tongue-in-the-cheek attitude to everything as a means of retaining one's sanity. Translated in terms of writing a play, this means a permanent state of tension between what we shall call parody, which we have already observed, and genuine human feeling. No sooner have we formed a certain relationship with one character on the stage than we are addressed directly as an audience, thereby reminding us of the illusion of it all (e.g. the interplay between the Guard & Roi Bérenger in Le Roi se meurt).

Much depends on the stage technicalities exploited during any one performance: 'Sur un texte burlesque, un jeu dramatique sur un texte dramatique, un jeu burlesque' (ibid., p.256). We are shocked or disorientated as we are meant to be by a succession of non-sequiturs, by verbal irony of the kind in Rhinocéros, where a drunkard asserts what is close to the playwright's own beliefs, by an airborne pedestrian, by the appearance of Ionesco in person on stage at a most unexpected moment towards the end of Macbett and not least by the injection of cosmic details into a local situation in the opening scene of Le Roi se meurt. Identification between us and the plays is non-existent. But a sense of frustration mounts once a certain relationship with the principal characters in a play has been established (and there can be little doubt of a definite affiliation between Ionesco and the protagonists of his plays) only to be soundly mocked and destroyed, as for example at the end of Le Roi se meurt, Rhinocéros and Tueur sans gages respectively; more than enough evidence can be found to support Duckworth's argument: 'Ionesco is absolutely right to stress the importance of empathic transmission of anguish, but his dependence on destructive parody and inconsequential fantasy frequently works against complete audience involvement'¹². Little comfort is provided by Ionesco himself who is extremely fond of ironies; speaking of American critics' reception of

12. Colin Duckworth, Angels of Darkness. Dramatic Effect in the Plays of Samuel Beckett with Special Reference to Ionesco, London, 1972), p.41.

Rhinocéros he said of it: 'Or elle n'est pas drôle; bien qu'elle soit une farce, elle est surtout une tragédie' (Notes et contre-notes, p.289). We should not fall into the trap of taking him or his works too seriously. Yet this is to be expected from one who accepts the truth of fiction to be superior to reality and questions the validity of all outward appearances. Any situation or any incident in a particular play can elicit a number of different reactions, depending on the manner in which it is treated. His insistence on "un antagonisme dynamique"¹³ bears close resemblance to Philip Thomson's definition of the grotesque: '....the unresolved clash of compatibles in work and response'¹⁴ as well as Thomas Cramer's interpretation of the same term: 'the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to an extreme'. (ibid., p.60)

This dilemma is very real and subconsciously preoccupies most modern dramatists in their adherence to or rejection of various genres. If farce is by definition without pity, comedy has in recent decades gained a deeper perspective and in the process provided a vehicle of expression for truly tragic experience. Tragedy, in the sense of being able to uplift and transfigure both observer and observed, is no longer with us. There are no incarnations of pure will or immortal beings in any of Ionesco's plays. To an author of an essay on the principle of identity, (Nu), differentiation between the genres has always been

13. See note 7.

14. Philip Thomson, The Grotesque (London, 1977), p.22.

an enigma:

Je n'ai jamais compris, pour ma part, la différence que l'on fait entre comique et tragique. Le comique étant l'intuition de l'absurde, il me semble plus désespérant que le tragique. Le comique n'offre pas d'issue. Je dis "désespérant" mais en réalité il est au-delà ou en deçà du désespoir ou de l'espoir.

(Notes et contre-notes, p.61)

In our acceptance of universal absurdity, no feasible alternative exists any longer: 'le comique est seul en mesure de nous donner la force de supporter la tragédie de l'existence...' (ibid., p.206). All this confirms the writings of Lionel Abel (Meta-theatre). A New View of Dramatic Form), George Steiner's The Death of Tragedy and Shaw's estimate of the grimace of tragicomedy as being much "deeper and grimmer" than tragedy. Ionesco like Beckett adheres to a generation of writers whose experience is essentially tragic but who have deliberately chosen to express themselves in comic terms. Anouilh wrote of Les Chaises: 'Je crois bien que c'est mieux que Strindberg, parce que c'est noir "à la Molière", d'une façon parfois follement drôle, que c'est affreux et cocasse, poignant et toujours vrai....'¹⁶ Ionesco has been at pains to clarify the issue of the overlapping of the genres, as for instance in accounting for the polarity present in two early plays:

16. Claude Abastado, Ionesco (Paris, 1971), p.260.

J'ai tenté, dans Victimes du devoir, de noyer le comique dans le tragique; dans Les Chaises, le tragique dans le comique ou, si l'on veut, d'opposer le comique au tragique pour les réunir dans une synthèse théâtrale nouvelle. Mais ce n'est pas une véritable synthèse, car ces deux éléments ne fondent pas l'un dans l'autre, ils coexistent, se repoussent l'un l'autre en permanence....(Notes et contre-notes, p.61).

This also applies to Rhinocéros, judged by many to be his most "human" play, where few of us would find it difficult to forge links with Béranger in his torment and ultimate isolation. As for his namesake in Le Roi se meurt, Kierkegaard, who to a large extent anticipated much of the mood of post-war theatre, has provided him with a suitable epitaph:

Pathos that is not reinforced by the comic is illusion; the comic that is not reinforced by pathos is immaturity...Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving as pathetic as it is comic; pathetic because the striving is infinite, i.e. directed towards infinity, an act of making itself infinite which is the summit of the pathetic; comic because such striving is self-contradictory. Seen pathetically a second has infinite value; seen comically, ten thousand years are a mere flash of foolery like yesterday; and yet time, in which the existing individual finds himself, is made up

of such parts....¹⁷

Jacques Lemarchand summarizes the equivocal response to Le Roi se meurt experienced by many audiences: 'On rit beaucoup au Roi se meurt et d'un rire qui ne parvient jamais à tuer, ni même à amoindrir l'angoissante impression d'effroi personnel que donne la descente vers sa fin du vieux roi.'¹⁸ Most of the time our relationship with stage events functions at a deep level below the conscious intellect. Perhaps "a sense of identity with characters in a play" or "complete audience involvement" is not what is called for, though intense contact as in Rhinocéros is unavoidable. What takes its place is a quality surpassing an awareness of the "fun" and illusion of it all, that makes its impact perceptible long after our leaving the theatre. It is after all Ionesco's conviction that the "monstrous" (See Note 12, p.86) unites us all. When Choubert in Victimes du devoir talks to his father after a long period of absence, or "Le Premier Homme" in L'Homme aux valises tries to recapture the past in his native Chapelle Anthenaïse, or Jean in La Soif et la faim is much too eager to leave both his wife and child in a musty groundfloor flat, we are confronted with creatures cut off from themselves and feeding on illusions. This predicament is in the final analysis known as much to the observer as to the observed; it acts as a source of common identity. No neat solutions are forthcoming but at best a

17. Kierkegaard, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript', quoted by M. Robinson in The Long Sonata of the Dead (London, 1967) p.46.

18. Jacques Lemarchand, article in Figaro Littéraire dated 3rd January 1963, in Le Roi se meurt (Paris, 1968) edited by Colette Audry.

temporary feeling of relief. Any hint of superiority on the audience's part is replaced by a sense of delayed empathy.

Chapter Three

Characterisation

Bearing in mind the genesis of Ionesco's theatre and his profound distaste of what was being performed on "boulevard" stages, we can appreciate his scepticism towards the whole "raison d'être" of dramatic characters. He endorsed Brecht's view of actor as demonstrator, as opposed to subject, but felt the latter had not carried the abandonment of a simulation of reality far enough. Such dissatisfaction was to surface in the "impossible situation" which is La Cantatrice chauve. If characters were to have any validity, it was to be a threefold issue: first as a means of what he has called "jeter le trouble"¹; secondly through the requirement of physical identities to clothe ideas and images; thirdly to show language to be more powerful than character. On considering the plays in retrospect, we can rarely point to individuals in their own right.

Dobrovsky's observations pertaining to the majority of figures in the play, made as early as 1959 are still very relevant:

Within the total impersonality of
consciousness it is now possible, as
Rimbaud says, that "I" be another. In

1. Alain Bosquet, 'Comment se débarrasser du personnage', Cahiers des Saisons No.15, winter 1959.

this respect, the comments of the Belgian scholar A. de Waelhens on "the One" in Heidegger's philosophy could apply word for word to Ionesco's characters. The real "subject" in daily life is that Impersonal Man, since at all times and in all occasions it dictates to me what I must do or be. I become lost in it.²

The aforementioned and corollaries, namely "comique de non-caractère" and "comedy of circularity" (ibid) epitomize the reverse of psychological drama. In the modern era of mass production, few playwrights have so vehemently expressed the notion of impersonality and interchangeability of character. A brief glance at the very titles of the plays provides a clear pointer; Les Chaises, L'Avenir est dans les oeufs, Rhinocéros, Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, Jeux de massacre. Nor do the "landscapes" at the end of ^{these works} ~~the aforementioned~~ augur well for the future of mankind. There is moreover a persistent confrontation with the facelessness of what may broadly be called "the human crowd". Ionesco systematically exploits the traditional comic device of numerical extension, as in the Bobby Watson episode in La Cantatrice chauve, in the case of Amédée Buccioni in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser (where one third of all Parisians are said to bear that name) and the

2. J.S. Doubrovsky, 'Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity', Yale French Studies No.23, summer 1959, pp.3-10.

population of L'Avenir est dans les oeufs, in no way distant from the world of test-tube babies. There are interesting variants on this ~~af~~orementioned device. A fondness for the duplication of characters is found in La Leçon (Marie acting as servant, wife and mother), Victimes du devoir (Madeleine and detective) and L'Homme aux valises (Femme - p.61), whilst in Jeux de massacre, sixteen actors share between them one hundred roles. Very often the machinery of proliferation can be traced to the family unit; a comparatively recent appearance is the Banco dynasty in Macbett. Families and crowds, owing to their uniform character, evoke a false sense of security, thereby robbing the individual of any genuine thought or feeling, of what has been called; 'sa troisième dimension' (Journal en miettes, p.56). Opposed to this is the farcical yet uncanny anonymity of group behaviour. The families in Jacques ou la soumission and its sequel hardly differ in their moods and reactions from that in Le Jeune Homme à marier. Little differentiates the cheering of the onlookers in the closing act of Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser from the spectators at the pseudo press conference given ostensibly in Bérenger's honour on his return to earth in Le Piéton de l'air. The mood at the beginning of the second act of Tueur sans gages is never allowed to fade completely in subsequent plays, with the exception of La Soif et la faim and L'Homme aux valises. No attempt is made to lend any individuality to characters in a scene of potential local colour, a market place, in Jeux de massacre; responses to revolutionary cries evoke in Ce Formidable Bordel! a strong sense of "déjà vu".

Every group is interchangeable and betrays the sheeplike mentality waiting to be tapped by a tyrant's paranoia.

If groups and crowds are interchangeable, so are individuals. What is usually understood to be "character", i.e. a personality eliciting psychological interest, turns out to be a misnomer in most cases in Ionesco's theatre, for the stage abounds with automata or physical entities who have lost all power to think and to feel. Like the traditional writers of farce, Ionesco's comic sense owes much to his ability to confront us with a mechanical world which has somehow got out of control, inhabited by zombies and "workers" or a combination of both. In parenthesis, we may note that the term "workers", inspired by Kafka, denotes the individual whose personality has become totally dominated by his social and vocational function; references (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.17) made to the adjutant who falls asleep in his uniform are in this respect illuminating. Philippe and Paul in scene X of L'Homme aux valises are the latest in a long line of representatives of bureaucratic paraphernalia, consistently trying to outwit the individual. The "Premier Homme" or wandering Jew in L'Homme aux valises is a non-being in his native country, an unclassified individual bereft of any hope of identity:

Le Consul: Je lui ai donné des papiers
de fortune. Il n'a pas voulu nous dire
son identité véritable.

L'Infirmière: Il ne connaît pas son identité.

Le Consul: Connaissons-nous la nôtre?

Nous la connaissons, en gros, grâce à nos fonctions. (L'Homme aux valises, p.67)

Policemen and "fonctionnaires" are prominent amongst the secondary characters of Ionesco's theatre. Many of these types act as a sheer source of amusement; the second policeman in Tueur sans gages stands out as a Bergsonian "homme mécanique":

Tandis que le Deuxième Agent dit de plus en plus vite, d'une manière de plus en plus automatique: "Tout droit! à gauche! à droite! tout droit! en arrière! en avant!, etc." et que le Second Agent répète les ordres de la même manière, en tournant la tête à droite, à gauche etc., comme une marionnette. (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii p.153).

Likewise the Maître's over-confidence in Jeux de massacre (p.31), 'je suis impénétrable', and subsequent collapse, reminds us of a Molière farce. In Le Tableau, "Le Gros Monsieur" is cast as a mixture of Joseph Prudhomme and Groucho Marx. Guignolesque effects can so often be attributed to mental intransigence.

Pantomime effects can however assume sinister overtones. Those who try to respect the law and enforce it are more than anyone else imprisoned by society's pressures and drilled to conformity. In Victimes du devoir, the young policeman, at first excessively timid, turns into a tyrannical investigator. Police brutality is the order of the day in parts of Tueur sans gages, Jeux de massacre and Ce Formidable Bordel!. "A wizard of Oz" figure, the Doctor, in Le Roi se meurt changes into an executioner, John Bull ends up as an assassin in La Soif et la faim and the representative of Authority in the same play, Frère Tarabas, is described as "un Génie machinal et malin".³ Interrogations and brainwashing, against a police state backcloth, are never far away. It comes as no surprise that several citizens from totalitarian states have been able to draw parallels between the events in these plays and their own bitter experiences.⁴

Much of the cause of the trouble lies in one half of humanity not wanting to understand the other, and in particular the different sexes. There is nothing arbitrary about Madeleine's turning out to be an accomplice to her husband's torture in Victimes du devoir, nor the strong physical resemblance between

3. P. Sénart, 'La Revue théâtrale. Eugène Ionesco: La Soif et la faim à la Comédie Française, La Revue des deux mondes, No.12, 15 June 1967, pp.599-604.

