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ABSTRACT

THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF EUGENE IONESCO

1950-1985

by

Ellyn Isabelle Bradley

The thesis aims to demonstrate that the search for individual identity is fundamental to Ionesco's work, affecting every aspect of his artistic creation. The crisis of identity, Ionesco suggests, stems from early childhood when the individual experiences a separation from himself, from his surroundings, and from others. Thereafter, two states of being divide all existence: joy, wonder, and a firm awareness of being alternating with moods of anguish and estrangement from the self. This inner tension provokes the individual to seek a more secure sense of identity. The theme of the search runs throughout Ionesco's theatre, portrayed as an allegorical search for another world or as an attempt to penetrate the depths of the consciousness through dreams or a return to childhood. These searches fail, for the key to the self lies not in escape or a change of material circumstances, but in the painful struggle to maintain one's lucidity and integrity against the forces that oppose individuality. Chapters four to nine examine these forces: the hostility of the material world, the threat of death, the attempts of the family and of society to force conformity to social norms, the more deliberate attempt of politicians to limit individual freedom, and finally the breakdown of communication through the distortion of language into clichés and slogans. Artistic creation is a means of counterbalancing these pressures by exposing the dangers of a mechanical existence and reaffirming the potentials of the individual. Ionesco proposes no final solutions because they would falsify the living, dynamic nature of identity which must constantly be approached afresh by the continual questioning that is fundamental to life and art. Moreover, it is not the solution that is important but the depth and sincerity of the search which Ionesco's work challenges each individual to undertake by himself in total freedom.

THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY
IN THE WORKS OF EUGENE IONESCO
1950-1985

A thesis presented for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of French,
University of Durham

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by
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1985



-8. OCT. 1986

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and
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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank my supervisor, Dr. B.G. Garnham, for his helpful advice and guidance and also my husband for the many hours that he spent in preparing the typescript.

Bibliographical Note

References to Ionesco's plays are to the Gallimard editions of the collected plays, Théâtre, volumes I-VII, published in 1954, 1958, 1963, 1966, 1973, 1975, and 1981 respectively. To facilitate presentation, some of the titles of the plays that recur most frequently have been abbreviated in the text. The abbreviations are as follows:

La Cantatrice chauve - La Cantatrice

Jacques ou la soumission - Jacques

Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser - Amédée

L'Impromptu de l'Alma ou le caméléon du berger - L'Impromptu

Tueur sans gages - Tueur

L'Avenir est dans les oeufs ou il faut de tout pour faire un monde
- L'Avenir

Le Piéton de l'air - Le Piéton

Le Roi se meurt - Le Roi

La Soif et la faim - La Soif

Jeux de massacre - Jeux

Frequent reference is also made to Ionesco's articles and essays collected in Notes et contre-notes (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), which is abbreviated to Notes in the footnotes and, after its first appearance, in the text of the thesis also, Antidotes (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) and Un Homme en question (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) and, in addition, to his autobiographical works, Découvertes (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1969), Journal en miettes (Paris: Mercure de France, 1967), and Présent passé. Passé présent (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). The two latter works will be abbreviated to Journal and Présent passé respectively in the footnotes and after the first reference in the text. Finally, much material has been drawn from a series of interviews between Ionesco and Claude Bonnefoy, collected in the volume Entre la vie et le rêve (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1977).

Because of the frequency with which it recurs, Ionesco's name has been omitted from references to his books, articles, and interviews, except in the case of his contribution to works by another author.

Yes, there were times when I forgot
not only what I was, but that I was,
forgot to be.

Samuel Beckett, Molloy.

If I don't know I don't know
I think I know.

If I don't know I know
I think I don't know.
R.D. Laing, Knots.

INTRODUCTION

The reliability of all our experiences, of all our relationships with others depends upon our sense of individual identity. However, in the twentieth century, where Samuel Beckett dismisses personality as a 'retrospective hypothesis',¹ and Alain Robbe-Grillet talks of mankind reduced to a 'numéro matricule',² we walk in a universe where, in the words of Jean Grenier, '"je" n'ai pas d'écho'.³ The concept of individual identity, which in former ages could be neatly subsumed under the notion of a soul, is now seen as uncertain and nebulous. Identity or self demands a degree of uniqueness and of continuity, the presence of a core of essential being that makes the individual a 'center of integrity',⁴ and gives him 'a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity',⁵ throughout all the changing circumstances of his life. R.D. Laing defines it as 'that whereby one feels the same, in this place, this time, as at that time and at that place, past or future; it is that by which one is identified'.⁶ However, in the rapidly changing world of the twentieth century, a time characterized by loss of certainty and disillusionment in every field, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain these basic tenets of individual identity. The discoveries of biology and zoology, especially the theories of Lamarck and later Darwin, which explained the world in wholly naturalistic terms, shattered the,

¹Samuel Beckett, Proust (London: John Calder, 1965), p.15.

²Alain Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), p.28.

³Jean Grenier, Essais sur la peinture contemporaine (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p.180.

⁴The Identities of Persons, edited by Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley, California and London: University of California Press, 1976), p.302.

⁵Erik H. Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1968), p.19.

⁶R.D. Laing, The Self and Others (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), p.70.



anthropocentric attitude that had been the hallmark of previous centuries and made it impossible to attribute to man a specially ordained role in Creation. Science, conceived as an attempt to secure man's position in the universe and hailed by the 'idéologues' and positivists of the nineteenth century as an unlimited source of knowledge of man and the world, had by the twentieth century revealed to man that reality cannot be equated with the scientifically knowable and, by reducing absolutes to relatives, had only revealed how little man knows of the world and how limited is his control over it. Moreover, the enthusiasm for the material progress that scientific advances were to herald had turned to terror at the accelerating pace with which technology transformed man's life, centring it increasingly around materialistic values at the expense of the spiritual or metaphysical and drawing it more into the realm of the impersonal and the mechanical. The atrocities of modern weapons finally proved beyond a doubt that scientific progress was no longer coextensive with cultural or moral progress or with the well-being of mankind. If science showed man how little he knew of his world, the development of psychology showed man how little he knew of himself. The unified 'res cogitans' or the exalted self of the Romantics, 'la raison de toute chose, la clef de l'univers, et son maître naturel, de droit divin',⁷ was replaced by the idea of personality fragmented into a collection of conflicting selves, governed primarily by irrational, subconscious forces. In an era that has been called 'the age during which we lost our identity',⁸ it is not surprising that much of the art and literature reflects this central crisis of identity, and this is particularly true of the works of Eugène Ionesco. It is this fundamental problem and Ionesco's attempts, if not to resolve it through his work, at least to present it in being as he experiences it that the present study explores.

The traditional way out of the dilemma of the unknown and unknowable nature of external and internal realities was a reliance on some absolute, transcendental reference such as religion. It was in 1882 that Nietzsche's madman proclaimed, 'Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him'.⁹ Between that date

⁷Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, p.119.

⁸William K. Kilpatrick, Identity and Intimacy (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975), p.1.

⁹Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, translated with commentary by Walker Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), Section 125, p.181.

and Ionesco's wistful question, 'Qui peut nous aider, sauf Dieu? Il n'est pas là',¹⁰ or Beckett's angry exclamation, 'Le salaud! Il n'existe pas',¹¹ the controversial explosiveness of Nietzsche's statement has been much tempered as an increasing number of people have come to accept the fact that God is indeed dead. However, Ionesco believes that although the 'Dieu personnel quaquaquaquà à barbe blanche',¹² in Beckett's phrase, is no longer a reality in the twentieth century, man has not become atheistic. Ionesco often admits that he yearns for the faith which he lost as a child, and this longing for a metaphysical dimension, for a frame of reference outside the ordinary world of reality is, he believes, the deepest need of mankind.¹³ Whereas the Existentialists see this loss of a metaphysical transcendence as a challenge for the individual to create himself and his own values through his acts, for Ionesco the irreconcilability of man's needs and his demarcation leads him to an awareness of the absurdity and futility of all existence. 'Coupé de ses racines religieuses ou métaphysiques ou transcendentales, l'homme est perdu, toute sa démarche devient insensée absurde, inutile, étouffante', he writes.¹⁴ Abandoned in a world of shattered illusions, without any generally accepted integrating principle, all certainty about the nature of the self and its surroundings is lost and the problem of individual identity comes to the fore. Ionesco asks:

A partir de quel moment les dieux se sont-ils retirés du monde, à partir de quel moment les images ont-elles perdu leur couleur? A partir de quel moment le monde s'est-il vidé de substance ... à partir de quel moment il y a eu la rupture tragique, à partir de quel moment avons-nous été abandonnés à nous-mêmes, c'est-à-dire ... à partir de quel moment n'ont-ils plus voulu de nous comme spectateurs, comme participants? Nous avons été abandonnés à nous-mêmes, à notre solitude, à notre peur, et le problème est né. Qu'est-ce que ce monde? Qui sommes-nous?¹⁵

Much has been written in the past few decades by sociologists and psychologists on different aspects of the individual identity. However, although the social sciences have been able to classify all human and social functions, they are still no closer to approaching what Beckett

¹⁰ Théâtre, V, 95.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, Fin de partie (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957), p.76.

¹² Samuel Beckett, En attendant Godot (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1952), p.59.

¹³ Antidotes, p.191.

¹⁴ 'Dans les armes de la ville', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 20 (October 1957), 4.

¹⁵ Présent passé, pp.172-173.

has so poetically called 'the within, all that inner space one never sees, the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath'.¹⁶ Man's attempts to reduce the enigma of self and the sense of being to rational ideas and concepts has been futile. As Erikson, one of the foremost analysts of identity, admits, 'The more one writes about this subject [identity], the more the word becomes a term for something as unfathomable as it is all-pervasive'.¹⁷ However, according to his own precept that 'on ne doit pas philosopher quand on n'est pas un grand philosophe',¹⁸ Ionesco does not concern himself with a logical, rational approach to the complexities of the individual identity, but rather with an affective, intuitive presentation of his sense of being, something that can never be known objectively with the intellect or reduced to an idea. If his work appears contradictory, sometimes repetitive, lacking the constructive, clear direction of the scientific approach, it is because his work is an experience that is lived through by author and audience; as Samuel Beckett wrote of James Joyce, 'his writing is not about something, it is the thing itself'.¹⁹ Indeed, it is only by bypassing conceptual reasoning and language that Ionesco believes one can break through surface appearances to the depths of the 'residual, unexorcised inner self',²⁰ and this is what he hopes to be able to achieve through his writing. 'J'aspire à l'impossible, que mes paroles soient transparentes', he writes.²¹ Thus, while science 'ne fait que tourner autour de l'être',²² the artist, he believes, can penetrate the problem of individual identity and present it in being.

There is a striking consistency and unity in Ionesco's work. Although his writing has been primarily theatrical in nature and, as the last chapter attempts to demonstrate, the choice of the theatrical medium is intimately linked with Ionesco's obsession with the search for individual identity, for the purpose of this analysis it is impossible

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, Molloy, translated from the French by Patrick Bowles in collaboration with the author (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p.11.

¹⁷ Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis, p.9.

¹⁸ Le Solitaire (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp.34-35.

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, cited by Alec Reid, in All I Can Manage, More Than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968), p.52.

²⁰ R.J. Kaufmann, 'On the Newness of the New Drama', Tulane Drama Review, VI, 4 (June 1962), 103.

²¹ Présent passé, p.248.

²² Découvertes, p.97.

to consider his plays in isolation from his other works, his novel Le Solitaire, his short stories,²³ his memories, journals, and reveries collected in Journal en miettes, Présent passé Passé présent, and Découvertes, and the many essays, articles, and interviews not only about his theatre but covering a broad range of contemporary issues collected in Notes et contre-notes, Un Homme en question, Entre la vie et le rêve, and Antidotes. These works, by shedding light on the network of dreams, images, experiences, and obsessions that make up Ionesco's plays, are an invaluable facet of his work constituting, in the words of Robert Frickx, 'l'autre face de l'oeuvre dramatique; ou, si l'on préfère, comme le signifié qu'elle organise et objective, en confisquant au profit de la littérature l'écheveau des rêves, des expériences et des obsessions dont est tissée la vie de l'homme'.²⁴ Many critics have attempted to distinguish different periods in Ionesco's work, most frequently observing a division between the fantasy and absurd humour of the earlier 'anti-plays' and the one-act sketches that he continues to write throughout his career and the deeper, metaphysical questioning and more serious literary intent of the longer plays, where the interchangeable puppet-like characters cede priority to a self-conscious central figure embodying many of Ionesco's personal obsessions. Richard Schechner links this development in Ionesco's theatre to the search for individual identity. Stating in 1963 that the question 'Who am I?' is the central question of Ionesco's dramaturgy and one that runs through every play,²⁵ he later qualifies this by asserting that, in *Bérenger*, Ionesco had created a character with a 'fully-defined, ego-constituted self',²⁶ and that, with the success of the *Bérenger* plays in the theatre, Ionesco found a solution to his own problem of identity.²⁷ It is the aim of this study to show that the search for individual identity remains Ionesco's central obsession and that, therefore, there is no fundamental division in Ionesco's work, the differences in register being attributable to Ionesco's admitted use of the theatre and other writings as 'exercices de style',²⁸ or, as he puts it

²³Collected in La Photo du Colonel (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

²⁴Robert Frickx, Ionesco (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1974), p.205.

²⁵Richard Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', Tulane Drama Review, 7, 3 (Spring 1963), 202.