4. Eugène Ionesco, Entre La Vie et le rêve (Paris, 1977), p.174.

the concierge and Mère Pipe in Tueur sans gages. A mood of ennui and lovelessness, half way between bedroom farces and the vehemence of Strindberg, characterises many marriages in the plays, all set in bourgeois domesticity. Thirteen out of eighteen plays depict familiar domestic quarrels. Not only do women frequently bear the same name (Marie or Madeleine) but most of them are typecast as bickering, authoritative creatures of habit (e.g. Madeleine in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser) or chained to biological drives (e.g. Roberte in Jacques ou la soumission and Daisy in Rhinocéros). Female loquacity, is fully exploited for its comic potential. Apart from the absence of anything remotely resembling mutual love, another source of ennui is isolation from the rest of society, whether it be in a lighthouse (Les Chaises) or tenement flat (Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, Rhinocéros, La Soif et la faim - first episode, Ce Formidable Bordel! - closing scenes). After the total lack of feeling and general pandemonium of La Cantatrice chauve, an initial impression of welcome sanity is conveyed in Les Chaises, but towards the end of the play the illusory nature of the couple's common existence breaks through: 'ils ont l'air de glisser sur des roulettes....les deux vieux devront toujours donner l'impression de ne pas s'arrêter, tout en restant à peu pres sur place; leurs mains, leur buste, leurs yeux s'agiteront en dessinant peut-être des petits cercles' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i., p.160) Two self-indulgent, egocentric individuals have become no more than "des objets roulants". And yet to dismiss couples totally, or just women in Ionesco's theatre as mere automata limited to a claustrophobic shell, or to accuse the

playwright of outright misogyny, is erroneous. Increasingly in the longer plays, the source of the dilemma has been spotlighted. The couple's relationship is situated within the "true community of fear". Rebellious wanderlust and rêverie, ostensibly male qualities, conflict with practical conservatism and humble resignation, associated with the opposite sex. To take Le Piéton de l'air as an illustration, on the one hand, Joséphine is unlike her husband and daughter unable to see "Le passant de l'antimonde", trusting wholly in the powers of technology and, on the other, she awakens pity as an albeit courageous scapegoat for the whole of humanity: 'je suis minuscule dans ce monde énorme... Je suis une fourmi égarée, affolée, qui cherche ses compagnes' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.180). Woman, not man, is subject to harsh, psychological persecution (Cf. L'Homme aux valises, p.17). No less moving is the rôle of Marie-Madeleine, the "protectress" in La Soif et la faim, where man is seen to be at fault for not recognizing that salvation and love are to be found so close to him. Similarly, in the moving scene in Jeux de massacre between the old couple, the old woman apart from her self-sufficiency stands for an affirmation of life, light and joy, whilst her husband echoes the familiar sentiments of world weariness: 'La Vieille: Il ne faut pas courir. Il faut à peine se baisser pour cueillir. Tout est à notre portée. Il ne faut pas tenter de saisir les rêves. Ils nous saisissent. Nous-mêmes nous sommes tels qu'en rêve.' (Jeux de massacre, p.93). Even the nagging, shrew-like Madeleine in Victimes du devoir grieves over her situation, when Choubert decides to fly away, anticipating the problem of

solitude brought to light in later plays: 'Pense à nous. La solitude n'est pas bonne. Tu ne peux pas nous laisser.... Aie pitié! (Elle est une mendicante). Je n'ai pas de pain à donner à mes enfants. J'ai quatre enfants. Mon mari en prison. Je sors de l'hôpital' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i. p.216). A possible solution to the dilemma is suggested in scene XVIII of L'Homme aux valises, where the Premier Homme meets his wife again after a long absence; it could have been Jean returning to Marie-Madeleine and the "security" of the family nest after theoretically being discharged from his tasks at the "Bonne Auberge". However complex relations between the sexes are or may become, the final irony lies in the couple standing for a microcosm of humanity:

Le couple c'est le monde lui-même,
c'est l'homme et la femme, c'est Adam
et Eve, ce sont les deux moitiés, de
l'humanité qui s'aiment, qui se retrouvent,
qui n'en peuvent plus de s'aimer, qui ne
peuvent être l'un sans l'autre. Le couple
ici, ce n'est pas seulement un homme et
une femme, c'est peut-être aussi l'humanité
divisée et qui essaie de se réunir, de s'unifier.
(Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.97)

But if difficulties of communication do indeed exist in such a world, where character and conscience carry little to no significance,

the normal functioning of sense perceptions is also impaired. Like the Symbolists before him, Ionesco shows us a universe where a fusion of past, present and future is substituted for any stable chronological and linear order. Most of the aforementioned "robots", lacking any kind of social identity, appear to live in a limbo, coming from nowhere and heading nowhere. Although they have been living under the same roof for the last twenty years, not until their arrival at the Smiths' house do the Martins discover themselves to be husband and wife. We know as much about the background of the couples in La Cantatrice chauve as we do of Amédée and Madeleine; this is seen to be irrelevant to the irony of the presence of a living corpse in the flat. At the same time, their inability to relate the circumstances of how a corpse came to lie in their bedroom in the first place provides us with another example of a failing faculty, this time memory. Amédée's amnesia is a weakness he shares with many others: Choubert munches breadcrusts to fill in the gaps in his memory; Roi Bérenger's failing memory plays its part in his downfall; Jean in La Soif et la faim vainly attempts to recall the details of his long journey; the "Personnage" in Ce Formidable Bordel! eventually forgets the name of the only being who took any sincere interest in him, Agnès; the "Premier Homme's" identity crisis in L'Homme aux valises is largely brought on by his inability to remember the basics of life. So much is made of this issue of amnesia since it forms an important part of Ionesco's overall comic exploitation of a disrupted sense of time.

Actual time is of as much consequence as the notion of physical age. The acceleration or slowing down of the passage of time at will parallels the proliferation of objects and "robots". We find an early illustration of this at the beginning of Les Chaises where the Old Man sits on his wife's knees as if it were the most natural thing possible. The audience remains bewildered as to the man's real age; the playwright is insistent on the actors' not giving us an impression of decrepitude in rôles which, other considerations excepted, require a large degree of athletic prowess from the actor and actress playing them. No less puzzling is the protagonist's real age in Jacques ou la soumission. According to Jacques, the age of reason dawns at thirteen and he was born a year later, coinciding with the age Ionesco himself left France for Rumania. Jacques Père in L'Avenir est dans les oeufs talks of his son's descendants as if they were still alive. In L'Homme aux valises (p.14) confirmation comes from Jean that his grandmother was not present at his own baptism. Though Victimes du devoir stands out in relation to the "anti-pièces" before it, in concentrating on the plight of one figure, Choubert follows a strange line of development by adopting the attitudes of a child for most of the play so that by the end he has acquired the characteristics of a two year old. A similar process takes place in reverse in Le Roi se meurt, La Soif et la faim and Ce Formidable Bordel! In his latest play, L'Homme aux valises, there is one scene which might be qualified as a "prodigal daughter" scene, where an old and a young woman

exchange the roles of mother and daughter. Nor does the seemingly integrated individual, Bérenger, escape achronology: 'Je suis aussi jeune qu'il y a cent ans' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. ii, p.81).

This apparent absence of precise concepts of age and other vital empirical data is further evidence of the lack of identity and unity of character in Ionesco's theatre. According to Coe, humanity in these plays is defined in terms of subconscious rather than conscious criteria. Frequently, we receive an indirect reminder of Lupasco's dynamic self, as in Jacques ou la soumission, where the introduction of Robert II allows the action to shift from what seems a sociological level to a ritual evoking subconscious fears and sexual desires. Similarly in Les Chaises, the double personalities of the old couple (soldier/photo-engraver and provocative female/Mme Belle respectively) manifest both the eroticism and aggression latent in repressed personalities. As for Choubert's half-comic, half-savage search for Mallot, it marks a voyage of self-discovery and an attempt by the detective to create coherence out of contradictory forces: 'This notion-psychological determinism-attempts to fill the void which encircles us, to re-establish links between past and present, between present and future. It provides us with a nature productive of our acts. It is a matter of envisaging the self as a little god (in this case Mallot) which inhabits me.'⁵

5. Richard Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', Tulane Drama Review vii, no.3, spring 1963, pp.187-217.

The outcome in a play that makes active use of the language of classical psychoanalysis, proves to be fruitless. Another identity crisis arises in L'Homme aux valises. What is important is the tenuous dividing line between what appears to be real and what is hallucinatory or fantastic. In the stage directions to Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, for example, Ionesco is at great pains to show Amédée II and Madeleine II to be quite normal: 'Il faut encore signaler que l'on doit éviter, dans toute la mesure du possible, que Madeleine II et Amédée II aient l'aspect d'ectoplasmes; pour ceci, pas d'apparition dans une lumière fantomatique, mais dans celle normale de la scène; le jeu de Madeleine II et Amédée II doit être naturel dans l'irréel' (Théâtre Gallimard Vol.i., p.285). Scene XV of Ce Formidable Bordel! (p.131) has the same kind of directions. In Les Chaises, every character functions in accordance with the play's central image of nothingness:

une conversation inaudible s'engage
entre les deux personnages invisibles
assis l'un près de l'autre (Théâtre
Gallimard, Vol.i., p.146)
les vieux font attention pour ne pas
heurter les gens (ibid., p.151)

Simply because the Orator appears on the stage, this does not make him any more real than the invisible throng. By the end

of the play, thirty-two "characters" have been created, calling into question the existence of the old couple and rendering the old man's message illusory. Elsewhere, ghostly, grotesque figures perform the same function: a maid claiming to be Sherlock Holmes (La Cantatrice Chauve); "Le Passant de l'anti-monde" (Le Piéton de l'air); Tante Adelaide in La Soif et la faim; the monk dressed in black in Jeux de massacre; the dumb lady in Victimes du devoir who, though indifferent to the action, remains through her very presence no less a victim of duty than the rest of the cast. All these figures call into question the validity of those others we presume to be normal.

A proclivity to "automatisme" in the broadest sense, the breakdown of sense perceptions and the lack of an integrated personality are ^{all} features common to ~~what Vernois has called~~ ~~"personnages pivots"~~ or Ionesco's protagonists, as well as to the majority of the figures in the plays. The former adhere to the post-war literary convention of debunking the hero. An amusing naiveté and helplessness are combined with a reluctance if not downright refusal to be assimilated into the norms of bourgeois society:

Je suis désarmé dans la vie. Je suis
un inadapté. Je ne suis pas fait pour
vivre dans ce siècle (Théâtre Gallimard
Vol.i, p.269)

Moi, je ne m'y fais pas à la vie

(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.24)

Je ne suis pas un esprit scientifique

(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.71)

Sharply contrasted with the architect and the "cité radieuse", Béranger in Tueur sans gages resembles the main figure in Dostoievsky's The Idiot in his assumption that all members of the human race deeply care for each other. Very often, our first impression is of a host of latter-day Romantic heroes: a young rebel struggling against the tenets of the adult world in Jacques ou la soumission; a stupidly optimistic old man in Les Chaises convinced by his own sense of superiority and considering himself to have been misunderstood by the rest of mankind; the contagious 'grande fatigue' of the 'poète manqué' peculiar to Amédée, Béranger in Le Piéton de l'air, Alexandre in Jeux de massacre; a distinct lack of intellectualism even in the figure of Béranger in Le Piéton de l'air despite his theorizing about entropy and anti-worlds; a resort to alcohol as a means of poetic liberation (Béranger in Rhinocéros and the "Personnage" in Ce Formidable Bordel!); a weakness of moral-fibre (Jean in La Soif et la faim); an impulsive streak in the toughest of warriors, as Candor said of Macbett on our first glimpse of him:

c'est un croyant

c'est un incorruptible

c'est un naïf (Macbett, pp.14-15)

These 'heroes-in-spite-of-themselves' remain fundamentally very modest and ordinary; what they evoke is not concepts but the feeling of the absurdity of existence: 'Le personnage du nouveau théâtre sera donc à la fois un individu associable et confessant publiquement - et parfois indécentement - ses peurs ou ses extases naïves et l'homme qui vit en chacun de nous. Comme Ramuz, Ionesco à travers l'individuel rejoint l'élémentaire - ou l'archétypal proche parent de l'universel' (Paul Vernois, Le Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, pp.32-33).

Pronko makes an apology for "the dreamer who vindicates the rights of the imagination, the validity of the artist and the visionary".⁶ Protagonists speak less of what they know and do than of what they seek. In the end though, a paradox ensues, for reliance on intuition is as illusory as a belief in the forces of rationalism. As far as the elderly couple in Les Chaises is concerned, an imaginary, invisible audience really exists, so that the real audience in the auditorium is alienated by the events on the stage. In Tueur sans gages (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.65-66), the hypersensitive being of Act One ('J'y croyais sans y croire. Je le savais sans le savoir') gathers inner strength as the play proceeds, becomes the City's "defender" only to be annihilated helplessly in the last act. Similarly, the defender of mankind in Rhinocéros, the only one to be truly shocked by the events, is overwhelmed by the forces of indifference and hatred embodied by Edouard. Again and again, the pathetically

6. Leonard Pronko: Eugène Ionesco (New York, 1965), p.39.

bewildered "little man", in remaining honest and true to himself, is seen to be simply used as a pawn. Nor is there any hint of tragic grandeur; human fate is simply irrational and gratuitous and must be accepted as such. Chronic dissatisfaction and moral fatigue are characteristic of Béranger in Le Piéton de l'air and of Jean in La Soif et la faim: 'Je ne peux pas vivre que dans l'espoir que l'extraordinaire va naître' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, pp.81-82), seem to lead nowhere. The fruitless outcome of a bid to acquire nationality on the part of "Le Premier Homme" seems to have been predestined:

Deuxième Homme: Vous avez un esprit
aventureux. Vous n'avez pas le courage
de vos aventures. Vous vous prenez pour
un audacieux, un risque-tout. Vous n'avez
pas la possibilité psychologique d'assumer
vos aventures. Le matin vous avez peur...

Premier Homme: A l'aube, oui, j'ai peur.
La nuit aussi, dans mes insomnies.....
Je vous avoue, j'ai très peur dans ce pays
dangereux. Si je n'étais qu'un touriste.
Les touristes ne risquent rien. Je n'ai
jamais réussi à être un vrai touriste. Je
me suis mis tout seul dans la gueule du
loup. Dans l'antre du diable. Dans le ventre
de la baleine. Aux portes de l'enfer. Dans
l'enfer même.

Deuxième Homme: C'est à cause de votre sottise. De l'ignorance que vous avez de vous-même et de vos possibilités. Vous viviez dans une oasis, entourée par l'enfer. (L'Homme aux valises, pp.47-48)

Life has robbed man of his faith that he can understand his fellow men, for, like Bérenger, the "roi non-métaphysique", we all die unknown. Dying unknown reflects a lack of identity accompanying everyone through life: 'Au fond, tous ces personnages sont des solitaires.'⁷ The old man in Les Chaises speaks for all when he affirms: 'Je suis orphelin dans la vie' (Théâtre Gallimard Vol.i, p.136).

Even tyrants, or potential tragic heroes, are lacking in individualism and ruled by events. Macbett is like Candor, or Glamiss or Banco: 'un exemple de ce qu'il ne faut pas faire' (Macbett, p.36). In being sincere to their own natures or conversely evading the truth, the majority of the principal characters are no less trapped within a complex system, their situation being no different from that of the blind followers of "Law and Order" or the advocates of scientific progress as the key to civilization. All we can do is try and laugh life off, as the "Personnage" does at the end of Ce Formidable Bordel! as one big metaphysical joke.

If we stand back and laugh too, it results from a balance established between sympathy and detachment, the quintessence of

7. Faust Bradesco, 'Indetermination du personnage', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, edited by Raymond Laubreaux (Paris 1973), p.68.

dramatic irony. To take just two examples, we know next to nothing about Choubert and Roi Bérenger, yet they are both able to forge links between the stage and the audience previously unknown to the "automata of the ^{early plays.} ~~anti-pieces~~". Alienation, and in particular that kind inspired by farce, only functions to a certain degree. Increasingly throughout his dramatic career Ionesco has discovered a greater complexity within characters, a phenomenon which is to affect the entire structure of his plays.

Chapter Four

P L O T

Une pièce de théâtre est une construction constituée d'une série d'états de conscience, ou de situations, qui s'intensifient, se densifient, puis se nouent, soit pour se dénouer, soit pour finir dans un inextricable insoutenable. (Notes et contre-notes, p.329)

After the absence of character delineation in the conventional sense, Ionesco develops Maeterlinck's initiative, in rejecting what had long been the "sine qua non" of drama, i.e. the traditional plot, as a coating concealing the real action of a play. Two principal lines of thought may account for this. Firstly, as an aforementioned disciple of Croce de facto, he has always believed in content and form as constituting an inseparable whole. Drawing a parallel between a play and a work of architecture, he resembles the advocates of "l'art pour l'art"; it was after all no accident that Lavelli once spoke of Jeux de massacre as a fresco. (Claude Abastado, Ionesco, p.190). In L'Impromptu de l'Alma, the figure assuming the playwright's name, recounts: 'Je ne sais jamais raconter mes pièces' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii.p.13) A play remains for Ionesco fundamentally a three-dimensional world closed in upon itself and like a score of music, referring to nothing beyond its own limits.

Secondly though, Ionesco had like Pinter, at the beginning of his career as a dramatist, been thoroughly disillusioned by certain aspects of the theatre of the day, not least by the causative necessities of plot: 'Le théâtre n'a jamais été que réaliste et policier. Toute pièce est une enquête menée à bonne fin. Il y a une énigme, qui nous est révélée à la dernière scène' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.185).

To counteract this, a notion of rhythm and a tension resulting from two opposing tonalities were introduced. Gone is the story-telling element and in its place a structure attempting to promote what Artaud had considered to be the essence of theatre: 'An immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit'.¹ Of even greater interest, in Ionesco's case, is the source of the conflict of opposites, i.e. the interplay between comedy and tragedy which replaces the familiar pattern of plot:

Le comique, dans mes pièces, n'est souvent
qu'une étape de la construction dramatique,
et même un moyen de construire la pièce.

Tragique et farce, prosaïsme et poétique,
réalisme et fantastique, quotidien et insolite,
voilà peut-être les principes contradictoires (il
n'y a de théâtre que s'il y a des antagonismes)
qui constituent les bases d'une construction
théâtrale possible. (Notes et contre-notes, pp.175-6)

1. The Theory of the Modern Stage, edited by Eric Bentley,
(Harmondsworth, 1968, reprinted 1976) p.77.

One of the most conspicuous ways in which tension or suspense without plot is sustained can be traced to the device of proliferation:

....le théâtre c'est pour moi l'exposition de quelque chose d'assez rare, d'assez étrange, d'assez monstrueux. C'est quelque chose de terrible qui se révèle petit à petit à mesure que progresse non pas l'action, ou alors il faut mettre ce terme d'action entre parenthèses, mais une série d'événements ou d'états plus ou moins complexes. Le théâtre est une sorte de succession d'états et de situations allant vers une densification de plus en plus grande. (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, pp.166-7)

This corresponds to his apocalyptic view of world history (ibid., p.168). If we consider the first of the two most frequently performed plays to date, La Cantatrice chauve, much of its undeniable success is due to its negation of plot, considered by Alain Bosquet in his study² to be the essential criterion in assessing the comic quality of the play, and the substitution of rhythm as unifying factor. Ironically, such an antithesis of the well-made play possesses a rigid structure where logic

2. Alain Bosquet, 'Le Théâtre de Eugène Ionesco ou les 36 recettes du comique', Combat, 15 February 1955.

is stretched to its utmost limits; in Notes et contre-notes, (p.254), he writes of it: 'tentatives de fonctionnement à vide de la mécanique théâtrale'.

La Cantatrice chauve is an attempt to rediscover the hectic stage movement of La Puce à l'oreille which had for him so emphatically evoked a sense of individual isolation and anguish. Not before actually witnessing a rehearsal did he become aware of the play's abstract progression, consisting of much varied movement. The full significance of dramatic structure first became clear to him on writing his second play which, like La Cantatrice chauve, adopts a rhythm of progressive exaltation, the quintessence of "l'anti-pièce". Here a situation is stretched to the utmost thus dispensing with the need for a division into scenes; the Maid's entries alone provide breathing space in an otherwise hectic onrush of movement. We ought to remember, in parenthesis, that an absence of scene changes and ostensibly haphazard comings and goings had been very familiar to vaudeville audiences. Ionesco's skill lies in adopting a well-worn pattern, be it the salon comedy in La Cantatrice chauve or later in Jacques ou la soumission the "return of the prodigal son" story as a mere pretext for his main purpose of parody. A rhythm, made up of intensification and repetition of moods, characterises La Leçon. In his analysis, Schechner has recognized a seven-beat pattern as constituting a rhythmic leitmotiv and has singled out this particular play as an example of an incremental as opposed to a culminant work, in his view common to all of Ionesco's theatre:

In The Lesson, for example, the final "scalp dance" between the Professor and Pupil would be pointlessly shocking if it were not for the several analogous dances between them which precede the rape-murder.... The earlier moments do not "prepare" us for the ultimate dance; they are early symphonic motifs which will finally be consummated and musically resolved in the rape-murder. The tensions and contradictions so blatant at the end are subtly present at the beginning: there is no "development", but here is orchestration: variations on a theme, amplification, and then modal resolution.

Coe has drawn a parallel with a Rossini overture in his study of Jeux de massacre (Ionesco, pp.735-6).

Acceleration and brevity are not only characteristic of those first "anti-pièces" but feature prominently in much of his dramatic output since. Such an economy of style, dependent on rhythm, represents the medium Ionesco can come to terms with best. There is nothing arbitrary about the parallels drawn between La Leçon, Rhinocéros and Le Nouveau Locataire respectively: 'Elles ont un thème initial, une progression simple. Donc la construction est simple, c'est la transposition, peut-être d'une respiration, la transposition d'un rythme, d'un mouvement' (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.101). In other words, here we have Ionesco's interpretation of "classicisme". Compared

to La Leçon, Rhinocéros possesses a story-line, but this remains subordinate to the mechanism of proliferation: 'Pour La Leçon je voulais inscrire une courbe ascendante, partir doucement pour arriver à l'exaltation du professeur, puis à une chute brutale. Le Rhinocéros, c'était la construction d'un récit transposée scéniquement; mais aussi une progression dramatique, une prolifération; un piège qui se resserre sur quelqu'un' (ibid., p.102).

Remorselessly repetitive processes are triggered off on the one hand by the ringing of the front door bell and on the other, by Mme Boeuf's jumping down to ground floor level to join her husband turned pachyderm. Whether it be an arithmetic lesson as in La Leçon, the entry of a guest to be provided with a chair (an event that takes place no less than thirty-five times making for a frenzied performance) as in Les Chaises, the carrying of teacups as in Victimes du devoir, eating and drinking as in La Soif et la faim or just drinking as in Ce Formidable Bordel!, the spread of an epidemic (Rhinocéros and Jeux de massacre) or guillotining en masse in Macbett, the same rhythm derived from the snowball effect of traditional farce creates suspense and prevails as the determining factor of structure. A clockwork mechanism also predominates in Le Roi se meurt, originally entitled La Cérémonie; in opening at a moment of imminent crisis, it resembles a classical tragedy and then follows a swift, downward curve, gradually wasting away. The situation in the longer play Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser however is in a sense a

reversal of that in the shorter play. In the first act, a mood of suspense is evoked in which the corpse whilst lying in the adjoining bedroom remains invisible to the audience. Despite the "who-done-it" atmosphere and the subsequent revelation of the corpse's probable identity, the corpse in itself is used as a catalyst to the main action, in the same way as the search for Mallot per se in Victimes du devoir. If, as Abastado has acknowledged, we must await the last act to receive clarification of the play's title, the search for a satisfactory ending, quite the reverse of Les Chaises, was to prove a major obstacle:

Dans la logique et la vérité des personnages, tout aurait dû continuer de grandir bien qu'il ne le puisse plus par manque de place. Les personnages auraient dû rester là alors qu'ils ne le pouvaient plus. Il fallait absolument ne pas trouver de solution, alors qu'il était absolument indispensable d'en trouver une. Et c'est dans cette contradiction que la pièce aurait dû se poursuivre, de plus en plus étouffante (Claude Abastado, Ionesco, p.109).

We are faced with an impossible, stifling situation in keeping with the whole spirit of the theatre of contradiction and paroxysm. Commentators have been quick to dismiss the last act as escape drama with its laughable deus ex machina befitting

a melodrama. Whilst undeniably Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser includes much incoherent and superfluous material (in an interview, the playwright himself admitted it had been altogether fun to make), it would be short-sighted to forget the almost insurmountable technical problems arising from the use of an extremely forceful symbol. So perplexing was the issue that two versions of ending the play were envisaged.

The final act or scene has proved to be a difficult hurdle in much of Ionesco's theatre. This is however partly to be expected in the aforementioned plays which, notwithstanding a few exceptions like Rhinocéros, disregard linear development and show harsh contempt towards the unities of time and place. Scenes fourteen and fifteen of Ce Formidable Bordel! or the following example from the beginning of L'Homme aux valises are symptomatic of Ionesco's object of derision:

Le Peintre: "Nous sommes en 1938, vous vous imaginez, c'est encore la révolution. Le grand souffle de 1789 passe encore à travers les gens.....Heureusement que nous sommes en 1938 et 1944 n'est pas encore arrivé." Premier Homme: "Regardez-les ces Français de 1940-42 comme ils sont petits et comme ils sont vaincus! Ces Français de 42....." Le Peintre: "Nous sommes en 1938, un Paris vivant. Ou 42, ou 50." (L'Homme aux valises, p.10)

With the incessant striking of the clock in La Cantatrice chauve and the anticipation of mushrooms' growth in the early stages of Madeleine's and Amédée's relationship, all chronology becomes blurred. The principal comic method of mingling allegory and reality is developed in Tueur sans gages, Le Roi se meurt and Jeux de massacre respectively. Edouard totally ignores any passage of time since leaving Bérenger's flat. No less than five references are made to the movements of a clock in the remorseless ceremony in Le Roi se meurt, in an attempt to fuse actual time with the timing of the events on the stage. Robert Postec's production in Brussels allowed for an interval at the point where the king says: 'et si je décidais de ne pas vouloir, si je décidais de ne pas me décider' (Théâtre Gallimard Vol.iv, p.57) to emphasise two different rhythms present in the play. But if we consider Ionesco's predilection for brevity, and his symmetrical skill (e.g. Tueur sans gages and Rhinocéros are approximately of the same length), then we ought to advocate a performance without interruption, like Jeux de massacre, lasting one hour forty minutes. In the frenzy which is Jeux de massacre, a tragic farce in its own right, chronological absence is taken to new limits: '...comme si, tout simplement, la condition mortelle des hommes subissait une accélération tout à fait folle..... Répétition veut dire immobilité. Imprévisible, incompréhensible, inguérissable, le monde est figé dans sa glace'.³

3. Robert Abirached: 'La Mort mise en scène - Ionesco et Genet', NRF, November 1970.

Allegory determines the dramatic structure as it did in Tueur sans gages. Apparent anarchy is in keeping with the death theme: 'cette "anarchie" apparente de composition se justifie pleinement puisque la Mort frappe par surprise, n'importe qui, n'importe où, n'importe quand....' (Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, p.213).

Time, as well as place, resembles a circle leading nowhere. The aforementioned illustration from Jeux de massacre points to a profound paradox of this essentially static drama; static in its total lack of chronological development and anything approaching a dénouement. Both frantic movement and immobility achieve similar effects. Audiences are conscious of plays beginning at any one point and ending just as abruptly. Kahler has referred to Ionesco's plays as being situated in an immobile present, and like that presence, lapped in darkness. What we often retain is a certain image or series of images with little or no sense of progression. Much of Ionesco's theatre can be qualified as "theatrical" in the manner in which Eric Bentley interpreted En Attendant Godot; a useful distinction in this respect has been drawn by Hugh Dickinson: 'To me theatrical is anything which achieves its desired effect through performance; "dramatic" involves consequential action, that is significant change directed to some aim or end' (Eugene Ionesco, 'The Existential Oedipus', in Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont, p.104).

Thus the concept of circularity or what Doubrovsky has called the phenomenon of "eternal return", which assumes various forms,

acquires significance. Stumbling-blocks in the drafting of the end to La Cantatrice chauve resulted from the play's isolation from any concept of time and an impression of "perpetuum mobile" transmitted by the absurd nature of the subject-matter. In Notes et contre-notes an account is given of the two complicated and controversial versions, before the present ending was ultimately adopted. Every action is orientated towards the close in Les Chaises in which the couple's double suicide is of secondary importance to their frenzied performance and the chairs themselves; in effect a striking example of Bentley's interpretation of "theatrical". The ending to Les Chaises was, after all, envisaged before anything else. But the dramatist's skill here lies in his exploiting the comic principle of the denial of the expectation of climax. To an audience accustomed for most of the play to bearing witness to intelligible dialogue between invisible guests, the entrance of the orator and what is more an individual of flesh and blood, makes a powerful theatrical impact. The playwright however is not content with one deflationary punch. A secondary ironic twist occurs when the spectators, no sooner having adjusted to the changed situation must come to terms with a deaf and dumb "orateur". Abrupt disorientation takes place at the end of Le Maître and Jeune Fille à marier, if not so vehemently. Before the curtain falls in Les Chaises though, a long pause of silence ensues so that the last scene may remain vividly in our minds. Psychological, if not actual physical encirclement and claustrophobia, reflect Ionesco's anathema towards totalitarianism, and much of his work can be considered in the light of a struggle opposed to such sensations.

At times, there is just a hint of circularity, as when Amédée the sceptic asks Madeleine: 'Si on s'en débarrasse, crois-tu que cela soit tellement utile? Il se peut qu'il vienne un autre invité, la même histoire recommencera....' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.295). Interchangeable, i.e. identical scenes in La Cantatrice chauve (scenes iv and vi, vii and xi and viii and x respectively), Le Piéton de l'air (pp.129-131 and pp.186-188) and Macbett (pp.19-21 and pp.21-23, pp.9-12 and pp.67-71, as well as pp.41-43 and pp.44-47) confirm Amédée's fears of repetition. Simultaneous scenes (Jeux de massacre - pp.53-59 and pp.60-64) perform the same function. But if Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser turns out to be inconclusive, Le Piéton de l'air is no less open-ended; despite Bérenger's flight and experiences of the apocalypse, everything on his return has been left unchanged. Elsewhere, as in Victimes du devoir and La Soif et la faim, characters are condemned to Sisyphean tasks. In contrast, Le Nouveau Locataire and Ce Formidable Bordel! show us characters being literally buried alive. Perhaps the most memorable illustrations of encirclement are to be found at the close of Rhinocéros, Jeux de massacre and Macbett respectively. A note of bitter irony at the end of the last two in particular: the last line of Jeux de massacre reads: 'Nous sommes pris au piège comme des rats' (p.111) whilst the fire rages and there is no suggestion of a rising phoenix; at the end of Macbett, in a play where the two warriors, Macbett and Banco, have been spending much of their time looking around for each other, Macol's accession to the throne suggests a cruel mockery of

Shakespearean catharsis.

Circular plots are closely combined with horizontal and vertical planes in many plays i.e. an eros-thanatos dichotomy:

Le dessin d'une pièce n'est donc pas -
ou n'est plus - de mener à son terme une
histoire, mais de rendre intuitivement
perceptibles par une figuration symbolique
et ordonnée, les archétypes oniriques
communs à l'auteur et aux spectateurs....
La représentation théâtrale n'est alors
que l'expression, à la fois multiple et une,
des élans impétueux d'un vouloir vivre, toujours
renaissant et toujours déçu que l'auteur a
découvert dans ses rêves et dont il veut
donner une conscience quasi physique au
spectateur (Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale
d'Eugène Ionesco, p.54).