²⁶Richard Schechner, 'Three Aspects of Ionesco's Theatre' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1962), p.81.

²⁷Schechner, 'The Inner and Outer Reality', p.205.

²⁸Ionesco, 'Lettre-Préface' to Ionesco, by Frickx, p.6.

elsewhere, 'exercices spirituels',²⁹ trying to capture the essence of his experiences through different approaches. When it was suggested to Ionesco himself that the search for identity was the central theme of his work, he reacted, as he does to any attempt to limit the scope or significance of his work or to tie it to any single interpretation, by stating that this is only one of a wide range of themes that he treats in his theatre including the problem of evil, social and political questions, old age and death, nothingness and absence.³⁰ However, these themes cannot be considered in isolation as they are part of a network of themes that revolve round the central obsession of the search for individual identity, for, as Ionesco himself readily admits, 'un écrivain raconte un peu toujours la même chose! Il y a chez lui une obsession fondamentale. C'est cela son oeuvre! Le thème et ses variations'.³¹ Although Ionesco's plays cover the questions of society and politics, corruption and power, death, language and communication, and the problems of artistic and theatrical creation, his intention is not to awaken mankind to current problems, but rather to go beyond them to highlight the metaphysical problems which they reveal as the individual in search of identity explores the modes and limits of his relationships with himself, with others, with objects, and with the world. His work thus constitutes, in the words of Paul Vernois, an 'exploration des moyens de théâtre au service d'un nouveau "Connais-toi"'.³²

In the vast amount of criticism that has been written on Ionesco since he became a major literary figure, many attempts have inevitably been made to discern influences in his work from sources varying as widely as Maeterlinck, the *Commedia dell'arte*, Cervantes, Chaplin, the Marx Brothers and the cinema of the 1930s, Molière, and earlier generations of Roumanian writers.³³ In particular, the revolutionary idea of

²⁹'Une Entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly K. Murstein, *French Review*, XLV, 3 (February, 1972), 618.

³⁰'An Interview with Ionesco', Interview with Richard Schechner, *Tulane Drama Review*, 7, 3 (Spring 1963), 163.

³¹'Tuons-nous les uns les autres', Interview with Claude Cézan, *Nouvelles Littéraires* (17 September 1970), p.13.

³²Paul Vernois, *La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), p.2.

³³See Catherine B. Osborne, 'Maeterlinck, Predecessor to Ionesco', *French Review*, 41, 15 (April 1968), 660-668; J.L. Curtis, 'Echos de la *Commedia dell'arte* dans *l'Amedée* de Ionesco', *Romance Notes*, XVI, 1

theatre advanced by Antonin Artaud in the 1930s seems to many critics to find its realization in many aspects of Ionesco's work. It is also customary to link Ionesco's theatre with that of his contemporaries; in particular, he is associated with the 'Theatre of the Absurd', a term first coined by the critic Martin Esslin in 1961 but which rapidly gained acceptance as a term describing a wide variety of contemporary

dramatists, not only in France but in America and Eastern Europe. Although Ionesco acknowledges that the idea of the absurd is applicable to certain aspects of his plays, and, although he undoubtedly shares an awareness of the senselessness of the world that is at the basis of the notion of absurdity, he distrusts the term both because he finds it too imprecise and because to him all fashionable terminology is suspect.³⁴ He resists any attempt to neatly categorize his theatre as part of any movement and prefers to use the adjective 'insolite', rather than absurd, to describe his vision of life, for he feels that this conveys not only the awareness of the futility of human endeavour but also the sense of amazement, sometimes joyful, sometimes anguished, that springs from this awareness and which is the unique hallmark of his theatre. When asked to single out authors that had influenced him, Ionesco named Charles du Bos, Valéry Larbaud, Alain-Fournier, and Flaubert whom he felt shared with him a certain 'luminosité' in their works.³⁵ However, rather than influences, it is more appropriate to talk, as Ionesco himself does, of 'a meeting of minds'.³⁶ Moreover, on a deeper level, Ionesco perceives a link between his work and the work of all true artists at all times, for the most personal experiences and obsessions, those that the author endeavours to express in his work, are fundamentally the same as those of all men. 'Si j'ai été "influencé" par ces auteurs sans les avoir connus', Ionesco states, 'cela veut dire tout simplement qu'un

(Autumn 1974), 1-12; Edwin T. Williams, 'Cervantes and Ionesco and the Dramatic Fantasy', Hispania, 45, 4 (December 1962), 675-678; Alexandre Rainof, 'Ionesco and the Film of the 20's and 30's from Groucho to Harpo', in The Two Faces of Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont and Melvin J. Friedman (Troy, New York: Whitson Publishing Co., 1978), pp.65-74; Sidney L. Pellissier, 'Ionesco and Molière', in Molière and the Commonwealth of Letters, edited by R. Johnson, G. Trail and E. Neumann (University Press of Mississippi, 1975), pp.145-159; E. Goldstein, 'Les précurseurs roumains de Ionesco', Bulletin des jeunes Romanistes (11-12 December 1965), pp.70-74.

³⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.136-137.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.28-29.

³⁶ 'An Interview with Ionesco', Interview with Richard Schechner, p.166.

individu n'est pas seul En réalité, les préoccupations, les obsessions, les problèmes universels sont en nous et tous nous les retrouvons les uns après les autres'.³⁷ Ionesco, therefore, considers his theatre to be a classical theatre where his personal dreams and fears become myths of universal validity, revealing 'ce fonds commun inaltérable que l'on peut arriver à découvrir ... directement en soi-même'.³⁸ Unless it is at once discovery and rediscovery, at once personal and universal, rooted in the present time yet rejoining a 'tradition vivante',³⁹ art has no value. It is in this sense only that we should look for the influences of Ionesco's writing, for, as he himself admits, 'les oeuvres d'art les plus jeunes, les plus neuves, se reconnaissent et parlent à toutes les époques. Oui, c'est le roi Salomon qui est mon chef de file; et Job, ce contemporain de Beckett'.⁴⁰

We know from Ionesco's autobiographical writing and journals the tremendous importance that he accords to his childhood memories and experiences, which he recalls with an unusual clarity. Childhood constitutes a kind of paradise outside the processes of time and decay, a place where the individual felt in total harmony with himself and the surrounding universe. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is frequently to childhood that the adult looks in search of his individual identity, as if by deciphering the images of infancy he could re-discover the plenitude of being and the sense of wonder and joy that were the privileges of childhood, thereby regaining his lost paradise. It is with the images of childhood, filtered and reconstructed by the mature author, that the present study therefore begins. Before he was even able to formulate his thoughts and sensations into words, Ionesco suggests that he was aware of his own consciousness, not as something separate and distinct but as part of a harmonious whole, and this awareness of existence was accompanied by an amazement that gave rise to a feeling of deep joy. The gradual formulation of a concept of individuality, however, involved a process of increasing differentiation of the self from its surroundings as the child became aware of the 'moi-relatif' of his body and the 'tout cela' that was the remainder of his visible environment and over which he had no control.⁴¹ In attempting

³⁷ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.50.

³⁸ Notes, p.96.

³⁹ Ibid., p.86.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.223.

⁴¹ Découvertes, p.23.

to categorize and understand the relationship between the self and his surroundings, the child Ionesco necessarily placed himself outside creation, and, becoming suddenly aware of his uniqueness, he experienced what Ionesco describes as a tragic separation, losing forever the serenity and acceptance that characterized childhood and losing his certainty about the nature of the self and the world. 'Je me vois voulant saisir le monde', Ionesco recalls, 'Plus je crois le saisir, plus il m'échappe A tellement courir après tout, je n'ai plus rien, je ne suis plus Je ne vois plus les êtres. Je ne vois plus l'être'.⁴²

Estranged from the self and the world, wonder turns to terrified horror at the evil and impenetrable mystery of the world, and the primeval unity becomes a bipolar system of unresolved dichotomies between a state of joy, wonder, lightness, and beauty accompanied by a profound consciousness of being and malaise, heaviness, darkness, ugliness, and guilt, in which state all phenomena, including the self, seem unreal and pointless, on the verge of destruction either by being crushed or by being engulfed in a 'Néant' that the opaqueness of material phenomena disguises. Whereas most men are able to find a *modus vivendi* between the two poles, Ionesco oscillates constantly between wonder and horror, and this constant tension informs every aspect of his life and art. During his adolescence Ionesco experienced moments of wonder during which he was able to recapture the freshness of vision of the child. At these times, he explained to the author, 'j'avais l'impression ne pas de m'appartenir à moi, mais d'appartenir à quelque chose qui me dépassait ... une sorte de véritable moi profond peut-être'.⁴³

Unfortunately these spontaneous illuminations were short-lived, and the return to the negative pole of being and the loss of certainty that accompanied it were made all the more painful by the nostalgia for the joy that preceded it. However, Ionesco considers that these momentary visions are of the greatest importance, for they indicate the presence of an inner spring of joy and wonder that is not lost but merely buried by the dullness of vision that comes with habit and custom, and this leads him to hope that he can recapture this vision and with it the sense of self that was an integral part of the experience. 'Pour retrouver son âme', he told the author, 'il faut redécouvrir cette

⁴²Découvertes, p.124.

⁴³Interview with author, 96 Boulevard Montparnasse (5 April 1980).

faculté de contemplation, voir le monde, non plus comme une chose banale et quotidienne, mais comme une chose merveilleuse, tel qu'il apparaît aux enfants'.⁴⁴ It is this sense of wonder at the new and surprising that he aims to recreate in his theatre. 'Telle est pour moi l'expérience de la littérature', he explains, 'avoir l'impression qu'il [le monde] est tellement nouveau, tellement inédit qu'il faut inventer les mots pour le dire, des mots qui n'ont jamais existé Rien n'est à refaire. Tout est à faire, puisque cela n'a jamais été fait'.⁴⁵

Torn by the tensions within himself and within the world as he perceives it, Ionesco feels isolated in a 'univers de feu et d'acier',⁴⁶ forced by his human nature to try to understand existence yet unable to penetrate its mystery, tied to a human destiny that he cannot escape and yet cannot accept. Nor has he anything to oppose to the hostile forces that surround him, for he no longer enjoys the firm awareness of being that was the privilege of childhood. Insecure and insubstantial, aware of a sense of incompleteness, even living from day to day seems to be a painful, almost insurmountable task. 'J'ai toujours eu une mauvaise cénesthésie', Ionesco admits, 'mal à l'aise dans ma peau'.⁴⁷ To confront the emptiness of the self inevitably brings anguish, for, as Beckett pointed out, man 'must know that self-perception is the most frightening of all human observations. He must know that when man faces himself he is looking into the abyss'.⁴⁸ There is inevitably a great temptation to avoid the problem, sheltering behind an illusory screen of order and logic, busying one's mind with superficial concerns. If the puppet-like 'zanni' of Ionesco's early plays and sketches seem comic in their total lack of individuality and awareness of themselves, their behaviour betrays a tragic parody of the world as Ionesco sees it, and everyone is implicated in their inauthenticity, for, he states unequivocally, 'Il faut croire que pour le moment, dans sa majorité, le monde est composé d'individus spirituellement, métaphysiquement amputés, handicapés'.⁴⁹ In the later plays, Ionesco portrays heroes who share

⁴⁴ Interview with author.

⁴⁵ Découvertes, p.107.

⁴⁶ Présent passé, p.183.

⁴⁷ Journal, p.48.

⁴⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Samuel Beckett Talks About Beckett', Vogue (December 1969), p.210.

⁴⁹ Un Homme en question, p.49.

his lucid malaise at their loss of certitude. Through the experiences of these characters, Ionesco attempts to communicate his belief that tension, anguish, and uncertainty are an inescapable part of modern man's existence if it is lived with awareness and sincerity, but they are also a stimulus and can be used as a positive force to guard against indifference and compromise and should not therefore be avoided but assumed as constituting the very definition of man.

'Today ... the term identity refers, more often than not, to something noisily demonstrative, to a more or less desperate "quest", or to an almost deliberately confused "search"', writes Erikson.⁵⁰ Nowhere is this more true than in Ionesco's life and his theatre, and it is in this theme of the search for identity that his life and his artistic creation, always so closely linked, come together. If each man's life sincerely lived must, in Ionesco's opinion, be a difficult, treacherous journey in search of individual identity and of insight into the fundamental truths that remain hidden to man, writing is equally a quest, an exploration into unknown and uncharted regions in the search of knowledge, 'une aventure, une chasse, une découverte d'un univers qui se révèle à moi-même, de la présence duquel je suis le premier à être étonné'.⁵¹ The quest of modern man, however, cannot be like the heroic odysseys of history, for it is beset by confusion and uncertainty, even about the ultimate goals. 'Dans le labyrinthe ténébreux du monde, l'homme ne cherche plus qu'inconsciemment une dimension perdue qu'il ne peut même plus entrevoir', Ionesco observes.⁵² Many of Ionesco's plays are allegorical, portraying a physical journey in search of a person or a different world which would fulfil all the heroes' desires and needs. All such journeys end in failure, for, Ionesco suggests, they attempt to evade responsibility and to escape from the self rather than to plunge deeper into it, and, moreover, it is futile to seek in a change in material circumstances the remedy for a deficiency that is metaphysical in nature. In other plays, the journey is an inner, spiritual adventure, delving the depths of the consciousness. Often this search is regressional, an attempt to recapture the world of childhood, now perceived as a lost paradise from which the individual was expelled. Closely linked with his obsession with childhood is the

⁵⁰Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis, p.19.