This was already manifest in Victimes du devoir where the common-or-garden thriller plot, the pursuit of Mallot as the one supposedly major intrigue begging solution, was replaced by an incoherent structure composed of haphazard sequences. But this "natural" structure: 'cette absence de construction qui est une construction' (Notes et contre-notes, p.129), was precisely what the playwright had been seeking after the aforementioned paradox of

La Cantatrice chauve, i.e. an extremely logical construction:

Cette oeuvre n'a rien d'onirique. Les associations d'images, les mouvements du rêve sont tout à fait différents. Dans les rêves, il n'y a pas de progression rigoureuse. On passe d'une image, les associations se font librement. Elles sont plus désordonnées apparemment; en réalité elles doivent suivre un certain mouvement de l'âme, de l'être d'une façon très naturelle (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.129)

At the same time, ever since the iconoclasm of those early plays he has striven to reduce dramatic dialogue to a minimum. In retrospect, the last "act" of Tueur sans gages where Bérenger appears face to face with the Killer, has failed in Ionesco's view to become that supreme theatrical experience, despite widespread recognition of the uncanny tension it evokes. It does not represent literature as close as possible to the experience of dreaming. Similarly, on account of an over-emphasis on language in scenes IV - VII of Ce Formidable Bordel! respectively, the stage events no longer accurately mirror the playwright's intentions. Interpolations on stage theory, a frequent occurrence, are no less artificial: 'Je dis, que lorsque j'écris, j'essaye d'empêcher la pensée discursive ou la conscience diurne

d'intervenir, que je laisse surgir les images autant que possible: cela n'est jamais tout à fait pur!' (ibid., p.83)

Of interest in this respect is the space devoted to "images" and memories in the play Tueur sans gages whilst the "nouvelle" bearing the same title, though likewise a transcription of a dream, retains a marked simplicity and straightforwardness.

More and more, in the longer plays, there is a proclivity to abstraction. In Victimes du devoir, Le Roi se meurt, Le Piéton de l'air, La Soif et la faim and L'Homme aux valises an allegorical journey consisting of several disunited episodes, marking the evanescence of a persona or the search for true identity, forms the cornerstone of the play's structure. Much of this has and will not cease to raise controversy as to what extent the enigma of one individual's psyche, employed as a means of creating and sustaining tension in each of the plays' situations, remains dramatically effective, in contrast to the alternative "plot" we have already noted. Long-drawn-out passages undoubtedly do occur, in particular in Act II of Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser and the first two episodes of La Soif et la faim inspired originally by Claudel's Soulier de satin. These should however not make us oblivious of the complex challenge at hand: a recourse to objectivity in art arising from the conviction that universal significance can be read into one individual's thoughts, passions and feeling (a discovery made on the occasion of the public's acknowledgement of La Cantatrice chauve). We are as swiftly jolted out of our common-sense perception of reality by the contradictions inherent in the structure of later plays; this in turn originates in the opposition of feelings within and not

between individuals. Hence the externalisation of conflict within one character in Victimes du devoir where the whole structure intermingles past and would-be present, in Le Roi se meurt where the thoughts and feelings of Queen Marguerite and Queen Marie reflect the action taking place within Roi Bérenger's head (Cf. Dubillard's Maison d'Os) and in Le Piéton de l'air, a mixture of fairy-tale, nightmare and "saugrenu" reminiscent of the productions of the early 1950's. The enchantment of a dream episode is invariably succeeded by a sense of anguish. As for the sequence of the various moods or "correspondences" it is as significant as that occurring in a normal state of subconsciousness; thus a rapid switch at the beginning of L'Homme aux valises from an apparent journey in no man's land (scene I) to brief encounters with various family members recalled suddenly from the past (scenes II - V) to the "reality" of the protagonist's search for concrete information. Not until page twenty-four does the audience receive a true source of orientation, linking "Le Premier Homme" to a host of his antecedents: 'Je vois un grand trou' (L'Homme aux valises, p.24)

Moreover, a measure of the significance attached to the dramatic potential of the disordered association of dreams can be found in the analogy Ionesco draws between his most recent play and preceding works:

Un renouveau qui est peut-être
un retour vers Victimes du devoir

et mes premières pièces.....dans L'Homme
aux valises la construction est complexe.

Elle procède par retours en arrière, images éclatées... Cette pièce est faite d'une série de rêves emboîtés les uns dans les autres et l'unité est donnée par le personnage, toujours présent sur scène, à la fois témoin et acteur de ce qui se passe, mais aussi de ce qu'il fantasme. Egalement le personnage est toujours présent parce que dans ^{un} ~~au~~ rêve on est toujours au milieu de ses fantasmes, de ses images et, parce que son aventure, si onirique qu'elle paraisse, est d'abord une quête de soi.

(Eugène Ionesco, Entre la Vie et le rêve, p.171).

So whether he resumes the pattern of complexity adopted in Victimes du devoir or the rhythm of proliferation of his first plays, Ionesco has permanently rejected conventional canons of plot based on almost sacrosanct laws of cause and effect.

Chapter Five

USE OF LANGUAGE FOR COMIC EFFECTS

In traditional bourgeois theatre, as we have suggested, plot conveyed a note of clarity and assurance to the audience, leaving each spectator with a certain sense of superiority vis-à-vis the events on the stage. The same is no less true of the rôle of language. We may point to Anouilh and Giraudoux whose plays are readily identifiable depictions of bourgeois morality. Sartre and Camus, in their theatrical output attempted to come to terms with the irrationality of existence by making use of what appeared to them to be the only available vehicle, the language of rational logic. Breton and his disciples, on the other hand, had been eager to show that logic and common sense, and all that had been conventionally bracketed as "good literature", mirrored but a fraction of reality. In Nadja, rational logic had been qualified as 'la plus haïssable des prisons'.¹ Although enough evidence can be found to support Ionesco's theoretical acceptance of this proposition, it has never proved feasible in putting pen to paper for the purposes of dramatic production - hence the total failure of Artaud's Les Cenci compared to the success of post-war playwrights. Not until the works of Beckett and Ionesco did a revolution take place on the stage itself, when the spoken word in its habitual form was to come under fire.

1. Andre Breton, Nadja, Paris, 1928, reprinted in 1963), p.135.

What disconcerted those first audiences of La Cantatrice chauve so much was a remorseless pattern of anti-logic. The zany nature of the dialogue in the Martins' recognition scene and the subsequent information supplied by the Maid totally destroy the couple's hope of logical deduction from the facts known to them. Senseless words take charge of parlour game players who are emotionally and intellectually dead. The breakdown of rationality may often be attributed to a spirit of irony and contradiction. In this respect, we should call to mind M. Smith's description of Bobby Watson's physical appearance (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.1, pp.22-23) or the teacher's ludicrous assumption in La Leçon that the difference between various languages can be explained in terms of their striking similarity, or the patron's trite alliterative piece in Tueur sans gages: 'J'ai un pâté de lapin épatant, c'est du pur porc' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.94). Occasionally, he goes beyond this spirit of anti-thesis and introduces a Surrealist proverb: 'On ne fait pas briller ses lunettes avec du cirage noir' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.43) or a non-sequitur: 'Je te donnerai les pantoufles de ma belle-mère si tu me donnes le cercueil de ton mari' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.94). Another device to elicit laughter is the so-called experimental fable, such as Le Chien et le boeuf in La Cantatrice chauve which is made to sound like a plausible La Fontaine fable but then, in its utter lack of meaning, leaves the spectator in a state of limbo: 'Quelle est la morale? C'est à vous de la trouver' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.43). Paradoxically, the nonsense talk

"succeeds" as a result of its own built-in logic; refutation of what seems abundantly clear arises when logic is extended as far as possible. As M. Lecuyer has observed in his comprehensive linguistic study Ionesco ou la précedence du verbe² significance frequently precedes signification. This gives rise to a number of anomalies in the shape of permutations in Jacques ou la soumission when Mère Jacques talks to her son: 'Ah! fils ingrat, tu ne te rappelles même pas quand je te tenais sur mes genoux, et t'arrachais tes petites dents mignonnes, et les ongles de tes orteils pour te faire gueuler comme un petit veau adorable' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. i, p.94). Furthermore, accidents of language such as "egloge" and "mononstre" culminating in the all-embracing "chat" correspond to the physical monsters the spectators actually see on the stage. In Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, the present tense is employed in relation to a corpse. "Le bon sens" and any rationalization of a problem, suggesting it to be the key to its solution, receive a severe attack in these plays. Mock arguments as to the distinction between African and Asian rhinos in Rhinocéros and the controversy over the tortoise and the snail in Délire à deux (Théâtre Gallimard Vol.iii, p.202) are amongst many parodies of logic. In his predilection for syllogisms, Ionesco reminds us of Lewis Carroll:

Un médecin consciencieux doit mourir
avec le malade s'ils ne peuvent pas
guérir ensemble (Théâtre Gallimard, vol.i, p.21)

2. This essay appears in Cahiers Renaud-Barrault No.53, February, 1966.

Les personnes polies meurent en
s'excusant (Jeux de massacre, p.83)

Le Logicien au Vieux Monsieur: "Autre
syllogisme: tous les chats sont mortels.
Socrate est mortel. Donc Socrate est un
chat (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.25)

This childlike naiveté, as we shall examine later, can assume foreboding dimensions in a socio-political context where speakers suddenly find themselves in the dangerous position of disproving nothing. Numerous dialogues, particularly in the early plays, can be judged as indirect confirmation of the Logician's remarks in Rhinocéros about the absence of limits to the phenomenon of logic. This comic device of purely verbal logic has also been amply exploited in the comedian's lines in A Resounding Tinkle as well as some exchanges in One Way Pendulum, both very close to Ionesco in mood. The author's words at the end of A Resounding Tinkle which summarise what Ionesco, Beckett and other modern playwrights have been seeking to evoke in various plays: 'The retreat from reason means precious little to anyone who has never caught up with reason in the first place. It takes a trained mind to relish a non-sequitur'.³

In the whole debate between rational language and manifest evocations of the subconscious, we are treading on soft ground:

3. N.F. Simpson, A Resounding Tinkle, (London, 1973), p.74.

It could be argued that all irrational literature is subversive, and that therefore all such literature is important in creating a climate appropriate to revolutionary social change. But it could also be argued that all true human progress has been based on the critical use of reason; that no doctrines were more irrational than those of Hitlerism; and that therefore any literature which exalts the irrational at the expense of the rational is fundamentally hostile to progress and thus, in the long run, reactionary. Ionesco uses the first of these arguments to justify himself, and it was also the argument I adopted in this essay; but his critics who use the second argument have a strong case in their favour.⁴

Notwithstanding such deliberations, meaninglessness in La Cantatrice chauve prevails on a scale hitherto unknown to the post-war stage. Language, instead of acting as a catalyst to psychological analysis and assuming a purely representational rôle, has become an end in itself. Not only does the whole paraphernalia of existence proliferate before the audience, but so do words. As Vannier implies in his essay, we have now transcended illogicality for its own sake:

4. Richard Coe, 'Utopia and After', in Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont, p.153.

Dès qu'on refuse d'adopter le mouvement d'une pensée qui se cherche à travers ses mots, ceux-ci deviennent des corps étrangers ou dérisoires, et on oppose à un langage qui ne vivait que par son intention signifiante, une rhétorique sclérosée qui n'est que sa caricature. Il suffit pour cela de transformer ce langage en chose, absurde comme l'est toute chose dès qu'on la considère en dehors de son contexte humain.⁵

In Notes et contre-notes, words are described as falling like stones. The proliferation of language, more precisely of platitudes, characterises the hollowness and dull homogeneity of an alienated society to no less an extent than eggs and teacups. E. Melcher has provided the following definition of a cliché: '...the familiar commonplace formula on which people can rely because it gives a reassuring illusion not only of meaningful thought but also of permanence. Like all ritual, it is essentially a way of trying to explain and control the unknown.'⁶

In reproducing the axiomatic phrases of "La Méthode Assimil" in La Cantatrice Chauve to such a concentrated level, Ionesco has shown how people can find a thousand ways of saying

5. ~~Jean~~^{J.} Vannier, 'Le Langage et la terreur', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, p.59.

6. ~~E.~~^{E.} Melcher, 'The Use of Words in Contemporary French Theater', Modern Language Notes 77, 1972.

what amounts to nothing - speech is not controlled here partly by the will and partly by the nervous system as in real life, but by the latter source alone. This play has always been qualified by its creator as 'la tragédie du langage' (Notes et contre-notes, p.247). Normal verbal interchange is impeded here and much of what is heard can be traced to what Heidegger has called 'la parlerie quotidienne' (Claude Abastado, Ionesco, p.190). Within the context of comic theatrical language, Ionesco's success in writing this play is in large measure due to his mastering the following problem: 'somehow the phrase whose very essence is meaningless significance should become significant without thereby becoming meaningful' (Richard Coe, Ionesco, p.66). Pinter achieves a similar effect in his transcription of incoherent everyday speech; parallels might be drawn between Ionesco's concierges and Rose in The Room, or between petit bourgeois talk and the down-to-earth-expressions uttered by Ben and Gus in The Dumb Waiter. Even if Ionesco's later plays appear on the surface to be more articulate, the small talk persists. The mouthpiece of the "petite bourgeoise", for Vernois, is to be traced to the figure of the concierge:

La concierge par son langage se fait
l'écho multiple et renforcé de la vacuité
de tout discours. Elle s'exprime de manière
confuse, parataxique: elle accumule les
associations d'idées, les truismes, saute
du coq à l'âne au gré de ses mouvements

égoïstes ou d'élans de sa pitié facile.

Elle se complaît en monologues au style débridé, relâché, incohérent. Sa spontanéité est conditionnée par l'habitude et déterminée par des réactions immédiates à une situation toujours mouvante.

(La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, p.250).

Logorrhea "attacks" at the beginning of act two of Tueur sans gages and during much of Le Nouveau Locataire serve to confirm Vernois's thesis. Wherever a concierge makes an appearance, an unbalanced dialogue in the tradition of true farce ensues. Her cliché-ridden vulgarity is infectious. She stands for humanity all too prone to conceal itself behind a battery of "idées reçues", too scared to come to terms with the fearfulness of real life. Hidebound societies are very much in evidence in many plays. Apart from the concierges' patter, numerous remarks uttered by various crowds in the opening scenes to Rhinocéros, Le Piéton de l'air and Jeux de massacre respectively are characteristically dull and stupid. The mad parlour game of La Cantatrice chauve is allowed to continue elsewhere: talking without thinking in Les Chaises: 'Bois ton thé, Sémiramis' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.1, p.139). when there is no tea to be had; repetition ad nauseam in the same play ('il viendra', *ibid*, p.173); vacuous remarks echoing Flaubert's "idées reçues" in Délire à deux and La Jeune fille à marier; a readiness to make generalizations in Le Tableau (le gros Monsieur)

and La Jeune fille à marier, and thus, on the part of the playwright, a means of undermining characters who in failing to express genuine thought virtually say nothing. Dialogue hardly ever advances the action, since simultaneity, reiteration and a frequent chain of disconnected thoughts make up most of what is said. When a wild beast gallops past the onlookers in Rhinocéros, the event sets off commentary which in many ways is only too true to real life, yet the irony lies in the audience's expecting much more response to what has taken place. When no natural reaction is forthcoming, a recurrence to nonsense language and highly artificial exchanges becomes inevitable, as in the "grammar lesson" in the market-place in Jeux de massacre: (pp.7-21).