⁵¹Théâtre, II, 13.

⁵²'Dans les armes de la ville', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 20 (October 1957), 4.

importance that Ionesco accords to dreams and the irrational as means of gaining access to the hidden, inner self. Although he showed some interest in Freudian and Jungian methods of psychoanalysis, finding some common ground between their approaches and his own, he parodies them both in his plays, rejecting them as a means of finding a sense of individual identity, for all they can do, he suggests, is to highlight different fragments of the inner self thereby separating the individual even further from the integrated, unified sense of self which he is seeking. The search for individual identity must be a personal one; it cannot be made dependent on some external circumstance or person, and it cannot be undertaken by another on our behalf. However, the importance of the search for individual identity is not, Ionesco believes, in the goals achieved or in the advances made, for there are no milestones by which to measure one's progress, but in the depth and sincerity of a struggle that can never cease or even reach a resting point. If, through his personal testimony to these beliefs in his theatre, Ionesco is able to make others aware of the necessity of their own individual search for identity, a search they must continue without despairing at the impossibility of finding any answers, then he believes his work will have made a valuable contribution. Austin Quigley sums this up, writing:

The drama of inquiry in a pluralistic universe can offer us no final horizon, no ultimate destination, no road back to where we began. The focus of attention is not on conclusion but on clarification ... The drama of inquiry is also an incitement to inquiry, a reminder that learning is as fundamental to our lives as loving, that moving on is not only a process of keeping up with what we have the capacity to become. As history shows and as the drama of inquiry displays there is no point at which we can finally stop and rest satisfied with where we have arrived and what we have achieved. If we must repeatedly contemplate the possibility of moving on, it is well to have acquired the knowledge that dramas of inquiry have individually to offer, but it is more important to have mastered the technique they have collectively displayed: the technique of inquiring further for ourselves.⁵³

In his search for identity, the individual has to take account of his material surroundings to which he is indissolubly linked in a position of dependence through his physical body. Man is frustrated by his inability to comprehend the universe. Although science can reduce phenomena to facts and measurements, Ionesco suggests that it brings us no nearer to understanding the essence of these things; all that man

⁵³ Austin E. Quigley, The Modern Stage and Other Worlds (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), p.263.

can know is his subjective perception of them, and reality is, therefore, as multiform as there are individuals to perceive it. The world is no longer a context or mirror for the individual, but a hostile force, constantly threatening to draw the individual into its own inanimate sphere, thereby destroying his unique metaphysical dimension. At times the world seems too full of matter, heavy, oppressive, crushing the individual by a proliferating mass of inanimate objects, yet at other times it seems empty, evanescent, without reality, a void that menaces the individual with engulfment. Life is a constant struggle between the self and its surroundings, between the material and spiritual planes. Summarizing a conversation with Ionesco, Father Lendger concluded that Ionesco considered 'que le grand enjeu de l'époque actuelle est un enjeu spirituel pour le monde: ou le monde verse dans un matérialisme pur et simple qui nous fait rester à la surface de l'homme, ou au contraire on redécouvre les profondeurs de l'homme'.⁵⁴ However, even this struggle is made absurd by the fact that at any moment it can be ended by death, the final victory of the world of inanimate matter. Unlike other forms of life, man is aware that he is going to die, and this awareness becomes for Ionesco an obsession that makes all human endeavour futile. 'A quoi bon tout', asks Bérenger in Tueur, 'si ce n'est que pour en arriver là?'.⁵⁵ Moreover, as Ionesco cannot believe in any transcendence for the individual, death represents the end of the search for identity, and he asks in panic, 'Vais-je mourir sans m'être connu, sans m'être compris?'.⁵⁶ Caught between the unknown of the world and the unknown of death, Ionesco describes himself as 'écartelé entre l'horreur de vivre et l'horreur de mourir'.⁵⁷ However, life cannot be comprehended without death, which is the only certainty that man has in life, and, although mortality is something that Ionesco can never accept as natural, he believes that to deny or avoid the fact of death is to live a life that is a lie. Ionesco's plays and journals frequently remind us of the presence of death in life, but not in order that we may be overcome by a depression that deprives us of the possibility of life in the present but that we may achieve what he himself seeks in vain, to come to terms with death and to face it, not with resignation, but with lucidity and

⁵⁴ Antidotes, p.246.

⁵⁵ Théâtre, II, 89.

⁵⁶ Journal, p.210.

⁵⁷ Présent passé, p.121.

without despair, 'for to bear all naked truths | And to envisage
circumstance, all calm | That is the top of sovereignty'.⁵⁸

No individual exists in isolation, and his relationships with his contemporaries and his perceptions of others' appraisals of him are important aspects of the formation of a sense of identity. In a sociological perspective, the social framework in which the individual grows is the primary medium through which he comes to know himself. It was not until the age of seven, Ionesco recounts, that he first became aware of his uniqueness, his separation, his difference from the others, and he was overcome by a sense of shame and isolation. From that time onwards Ionesco has always found social contacts difficult and sometimes distasteful. Ionesco believes that, when an individual is cut off from his inner self, his contacts with others are no longer a means of self-confirmation, but a struggle for dominance where the stronger individual or a majority group constantly threatens to overwhelm the tenuous identity of the weaker one. From the individual's first social interaction with his family to the more complex matrices of organized society, Ionesco shows all inter-personal relationships to be vitiated by the constant encroachment of one individual or group on another. The problem is aggravated when the individual, aware of his own incompleteness, tries to assume a stronger sense of identity by sheltering behind the logical forms of society incarnate in the ideas of authority, law, convention, and order, or by identifying himself totally with a group, a function, or a social class. All such groups are antithetical to the individual's search for identity, for they allow no room for spontaneity and originality, demanding total conformity to certain beliefs, traditions, or stereotyped modes of behaviour and thought. Moreover, in identifying himself with an impersonal abstraction, the individual abdicates his right, not only to think and act for himself, but also, insofar as he is defined by his inner spiritual life, he loses his humanity. 'Où il y a fonction sociale il y a aliénation', Ionesco warns.⁵⁹ For Ionesco, the bourgeoisie are the most characteristic of this social alienation and conformity, but, in targeting them for his satire, he is not singling out one class in favour of another, for he suggests that the bourgeois mentality, the 'sclérose mentale

⁵⁸ John Keats, 'Hyperion', Complete Poems, edited by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), Book II, lines 203-205.

⁵⁹ Notes, p.163.

bourgeoise',⁶⁰ is universal and can be found in all strata of society and in all societies, for, he reminds us, 'toute société est aliénante'.⁶¹ Although Ionesco accepts the necessity of the social framework in which the individual is inevitably implicated, he believes that meaning inheres in the individual who alone can give a form and humanity to the collective structures of society. The social side of man is the least important, whilst the deepest, unique part of his being is, and must remain, extra-social, giving him freedom to act and to judge according to his individual conscience, not according to the arbitrary standards of a social group. Ionesco's work, therefore, constitutes 'une mise en garde, un appel amical à la vigilance',⁶² awakening all individuals to the dangers of the dehumanizing, standardizing pressures of society and making them aware that social relationships must be a constant struggle to balance the demands of society and the necessity of maintaining their integrity and uniqueness. 'Le "tout le monde" c'est le "on" impersonnel, c'est le vide', Ionesco warns, 'Il faut être personnel. Moi c'est ce qui s'oppose aux autres, les autres sont ceux qui s'opposent à moi. C'est cette opposition, cet équilibre qui constitue le personnel'.⁶³

A large part of Ionesco's polemical writing has been devoted to political questions, and his interest in politics is inevitably reflected in many of his plays. Nowhere, however, even in a play like Rhinocéros, which has been called 'one of the most significant political plays of the twentieth century',⁶⁴ are metaphysical and political issues far apart. The totalitarianism that Ionesco decries in Rhinocéros is not only a political concern, but an 'all-pervading presence in life',⁶⁵ that is reflected in the family, society, language, and modes of action and thought. Ionesco is concerned with politics, not because he sees in political action a means to improve life, but on the contrary because he sees it as a threat to the individual's search for identity. Bérenger's refusal to capitulate to the rhinoceroses is not, as Pierre-Aimé Touchard has pointed out, 'un refus politique en présence d'une option

⁶⁰Notes, p.128.

⁶¹Ibid., p.163.

⁶²Ibid., p.105.

⁶³Présent passé, p.61.

⁶⁴Richard N. Coe, 'Utopia and After', in Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Rosette C. Lamont (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p.148.

⁶⁵Louis Allen, 'The Avant-Garde', Prompt, 4 (1964), 30.

actuelle, mais un refus de la politique dans la mesure où elle tend à aliéner l'homme'.⁶⁶ In Ionesco's opinion all systems, whether of the right or left wing, are equally inimical to the full development of the individual, and the self-styled saviours of humanity are possibly the most dangerous and deceitful. 'Quand je vois un bon apôtre', Ionesco warns us, 'je m'enfuis comme lorsque je vois un dément criminel armé d'un poignard'.⁶⁷ Political action distracts man from seeking answers to the vital metaphysical questions of his existence, shielding him from an awareness of his condition with the pseudo-logic of ideologies and the panacea of ineffectual political agitation. 'Agissant ainsi, évitant de regarder la réalité en face, ils n'étaient plus conscients de leur identité, ni du sens de leur existence La politique ... nous fait oublier le seul problème authentique, celui de la signification de notre existence', Ionesco observes.⁶⁸ Man is a victim of his desire for a perfect solution in a world of the relative and the imperfect, but, in seeking his answers in politics, he deludes himself, for there are no utopias or simple answers in this world. He is also the victim of a fundamental instinct of evil and aggression that Ionesco perceives in all forms of life and of the will to power and desire for domination that is at the basis of all authority. He believes that it is these irrational passions that are the underlying causes of wars and revolutions and not the accredited political aims. Politics is an alibi, a pretext for these destructive instincts, for, by losing himself in a faceless mass, the individual abdicates responsibility for his actions, for a crowd has no conscience. By reemphasizing the importance of the unique individual, free politically and spiritually, Ionesco hopes to make man aware of his human values and to make him feel responsible for his own actions. Only at this level can man see beyond the political issues which separate mankind into factions and parties to the fundamental issues that unite all men in a spiritual bond, aware of their common plight. Ionesco told Peter Gelbard in an interview:

Barriers between people are false, they must be surmounted ... We must go beyond them in order to find a fundamental and permanent community. It does exist and can be found - very deep within us: at the edge of dreams, in certain haunting memories, in questions that are common to all men and never

⁶⁶ Pierre-Aimé Touchard, 'Un nouveau fabuliste', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 29 (February 1960), 13.

⁶⁷ Notes, p.229.

⁶⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.160.

answered.⁶⁹

The search for individual identity may be a means of counteracting the predominant role that politics has assumed in the modern world, reducing it to its true function as a framework for the 'libre épanouissement de la vie spirituelle'.⁷⁰ Therefore, despite Ionesco's apparent interest in political questions, his only engagement is an anti-engagement, and his true interest lies in reducing man's concern for politics by revealing the futility and irrationality of political action and the dangers that it involves for the inner life of the individual. He writes:

Si quelque chose est encore possible dans l'immédiat, ce serait de rétablir la hiérarchie des valeurs dans la structure de notre esprit et dans celle de notre société. Tout devrait être recentré sur la métaphysique et le spirituel, appuyés par le savoir scientifique avec, non omise, mais placée au bas de l'échelle, la politique.⁷¹

It was to express the experience of man losing control over language, which Ionesco had experienced at first hand when studying the banal platitudes of an English textbook for beginners, that Ionesco wrote his first play, and the problem of language and communication has remained one of his major concerns ever since. The perversion of language is both a symptom and a cause of the absence of living thought that reflects a lack of individual identity. Language not only distinguishes man from other forms of life, but to a large extent determines his thoughts, perceptions, and even individuality. It is a means of interrogating the inner self and of establishing a link of understanding with others. However, when language no longer reflects an inner core of being, the vital links between language, thought, and meaning break down, and language functions mechanically by the repetition of clichés and banalities, a process which Ionesco describes as 'la crise du langage':

Divorce entre l'être et la pensée. La pensée, vidée de l'être, se dessèche, se rabougrit, n'est plus une pensée. En effet, la pensée est l'expression de l'être, elle coïncide avec l'être. On peut parler sans penser. Il y a pour cela à notre disposition les clichés, c'est-à-dire les automatismes. Il n'y a de vraie pensée que vivante.⁷²

Unable to communicate with himself, the individual can no longer reach out to others and establish relationships with them. Language becomes

⁶⁹'Peter Gelbard Interviews Ionesco', Drama Survey, 3, 1 (May 1963), 32.

⁷⁰Un Homme en question, p.48.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Journal, p.42.

totally redundant, yet Ionesco's plays are full of individuals talking endlessly to one another or rather to themselves. The less they have to say, the more the characters talk, for they attempt to use words as an antidote to their inner emptiness, but their endless chattering tragically emphasizes their total isolation and lack of substantiality.

Divorced from their system of reference in reality, words become petrified objects that can be perceived only as units of sound, and, like other material objects, they proliferate, and the individual loses any residual control over them and over the reality that they should denote and classify. This mechanical language provides one of the main sources of Ionesco's humour in its ridiculous inappropriateness to the situations in which it is used and in its satire of the hollowness of social forms and politeness, but the comedy has a tragic face. It is not so much the 'tragédie du langage',⁷³ that is in question in these plays as the tragedy of the individual who has lost one of the most precious of human faculties. The inadequacy of language can also be dangerous, for the vacuum left by the absence of thought is only too easily filled by the political ideologies of dictators who twist language to fit a new meaning that will act as an alibi for their personal aggression and ambitions. However, despite the problems inherent in language, Ionesco maintains that communication, although difficult, is possible. People fail to communicate only because they abdicate the power of individual expression. Puppets themselves, they have nothing valid to communicate and avoid the trouble of putting any thought into their words, either from laziness and apathy or from fear of the inner void that thought might reveal. However, although the problems of communication are mostly man-made, there is a whole realm of experience concerning the metaphysical position of man in the universe that defies expression in rational terms and which can only be approached by the fundamental questions that Ionesco never ceases to pose, for these ineffable states of being are diminished or falsified by ordinary language. It is this barrier of communication that Ionesco pits himself against in his theatre, which is for him 'un combat avec un démon inconnu, pour faire l'effort de formuler ce qui, n'étant pas formulé, nous paraît informulable'.⁷⁴

As an artist, Ionesco feels that his work involves a constant struggle to renew language and to avoid the trap of falling into clichés and

⁷³Notes, p.252.

⁷⁴'Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Denise Bourdet, Revue de Paris, 68, 12 (December 1961), 141.

platitudes, his own or those of others. However, to a lesser degree each individual faces the same challenge as the artist to renew and extend the possibilities of expression. By revealing the consequences for the individual of relinquishing personal expression in favour of the mechanical language of convention and slogans, he aims to make his audiences realize that the corruption of language is not just a semantic problem, but one that affects the very foundation of their lives.

It is in the crucible of artistic creation that all the different elements of Ionesco's life and his search for individual identity finally come together. Art is a means of retracing his steps to childhood by reliving his dreams and memories materialized on stage, and the surprising, startling vision of the world that all true art affords approximates most nearly to the astonished wonder that is the prerogative of childhood. Art is a way of resolving the conflict between the individual's inner world and the refractoriness and tensions of external reality. The work of art is an anagram of life and nature, drawn from reality yet filtered and moulded by the inner reality of the creative artist. Here the dual postulations of existence can be presented without being resolved into a synthesis yet fused by the structuring vision of the artist into an organic, ordered unity, 'un ensemble réunissant les contraires, non pas dans une synthèse, mais dans des coexistences multiples'.⁷⁵ By interiorizing the external world and then projecting it out again in the world of art, the artist creates an autonomous world that is his own, a harmonious context where internal and external realities can totally coincide as in childhood. Creation, for Ionesco, is therefore a source of joy, not only because it is a way to rid himself of his toxins by distancing himself from them,⁷⁶ but because it is when he is creating that he feels most fully in touch with himself, as Irving Malin writes, 'His plays ... are therapeutic not clinically but metaphysically: they affirm his existence'.⁷⁷ Creation, as Camus had perceived, is the only true revolt against the absurd, for it is the bringing into being of a new existence and also a means of facing the senselessness of existence with full lucidity and thereby freeing oneself from it. 'La déchéance universelle est niée par la création scientifique ou artistique', Ionesco writes, 'même si, dans cette dernière, on nous

⁷⁵Entre la vie et le rêve, p.62.

⁷⁶Journal, p.110.

⁷⁷Irving Malin, 'The Fragments of Eugene Ionesco', in The Two Faces of Ionesco, p.91.

présente l'image de la décadence ou la réalité du marasme: en prendre conscience, c'est déjà la dépasser'.⁷⁸ The creative act is, therefore, an 'encounter' both with the self and with the world in the sense described by Rollo May in his article on 'The Nature of Creativity' and, as such, occasions joy, 'joy defined as the effect which goes with heightened consciousness, the affect that accompanies the experience of actualizing one's own potentialities'.⁷⁹ It is the same joy of discovery and encounter that Ionesco describes in Découvertes:

La grande surprise et la grande joie de la littérature est dans cette découverte étonnée de soi que l'on fait à travers les mondes ou dans le monde, comme dans un miroir ou comme si l'on était devenu soi-même le miroir du monde un soi-même, un être intégré, entouré dans un contexte, c'est-à-dire justifié par le contexte si riche, immense, universel.⁸⁰

Although Ionesco admits that he writes primarily for his own pleasure and gratification and because writing is for him a natural function no less important to his well-being than breathing, this superficially egocentric, introspective activity is paradoxically a means of reaching out to others. 'Il faut écrire pour soi', Ionesco affirms, 'c'est ainsi que l'on peut arriver aux autres'.⁸¹ Springing from the depths of the individual consciousness, art transcends itself and its time, attaining a universality that reflects the fundamental concerns of man throughout all time. Ionesco considers that the success of a true work of art can be measured by 'la puissance et la durée de son rayonnement'.⁸² The reality and universality of the artist's inner reality is proven by the fact that others can identify with his obsessions and hopes and recognize themselves through him. Thus, as George Anex wrote:

Lorsque nous sortons d'une pièce de Ionesco, nous la retrouvons un peu partout, dans nos familles, chez nos amis, dans les mystérieux colloques des rues et des cafés ... Ses héros traduisent à leur manière notre vie la plus familière et la plus sûre, et la font éclater.⁸³

All art is a constant struggle to overcome the deficiencies of language

⁷⁸ Notes, p.311.

⁷⁹ Rollo May, 'The Nature of Creativity', Etc., XVI, 3 (Spring 1959), 261.

⁸⁰ Découvertes, pp.91-92.

⁸¹ Notes, p.300.

⁸² Journal, p.41.

⁸³ Georges Anex, 'Ionesco, le médium', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 67.

and to express the inexpressible, but in the theatre Ionesco found a powerful instrument of communication which could bypass the spoken word and, through the use of physical theatrical images, objects, and actions, speak to the audience with the directness of life itself, conveying the intangible aspects of man's condition as an immediate experience.

'Je ne raconte pas ces choses, je les fais apparaître; je ne les discute pas, car la discussion atténue les faits, les explique faussement, nous aide à les oublier; je les présente, ces faits, dans leur nudité, matériellement', Ionesco explains.⁸⁴

The language of the artist and, in particular, of the dramatist is a universal language, renewing the possibility of communication and communion between all men through the medium of the work. It is only 'à travers un texte, c'est-à-dire à travers une confession, c'est-à-dire en plongeant dans l'univers, c'est-à-dire dans les abîmes d'un autre que la communion peut s'accomplir', Ionesco asserts.⁸⁵

All good art is shocking and surprising in its originality, and, by disturbing the foundations of our thinking, it is an exercise in freedom, freedom from the limitations of theatrical techniques and stereotyped language and freedom from habitual, mechanical patterns of thinking and behaviour, as well as freedom from idolatry and fanaticism. The heightened consciousness of the artist is able to break through the crust of appearances and conventions, exposing the reader or audience to the forces of conformity and habit that threaten them both from outside and from within, and making them face aspects of themselves and their world that they normally overlook or evade because of the anguish which such perception engenders. It is this ability to communicate the uniqueness of his vision to others by renewing language that differentiates the 'writer who is merely eccentric or mad' from 'the genuine poet', for, as T.S. Eliot wrote, whilst the first 'may have feelings which are unique but which cannot be shared, and are therefore useless; the latter discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others. And in expressing them he is developing and enriching the language which he speaks'.⁸⁶

The multiplicity of different realities that Ionesco proposes and crystalizes in the theatrical worlds of his works constitute poetical hypotheses, infinitely broadening the vision of the spectator, affording him a vantage point from which he

⁸⁴ Antidotes, p.261.

⁸⁵ Journal, p.124.

⁸⁶ T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), p.20.

can begin to restructure his own world, to search for his individual identity and to recognize his fraternity with others, free from any constraints or standards imposed by another or by his own habitual modes of vision and thought:

The knowledge that we get from a poem does not tell us how to act, but how to be. A poem tells us how to be human by identifying ourselves with others and finding again their dilemmas in ourselves. What we learn from it is self-knowledge.⁸⁷

Ionesco's theatre is not concerned with the formulation of an answer to the search for individual identity, but only with framing over and over again the same question, a question without answer that marks the very limits of human understanding and which puts all others, political, social, or everyday, in their true perspective, 'question sans réponse, question qui se suffit à elle-même, question qui est comme sa propre réponse'.⁸⁸ This, he suggests, is the only possible way to approach the individual identity, for the individual is not determinate, clearly definable once and for all, but something in a constant process of change and development, both because man by his nature is compelled to continually search for new possibilities and new knowledge and because man exists in relation to others and to an ever-changing world that is divided against itself and so is constantly modified by changes in time and situation. Yet, even when he appears to lose his sense of self, the pain and nostalgia which he experiences prove to him that there is an individual identity, and, if its essence eludes final understanding, he can at least hope to intensify his awareness of it through the process of continual searching that constitutes the basis of artistic creation. This identity, he suggests, exists as a structuring consciousness, a unique centre of choice and action that integrates the maelstrom of contradictory forces that surround it in a way that is consistent and peculiar to itself:

La structure individuelle, c'est bien ce qui donne une forme aux structures collectives. La personne est aussi une forme, cette forme, c'est-à-dire une idée, une essence, cette essence-ci. Cela n'est pas une illusion. Tout est en relation. Il y a donc les désirs, obsessions, angoisses collectives, qui ont leur façon d'être, leur dynamisme propre, leur dialectique. Je prends ces désirs, ces obsessions, ces angoisses collectives, je leur donne un système de relations, un dynamisme, une dialectique, une figure, une structure qui me sont propres.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ J. Bronowski, The Identity of Man (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.62.

⁸⁸ Découvertes, p.73.

⁸⁹ Présent passé, p.171.

He is conscious of this individual identity, more conscious of it when he is creating or in the rare experiences of the state of wonder and less conscious of it when he allows the superficial, social side of his nature to take too much emphasis, and the degree of joy or anguish that he feels is in direct correlation to the extent of his awareness of self and not to any external event. 'J'ai la clef de la félicité', he claims, 'souviens-toi, prends conscience profondément ... que tu es'.⁹⁰ If he has never been able to trap this sense of individual identity in a network of words and logic, it is not only because he believes it to be impossible, as concepts and being are not reducible one to another, but also because he believes that to try to make the individual identity into something static and finally achieved would be to falsify the living, dynamic nature of identity. 'Comprendre, c'est bien trop peu', he writes, 'Avoir compris c'est être fixé où figé'.⁹¹ Instead he aims to present a witness to his sense of being or anguish at his difficulty of being in a complex network of poetic images as an affective experience that, rather than being understood by the mind has to be lived through intuitively with the emotions and the whole self. 'Je constate donc tout simplement que je suis là, ce "je" difficile à définir', he explains, 'et c'est bien pour exprimer, pour faire part de mon étonnement et de ma nostalgie que j'écris'.⁹² It is in the artist's ability not only to perceive his inner reality with greater insight, but to enable others to share his insights, that Ionesco believes his work can make its most valuable contribution to the search for individual identity. 'Si le créateur n'est pas, comme on été tenté de le croire, celui qui a des lumières ... il est celui qui peut parler le mieux de ce qu'il a fait', he states.⁹³ Those that fully share in the experience of Ionesco's theatre remain, if not without hope, at least without illusions, if not any closer to the answers to the problem of the search for individual identity, at least the most open to the questions, if not at the final goal, at least, like Beckett's tramps in En attendant Godot, waiting at the rendez-vous, 'nous ne sommes pas des saints, mais nous sommes au rendez-vous. Combien de gens peuvent en dire autant?'.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Présent passé, p.246.

⁹¹ Journal, p.38.

⁹² Notes, p.18.

⁹³ Découvertes, pp.12-13.

⁹⁴ Beckett, En attendant Godot, p.112.

Deux états de conscience fondamentaux sont à
l'origine de toutes mes pièces: tantôt l'un, tantôt
l'autre prédomine, tantôt ils s'entremêlent.
Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes.

CHAPTER I

THE TWO STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

As Ionesco frequently advises his reader 'si on veut retrouver le sens de quelque chose à travers le non-sens ou au-delà du sens, c'est vers le tout début qu'il faut revenir',¹ it is not surprising that a study of the search for individual identity should commence at the point where the newborn child first perceives himself and the surrounding world. Ionesco's own experience, admittedly reconstructed from the perspective of the mature man, is described in his volume Découvertes and in passages of his other autobiographical works. There he tells us that the individual's first sensation is not an awareness of his identity as a separate entity but the awareness of a universal existence, the whole of Being; cosmos, world, life, and matter from which he was created and of which he feels himself to be a fully integrated part. The sheer fact of existence inspires in him an overwhelming sense of wonder and astonishment, together with a firm awareness of being both of himself and of the world, and an accompanying emotion of deep joy. This wonder is the fundamental basis of all human existence for, as Ionesco says, 'c'est dans cet étonnement que plongent les racines de la vie'.² The attempt to recapture the vision of childhood explains Ionesco's obsession with childhood and childhood memories in his writing. However, wonder is also a state of interrogation, and in his desire to understand, the individual separates himself from the world, and the original harmony is broken forever. Wonder turns to a horrified amazement at the evil and suffering in a hostile and alien outer world. On occasions in later life, Ionesco and some of his characters are able to recapture fleetingly the sense of wonder, but the opposing state of malaise and despair is always found in close association with it. They oscillate between these two perceptions of existence which form a system of conflicts and antagonisms that run throughout Ionesco's life and artistic creation. In his theatre, this dichotomy not only dictates much of the thematic structure but also largely controls the dramatic structure: rhythm,

¹Découvertes, p.79.