Troisième homme, au quatrième: Il n'y
a pas d'avenir.

Troisième femme à la quatrième: Rien n'est
à venir. Tout est à prévenir.

Quatrième femme à la troisième: Mieux vaut
prévenir que guérir.

Quatrième homme, au troisième: Rien n'est
vraiment prévisible.

Troisième femme à la quatrième: Rien n'est
vraiment guérissable.

Troisième homme, au quatrième: Pas même le
prévisible.

Quatrième femme à la troisième: pas même

le curable.

Quatrième homme au troisième: Surtout pas le

prévisible ne peut être prévu.

Troisième femme: C'est surtout le curable

qui ne peut être guéri. C'est du poison.

(ibid., p.14)

The accumulations of invective exchanged between Glamis and Condor in Macbett is in no way distant from the mood of petty quarrelling and abuse prevalent in Ionesco's theatre. For most of the time, it hardly matters who says what, for individual words and phrases carry little weight and so, like people and objects, they have become interchangeable.

Bonds can be established between logicians' quack philosophies and clichés on the one hand, and the most adverse kind of political ideology on the other. Ionesco is after all the child of an age in which politics and the language of the mass media feed on platitudes for their very "raison d'être". His plays, by dint of ridicule, constitute a vehement attack on those whose business it is to distort genuine thought as a means of justifying all manner of violence and oppression. Consistently victimised by language, mankind is at the same time highly vulnerable to political manipulation. Ionesco's critique in this respect found a starting-point in the sinister humour of La Leçon. Formulae and tables reeled off by the teacher reduce linguistic and mathematical knowledge to the level of gibberish; polite exchanges thinly mask

the instinctual realities latent in a sub-text:

Le Professeur:.....Sept et un?

L'Elève: Huit quater. Et parfois neuf.

Le Professeur: Magnifique. Vous êtes
magnifique. Vous êtes exquise. Je vous
félicite chaleureusement, Mademoiselle.

Ce n'est pas la peine de continuer. Pour

l'addition, vous êtes magistrale. Voyons

la subtraction. Dites-moi seulement, si

vous n'êtes pas épuisée, combien font

quatre moins trois? (Théâtre Gallimard,

Vol.i, p.67).

In this parody of the teaching process, nonsensical language assumes complete control of the situation, to the point of stifling all natural life. What remains paramount is the system:

'l'arithmétique mène à la philologie, et la philologie mène au crime' (ibid., p.91). From the arithmetic lesson onwards, the dialogue serves simply to punctuate feelings of aggression and submissiveness. The pupil is literally murdered by words, i.e. in this context vocal forms of gesture; Abastado has written a propos this play of 'le cours tout préparé' (Ionesco, p.70)

Marie alone triumphs for she does not let herself be confused by the meaning of words. Meaninglessness and paranoia are strongly evoked in Jacques ou la soumission, where a family sets rigid conditions of obedience to a particular order by resorting to a ritual recognition composed of absurd formulae.

If the ritual aspect of language is abandoned as from the Béranger cycle of plays, in what have generally come to be regarded as more articulate dramas, the "ideological struggle" has intensified. In terms of winners and losers, the dice are loaded against Béranger in Tueur sans gages; the soulless artificiality of the "cité radieuse" reinforced by Mère Pipe's demagogy and the dwarf killer reign without threat of a serious challenge. Coming face to face with inhumanity, every conceivable humanist argument and yearning to understand turns out to be fatal, and we can only conclude that the last act is in its own way no less of a tragedy than the asinine dialogue of the Smiths and the Martins in La Cantatrice chauve. The stage directions at the beginning of the last "act" read as follows:- 'Il parle avec une éloquence qui doit souligner les arguments tristement inutiles et périmés, qu'il avance' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.164). The process of manipulation is stepped up in Rhinocéros: 'On s'apercevra certainement que les répliques de Botard, de Jean, de Dudard, ne sont que les formules clefs, les slogans des dogmes divers cachant, sous le masque de la froideur objective, les impulsions les plus irrationnelles et véhémentes. Rhinocéros aussi est une tentative de "démystification"' (Notes et contre-notes, p.279). To take the case of Jean first, his thinking bears a close similarity to that of the common dictator. As for Botard, his trade-unionist jargon possesses an affinity to the speeches of "l'orateur" in Jeux de massacre (p.72) and Jacques in Ce Formidable Bordel! respectively; Ionesco drew material from the minutes of trade union meetings for Rhinocéros. Of the aforementioned

three figures though, Dudard, despite his ultimately falling into the same net as the others, is the most subtly delineated. As a very conscientious worker, Dudard possesses a force of persuasion and a willingness to understand and resort to intellectual arguments. When the third act begins, he is clearly meant to stand out as intellectually superior to Bérénger and in his cold-blooded casuistry, he exploits the latter's sense of insecurity and reliance on intuition:

Bérénger à Dudard: "L'homme est supérieur au rhinocéros!"

Dudard: Je ne dis pas le contraire. Je ne vous approuve pas non plus. Je ne sais pas, c'est l'expérience qui le prouve. J'ai des scrupules! Mon devoir m'impose de suivre mes chefs et mes camarades, pour le meilleur et pour le pire....Mon devoir est de ne pas les abandonner, j'écoute mon devoir. (Théâtre Gallimard, vol.iii, p.103)

We are reminded here of Madeleine's love of law and order in Victimes du devoir: 'Que veux-tu, mon pauvre ami, la loi est nécessaire, étant nécessaire et indispensable, elle est bonne, et tout ce qui est bon, est agréable. Il est, en effet, très agréable d'obéir aux lois, d'être un bon citoyen, de faire son devoir, de posséder une conscience pure!' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.184). There is little doubt that Dudard is cleverer

than Madeleine in his sense of political, and moral justification. In attempting to understand a phenomenon however, he falls into the intellectual's trap of justifying the most despicable of acts; what he lacks most is simple human feeling and natural emotional responses. Bérenger on the other hand, left alone with Daisy, adopts similar language to Dudard's in declaring his love: 'Vivons notre vie, soyons heureux, Nous avons le devoir d'être heureux' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.111). So irresolute had Bérenger been earlier on that he had told Dudard of his wish to see the Logician again. By the end of a good production of the play, and the same applies Tueur sans gages, we are left convinced that Bérenger's every move demonstrates either directly or indirectly the ideological force and the futility of opposition, rather than anything remotely approaching a heroic stance.

The crescendo reached at the final curtain of Rhinocéros is in a sense not allowed to fade away in subsequent plays. Words continually threaten to conquer the minds of those who manipulate them. The events of La Soif et la faim, Jeux de massacre, and Macbett with their travesties of justice could be subtitled by the second assessor in Piéton de l'air: 'Si la justice vous semble injuste, c'est parce qu'elle est équitable' (ibid., p.185). Kafka's The Trial lies close at hand. The final episode of La Soif et la faim, apart from its blatant allusions to the political aspects of Brecht's dramas in the names Tripp and Brechtoll, deliberately makes use

of psychoscientific terms, in particular "aliénation", "désintoxication" and "traumatisme", to convey the force of a particular ideology. Similarly in l'Impromptu de l'Alma, pedants' talk based on philosophical jargon and derived from articles in Théâtre Populaire, Bref and Le Figaro dominates every exchange between the various "doctors"; Nicole's tirade in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme was not dissimilar in conception. A party line is vigorously enforced in Jeux de massacre: 'Dans les circonstances exceptionnelles que nous vivons on a le droit et le devoir d'être prudent et méfiant. On a le droit et le devoir d'être provisoirement, égoïste dans les moments graves' (p.41). Such alibis for political killings make use of terms which are familiar to audiences of Victimes du devoir, Tueur sans gages, and Rhinocéros, to mention a few plays. Politicians' contradictory dogma rivals the utterances of the Smiths and Martins in its fundamental absurdity: 'Je ne promets pas la disparition du mal, mais je promets que la signification en sera différente' (ibid., p.41). Party loyalty and political commitment are the first prisoner's thoughts on his departure at the end of the gaol scene. The crunch comes towards the end of the play in the rhetorical apology for cannibalism. Even if matters do not reach such an extreme in Macbett, the full force of political parody is evoked by Banco and Macbett as potential dictators making identical speeches. Nor is Ce Formidable Bordel! without its own "rhinocérite" in the shape of a revolutionary country in scene X to be followed by a revolutionary hymn arousing aggressive

interaction and faith in the "brotherhood of Man".

With respect to the sheer quantity of banal remarks and various shades of political propaganda hitherto examined, little doubt remains that communication of a kind subsists. It is just this seeming communicability between individuals however that acts as the greatest illusion. Once everything has been strangled by the assumption of an all embracing rationalism, the essential truths of reality, such as genuine altruism and love, can only be expressed indirectly by means of images, and language in this role is graded as a poor second: 'Les mots ne sont pas la parole' (Journal en miettes, p.101) . Coe has drawn attention to this central problem, too: '....whereas in the early plays we find Ionesco attempting to use language to express nothing, in the latter ones we find him trying to express something with no valid means of expression' (Ionesco, p.110). An awareness of the illusory nature of all oral communication and the perennial gulf between spoken language on the one hand and thoughts and instincts on the other is in no way restricted to an observation of the aforementioned aspects of language. Words are equally inadequate in conveying frequently recurring dream experiences and a unique sense of amazement and second birth known as "l'insolite". Much has been written about oneiric elements in the various plays, but this is partly to overlook that Ionesco is not a poet. In La Cantatrice chauve (p.50), Mary's recital of the Surrealistic poem "Le Feu" falls on deaf ears as she is swiftly ushered out of the room, whilst the dialogue between

Jacques and Roberte in Jacques ou la soumission, both in a sense "poets" isolated from the rest of society, degenerates into monosyllables. The very titles of the plays (i.e. Jacques ou la soumission, Victimes du devoir, Rhinocéros, Jeux de massacre) imply that the scales are weighted in favour of the forces of authority and repression. Associations of water (representing the colourlessness of everyday life), fire (symbolizing the search for individual identity) and light (meant as an interpretation of transparency and hope) first feature in the "chat" episode in Jacques ou la soumission and abound in subsequent plays. Agnès's words towards the end of Ce Formidable Bordel! could equally have well been said by Choubert, Amédée in their revelations of an inner light or Béranger in his honest naiveté whilst contemplating the "cité radieuse" in Tueur sans gages:

Tout cela, toute cette tirade a un
arrière-fond de bruits et de vociférations.
.....Il y a des centaines, il y a des milliers
d'autres villes, des cités florissantes, des
cités épanouies, les unes plus belles que
les autres. Il y a aussi beaucoup de lacs
dans ce continent, l'eau est limpide et
transparente et les montagnes qui les
entourent sont immaculées.....Mais oui, c'est
vrai, puisque c'est dans ma tête. (Ce Formidable
Bordel! p.106)

Marie's affirmation of life and her singular role in defending Roi Bérenger are similar in mood: 'Plonge dans l'étonnement et la stupéfaction sans limites, ainsi tu peux être sans limites, ainsi tu peux être infiniment. Sois étonné, sois ébloui, tout est étrange, indéfinissable. Ecarte les barreaux de la prison, enfonce ses murs, évade-toi des définitions.....L'éblouissement pénètre les chairs et les os comme un flot, comme un fleuve de lumière éclatant. Si tu le veux' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, pp.41-42).

Owing to its repetitive monotony though, such language stands condemned and loses much of its symbolic force. There are constant reminders in Ionesco's theatre of "la boue tiède des vivants" (ibid.,p.31) - what is often lacking is a penetration into the cause of such a state of affairs. Even with the more balanced portrayal of women in La Soif et la faim, the plight of Joséphine in Le Piéton de l'air and a moving scene in Jeux de massacre (pp.88-95), little has altered the fate of man and wife by the penultimate scene in Ionesco's latest play:

La Femme: C'est le crépuscule.

Premier Homme: Nous avons toute une
carrière devant nous. Tu verras, demain,
tout sera neuf. Je comprends maintenant,
je te reconnais.

La Femme: De temps en temps, rarement, tu te
réveilles, dans cette vie ou tu n'as fait
que dormir presque tout le temps.

Premier Homme: Je me réveille en rêve.

Je ne m'endormirai plus dans mon rêve.

(L'Homme aux valises, p.96)

Immediately following this "Le Premier Homme", quite mute, resumes his "journey" condemned to isolation like so many protagonists before him. Nor is a profound sense of spiritual fatigue, failure and isolation dispelled in Le Piéton de l'air where Marthe and Bérenger, the latter betraying man's innate longing to fly, share a poetic conception of life unknown to those closest to them. A brave attempt at interpreting the "anti-monde" is made by Bérenger:

.....Peut-être pourrait-on avoir une vague idée de ce monde quand on voit les tours d'un château se reflétant dans l'eau, une mouche la tête en bas au plafond, une écriture de droite à gauche et de bas en haut (celui-ci peut être représenté par un panneau avec des lettres majuscules qui s'enchevêtrent), un jongleur, un acrobate ou les rayons du soleil qui se réfractent, se brisent, se désintègrent en une poussière de couleurs après avoir traversé un prisme de cristal, pour se reconstituer, tu vois, sur ce mur, sur cet écran, sur ton visage, comme une lumière éclatante, unie.....(Le Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, pp.150-151)

but as the play draws to a close all has been superseded by visions of an apocalypse recurring in Le Roi se meurt (Théâtre Gallimard, vol.iv, pp.17-19), to the accompaniment of 'musique foraine, tristement "gaie"' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.198). Marthe is allowed the last word: 'Il n'y aura peut-être rien d'autre que ces pétards.....cela s'arrangera peut-être....peut-être les flammes pourront s'éteindre....peut-être la glace va fondre....peut-être les abîmes se rempliront... peut-être que.....les jardins....les jardins....' (ibid., p.198). In La Soif et la faim the omnipresence of a gaping void is suggested by Jean's inability both to describe Marie-Madeleine's features except in pure abstracts and recount the occurrences throughout his long journey to the "bonne auberge" (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv.,pp.109-113). Like everything else words are subordinated to the implacable forces of transience and death and in all this, rhetoric and verbosity are out of place. Hope of immortality announced in Le Roi se meurt: 'Que tous meurent pourvu que je vive éternellement même tout seul dans le désert sans frontières. Je m'arrangerai avec la solitude. Je garderai le souvenir des autres, je les regretterai sincèrement. Je peux vivre dans l'immensité transparente du vide. Il vaut mieux regretter que d'être regretté' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, p.42) proves fruitless for Roi Bérenger as well as for Jean in La Soif et la faim and Le Premier Homme in L'Homme aux valises. Apart from accepting the truth with simple honesty, as in the moving scene between the elderly couple in Jeux de massacre or in certain exchanges towards the end of Le Roi se meurt, nothing can be achieved in the way of counter-acting such a predicament.

Sentimentality is uncalled for in Roi Bérenger's dialogue with Juliette: 'Tout ce qui va être dit par le Roi dans cette scène doit être dit avec hébétude, stupéfaction, plutôt qu'avec pathétisme' (ibid., p.48). Similarly, the stage directions pertinent to the "chat" tirade read: 'Cette tirade du chat doit être dite avec le moins d'émotion possible; le Roi doit la dire en prenant un air plutôt d'hébétude, avec une sorte de stupeur rêveuse, sauf peut-être cette toute dernière réplique qui exprime une détresse' (ibid., p.60). Notwithstanding the rituals of monarchy and the love of superlatives, Roi Bérenger on facing death compares himself to a pupil who has prepared nothing for his examination - such is the mortal's common lot. Once dead the name Bérenger will hardly figure in a book amongst millions in any one of a million libraries. Human speech is perishable.