²Journal, p.57.

movement, lighting, setting, and even costume.

The sense of wonder is caused by amazement at the strange phenomenon of existence itself, the sheer physical presence of things. 'Ce que je n'arrive pas à comprendre c'est ceci', Ionesco says, 'comment est-il possible que quelque chose soit? Pourquoi quelque chose est? Il était plus "naturel", si je puis employer ce mot, que rien ne soit'.³ In this state of wonder the individual is clearly aware both of the existence of the world and of the self. The two sensations are inseparable. 'En effet, la conscience d'être et l'étonnement s'identifiaient', Ionesco writes, ' . . . L'étonnement intense qui m'habitait n'était que la prise de conscience que j'étais'.⁴ For Ionesco this deep awareness of being is a great source of joy, and as such, he points out, his fundamental reaction is the very opposite of Sartre for whom consciousness is a source of anguish and nausea.⁵ This acute joy or euphoria should not be confused with what Ionesco calls 'le bonheur médiocre'.⁶ Ionesco describes the experience as a semi-mystical state, a state of grace,⁷ in which the self appears to exist in a sphere of infinity outside the normal dimensions of time and space, 'une dilation euphorique du moi'.⁸ For Ionesco it constitutes the supreme point of consciousness, almost a visionary state, as he acknowledges, 'c'est bien cet étonnement qui est ma conscience la plus authentique'.⁹ The joy and certainty of being result from the fact that the individual feels integrated and in harmony with the world. Béranger describes this experience in Tueur saying, 'Ma paix, ma propre lumière à leur tour s'épanchaient dans le monde, je comblais l'univers d'une sorte d'énergie aérienne'.¹⁰ The individual perceives the oneness of existence with immense joy. The hero of Le Solitaire says, 'La joie, c'est de s'apercevoir tout d'un coup, d'une façon qu'on pourrait appeler surnaturelle, que le monde est là et que l'on est dans

³Journal, p.57.

⁴Présent passé, p.227.

⁵Schechner, 'An Interview with Ionesco', pp.163-164.

⁶'Le Bonheur est médiocre', Nouvel Observateur (3 September 1973), pp.46-47.

⁷Compare Ionesco's statement in an interview with Richard Schechner, 'Consciousness, the very consciousness of existing provokes in me a shock which is a source of joy. This shock is like a state of grace'. 'Three Aspects of Ionesco's Theatre', p.7.

⁸Le Solitaire, p.80.

⁹Journal, p.60.

¹⁰Le Solitaire, p.111.

le monde, que l'on existe, que j'existe',¹¹ and Ionesco elaborates, 'La grâce, c'est se sentir à l'aise dans l'existence et en accord avec le monde. Mon personnage . . . est heureux dans les moments où il a le sentiment que son existence est enracinée dans une existence plus vaste, enracinée dans l'être'.¹² Wonder transforms both the inner and the outer worlds, and descriptions of the miraculous moment are always associated with images of light, vegetation and gardens, music, blue skies, free space, and evanescence. The individual feels secure in the phenomenal world which is neither an empty void in which the individual is adrift nor heavy and oppressive and full of dead matter. There is a perfect balance between the individual and the world which, once it has been destroyed by the 'tragic separation' that the individual later experiences, can never be regained. This loss has consequences for the individual's sense of identity and for his life in general as will be shown in the next chapter.

The 'émerveillement' of the newborn child is an unquestioning wonder of total acceptance, but the harmony of this state is almost immediately vitiated by the innate human faculty of reason, which desires to understand creation, rather than being content to merely experience it. However, rational questioning only separates the individual more from understanding. 'L'explication nous sépare de l'étonnement . . . ', Ionesco explains in Découvertes, 'Ne pas comprendre, être stupéfait, c'est ce qui est encore le plus près de la compréhension de l'incompréhensible'.¹³ To question the world and himself, the individual puts himself outside it and so loses the initial harmony which he had experienced. Ironically, it is therefore the desire to understand his individual identity, to reduce it to reason, which first separates the child from his firm sense of existence. 'Si je me demande ce que le monde est dans cette pensée émerveillée et sans langage, je suis dans le monde', Ionesco writes, 'Si je me demande qui je suis, je suis hors du monde, je me sépare, je suis malheureux'.¹⁴ Once the world and self are perceived as separate entities, the strangeness of the world is no longer a source of joy but of terror, a Pascalian 'vertige' before the unknown and unknowable nature of creation. The evanescence of objects no longer

¹¹ Le Solitaire, p.111.

¹² 'Nous avons la manie des révolutions', Interview with Sandra Stolojan, Journal de Genève, 180 (4-5 August 1973), 1.

¹³ Découvertes, p.72.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.81.

occasions a feeling of joy and freedom, but a nightmare vision of limitless space which threatens to engulf the individual's very being. It is the void which Béranger glimpses in Le Piéton de l'air: 'Après, il n'y a plus rien, plus rien que les abîmes illimités . . . que les abîmes'.¹⁵ Ionesco describes the same fear of the 'néant' which he perceives all around him, when he confessed to Jean Montalbeith, 'J'ai l'impression que je me promène parmi les fantômes et que l'univers est prêt à s'écrouler avec ou sans fracas dans un néant immense'.¹⁶

As in the Biblical myth of the fall from Paradise, when the desire for knowledge breaks the primeval harmony, the individual first becomes aware of the presence of evil. Ionesco describes his discovery of evil as 'un deuxième étonnement'. It is:

Un jugement étonné, constatation qu'il y a le mal ou, plus simplement, que cela va mal. La constatation que le mal existe, pour l'instant, au milieu de nous, qu'il nous ronge, qu'il nous détruit. Le mal nous empêche de prendre conscience du miracle. C'est comme si le mal ne faisait partie du miracle, il est quotidien, il est notre nourriture quotidienne. La joie d'être est étouffée par le malheur, submergée. Il est aussi inexplicable¹⁷ que l'existence, lié à l'existence. Il est la grande énigme.

The opposing pole of the state of wonder is thus a feeling of 'mal d'être', and this state is, in Ionesco's life, the more prevalent one, as he admits, 'Je suis, le plus souvent, sous la domination du sentiment opposé'.¹⁸ As wonder is characterized by a feeling of harmony and oneness with the world, this state is typified by a sensation of discomfort, of being out of place in an alien world, perceived either as a prison or as a crushing weight. '"On" a fait une faute inadmissible, colossale en me distribuant dans l'univers, dans cette société, dans ce lieu', Ionesco writes.¹⁹ Lightness turns to grey shadows; translucent reality becomes heaviness and opaqueness; la légèreté se mue en lourdeur; la transparence en épaisseur; le monde pèse; l'univers m'écrase'.²⁰ In this state the individual can no longer contemplate creation with wonder, as he appears to be separated from it, and from his inner self, as

¹⁵ Théâtre, III, 198.

¹⁶ 'Un somnambule sur la crête d'histoire', Interview with Jean Montalbeith, Contrepoint, (Spring 1978), p.10.

¹⁷ Antidotes, p.10.

¹⁸ Notes, pp.231-232.

¹⁹ Présent passé, p.181.

²⁰ Notes, p.232.

though by a wall. The sense of certainty of the permanence of his own essence, and that of the world, dissolves into a feeling of doubt about all existence, which now appears insubstantial, pointless and unjustified, destined for destruction. 'Un rideau, un mur infranchissable s'interpose entre moi et le monde', Ionesco writes, 'entre moi et moi-même, la matière remplit tout, prend toute la place, anéantit toute liberté sous son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient un cachot étouffant'.²¹ The 'à quoi bon?' of existence in general and of his individual existence in particular makes any action, especially social or political actions, irrelevant and pointless. 'Une énorme fatigue m'accable', Ionesco laments, 'la certitude ou presque que tout est vain'.²²

Ionesco once stated that, 'la sclérose de l'individu commence à vingt ans',²³ but his writings indicate that he believes it in fact starts much earlier, at the moment when the infant becomes aware of the dual nature of existence. At this point the paradise of childhood is lost forever. 'L'enfance c'est le monde du miracle ou du merveilleux', Ionesco says, 'Il n'y a plus d'enfance à partir du moment où les choses ne sont plus étonnantes. Lorsque le monde vous semble "déjà vu", lorsqu'on s'est habitué à l'existence, on devient adulte'.²⁴ As the child gets older, the sense of malaise predominates more and more over that of wonder. Habit, as Beckett wrote in his essay on Proust, is a great deadener, 'the guarantee of dull inviolability, the lightning conductor of . . . existence'.²⁵ It dulls the freshness and wonder of creation and catches the individual in a web of stultifying routine. Ionesco warns us that, 'C'est l'accoutumance qui a terni la lumière, qui a assombri mon émerveillement. Les désirs et passions et l'habitude d'exister m'ont enfoncé, comme enterré, dans le monde, cette cave, ce tombeau'.²⁶ The process of living and aging is thus a constant growth away from wonder and certainty; a barrier of stereotyped thought-patterns and reactions builds up which prevents the individual from perceiving the beauty of the world or his own individual identity. It is for this reason that the search for individual identity is indissolubly

²¹ Notes, p.232.

²² Journal, p.26.

²³ 'Il fallait y penser', Nouvel Observateur (10 June 1965), p.24.

²⁴ Journal, p.55.

²⁵ Beckett, Proust, p.7.

²⁶ Découvertes, pp.125-126. See also Notes, p.329; Présent passé, p.35.

linked with an attempt to recapture the vision of a child and that Ionesco's avowed aim throughout his life and writing is to, 'Détruire les murs du réel qui nous sépare de la réalité, participer à l'être pour vivre comme au premier jour de la naissance du monde, un jour qui serait tous les jours le premier jour des nouvelles naissances'.²⁷

'Emerveillement' or wonder is an attitude, a particular way of looking at the world and at oneself, that occurs naturally to the child but not to the adult. However, Ionesco and some of his characters retain an obsessive memory of the primary wonder which haunts their adult lives, and they are remarkable in that they have preserved this faculty of amazement to a greater degree than the average man. In later life, the state of wonder may occur sporadically as a spontaneous 'satori' or illumination. Ionesco, in particular, describes one experience which took place in a Roumanian provincial town, when he was seventeen or eighteen years old. Mircea Eliade believes this to have been the most 'decisive experience' of Ionesco's life,²⁸ and links it to his readings of the Byzantine mystics, stressing how much it has in common with similar 'light experiences' throughout the history of mysticism and religion.²⁹ Whatever its antecedents and analogies, for Ionesco, the experience is intimately personal and unique, involving an enhanced perception of the self and of the world, recreated as though he were seeing them for the first time, yet appearing familiar and reassuring. 'Il semble que l'univers vient de naître, qu'il vient de sortir de l'eau originelle, illimitée', Ionesco says, 'qu'il est encore humide, qu'il garde quelque chose de la transparence des lacs. Le monde n'est que lumière et eau. C'est le premier jour'.³⁰ In this experience,

²⁷ Présent passé, p.222. Muriel Reed has said of Eugène Ionesco, 'Each one of his plays is, in a way, a hymn to naivety, to the joy of living, to freshness and wonderment. But it is a hymn to creation in reverse'. 'Ionesco', Réalités, ed. anglaise, 85 (December 1957), 50.

²⁸ Mircea Eliade, 'Eugene Ionesco and "La Nostalgie du Paradis"', in The Two Faces of Ionesco, edited by Rosette C. Lamont and Melvin J. Friedman (New York: Whitson Publishing Co., 1978), p.22.

²⁹ 'Although of a great morphological variety, all these "spontaneous" light experiences contain some basic features in common: they come suddenly and unexpectedly; they are accompanied by the feeling of joy, happiness, peace and confidence, or by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe; they reveal a fundamental unity, purpose and meaning of the world and of human existence, an "Urgrund" where contraries are reconciled. . . . Another common element is the sense of being born again, of "incipit vita nova", of an "existential mutation" or of being "saved". And what is more, in many cases the subject's life was radically and permanently transformed'. Ibid., pp.25-26.

³⁰ Présent passé, p.276.

as in later experiences, and in those which he recreates in his plays and novel, there is first of all the awareness of a blinding light which dissolves the forms of material objects and traditional meanings and distinctions, making everything transparent, insubstantial, and weightless; 'une grande lumière aveuglante envahit tout, fait disparaître les ombres des significations, les ombres de nos préoccupations, toutes les ombres, c'est-à-dire, tous les murs qui font que nous nous imaginons, que nous inventons les limites, les distinctions, les séparations, le sens'.³¹ This sense of unreality is followed by the awareness of a more essential reality, a sense of being in the centre of a harmonious existence, where objects, liberated from the limitations of their conventional significance, are pure and ineffable. Ionesco explains that, 'Si la première étape de cet état de conscience avait débuté par un vide du contenu des notions, la deuxième, l'essentielle, était une plénitude unifiée au-delà des définitions et des limites'.³² Béranger, in Tueur, describes the plenitude and inner cohesion which this world seems to possess, 'Pas une parcelle vide, tout était un mélange de plénitude et de légèreté, un parfait équilibre'.³³ Moreover, the state is an extra-temporal one, transcending time and determinism, where normal laws of death and decay do not apply; 'la mort elle-même se dissipe comme une fumée'.³⁴ Ionesco recalls the experience of timelessness in his Journal:

J'ai eu l'expérience, j'ai su ce qu'est être en dehors de l'Histoire. On peut y arriver. Cet état d'étonnement premier, de stupéfaction est propre à la condition humaine et peut illuminer quiconque au-delà de sa condition sociale, de son temps historique, du conditionnement économique. . . . cela se passe donc bien dans cette sorte de no man's land en marge de l'absolu ou du néant.³⁵

Although fleeting and rare, Ionesco considers these later experiences, of wonder and plenitude of being, to be the most fundamental experiences of his adult life, and it was to give expression to this sense of wonder and child-like amazement that Ionesco first began to write for the theatre; 'pour exprimer ce sentiment d'étonnement, de stupéfaction.

³¹ Journal, p.57.

³² Présent passé, p.227.

³³ Théâtre, II, 78.

³⁴ Présent passé, p.246.

³⁵ Journal, pp.59-60.

Pourquoi et que sommes-nous? Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire?'.³⁶ His first play, La Cantatrice chauve, has often been taken as a criticism of the banality of bourgeois life and drawing room conversation, but Ionesco claims that, far from finding it commonplace and boring, he found it amazing and incredible. 'C'était l'expression de l'insolite, de l'existence vue comme une chose absolument insolite', he writes.³⁷ Not only is his theatre as a whole an expression of his amazement at existence, but glimpses of the state of wonder recur throughout his plays, sometimes in the most unlikely situations. For example, in the middle of all the slogans and nonsense of Les Chaises, a sudden memory of the primary 'étonnement d'être' surges up in the Old Man's mind, and he says, 'Je me réveille quelquefois au milieu du silence absolu. C'est la sphère. Il n'y manque rien'.³⁸ The sphere signifies the harmonious, complete cosmos perceived by the infant, a universe with which he felt himself to be in total concord.³⁹ Choubert, in Victimes du devoir, forced by the Policeman to descend into his past life, re-discovers the sheer fact of existence and the joy and amazement of Being and exclaims, 'La lumière me pénètre. Je suis étonné d'être, étonné d'être'.⁴⁰ As he retreats further into his childhood, he is on the point of escaping altogether into a world of light and pure being, but he is forced back into reality by the Policeman and Madeleine.

In the later plays, the character of Béranger often experiences a more complete and conscious illumination which, like that of Ionesco himself, appears so fundamental and important that it alters the rest of his life, leaving him with an unbearable sense of grief and nostalgia at not being able to perpetuate the experience and a burning desire to recapture the lost vision. Béranger's description of his rare experiences of illumination to the impervious Architect, in Tueur, is typical, containing all the elements of Ionesco's own experience.⁴¹ The illumination takes place in an extraordinary silence, and there is a sense of joy, of 'l'indicible euphorie'. Everything is bathed in a

³⁶Entre la vie et le rêve, p.60.

³⁷Ibid., p.59.

³⁸Théâtre, I, 165.

³⁹Compare 'Hélas, tout s'obscurcissait autour de moi et tout ce qui était sphère ou cercle redevint angles'.
Présent passé, p.234.

⁴⁰Théâtre, I, 219.

⁴¹Théâtre, II, 76-79.

dazzling, almost palpable, light, as though four suns were lighting the sky, and the houses and other material forms seem to melt away in the density of this light. The world seems transfigured: new, fresh and wonderful, yet its strangeness is paradoxically combined with a comforting familiarity, as Béranger struggles to explain, 'Je ressentais à la fois un étonnement sans nom, mêlé à un sentiment d'extrême familiarité'. In this euphoric state, the individual feels a perfect harmony between the inner and outer worlds, 'ce monde construit à ma mesure'. The individual is confident of the existence of the self and of its immortality, and Béranger describes, like a triumphal song arising from his deepest being, the awareness that 'j'étais, j'avais conscience que j'étais depuis toujours, que je n'allais plus mourir'.⁴² As for Ionesco, it is the memory of this state that alone allows him to continue living, but, as the memory fades more and more, he feels as though he is slowly dying from lack of spiritual nourishment, until, in the radiant city, he seems to find the material realization of the harmony and serenity of his visions, where he can once again live as 'un être souriant, dans un monde souriant'.⁴³

The dramatic movement of Le Piéton is centred almost entirely around images of lightness and evanescence associated with the state of wonder. Here the experience of euphoria is not just a past memory, but something which the hero Béranger experiences before our eyes. Again, the starting point is a return to the vision of the child. 'Je regarde, c'est comme si c'était la première fois que je voyais. Je viens de naître', Béranger exclaims.⁴⁴ The state is characterized by both certainty and joy, of being 'enivré de certitude',⁴⁵ and by the paradoxical intermingling of the new and astounding with a sense of comfort and familiarity. Béranger describes the experience as 'une des ces joies oubliées, oubliées et pourtant bien connues, comme une chose qui m'appartient de toute éternité'.⁴⁶ In the second act of La Soif et la faim, Jean also briefly experiences this state of joy and amazement which he had left his wife and home to seek. Like a child, he is amazed at the sheer physical presence of things in the newly re-created world which yet looks

⁴²Théâtre, II, 76-79.

⁴³Ibid., p.73.

⁴⁴Théâtre, III, 155.

⁴⁵Ibid., p.156.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp.155-156.

strangely familiar. In words that echo Ionesco's own, he declares, 'Je suis ébloui comme je le fus la première fois. . . . C'est de nouveau la première fois et cette exaltation je la reconnais; comment est-ce possible que tout ce paysage soit, comment est-ce possible que cela soit, comment est-ce possible qu'il y ait . . . qu'il y ait . . . '. He too is filled with a tremendous joy: 'Une joie abondante qui m'envahit tout entier comme une marée qui monte irrésistiblement et vient féconder un sol aride'.⁴⁷ The King, Bérenger I, in Le Roi se meurt, only re-discovers the state of wonder on the verge of his death when he reverts to a childlike state and realizes with astonishment the beauty of the simple acts of everyday life. He is amazed at all he had never before perceived: 'On s'agite, et vous parlez et on vous parle, vous touchez et on vous touche. Une féerie tout ça, une fête continuelle'.⁴⁸ In Jeux de massacre, Ionesco presents an old couple, one of whom has preserved the faculty of wonder and can live the simple, unquestioning existence of the child. The Old Woman tells her husband, 'Chaque jour est pour moi le premier jour. Un premier jour que j'accepte tous les jours. Je me suis contentée de la présence mystérieuse du monde, ce qui m'entoure et de la conscience d'exister'.⁴⁹ Her husband remembers the state of wonder, but, unlike his wife, has been unable to maintain the miracle intact. For him 'la vie n'est plus miracle, elle est cauchemar'.⁵⁰

For all Ionesco's characters, the process of aging is a continual growth away from the sources of wonder and joy that alone make life worthwhile. Even the semi-autobiographical hero of Le Solitaire, who more than any other character of Ionesco lives in a state of constant, paralyzing amazement at the fact of existence, sees his ability to transfigure the surrounding world diminishing as he gets older:

Au tout début de ce genre d'expérience, quand j'avais quinze ou dix-sept ans, l'ailleurs arrivait plus vite. Le plus souvent, il y avait une sorte de halo lumineux. Et quand l'ailleurs s'en allait, je gardais longtemps, des jours, le souvenir d'un monde de la lumière. J'avais la certitude que cela avait été et que cela était et que je pouvais le retrouver. J'en gardais le souvenir joyeux pendant des jours, peut-être même pendant des semaines. Maintenant, quand j'arrive beau-

⁴⁷Théâtre, IV, 106.

⁴⁸Ibid., p.51.

⁴⁹Théâtre, V, 91.

⁵⁰Ibid., p.90.

coup plus difficilement et beaucoup plus rarement à cet état, sa disparition me laisse dans l'incertitude, dans l'accablement, dans une sorte de détresse. Je ne suis même plus sûr que cela soit vrai⁵¹

Ionesco's deepest fear is that he, like the Old Man in Jeux, might totally lose this sense of wonder, the tenuous lifeline which links him to his past and to the sources of Being, as he confessed to Claude Bonnefoy, 'Quand j'étais plus jeune, j'avais des réserves lumineuses. Cela commence à décroître . . . je vais vers la boue'.⁵²

Therefore, although the adult still has experiences of wonder, when the world seems amazing and existence a source of joy, these experiences are, in general, very different from the 'émerveillement' of the child who is unaware of the opposing pole of existence, evil and malaise. The adult knows from experience that the 'stupeur émerveillée' may, at any moment, replunge into 'stupeur angoissée', the latter being made all the more acute by its juxtaposition with the previous state of euphoria. Whereas the world of the child is dominated by a sense of wonder, the world of the adult is therefore dominated by an unresolvable dichotomy between wonder and depression, a dual postulation similar to the 'Spleen' and 'L'Idéal' of Baudelaire's works. It is the constant tension between these two states that makes up Ionesco's unique perspective of life and that he tries to resolve through his artistic creation. All his life, Ionesco says, he has 'vécu intensément ces deux sentiments contradictoires: le monde est à la fois merveilleux et atroce, un miracle et l'enfer', and he adds, 'Ces deux vérités évidentes constituent la toile de fond de mon existence personnelle et de mon oeuvre littéraire'.⁵³

The antithetical states of Being create unresolved antagonisms in every sphere of Ionesco's life and creation. On the psychological level, the profound consciousness of the existence of self, characterized by joy and wonder, is balanced by a sense of the irreality of all existence, accompanied by feelings of depression and guilt, habit and weariness. Inherent in the positive pole of Being is a feeling of being in harmony with the created world, of being immobile at the centre of existence, and of being immortal; whereas, under the influence of the opposing state, the individual feels a sense of separation, of being an outsider,

⁵¹ Le Solitaire, p.63.

⁵² Entre la vie et le rêve, p.80.

⁵³ Antidotes, p.325.

and he is obsessed with an acute sense of the passing of time and with a terror of death. The two states inevitably affect the individual's relationships with other people. Whereas, in the state of wonder and joy, the individual feels oneness and love for others, in the state of anguish, he feels himself to be an outsider, a freak; others oppress him and threaten his tenuous sense of identity. The society of La Chapelle-Anthenaise, described by Ionesco as 'un nid, un abri',⁵⁴ is an embodiment of the positive state of Being, and the second state predominates in the 'vie moderne impossible à vivre',⁵⁵ with the pressures of depersonalization and conformity. These analogies are far reaching, and Ionesco believes that it is possible to discern periods in history where one state or the other predominates. Thus, there have been ages of heaviness and malaise, associated with regimes of collectivism, totalitarianism and tyrannies, along with periods of lightness and wonder, such as the age of Pericles and the Renaissance.⁵⁶

The opposition between the two states also dictates the oscillation in the individual's relationship with his material surroundings. In the state of joy, the world is evanescent, insubstantial yet secure; whereas, in a state of ennui, the world seems heavy, over-full of dead matter, yet behind this 'trop-plein', there is paradoxically a 'Vide' which threatens the individual with extinction. Around each of these poles, Ionesco has created a cluster of poetic images which recur throughout his work. Images of a garden or green fields, light, a golden bridge, the colours blue and green, and flight stand in direct opposition to images of the wall, prisons, mud, tombs, ugliness, sinking and greyness. Mary Ann Witt, studying the physical manifestations of the two states in the plays, has outlined 'a dialectic of space'⁵⁷ in Ionesco's work. Similarly, Rosette Lamont analyses Ionesco's use of images of air and matter and demonstrates that images of ascension, mountains, and flying are associated with joy and those of descent and sinking with malaise.⁵⁸ This is an opposition which Paul Vernois has

⁵⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.15.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.38.

⁵⁷ Mary Ann Witt, 'Eugène Ionesco and the dialectic of space', Modern Language Quarterly, 33 (September 1972), 312-326.

⁵⁸ Rosette C. Lamont, 'Air and Matter: Ionesco's Le Piéton de l'air and Victimes du devoir', French Review, XXXVIII (January 1965), 349-361.

aptly classified as a 'polarisation verticale' that runs throughout Ionesco's work.⁵⁹ Simone Benmussa's more comprehensive study claims that the construction of Ionesco's theatre is based upon the interplay of the poetic images associated with the physical opposites of evanescence and heaviness, to the exclusion of traditional dramatic elements, such as plot and character.⁶⁰

Other critics have interpreted the two states on a wide variety of different levels. J.H. Donnard, considering the state of wonder in terms of psychoanalysis, comments, 'Les psychanalystes verraint^e, sans doute, dans ce rêve la symbolisation d'une excitation érotique, typiquement masculine'.⁶¹ The dialectic has also been treated in terms of the traditional polarities of religious experience; light and dark, high and low, good and evil, life and death, comfort and terror, heaven and hell.⁶² Richard Coe even links the two states to Ionesco's interest in Christian mysticism, Zen Budhism^d, and the Hasidim.⁶³ Moreover, far from dividing Ionesco's work, like Jean Anouilh's, into 'pièces noires' and 'pièces roses', the two states are intermingled in each play and sometimes related concomitantly, even within an individual image, so that the state of joy and wonder contains the germ of its own destruction. The Killer already lurks in the radiant city of Tueur; the sunlit platform of the second act of La Soif embodies not freedom and joy, but solitude and nostalgia; and the silver bridge of Le Piéton leads not to the heaven that Bérenger seeks, but to hell and destruction. Thus, the conflict and tension between the opposite poles of existence gives Ionesco's work greater cohesion, as Simone Benmussa concludes, 'Ces deux contraires physiques d'évanescence et de pesanteur, le conflit qui résulte de ces deux attirances, sont à la base de la construction des pièces de Ionesco et donnent à l'oeuvre sa grande cohésion'.⁶⁴ Ionesco, however, is not primarily concerned with trying to give any single interpretation, whether literary, metaphysical or philosophical, to these two states of Being, but rather with merely trying to describe

⁵⁹Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.57.