Ce que nous avons à dire, il faut
le dire tout de suite. Ainsi, on
peut se faire une place dans l'histoire
de l'expression. Nous n'avons qu'un
seul mot à dire. Il sera enterré avec
les millions d'autres mots, mais auparavant,
il se sera fait entendre. Si on ne se dépêche
pas, le mot n'est plus compréhensible, il
perd sa signification, il est dépassé.

(Alexandre in Jeux de massacre, p.36)

Language is ultimately just an excuse, 'littérature'
(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, p.43), as finite as any other part
of human existence.

Behind the illusion which is "littérature" lies a deep threat to undermine the spoken word present at all levels of verbal interchange in Ionesco's plays so that a permanent conflict ensues between language and its sole alternative, silence. To understand this phenomenon, a distinction must be drawn between words per se and sound, and so doing, as Vannier has observed, we should interpret the teacher's remarks in La Leçon quite literally: 'Si vous émettez plusieurs sons à une vitesse accélérée, ceux-ci s'agripperont les uns aux autres automatiquement, constituant ainsi les syllabes des mots, à la rigueur des phrases, c'est-à-dire des groupements plus ou moins importants, des assemblages purement irrationnels de sons, dénué de tout sens.....' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. i. p.77). The protagonist of Ionesco's latest novel Le Solitaire, at the same time the "Personnage" of Ce Formidable Bordel!, utters similar thoughts: 'Souvent il me suffisait de répéter assez longtemps et assez vite, le mot cheval ou le mot table jusqu'au moment où la notion se vidait de son contenu, toute signification disparaissant' (Le Solitaire, p.62). Within the context of the various plays we have already pointed to several aspects of such a nonsensical condition. It is not enough that chairs and clocks assume the status of characters in their own right, but characters' responses have to compete with all kinds of noise: 'A stage full of empty yet "heavy" (tangible) noise is certainly full in the literal sense of the word. The shouting of the Martins and the Smiths, the Jacks and the Roberts is in no way different than Madeleine's coffee cups, The New Tenant's

furniture, or Roberta's eggs' (Richard Schechner, 'The Inner and Outer Reality', in Tulane Drama Review VII, no.3, p.197) Exterior reality whether it be an organic invasion as at the end of L'Avenir est dans les oeufs, street noises (Tueur sans gages), the melodic trumpeting of almost lovable creatures i.e. pachyderms in the second half of Rhinocéros, movements of protest and revolution (Ce Formidable Bordel!) or the hustle and bustle of port activity (L'Homme aux valises) continually encroaches on the central action. But even more pronounced is the "noise" or silence emanating from the absence of anything worthwhile to say. Conspicuously, the stage-direction "silence" often emerges during a conversation between husband and wife; the only alternative to talking in their existence already strained by thwarted love. Although Les Chaises is meant as an albeit pathetic plea for dialogue and mutual understanding, the reverse takes place. Elsewhere dialogues degenerate into monologues, with at best one partner echoing the words of the other (e.g. Juliette and Roi Bérenger in Le Roi se meurt (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, pp.49-57) or Jean and Madeleine in La Soif et la faim (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv.pp.94-98). Much of the trouble lies in a sense of anguish experienced by many characters, particularly in the longer plays, who are unable to come to terms with themselves since no word has been found to describe the Self. In Ce Formidable Bordel! almost the entire play revolves around a mute listener and his garrulous partners:

Avec Ce Formidable Bordel! je crois avoir
introduit dans le théâtre moderne cette chose
assez difficile: le long monologue...Mon metteur

en scène Jacques Mauclair aussi, qui me disait: "Mais personne ne va résister à ces longues tirades, ça ne se fait plus." Contrairement à ce que nous craignons, le public a écouté ces monologues;.....Grâce au monologue de la pièce j'ai constaté que le public pouvait accueillir, comprendre la solitude d'autrui. Chaque personnage qui racontait son drame, ses problèmes, se plaignait en fait de sa solitude (Eugène Ionesco, Entre La Vie et le rêve, pp.109-110)

From this it seems that the playwright succeeded here in arousing what he had sought to do in so many of his previous plays. Much of the time however language affords no solace. If at best a long monologue is met by silence, elsewhere mutual exchanges are ridiculed in the guise of contrapuntal dialogues in Rhinocéros (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,pp.24-28), sneering on the part of the dwarf killer in Tueur sans gages (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.176,) applause by the monks in La Soif et la faim (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv,p.174) sardonic laughter from Macbett in Macbett (p.47) or mere hysterics by the Personnage at the end of Ce Formidable Bordel! Verbal exchanges turn into soap opera in Macbett (ibid.,97-99) and Le Piéton de l'air (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.164) or are reduced to uncanny silence and grave looks Frère Tarabas and Frère Supérieur in La Soif et la faim (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol. iv, p.148). Amongst the most powerful images in Ionesco's

is the final part of Les Chaises. Here an old woman is found echoing her husband's words and reiterating them to a point when the supposed dialogue turns into babble. All the audience is left with is a deaf and dumb orator totally helpless and yet desperately needing to be understood by his fellow men. Set against this is the old woman's belief in language as a kind of salvation: 'C'est en parlant qu'on trouve les idées, les mots et puis nous, dans nos propres mots, la ville aussi, le jardin, on trouve, on n'est plus orphelin' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.139). Such a proposition is cruelly refuted by the final scene. Though far from the elimination of spoken dialogue of Beckett's Actes sans paroles, Ionesco's plays are nevertheless situated at the edge of a dangerous precipice. In the ceaseless conflict between sound and silence, the latter invariably wins, as an analysis of most plays' ending shows. Like Beckett's Watt and Bérenger facing the killer, we are up against an impenetrable wall even if we are reluctant to admit it. Much of the time is devoted to the business of sheer survival. Ironically reminding us of En attendant Godot, the figure of the concierge in Le Nouveau Locataire comes closest to suggesting what is afoot: 'Vous savez, Monsieur, une parole en amène une autre et le temps passe' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.118)

Chapter Six

EXPLOITATION OF PURE THEATRE FOR COMIC EFFECTS

Les choses sont différentes si l'on considère que la parole ne constitue qu'un des éléments du théâtre: incarner des personnages, mais aussi matérialiser des angoisses, des présences intérieures. Il est donc non seulement permis mais recommandé de faire jouer les accessoires, faire vivre les objets, animer les décors, concrétiser les symboles (Notes et contre-notes, p.63).

When language either reaches a state of disintegration into sound or is condemned by a flood of verbosity, the stage must literally take over and "speak". Ionesco's primary purpose in writing plays is after all creative drama and he wishes fully to exploit the comic potential of a three dimensional stage. When everything has been thrown into balance, the enlargement of effects he promotes has little in common with literary language. Though the dramatist cannot for practical purposes reduce a text to a bare minimum, he is continually striving to evoke the supremacy of "images", the truth of fiction as opposed to that of common-sense perception. In terms of a theatrical performance this supposes a return to the original concept of theatre as a spectacle or ritual with an aggressively visual and aural impact. The significance of

stage settings, the profusion and later the dearth of various paraphernalia, and the strengthening or replacing of the bonds of quasi physical contact on either side of the footlights, so that at times stage action seems to physically encompass the auditorium, are all nothing new or outstanding in themselves, but after the insipidity of boulevard and commercial plays they serve to reaffirm the spirit of genuine drama. Ionesco's art of exaggeration or paroxysm, dependent largely on the fastidiousness of his stage instructions and their overall effect, is just taking theatrical conventions to their absolute limit. If we are to any extent to be jolted out of our day-to-day complacency, then we must at first be confronted with a mirror of that "normal" existence.

With a few notable exceptions including Tueur sans gages, Le Roi se meurt and Macbett, whenever the curtain rises on one of his plays, our first impressions are deceptive, for we seem to find ourselves in a very familiar kind of world, the stereotyped "salon" of boulevard theatre. The plays of the early 1950's in particular present us with nondescript rooms reminiscent of Zola and Becque, marked by an air of old age and decrepitude. Pictorialism, in the guise of the melodrama's convention of "le tableau vivant", characterises the set at the start of the second act of "Rhinocéros". Later works, even though an abstract vagueness is increasingly evident, are still for the most part rooted in the world of provincialism and the "petite bourgeoisie": the ugliness of the flat and above all the jarring street sounds as the curtain rises on the second act of Tueur sans gages,

the postman's sound in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser; café and office life in both Rhinocéros and Ce Formidable Bordel!, damp claustrophobia in the first episode of La Soif et la faim; market activity in Jeux de massacre, despite everything unmistakably French: 'La scène représente une ville, la place. Ce n'est pas une ville moderne, ce n'est pas une ville ancienne. Cette ville ne doit avoir aucun caractère particulier. Le style qui conviendrait le mieux: entre 1880 et 1920. Jour de marché' (Jeux de massacre, p.7)

The noise and bustle of social activity noted in the preceding chapter are rarely distant. Even in the aforementioned exception, Le Roi se meurt the medieval and the modern are comically juxtaposed: 'salle du trône, vaguement délabrée, vaguement gothique' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv,p.9), the first exchange between Roi Bérenger and Juliette centres on the problems of central heating and cleaning living-rooms. So though we are conscious of being situated within a particular environment, an unfamiliar chord is also struck. Analogous to the grammatically correct yet thoroughly specious language of La Cantatrice Chauve, to quote only one example amongst many, stage directions can turn out to be just as disconcerting; as in Jacques ou la soumission: 'Un tableau ne représentant rien; un vieux fauteuil usé, poussiéreux, au milieu de la scène; une table de nuit; des choses indéfinies, à la fois étranges et banales, comme de vieilles pantoufles; peut-être un canapé défoncé, dans un coin, des chaises boiteuses' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.97). Jacques ou la soumission is

after all sub-titled "comédie naturaliste", in other words a parody of Zola.

It could be interpreted, and many commentators have already done so, that in parodying Naturalist and boulevard theatre Ionesco's sole aim is to launch an attack on the bastions of rationalism for its own sake. This remains a half-truth. Only if the happenings on stage are seen to originate from our would-be rationalist daily life can there be a suggestion of that which is diametrically opposed to it. Believing in the fusion of organic and inorganic matter (e.g. the rôle of eggs in L'Avenir est dans les oeufs), which are not only what they appear to be but also represent future generations, in the constant to and fro between life and death he looks upon ordinary and extraordinary actions as running parallel to each other, and his main dilemma in writing plays lies in creating a genuine, non-verbal expression of the irrational:

Plus l'action traditionnelle s'efface
au profit de la description d'états ou
d'événements intimes qui ne s'extériorisent
pas dans des actions, plus la difficulté est
grande pour l'auteur de montrer ce qui se
passe. Il en revient aux jeux surréalistes,
pour mettre en évidence l'impuissance non
évidente de l'homme; l'exigence esthétique
d'un théâtre suggestif et "total" a été

réalisé à partir d'un état de besoin
fondamental: à savoir la difficulté à
représenter scéniquement une situation
qui ne permet plus de recourir à l'action
ni au dialogue explicatif. (Hildegard
Seipel, 'Entre réalisme et surréalisme',
in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco,
pp.39-40).

What Seipel refers to as "jeux surréalistes" or the plays' visual language is a reflection of the playwright's deep-seated anguish. What he calls "onirisme" takes place before us; the heart-beat of a dying man fills the auditorium and causes the walls of the palace to shake in Le Roi se meurt (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, p.63). No ~~U.F.O.~~ ^{UFO} or creature from outer space is required, nor is any attempt made at shocking audiences with quasi-thriller material, for our daily milieu alone provides enough sources of estrangement. Ionesco is not striving towards a reproduction of reality or verisimilitude; he seeks rather to evoke fundamental rhythms and essences. We are reminded of the theatre of Meyerhold and Apollinaire's preface to Les Mamelles de Tirésias: 'Quand l'homme a voulu imiter la marche il a créé la roue qui ne ressemble pas à une jambe. Il a fait ainsi du surréalisme, sans le savoir'.¹

Almost all the controversies Ionesco has experienced with various producers stem from his longing to uncover the "ficelles"

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, Œuvres poétiques, texte établi et annoté par M.Adema et M.Decaudin, (Paris, 1959), p.85.

of theatre and from his firm conviction that the grossly and grimly exaggerated can communicate a playwright's intentions much more directly than what remains primitive imitation. Hence the décor in many plays is in keeping with a theatre of paroxysm based on a rhythm of proliferation. In a German production of Les Chaises, the play in Ionesco's view lost all its desired appeal of a "ballet fantastique", because the producer refused to have forty or more chairs carried onto the stage; the more chairs there are, the greater the profundity of the void in the empty ballroom effect after the double suicide: 'il ne faut jamais laisser parler les vieux en dehors de "la présence de cette absence" à laquelle ils doivent se référer constamment, qu'ils doivent constamment entretenir, embrasser, faute de quoi l'irréalisme ne pourrait être suggéré (car il ne peut être créé que par opposition permanente de ce qui est visible)' (Notes et contre-notes, p.264). The German producer had pandered to his audience's interests in realism so that what was achieved in Ionesco's view at the performance was a "grand guignol", not at all what he himself was seeking to convey. Nor could Peter Hall accept for his part the harmful and all too provocative note of exaggeration in La Leçon and instead of forty bargained for four murders a day. So great was the force of convention in America that a producer there could not dispense with the need for a telephone in Rhinocéros. Similar preoccupations about verisimilitude daunted Serreau too concerning Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser since he could not at first be persuaded to install legs measuring one and a half metres on the stage. But if the play was to remain a true reflection of the dramatist's

intent, the issue of length became crucial; on removing the corpse from the flat, Amédée is seen to be tampering with the very substance of his common existence with Madeleine: 'On doit avoir l'impression que le cadavre, dont on ne voit toujours pas la tête et qui traîné par Amédée, avance, maintenant, nettement, en direction de la fenêtre, entraîne dans son départ toute la maison et les entrailles de personnages' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i.p.301). Matter in the form of teacups, mushrooms or chairs invades the stage at such a hectic rate, that it diminishes the significance of all other varieties of life. Humanity is reduced both to a mass of robot-objects and to a vacuum, what Bérenger calls 'un vide chaotique' (Richard Coe, 'La Prolifération', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, p.81). But objects do not simply invade the stage; they also dictate the rest of the action and enjoy a certain kind of autonomy in Les Chaises and Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser: 'C'était joli, le théâtre libre! On disait il est cinq heures et il y avait une vraie pendule qui sonnait cinq heures. La liberté d'une pendule, ce n'est quand même pas ça! Si la pendule sonne cent deux heures, ça commence à être du théâtre!'² Perhaps the most outstanding examples of this kind of oppression are still to be found in his very first play:

Mme Smith: Nous n'avons pas l'heure chez nous!

(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i,p.47)

M. Smith:.....il y a quatre heures
que nous vous attendons. Pourquoi êtes-vous
venus en retard?

2. Jean Giraudoux, L'Impromptu de Paris, quoted by Hildegard Seipel, 'Entre réalisme et surréalisme', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, p.37.

Mme et M. Smith s'assoient en face des
des visiteurs. La pendule souligne les
répliques, avec plus ou moins de force,
selon le cas! (ibid., p.33).