⁶⁰Simone Benmussa, Ionesco (Paris: Seghers, 1966), p.67.

⁶¹Jean-Hervé Donnard, Ionesco dramaturge ou l'artisan et le démon (Paris: Minard, 1966), p.83.

⁶²See for example John Weightman's article, 'Dreams of Absurdity', TLS (16 July 1976), p.867.

⁶³Coe, Ionesco; a study of his plays, pp.116-133.

⁶⁴Benmussa, Ionesco, p.67.

them as involuntary, subjective reactions to his existence, poles of awareness of the surrounding world. He believes that, whereas rational analysis only serves to separate the individual further from fundamental truth, a lucid apprehension of the two states of Being might enable the individual to approach the mystery of Being and to begin to define the limits of the self.

Even in the early plays, the dynamic play of the opposite states is already apparent. The image of the 'grenier', as opposed to the 'cave', in Jacques ou la soumission, is the first symbolic version of the 'polarisation verticale'.⁶⁵ The first represents the childhood state of wonder, which Jacques wants to recapture, and is associated with images of fire, light, and limpid water. 'Je veux une fontaine de lumière, de l'eau incandescente, un feu de glace, des neiges de feu',⁶⁶ he cries, in L'Avenir est dans les oeufs. The 'cave' symbolizes the sordid and painful world of matter, in which he is now enveloped, and is associated with the images of mud and sinking which Roberte evokes. Choubert, in Victimes, also experiences the contrary states of heaviness and lightness. Descending into the mud, which represents his past life, he re-lives the tragic separation and the loss of wonder that accompanies maturity:

Ce matin, il y avait des fleurs sur notre chemin. Le soleil remplissait le ciel. Ton rire était clair. Nous avions des vêtements tout neufs, nous étions entourés d'amis. Personne n'était mort, tu n'avais encore jamais pleuré. L'hiver est venu brusquement. Notre route est déserte. . . . Hélas! hélas, retrouverons-nous la lumière bleue. . . . Les sources printanières . . . Les feuilles nouvelles . . . Le jardin enchanté a sombré dans la nuit, a glissé dans la boue . . .⁶⁷

Ascending again, Choubert reaches a state that is close to a pure awareness of Being, and, once again, he finds the polar opposites at the heart of existence, exposed with such terrible clarity that they threaten to tear him apart: 'Une joie . . . de la douleur . . . un déchirement . . . un apaisement . . . De la plénitude . . . Du vide . . . Un espoir désespéré. Je me sens fort, je me sens faible, je me sens mal, je me sens bien, mais je sens, surtout, je me sens . . .'⁶⁸

In Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser, Ionesco highlights the two

⁶⁵Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.57.

⁶⁶Théâtre, II, 228.

⁶⁷Théâtre, I, 197.

⁶⁸Ibid., p.211.

poles of Being by separating them and personifying them in the two partners of a marriage. The couple's conversation, of total incompatibility and incomprehension, embodies the tension that informs all of Ionesco's theatre, the conflict between the irreconcilable forces of joy and wonder and the grey inviolability of habit and matter. In a dream, Amédée is able to recapture his sense of wonder at creation. He feels that he is being re-born into the sunlight of springtime and appeals to Madeleine to share his vision. 'Réveille-toi ... ', he cries, 'le soleil inonde la chambre ... Lumière de gloire ... Chaleur douce! ... La vallée verte où fleurissent les lys [-] La joie éclate ... Lumière folle ... L'amour fou ... Le bonheur fou'⁶⁹ Madeleine, however, can only see images of mud and darkness, which seem to choke her: ' ... nuit, pluie, boue! ... le froid! je grelotte ... noir ... noir ...noir! ... [-] Sombre vallée, humide, marécages, on s'enlise, on se noie ... au secours, j'étouffe, au secours! ...'⁷⁰ At the end of Act II, the two elements which Ionesco believes form the substratum of all existence are skilfully juxtaposed in the contrast between the darkness, claustrophobia, and despair that rules the couple's life inside the apartment and the beauty and lightness outside. Ionesco stresses, 'Entre les jeux vus de lumière, d'artifices et l'aspect macabre de la chambre des deux époux, il y a un contraste frappant. ... l'horrible et le beau doivent coexister'.⁷¹ The movement of the play is thus built upon this double postulation, as Amédée, weighed down by sadness and guilt, symbolized by the corpse, rediscovers the sense of wonder in a dream and learns once again to appreciate the beauty of the world and so escapes, at least temporarily, into joy and lightness, represented by his floating into the sky in the last act. Geneviève Serreau sums up the movement of the play, writing: 'A cette menaçante pesanteur, une seule réponse: la fuite onirique d'Amédée dans la légèreté, sa lévitation dans l'émerveillement d'un ciel innocent ... A la lourdeur succède l'évanescence: nous avons reconnu les deux prises de conscience propres à Ionesco'.⁷²

In Tueur, the two states again form the basis of the dramatic

⁶⁹ Théâtre, I, 286-287.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.286.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp.297-298.

⁷² Geneviève Serreau, quoted in Maurice Bruézière, Histoire descriptive de la littérature contemporaine, I (Paris: Berger Levrault, 1975), 418.

structure, rhythm and movement, of the play. Whereas the overall progression of Amédée is from claustrophobia to evanescence, from heaviness to lightness, that of Tueur is the opposite, moving from space and light to enclosure and darkness. The dividing line between the 'cité radieuse' and the rest of the town appears clear, each materializing a certain vision of the world, yet the two states coexist, for the Killer is lurking in the heart of the radiant city just as, at the peak of joy, an invisible obstacle plunges the individual back into ennui. The contrast between the two states is already foreshadowed at the beginning of the play by the changes in lighting. At first, the light is grey and dull, with dark silhouettes only barely visible, but, with the entry of Béranger, the light becomes bright, dazzling white with a vivid blue sky, recalling the pure June light that Ionesco describes to Claude Bonnefoy accompanying his experiences of wonder.⁷³ The lighting alone is sufficient to create the atmosphere of the scene. Act II is set in deliberate opposition to the first; its decor is dark and dirty, heavy and oppressive, contrasting sharply with the lack of decor and bright light in Act I, and this is accentuated by the cacophony and ugliness of the sound effects and dialogue, compared to the silence and calm of Act I. Even the costumes reflect this central conflict; Béranger and Edouard wear grey overcoats and scarves, whereas the Architect of the sun-filled paradise sports an open-necked shirt and jacket. For the first time, Béranger is a hero who is consciously aware of the dichotomy between the two states of existence. He remembers, with nostalgia, a state of illumination which Ionesco admits is a direct transposition of his personal experience⁷⁴ and which contains all the characteristic elements of the positive pole of Being; profound joy, certainty of individual identity, harmony and oneness with the universe, lightness and evanescence, a sense that everything is at once strange and new and yet familiar and reassuring, 'un étonnement sans nom, mêlé à un sentiment d'extrême familiarité'.⁷⁵ Without warning, he had plunged from this state into a world of malaise and ugliness, where 'tout était redevenu gris ou pâle ou neutre'.⁷⁶ The loss of this faculty of amazement corresponds, Béranger believes, to the process of

⁷³See for example Entre la vie et le rêve, p.32, Présent passé, p.226.

⁷⁴Ibid., p.30

⁷⁵Théâtre, II, 78.

⁷⁶Ibid., p.79.

aging and the progressive separation from his inner self, but he is convinced that it still exists as a hidden inner force, and this memory and conviction is his only reason for continuing to live. In the radiant city, he seems to have at last found a materialization of this inner necessity, as if he were discovering his true self and the world:

'Depuis ce matin je suis un homme nouveau. Je suis sûr que je redeviens moi-même, le monde redevient lui-même'.⁷⁷ But the radiant city is artificial, not a true recreation of the paradise of childhood, where the individual, in harmony with himself and the world, was aware of his deepest Being. The strength of Bérenger's inner dream, his memory of joy and wonder, is sufficient to inspire him to reject the apathy of the other inhabitants of the city, but not strong enough to withstand a direct confrontation with the negative forces of evil, symbolized in the Killer. In adult life, Ionesco believes, the two poles of Being are never far apart.

The conflict of the two states of existence again forms the basis of the dramatic structure of Le Piéton, as Robert Frickx points out, 'L'oeuvre est, de toute évidence basée sur la dualité vie-mort, lumière-ténèbre, joie-douleur, sérénité-angoisse; elle illustre à merveille les deux postulats fondamentales qui confèrent au théâtre d'Ionesco son originalité et son dynamisme'.⁷⁸ As in Tueur, the hero is tormented by his memory of a state of joy and wonder which gave him a reason for adult life and without which existence seems pointless. 'Il y avait autrefois en moi une force inexplicable qui me déterminait à agir ou à écrire malgré un nihilisme fondamental', he laments, and having lost this, he says, 'Je ne peux plus continuer'.⁷⁹ Bérenger is unable to accept the purely relative nature of human happiness in this world or the destructive elements and evil that form an inseparable part of the negative pole of Being and hopes to escape to another world where happiness would be permanent and complete. As in Tueur, the decor materializes the mental state of the hero. Sunlight inundates the scene when Bérenger experiences a mood of joy and wonder, 'tout est en pleine lumière, sans pénombre donc ...'. The sky, 'très bleu et très pur', and the situation, 'un champ herbeux, très vert et très frais, se situant sur un plateau dominant la vallée',⁸⁰ recall the 'cité radieuse' of Tueur

⁷⁷Théâtre, II, 69.

⁷⁸Frickx, Ionesco, p.120.

⁷⁹Théâtre, III, 125.

⁸⁰Ibid., p.121.

and prefigure the second act of La Soif. In opposition to this opening of joy and lightness, can be set the gloom of the scenes where the hero is experiencing anguish: the bombardment, the dream sequences, and the despairing return of Béranger from his attempt to find a world not dominated by the two poles of Being, where death and ennui have been eliminated. He does attain to an increased awareness of reality from his experience, but it is not the certainty that accompanies an experience of joy and wonder, but rather what Ionesco calls 'la lucidité négative' or 'la lucidité de la nuit',⁸¹ which only reveals disintegration and death, 'la glace succédant au feu infini, le feu succédant à la glace. Des déserts de glace, des déserts de feu s'acharnant les uns contre les autres et venant vers nous'.⁸²

La Soif et la faim, as the title suggests, is again built around antinomic themes of joy and depression, heaviness and grace, shadow and light, earth and sky, anguish and certainty. Jean suffers from a sense of incompleteness, characteristic of the negative state of Being, resulting from the divorce between the individual and his identity and the disharmony between the individual and the world. He is unable to 'vivre comme tout le monde. Toujours quelque chose [lui] manque'.⁸³ The house of Act I materializes Jean's anguish. It is 'la maison de l'habitude',⁸⁴ and, associated with images of darkness, mud, and sinking, it oppresses Jean like a heavy weight: 'Ce plafond s'effrite, il s'affaisse, je le sens déjà qui pèse sur mes épaules, les tâches d'humidité s'agrandissent sur les murs'.⁸⁵ With its tomb-like appearance, it seems to be a constant reminder of death and of the passing of time. 'Est-ce l'image du temps?', Jean asks, 'A vue d'oeil, tout se dégrade'.⁸⁶ Jean longs to live under the domination of the other pole of Being, in a state of constant euphoria, saying to Marie-Madeleine, 'Ce n'est pas la paix que je veux, ce n'est pas le simple bonheur, il me faut une joie débordante, l'extase'. He desires to live in a setting of lightness, freedom, and beauty, that would coincide with his inner mood: 'Une maison plus lumineuse encore, envelopée, pénétrée par l'azur.

⁸¹Présent passé, pp.228-229.

⁸²Théâtre, III, 197.

⁸³Théâtre, IV, 81.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid., p.82.

⁸⁶Ibid.

Une maison perchée sur la montagne ... suspendue dans l'air, un peu au-dessus de l'eau, avec des visages de fleurs aux fenêtres ...'.⁸⁷

In Act II, Jean, having left his home, seems to have found this place of lightness and joy. The place appears strangely familiar, like a place he had visited before or somewhere he had seen in his dreams. The decor is one of bright light and clarity, but Ionesco warns us, through the words of the guard, that it is not the true light of illumination but a sterile empty light, 'Un peu vide, peut-être, un peu sèche, cette clarté'.⁸⁸ Jean believes that he is going to experience a total renewal of his self and irrepressible joy. However, everything depends upon meeting an enigmatic woman, with whom he has a rendezvous and so, instead of completeness and harmony, Jean still feels a burning emptiness and laments, 'L'absence que je ressens dans cette présence, le vide que je ressens dans cette plénitude'.⁸⁹ He finally realizes that this place is not what he was searching for, and the function of the woman was only to arouse him from the dullness of habit and routine and to awaken in him a nostalgic longing for a state of grace that would motivate him to set out on his search. 'Quel souvenir a-t-elle réveillé en moi, quelle nostalgie perdue, quels désirs cachés, quelle nécessité oubliée!', he cries, 'Elle m'a réveillé à moi-même, elle est le besoin absolu'.⁹⁰

Act IV is predominantly a return to the grey depression of Act I, but again the duality of the two postulations is emphasized by glimpses of an Eden-like garden, imbued with dazzling light, greenery, flowers, and an azure sky, seen through the cold, grey bars of the monastery-prison. In their interrogations, the monks ask Jean what marvels he has seen during his journey. They ask for news of the 'sources lumineuses',⁹¹ recalling the 'réserves lumineuses',⁹² which Ionesco describes as being the privilege of childhood and the source of the state of wonder. But Jean has been under the ascendancy of the opposing state of Being, and, having lost the gift of being able to transfigure the world, he has seen only 'la plaine morose, les sentiers perdus, les

⁸⁷Théâtre, IV, 80.