The doorbell ringing episode in La Cantatrice chauve, the movements of the clocks' hands during the telephone exchange scene in Amédée au comment s'en débarrasser (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.247), the to all appearances autonomous movements of the buffet and pictures in Le Nouveau Locataire (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii.p.193) or the columns and trees in Le Piéton de l'air are other well-known examples. Anything can happen once cause and effect cease to function. Much is attributable to a basic principle of force: one thing on its own is funny whilst one hundred things are in due proportion a hundred times funnier. Coakley puts it somewhat differently: 'To insist upon the importance of things to the exclusion of all else; to subscribe, moreover, to materialism as the only code by which man must live is to invite the comic disaster of the final scene of L'Avenir est dans les oeufs'.³

Whether it is called comic disaster or a mood approaching Pinter's comedy of menace, the threat of encroaching matter amongst other features takes place in an often claustrophobic atmosphere acting as a source of anxiety. Those clocks which go haywire also symbolize the passage of time and death. What we bear witness to

3. James Francis Coakley, The Comic World of Eugène Ionesco. A Study in Dramatic Technique, p.101.

in nine cases out of ten is a world closed in on itself akin to Pinter's single room and furthermore a microcosm of the totalitarian state. In this sense, Les Chaises provides an interesting yardstick with the rest of Ionesco's plays. The play is set in a room in a lighthouse on an island cut off from the rest of mankind. Such an atmosphere of sequestration also predominates in the study in La Leçon, in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, in the third act of Rhinocéros where Bérenger's room has been compared to Medusa's raft, in Le Roi se meurt which takes place "inside the head" like Dubillard's Maison d'Os, in Le Nouveau Locataire and more recently Ce Formidable Bordel! where at one point an iron curtain is lowered hermetically sealing the speakers from external events. From such a milieu little to no escape is afforded. Even more disconcerting in view of this atmosphere is a detail in some plays implying audience participation in the proceedings. When the old woman in Les Chaises arranges the chairs with their backs facing the audience, this is inviting us to participate in the whirlwind action in the sense of a theatre in the round. Again, owing to the installation of a window at the front of the set in Rhinocéros, we too become involved in the "rhinocérite" process. Demagogues and a concierge address the street crowd alias the audience directly in Jeux de massacre (pp.72 and 77) and Ce Formidable Bordel! (p.98) respectively. In addition, a sense of circularity is communicated by virtue of the actual form of the set. If we

consider Les Chaises once more, the oppressive aspect of the empty chairs is reinforced by the elaborate hemisphere suggestive of a maze and a graveyard. Particularly dramatic in a production of Le Roi se meurt is the use of these round shaped thrones by virtue of the invading void in the closing stages: 'Le Roi est 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' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, p.74). In Le Piéton de l'air, circularity is suggested by a semicircle again, here in the form of a plateau bordered by a precipice and also by the skilful use of a back-drop:

Pendant ce temps, la toile, avec les éléments du décor qui seront indiqués, défilera dans le sens de la marche des Anglais. La famille Bérenger marchera à contrecourant de la toile du fond ou fera semblant de marcher. A l'avant-scène, les deux enfants joueront au croquet à contresens de la marche des parents anglais...

1^{ère}
2^{ème} :
2 :

J'étais dans un pays d'où je ne pouvais plus sortir....Je n'avais jamais eu envie d'en sortir, j'ai eu tellement peur. Je ne voyais plus que les murs partout autour de moi..... Ce n'est pas de ne pas sortir qui est grave, c'est de savoir qu'on ne peut pas. (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.139).

Later on, Béranger and Marthe will be cycling around and above the stage, one clockwise and the other anti-clockwise; such a movement is in a sense repeated and intensified in the final scene of L'Homme aux valises where the great ballet-like activity of numerous characters going round and round in circles several times affords a glimpse of isolation and depth close to the whirlwind of Les Chaises. The amphitheatre set used for the Tripp and Brechtoll episode at a performance of La Soif et la faim at the Comédie Française, made up of circular cages evokes the same effect, as does Macbett: 'Le metteur en scène et le décorateur l'ont instinctivement compris qui ont inscrit leur décor - des remparts grisâtres - dans une série de cercles concentriques, transformant ce fort nordique en une sorte de cul de basse-fosse. Le ciel même apparaît lointain, incertain, vertigineux et comme fermé sur lui-même' (Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, p.270). When the despot is ultimately cornered by a human forest, the stage directions read as follows: 'En réalité, c'est tout le décor qui devrait venir pesamment encercler Macbett' (Macbett, p.100).

Besides introducing us to a world of cancerous multiplication and claustrophobia, Ionesco makes active use of other devices to evoke three-dimensional space, part fairy-tale and part nightmare. Employing relatively few props and stage lighting to its full potential are in themselves means of visualizing dramatic action though these present their own problems. On the one hand, in the abnormally large corpse and

mushrooms in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser or the enormous judge in Le Piéton de l'air, something strange and unsettling is at hand, rather like Artaud's "présences intérieures" or what he called "l'imprévu objectif": 'Un autre exemple serait l'apparition d'un être invertèbre, fait de bois et d'étoffe, créé de toutes pièces ne répondant à rien et cependant inquiétant par nature, capable de réintroduire sur la scène un petit souffle de cette grande peur métaphysique, qui est à la base de tout le théâtre ancien' (Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, p.155). We have advanced one step beyond the world of marionnettes. "L'imprévu objectif" amongst other things does away with the recourse to proliferation or bulk of matter. Thinking in particular of a performance of Le Piéton de l'air, Ionesco once remarked:

Avec la machinerie, on est plus tranquille. Les problèmes sont simples. Il faut que la technique soit au point, c'est tout. Pour créer une ambiance de non-réalité ou de surréalité, d'angoisse profonde, de rêve, c'est beaucoup plus difficile et il faut une grande subtilité car cela tient à tres peu de chose, un geste, un objet quelconque, à la fois banal et étrange. (Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens, p.118).

With a technically perfect representation of magic on the stage in Le Piéton de l'air, he is interested in the playful quality of baroque illusionism and entertaining the audience as if they were at the circus. This play had after all presented at the onset as much of a challenge as the first three-act production: 'Comment faire du théâtre avec Le Piéton de l'air, avec un bonhomme qui s'envole, des histoires que racontent des gens qui passent au lieu qu'il y ait des conflits simples et présents? C'est cela qui m'a tenté' (ibid., p.75). Problems arise though in Rhinocéros which can be interpreted in two ways. If the metamorphosis, itself a fairy-tale convention, is physical and seen to take place, it arouses a comic response whereas the converse, an inner "moral" change, can turn the play into a disturbing, blackish experience; of the alternatives, the latter is more difficult to bring off successfully. Likewise, much figurative power is gained when neither matches nor chalk nor a knife are used in La Leçon, or a means can be found of dispensing with the presence of a killer in Tueur sans gages (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii,p.162) and in Macbett (p.89) where, as in the Shakespearean original no actual portrait is required in the banquet scene. Another difficulty emerging from the use of props occurred during rehearsals for Victimes du devoir where the playwright was at a loss to solve the problem of Choubert's ascension until Mauclair hit on the idea of placing nothing more than a table and two chairs. As for the descent

into the depths of his memory all that was demanded of the actor playing Choubert was a single movement in combination with a ray of light. By dint of the greatest simplification of staging and the clever use of lighting Mauclair's set possessed a direct force of suggestion. The trend in later plays, and one need only refer to the "insolite" scene in Ce Formidable Bordel! (pp.65-68), lies in the use of fewer and fewer props.

A restriction in the number of props results in the playwright's laying greater emphasis on stage movement. As can partly be observed from the preponderance of stage directions, great significance is attached to the use of mime, as well as movement and gesture, in many ways the quintessence of pure theatre. The indelible memory of the Punch and Judy shows Ionesco as a boy regularly used to attend hims significantly influenced his dramatic output, not only with regard to the aforementioned puppet characters but also as a means of dispensing with the spoken word. Burlesque and "grand guignol" effects are realized by the age-old trick of "turning down the sound on a television set": interest in scene VIII of La Cantatrice Chauve is centred on listeners' reactions as the fire chief mimes the pseudo fable "Le Serpent et le renard"; the imagination is allowed free reign in the Mère Pipe episode in Tueur sans gages for she is seen but not heard; similarly in Le Piéton de l'air as the roaring of the plane's engines drowns the dialogue between Josephine and her uncle. In Jacques

ou la soumission mime assumes an added importance;

Le jeu n'est pas, dans Jacques ou la soumission, le contrepoint du texte. Les gestes des personnages au début, leur façon d'apprécier les charmes de Roberte et surtout la danse obscène autour du couple enlacé sont des scènes mimées ou le dialogue, quand il existe, est sans importance; le mime supporte alors la signification de la pièce. Le mime dans la scène de séduction devient même une métamorphose. (Claude Abastado, Ionesco, p.78).

Running parallel to the main action is a "second play" in the wings: 'Les grands-parents sont en dehors de l'action. De temps en temps, le vieux veut chanter; la vieille, donner un conseil. Entre temps ils dansent, miment vaguement l'action' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i,p.112). Such a play is doomed to failure if the actor's mimic performance is found wanting. In referring to the recital of adverbs in Les Salutations one figure aptly summarizes the actor's challenge in much of Ionesco's theatre: 'l^{er} spectateur, dans la salle: C'est un prétexte pour un jeu d'acteur!' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.291). A single minute of mime at the beginning of Délire à deux: 'Jeu sans paroles - promenade de l'homme, toilette de la femme' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii, p.201), if managed

well, can literally speak volumes for the archetypal bourgeois couple's existence which has remained a permanent feature in all the plays. Movement and gesture, as we have suggested are of as equal importance as mime in lending expression to inner emptiness and absurdity. Much can without doubt be attributed to the legacy of writers of farce. A frequent gulf between words and actions as well as the breakdown of the normal apparatus of cause and effect, illustrated by the removal men in Le Nouveau Locataire "tripping over" the chalk lines on the floor, make a vehement impact on the senses. Le Personnage testing the soundness of his own four walls in scene VIII of Ce Formidable Bordel! resembles an astronaut in a state of weightlessness. Visual puns, for instance the butterfly catcher in Macbett (p.50) or the unexpected appearance of a Japanese woman in L'Homme aux valises (pp.75-76), serve to intensify comic incongruity. The world of marionettes is again brought to life in the variations on the hide-and-seek game: Juliette on addressing her monarch in Le Roi se meurt: (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv, pp.25-6) Béranger's head jerks during a press interview at the beginning of Le Piéton de l'air make nonsense of the dialogue: the antics of Alice and "Le Gros Monsieur" in Le Tableau (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.260). Other scenes are endowed with repetitive, ritualistic features: teeth chattering in La Cantatrice chauve; (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, pp.19-21); sword-play in Macbett, (pp.9-27); and drinking in Ce Formidable Bordel! (pp.29-31). Nor is there anything arbitrary about music-hall features or ceremonial dances: '.....tout ceci est

devenu une sorte de ballet pesant, les mouvements étant toujours très lents' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii,p.196). An Italian version of La Cantatrice chauve ending in a "bagarre-ballet" was found quite acceptable by Ionesco. Parallels have been drawn between the choreography of Jacques ou la soumission and the "turquerie" episode in Molière's Le Bourgeois gentilhomme. In 1961, the first version of Le Roi se meurt was entitled Argument pour un ballet when the king danced with the allegorical Princess of Death. Much of the evocative power of Les Chaises, essentially a fantastic ballet set to a waltz tune, disappears if the actors concerned are unable to carry out anything less than a gymnastic performance; small wonder that camera close-ups in a television adaptation of the play turned out to be irrelevant in the whirlpool of activity. Something close to gymnastics is demanded of the actors in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.1 p.292) as they dodge the corpse's advancing bulk. Little separates gymnastics from the fun of the circus in Le Piéton de l'air (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,p.171). Joséphine and the English people are described as 'des spectateurs de cirque' (ibid., p.171) watching Bérenger's acrobatic feats - nowhere else has so emphatic an attempt been made to transcend the limits set by the proscenium arch. Yet hectic stage movement, ballet or circus numbers all represent an undeniable proclivity to "fun and games" and the playfully gratuitous. Again and again, whether in terms of a straight "jeu" such as in Le Piéton de l'air ("jeu de perruque") or the conjuror's

trick in Tueur sans gages when Edouard reveals the contents of his black bag, a "guignolade" after the manner of L'Impromptu de l'Alma and Le Tableau, or movements backwards and forwards across the stage, he has constantly attempted to gain comic theatrical effects without recourse to the spoken word, recalling to a sensitive audience the lost charm of silent movies.

It would be erroneous though to take into account sources of purely comic capital and overlook both the violence inherent in the "guignol" and the interlocking of different sketches and situations in individual plays. Without doubt, potentially tragic events are often neutralized. When there is nothing remotely connected with tragic heroism a note of ambivalence is suggested. This may result from the situation of a particular sketch such as the melodramatic "scène de gaieté folle" lasting one minute in Jeux de massacre as salt is rubbed into the wound in the form of a blazing inferno succeeding a plague, or in Tueur sans gages, in what is in effect a Punch and Judy show at a tense moment in the play when the audience is half expecting Béranger to reach his goal:

Le Second Agent de police, en haut,
que l'on ne voit toujours que jusqu'à
la ceinture, tourne la tête et bouge son
bâton "à gauche" "à droite", "tout droit",

"en arrière" à gauche en avant"; gestes symétriques de Bérenger, sur place; le Soldat fait de même avec son bouquet de fleurs. Le Vieux Monsieur fait un mouvement pour aller vers la gauche, puis vers la droite, puis tout droit, en arrière, en avant. (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii,p.151).

Again, just before the end of Rhinocéros, Bérenger feverishly tries to imitate the sounds of pachyderms. Not only sketches at crucial stages in an individual play however retain an equivocal note. A mixture of sadism and ridicule pervades the mood of a play within a play in Victimes du devoir when after Choubert's drowning scene, Madeleine and the policeman, in their attempts to draw the former back to the supposed advantages of daily social life, cut a ludicrous figure. In the Tripp and Brechtoll episode in La Soif et la faim the audience feels cut off from the plight of Jean, for what predominates in these scenes is the stage spectators' response to the gruesome sadism being enacted before their eyes:

Chaque groupe séparément, tandis que l'autre ne bouge pas, approuve par des applaudissements rythmés, aux moments cruciaux, par des mouvements collectifs rythmés aussi, par des mimiques appropriées, les paroles de Tarabas adressées

à l'un et l'autre des prisonniers.
Jean participera par sa mimique,
avec angoisse, à ce double jeu. Il
reflètera la passion des deux
prisonniers. Sa mimique contraste
avec l'attitude alternativement
approbative des deux camps de spectateurs;
il exprime donc l'angoisse des deux
prisonniers. (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iv,
p.158).

Ambivalence characterizes the whole of Les Chaises, acclaimed as a comic "tour de force", in which mime, though not providing a substitute for language, creates each guest's existence while conversely alluding to the old couple's dashed hopes and illusions, their every movement belying what we have been led to believe about their happy married life. Part of the dilemma lies with "games" or mechanisms getting out of hand. In the same way as matter proliferates, certain actions are triggered off by often subconscious stirrings. What betrays the teacher's intentions more than any malignant remarks in La Leçon, and long before the final rape and murder, is his subconscious rubbing of hands and the lascivious gleam in his eye. Fun and games assume a gruesome quality in the torture scene in Victimes du devoir; the uncanny mixture of savagery and playfulness is emphasized at the end of the play by the unexpected intervention of the lady who until that moment had shown total indifference to the proceedings. Jean's Sisyphean task at the close of La Soif et la faim, besides

reminding us of Choubert, the policeman and Nicolas, acts as a continuation of an earlier process: 'Frère Tarabas sort avec la cuvette, pour revenir avec d'autres serviettes, tandis que Jean boit et mange goulûment, intensément. Les Frères se précipitent tout le temps, assez comiquement, pour remplir les récipients et continuer de servir Jean. Mouvement rythmique' (ibid., p.146). Macbett's downfall springs as much from the sexual play during the execution scene as from any other factor; 'Elle (Lady Duncan) continue de compter en faisant du pied à Macbett et du coude d'abord d'une façon discrète, puis d'une façon de plus en plus ^{visible}, jusqu' à en devenir excessive, grossièrement indécente.

Macbett s'écarte un peu, plutôt gêné et confus au début, puis cédant, se laissant faire avec un mélange de plaisir et de timidité, déjà complice' (Macbett, p.38). The sexual overtones are reminiscent of the evocations of repressed personality in the old woman in Les Chaises (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, pp.150-152) and Madeleine in Victimes du devoir (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.195). At the same time, such scenes show with what skill and economy the dramatist exploits simple stage actions and rhythm. In more and more plays, Ionesco has discovered lighting to be a powerful visual complement to stage action. In addition lighting introduces a third dimension. Actors are after all meant to move as we do from sunlight or moonlight into shadow and to feel the surface of the earth beneath their feet; the playwright is always striving to evoke a certain "état d'âme": '...la lumière n'est pas uniquement l'expression des rêves de béatitude ou des profondeurs voilées du moi mais aussi un moyen de communication, les sortilèges de

l'envoûte étant inséparables de jeux de lumière qui "tissent" une atmosphère à laquelle peu de spectateurs restent insensibles' (Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco, p.147). Lighting, in particular intensely bright lighting, can lend the figure on the stage an apparent air of unreality. Very often though, stage lighting suggests the dull and often unbearable neutrality of day: "grisaille" as Jacques ou la soumission begins, and after the seduction scene; the pale light of the opening scene of Les Chaises reappears after the double suicide; a greyish light predominates in Victimes du devoir; the introduction of the last "act" of Tueur sans gages reads: 'Les projecteurs éclairent les deux personnages d'une lumière blafarde, le reste est dans la pénombre' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii, p.162). A greyish fog prevails at the end of Le Roi se meurt and in Jeux de massacre, whilst the stage directions to the second episode of La Soif et la faim read: 'Terrasse; elle a l'air suspendue dans le vide. Ciel sombre. A l'arrivée de Jean, le ciel se dégagera, cela sera une lumière, sans ombre et sans soleil' (Théâtre Gallimard), Vol.iv, p.105). A tenuous boundary exists between everyday life and a nightmare, but given the initial situation it is the electrician's task not to upset the balance and produce something horrific and quite foreign to the playwright's purpose. Such is the case in the flashback scene in Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser with Amédée II and Madeleine II; '...il faut encore signaler que l'on doit éviter, dans toute la mesure du possible que Madeleine II et Amédée II aient l'aspect d'ectoplasmes; pour ceci, pas d'apparition dans une lumière fantomatique, mais

dans celle normale, de la scène, le jeu de Madeleine II et d'Amédée II, doit être très naturel dans le non-naturel, dans l'irréel:' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i.p.285).

The drabness of the flat with its closed shutters is vividly contrasted with the brightness of the starry night, once Amédée brings himself to drag the bulk of the corpse into the street, but no extra-terrestrial light or further note of exaggeration is included:

La lumière, les jeux de lumière, ne semblent pas seulement venir de la fenêtre, mais d'un peu partout:.....
il faut que le metteur en scène, le décorateur, le spécialiste de l'éclairage, tiennent bien compte de ceci: l'atmosphère de la chambre des époux change un peu de caractère évidemment, mais toutefois, l'horrible et le beau doivent coexister.
(ibid., p.298).

Related to this is a blackcloth of silhouettes. They assume absurd and grotesque features as in the various shapes of building construction being cast onto the back wall in L'Homme aux valises (p.32) and the row of guillotines in Macbeth (p.36). From a simple point of departure, a lesson, a Swiss production of La Leçon made the play into nothing short of a vampire sketch. Bearing this in mind, Ionesco's interest in Shakespeare's Macbeth is justifiable on the basis of the witches' scene along and its evocative play of light and shadow.

Whilst silhouettes and various shades of grey traditionally suggest ambivalence in themselves, a broad range of other colours is exploited. Reds and greens also make their contribution. If grey evokes a dull sadness, red suffuses something approaching a note of tragedy. In many episodes, especially in the longer plays, red dominates, as in Joséphine's nightmare trial in Le Piéton de l'air: 'Lueurs rouges et sanglantes' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,p.190). The same is true of 'beau ciel rouge, ciel tragique' (Macbett, p.16) and the flames shooting up from the family dwelling in L'Homme aux valises (pp.12-15). Visual and oral effects are as central, if not on occasion even more so, than stage actions; such is the case in the aforementioned battle scene in Macbett:

Scène vide quelques minutes. On doit jouer beaucoup sur la lumière qui vient du fond et les bruits qui-mais à la fin seulement-seront transformés en une sorte de musique concrète....il faut que les décors, les lumières, les bruits jouent longtemps. Les éclairages, les bruits divers ne doivent pas, surtout vers la fin, rivaliser avec la vraisemblance. Le rôle du décorateur-éclaireur et celui du bruiteur sont ici très importants. (p.16).

No evocation of an 'état d'âme' is possible without due allowance being made for the duration and lighting in any one episode. Red lighting is conventionally associated with destruction and tragedy but there are wide-ranging overtones. In Jacques ou la soumission,

images of fire and water are equated with intense sexuality. Despite the setting sun, the trial scene with the gallows and the hangman in Le Piéton de l'air (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,p.188), where Joséphine comes face to face with "L'Homme en blanc", is described as "cauchemar et salon". Distant July 14th festive music qualified as "dérisoire" (ibid., p.191) is juxtaposed with exploding firework crackers and a red sky, and even in the aftermath of the apocalypse Bérenger has born witness to, hardly any change is noticeable: 'Le soir tombe sanglant, des coups de pétard se font entendre suivis de brèves lueurs rouges. Musique foraine, tristement "gaie"' (ibid.,p.198). Such sad gaiety proves as great a source of bewilderment as a foreboding sense of isolation and sterility acting virtually as accomplice to Bérenger's ambush and subsequent death:

Plus tard, dans le fond, le soleil couchant, rouge énorme, mais sans éclat. L'éclairage ne vient pas de lui.....Puis, on pourra, par exemple, de nouveau faire apparaître des murs, les rapprocher en couloir, afin de donner l'impression que Bérenger va être pris dans un guet-apens; la lumière ne changera pas: c'est le crépuscule, avec un soleil roux que l'on apercevra....un crépuscule figé. (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii,pp.135 and 159).

Even death itself in the guise of a corpse,
can be shown to have a certain attraction:

Un certain temps, il n'y a plus que
la musique, puis, soudain, la scène,
qui était devenue presque complètement
obscur, s'éclaire, d'une lumière verte,
pas désagréable; au début, cet éclairage
ne porte ~~pas~~ que sur une partie de la
scène, venant de la chambre du mort.

Madeleine:....Cette lumière vient de sa
chambre (Bas). C'est bien de chez lui.

Amédée, toujours bas: Ce sont ses yeux
qui éclairent....On dirait deux phares..

Tant mieux, ce n'est plus le peine d'allumer
la lampe....Sa lumière est plus douce.

(Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i, p.293) .

Sinister and pleasurable moods prevail above all in brightly lit scenes. It has become a commonplace to draw parallels between intensely bright lighting in Ionesco's theatre and the forces of transparency and freedom he so condones in contrast to "chosisme". No clearer example of this can be found than in the opening of Tueur sans gages. And rather like clocks and other paraphernalia of existence lighting assumes the role of "character" in its own right when an intense blue and white between them starkly monopolise the stage forming a solitary wordless composition of light. The brightness of the restaurant scene in Ce Formidable Bordel! (p.65), exceptional in an otherwise

dark play, reflects an "état d'âme" on the verge of transcending reality. Euphoria, which is often related to "l'insolite", could not be conveyed in Choubert's resplendent seclusion on reaching the summit of Mont Blanc in Victimes du devoir or in the childlike fantasy of a Douanier Rousseau in the opening scene of Le Piéton de l'air (cf. scene IX of L'Homme aux valises) were it not for the electrician's skills: 'Cette maisonnette, ainsi que le paysage décrit ci-dessous doivent donner une ambiance de rêve....Tout est en pleine lumière, sans pénombre donc, sans tulle, etc.dans le fond, sur la droite, les premières maisons toutes blanches et très ensoleillées, d'un soleil d'avrilLe ciel est très bleu et très pur' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,p.121). Not only are these memorable scenes on their own but they open out onto new dimensions in the plays concerned. Bright blues and whites, like reds and greens, are suggestive of a twilight zone or no man's land between life and death. An impression of immense space similar to the interior of a large Gothic cathedral should be conveyed in Les Chaises and the brighter the light becomes with each new arrival until a crescendo is reached with the entry of the Emperor: 'par la porte ouverte, on n'aperçoit que le vide, mais très puissante, une grande lumière envahit le plateau par la grande porte et les fenêtres qui, à l'arrivée de l'Empereur, également invisible, se sont fortement éclairées.. Lumière maximum d'intensité.....mais lumière froide, vide' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.i,p.267). That same coldish bright light, announcing the oncome of a void and death, shines as Amédée leaves his flat and as the curtain rises on Tueur sans pages: 'Le bleu, le blanc, le silence, la scène vide doivent

créer une impression de calme étrange' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.ii,p.63). During the period Bérenger has finally left the earth in Le Piéton de l'air, a dazzling light enhances the landscape, with the adjunct: 'une sorte de ciel ou de vide bleu' (Théâtre Gallimard, Vol.iii,p.173). The end of scene XV of Ce Formidable Bordel! recalls the "décor de lumière" of Tueur sans gages for in both cases two physical characters are subordinated to a third - abstract, sterile, continuously changing and invading the stage. Only slight hope of salvation in the broadest sense is granted to the "emprisoned" protagonists at the end of La Soif et la faim and Ce Formidable Bordel! respectively in the form of bluish tints of light projected on to a back wall. In a chapter dedicated to La Leçon in Notes et contre-notes (p.257), a reference is made to lighting as a determinant of burlesque and tragic moods in the play. What cannot be determined either in La Leçon or the rest of Ionesco's theatre, whether in relation to bright or subdued lighting, props or any other factor is that precise moment of a change of mood, for ambivalence is in this context a perennial matter.

C O N C L U S I O N

In conclusion, we may note that a mastery of stagecraft alone has ~~made~~ only contributed in part to this playwright's success. Widely acknowledged with Samuel Beckett as a leading exponent of the avant-garde, he has like the former retained an admirable consistency of thought and feeling in his works long after the furore of the 1950's subsided. If he has been classed as conservative and reactionary by his critics, it is as a result of the strength of his convictions in man's inhumanity to man and the loss of spiritual and metaphysical values arriving in the wake of the technological revolution. Despite the popularity of transcendentalism and drug-taking, more often than not associated with a seedy background of commercial interests, most of us have lost the capacity to retire into a corner and meditate on the whys and wherefores of our coming into the world. Modern society (whether in the communist or capitalist "camp" is immaterial) has become that primordially political epoch envisaged by Spengler in The Decline of the West (1918-1922), a work referred to in Présent passé passé présent (pp.151-152), whilst the surveillance equipment in Orwell's 1984 is uncannily close. The essence of Ionesco's address to the crowds at the Salzburg Festival in 1972 betrays an unmitigated pessimism and confirms the fears and scepticism latent in those early literary articles in Rumania. Simultaneously though he would be the first to acknowledge, as a non-philosopher, the mundane tenor of his thoughts.

1. Eugène Ionesco, 'Facing the Inferno', Encounter, No.5, November 1972, pp.3-6.

As for the theatregoer, he is not directly affected by the playwright's ideas as such but rather by the manner in which he exploits the immediacy of the theatrical experience to express his attitudes. This has been understood by both Beckett and Ionesco in their deliberate restriction of subject-matter. The great paradox of the age of mass media lies in the absence of anything new to write about so that, all along, these "classical" dramatists have been writing the same play. Instead of drawing crowds with the popular themes of commitment and participation, they have resurrected the age-old concept of theatre as a form of therapy: 'Au fait que je me décharge de mes toxines en les écrivant, c'est-à-dire en les jetant hors de moi?' (Journal en miettes, p.129). Theatre is not designed to preach or improve man's lot: 'Un dramaturge se borne à écrire des pièces, dans lesquelles il ne peut qu'offrir un témoignage, non point un message didactique, - un témoignage personnel, affectif, de son angoisse et de l'angoisse des autres, ou, ce qui est rare, de son bonheur; ou bien il y exprime ses sentiments, tragiques ou comiques, sur la vie' (Notes et contre-notes, p.141). Jean-Louis Barrault, one of Ionesco's favourite producers, conceives of the theatrical experience as an extension of the natural duality in life between one's own inner self and the image one continually projects towards others in one's dealings with them, a game between the illusion of appearances and the truth. Again and again, Ionesco has shattered the illusion of

representational art by means of exaggeration and parody on the one hand, and a stylised form interpreting dramas and visions on the other. At a technical level, and his practice is often superior to his theory, he has overthrown traditional demands of plot, character and stage setting yet kept within the boundaries of the proscenium arch in the process. A child-like simplicity and healthy lack of total seriousness characterise his work, recalling the anti-intellectualism of Dylan Thomas: 'The bigger the fool, the better the poet.'²

But this should not cloud our perception of the permanent dilemma to reconcile irony and detachment with a large measure of genuine feeling if not a degree of self-identification with certain characters (not by chance are the protagonists of the major plays in some capacity writers). This dilemma, or conflict, or spirit of contradiction is found to be indispensable: 'The ultimate 'angoisse' of Ionesco's own experience is at the same time the source and mainspring of his awareness of the comic' (Richard Coe, Ionesco, p.80). And although reservations must be made for parts of an audience at any individual performance, the dramatist's wrestling with his divided self does produce a conflict of emotions within the onlooker - an indirect acknowledgment of the continued attraction of his plays both within and beyond the frontiers of France. For such plays, like those of

2. John Weightman, The Concept of the Avant-Garde, Explorations in Modernism (London, 1973), p.27.

Beckett, Pinter and Dürrenmatt, both recall past traditions and also best translate the ironic mood of the contemporary age, when we casually discuss the impending holocaust over a cup of coffee:

.....present comic incongruity raised to tragic proportions and effecting in the audience tragic involvement in the tragic feelings of pity and terror. Because of the intense reality of theses dramas and because they do raise fundamental questions, the mixture of feelings they produce is nearer to the old tragic emotion than that of contemporary plays of solely tragic intention.....Waiting for Godot and The Chairs are both funny and terrible.

3. Colin Duckworth, Angels of Darkness. Dramatic Effect in the Plays of Samuel Beckett with Special References to Ionesco. (London, 1972), p.95.

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