⁸⁸Ibid., p.105.

⁸⁹Ibid., p.111.

⁹⁰Ibid., p.117.

⁹¹Ibid., p.149.

⁹²Entre la vie et le rêve, p.30.

carrefours vides, des terrains vagues'.⁹³ He has never seen creation as a harmonious, beautiful whole, but only as disconnected fragments; thus, his replies are merely an alignment of disconnected words. That Jean's perception of the outer world is a clear reflection of the aridity of his inner self, his lack of contact with his individual identity, is made clear when Frère Tarrabas asks, 'En vous-même, que voyiez-vous? ... Quelles images vous hantaient?'. Jean replies, in almost the same words, 'Une plaine morose, une plaine grise, une plaine boueuse, une plaine sans fin, des sentiers menant nulle part, des sentiers menant nulle part; et puis la brume s'est étendue'.⁹⁴ However, Jean is still dimly aware of the other state of Being which he had set out to find and has seen glimpses of joy, light, sun, and greenery. He recalls having seen from afar 'les brasiers des forges, de hauts fourneaux incandescents',⁹⁵ but, as he tried to approach, he found it was either too early or too late, and all the doors were bolted against him, or the vision simply disappeared, like a mirage, and turned to grey sterility:

Tout ce que je désirais s'évanouissait à mon approche, tout ce que je voulais toucher se flétrissait. Dès que j'avais dans une prairie ensoleillée, le ciel se couvrait de nuages. Jamais je n'ai pu me réjouir. L'herbe se déséchait sous mes pieds, les feuilles des arbres jaunissaient, tombaient dès que je les regardais. Si je voulais boire à la source la plus limpide, l'eau devenait impure, nauséabonde.⁹⁶

The experience of Jean, in La Soif, poses a question central to all of Ionesco's writing; what form should the search for individual identity take? Faced with the consciousness of the loss of the wholeness of individual identity and the rupture of the individual's harmony with the universe, should the individual resign himself to mediocrity and try to find a compromise between his ideals and harsh reality, or should he take heed of his burning sense of nostalgia and continue to search for a different existence, where he might recover his lost sense of wholeness and joy? These thoughts are expressed by Jean in a superb monologue:

Autrefois, il y a si longtemps ... lorsque les journées étaient lumineuses, je m'arrêtais au milieu d'une campagne, j'étais comme entouré par l'univers tout entier, puis je pivotais, je

⁹³Théâtre, IV, 150.

⁹⁴Ibid., p.155.

⁹⁵Ibid., p.153.

⁹⁶Ibid., p.185.

regardais ... pris d'un étonnement indicible et d'un ravissement indicible, je m'exclamais, je criais: ' ... C'est incroyable et pourtant cela est: invraisemblable ... ' Ou alors j'e m'asseyais dans l'herbe haute, regardais très attentivement, comblé par la joie. Tout suffisait, tout était plein. Je n'avais pas faim, je n'avais pas soif, ou, plutôt, c'était cette joie qui était mon pain, qui était mon eau ... Pourquoi, tout à coup, y-a-t-il eu ce changement? Pourquoi, tout à coup cette absence? ... Cette insatisfaction et l'angoisse, pourquoi, soudain, ce creux qui n'a plus fini de s'élargir en moi et de s'approfondir? Ce creux que je n'ai jamais su combler? Pourquoi n'y a-t-il plus eu de journées lumineuses, pourquoi l'assombrissement? Devais-je le subir? Devais-je me résigner? Devais-je attendre? Devais-je ne rien attendre? Devais-je ou non courir sur les routes de crépuscule et d'automne à la recherche de cette lumière ... ou de ces mirages?⁹⁷

Ionesco indicates one possible answer to the question, at the very end of the play, when the opposite poles of existence are presented simultaneously; the heavy, grey claustrophobic monastery coexists with the beautiful, luminous garden, blue sky, and green vegetation, glimpsed through the bars of the prison. Jean realizes that beauty and joy had been present all the time, embodied in his wife and daughter and the quiet contentment of home life, and that, blinded by his desires, he had been unable to perceive this until it was perhaps too late. 'Vous êtes dans une lumière que je n'avais jamais vue; vous avez toujours été dans cette lumière', he says.⁹⁸ Ionesco leaves us with a juxtaposition of the two states of joy and anguish and lets the dichotomy remain unresolved. We never know whether Jean will escape to regain happiness with his family.

Like Jean, it is only when it is too late, and he is on the verge of death, that Bérenger I, in Le Roi, realizes that joy and beauty can be found in the ordinary objects of life, if only he had understood how to perceive them. 'Tant de choses m'ont échappé', he laments, 'Je n'ai pas tout su. Je n'ai pas été partout. Ma vie aurait pu être pleine'.⁹⁹ The dialogue between the King and his servant, Juliette, is the dialogue between the two states of consciousness that informs all of Ionesco's work, 'le dialogue musical du paradis et de l'enfer'.¹⁰⁰ Whereas Juliette only perceives the ennui of a monotonous existence,

⁹⁷ Théâtre, IV, 186.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.189.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.49.

¹⁰⁰ Saint Tobi, Eugène Ionesco ou A la recherche du paradis perdu (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.199.

for the King everything is marvellous, as though he were seeing existence for the very first time:

Juliette: En été, quand je me lève, il commence à peine à faire jour. La lumière est blême.

Le Roi, avec ravissement: La lumière est blême! Il y a toutes sortes de lumières: la bleue, la rose, la blanche, la verte, la blême! ...

Juliette: Je vide des pots de chambre. Je fais les lits.

Le Roi: Elle fait les lits! On y couche, on s'y endort, on s'y réveille. Est-ce que tu t'es aperçu que tu te réveillais tous les jours? Se réveiller tous les jours ... On vient au monde tous les matins.¹⁰¹

The same 'dialogue de sourds', between two opposing states of Being and two contradictory views of creation, occurs in Jeux. The scene between the old couple is an illustration of Ionesco's belief that the world can be a paradise, or a hell, depending on whether the individual has retained the ability to transfigure the world and find joy, even in the commonplace, or whether he has lost this faculty as he grew away from the perception of childhood. The Old Woman tells her husband that the secret is to accept life, not to question it. For her, 'Chaque matin est tout neuf. A chaque aurore le monde renaît, tout propre, tout vierge'.¹⁰² He cannot understand this: 'Je ne sais comment tu as pu garder intact le miracle. Pour moi chaque instant est à la fois trop lourd et vide. Tout est affreux. Je m'ennuie dans l'angoisse'.¹⁰³ Once again, it is only when it is too late that the Old Man realizes that joy had been within his reach all along: 'Il est trop tard. La nuit va nous engloutir. La joie était là. Je n'ai pas su'.¹⁰⁴

At the end of the film scenario of La Vase, the two states of Being are presented simultaneously. The mud and mist of the swamp, where the hero falls, are the culmination of the growing malaise and paralysis which he experiences, and he feels an overwhelming nostalgia for the wholeness and inner harmony he once knew: 'Une nostalgie amère, immense, une tristesse écrasante, des remords, une pitié pour tout ce que j'ai aimé ... tout ce que j'ai aimé, pour tout ce que j'ai étreint'.¹⁰⁵ As parts of his body begin to separate themselves painlessly from him, he wonders if they ever really belonged to him, if he ever had a genuine existence. Yet, at the same time, there is a mysterious apparition,

¹⁰¹Théâtre, IV, 48-49.

¹⁰²Théâtre, V, 91.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p.95.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p.246.

symbolizing the positive pole of existence, a 'vision de flammes, léchant les murs, brasiers, incendies',¹⁰⁶ and the hero's last words and final images leave the two poles of awareness in an ambiguous and tenuous balance:

J'ai tout raté bien sûr ... Mais je recommencerais, je recommencerais ... Tout recommencera dès la naissance, dès le germe
Les brumes se dissipent.
Un ciel bleu.
A la place du corps, il n'y a plus rien.¹⁰⁷

The cases of L'Homme aux valises have been interpreted as representing the anguish and pressures of the world,¹⁰⁸ and, in keeping with the domination of each of the two poles of existence, at times of joy, they appear to be light and easy to carry, but, under the more frequent influence of the negative pole of Being, they seem heavy and cumbersome. The hero explains that he originally had a third suitcase, perhaps representing the original state of harmony with the self and the world, before being plunged into the bipolar state, characterized by a feeling of inner incompleteness. Although he believes that he is seeking a physical person or place to fill his inner void, the 'homme aux valises', like all of Ionesco's voyagers, is in fact seeking a part of himself, his third dimension. 'Depuis que j'ai perdu l'autre [valise]', he explains, 'Je n'ai plus ma troisième dimension. Quelque chose me manque, de l'intérieur. Je suis infirme'.¹⁰⁹ Again, the two states of existence are juxtaposed. The memory of the state of joy and harmony is contrasted sharply with the confusing, menacing world of grey shadows in which the hero now wanders.

The enigmatic, silent hero of Ce Formidable bordel lives in a world of ennui, habit, and anguish, symbolized by his clothing: 'Pardessus gris, un chapeau gris, des souliers noirs costume gris',¹¹⁰ and by the banality of his existence. However, even he glimpses the world of wonder and joy. One day, while sitting in a restaurant, a ray of

¹⁰⁶Théâtre, V, 257.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p.258.

¹⁰⁸This is Ionesco's own explanation: 'Les valises? C'est tout ce qui nous encombre, notre angoisse, notre passé, le fardeau de la vie, notre culpabilité. Tout ce qui nous empêche de nous détacher, de circuler librement, de nous évader'.

'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, Express (22-28 September 1975), p.28.

¹⁰⁹Théâtre, VI, 94.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p.124.

sunlight unexpectedly inundates the scene and transfigures the surrounding people and objects. The other customers' movements seem gracious, as though they are dancing, and their conversation is like singing, even the clattering of the knives and forks seems strangely melodious. This first experience passes fairly quickly, and the scene reverts to grey depression, but the episode anticipates the end of the play, when the 'Personnage' finds himself totally alone. All the furniture, representing the oppressiveness of the material world, disappears, and the stage is flooded with dazzling light as a huge tree, covered in leaves and blossoms, surges up in the middle of the stage. The light and tree symbolize the world of wonder which Ionesco wishes to recapture permanently, but the ending is again ambiguous. We are left with the 'Personnage' laughing at the 'bonne blague', which he now realizes existence to be,¹¹¹ and it is not clear whether this is a passing illumination, or whether he has attained the lost paradise of joy and wonder, or whether the idea of a harmonious, unified creation is merely a huge joke.

In Le Solitaire, the novel based on this play, the oscillation between the two states becomes even more apparent. The hero has a number of experiences of illumination in which the world and other people are transformed by a dazzling light, as though he had been transplanted into another creation, and inanimate objects lose their customary functions and significance. At first, this sense of estrangement had given him a feeling of exhilaration, wonder, and joy, as it confirmed the existence of the world and himself. Now, although the experiences of amazement still occur, the joy has turned to terror, because they reveal not Being and harmony, but insubstantiality and emptiness. Everyday objects, and even the words denoting them, change their substance, and the world threatens to disintegrate, either because it is too light and fragile, or because, on the contrary, it is too heavy, thus threatening to annihilate his own individual identity:

La découverte me plongeait autrefois dans la joie. La joie ne m'envahissait plus. Ne me touchait plus. La joie, c'est de s'apercevoir tout d'un coup, d'une façon qu'on pourrait appeler surnaturelle, que le monde est là et que l'on est dans le monde, que l'on existe, que j'existe. A présent, tout semblait prouver l'existence des choses et ma propre inexistence. J'avais peur de disparaître.¹¹²

Unlike the rest of mankind, represented by the attitude of the philosophy

¹¹¹ Théâtre, VI, 199.

¹¹² Le Solitaire, p.111.

student, André, for Ionesco and the autobiographical hero of Le Solitaire, these basic problems, concerning the nature of the existence of the universe and the self, are not just matters of cultural and literary interest that can be conveniently set aside at will, but they are the very essence of life, dominating every moment. Once he has experienced the euphoria of harmony and completeness, the hero can never again totally forget it, and, even though the memory of it grows more and more hazy, he believes that the manifestation of this joy in the past, and the brief glimpses of it now, prove the existence of a source of wonder, even though hidden, and it is the most important thing in his life to rediscover the way to gain access to it:

Il y a des sursauts de joie ou d'allégresse. Ils retombent aussi vite. Mais s'il y a ces sursauts, s'il y a ces jaillissements, c'est qu'il y a une source inépuisable, il y a une fontaine, il y a peut-être aussi un lac tout neuf entouré par des montagnes blanches aux pentes dorées par le soleil et la lumière d'un paradis intérieur. Il doit y avoir ça quelque part ... Cela veut dire qu'il y a aussi à l'intérieur des poussées favorables, quelque chose comme un combat. Je ne suis pas toujours écrasé, pas toujours englouti. Je sais que le monde est toujours, inlassablement vierge. C'est cela qui me donne comme une raison de vivre.¹¹³

Whereas so-called normal people can find a modus vivendi and live a life of compromise between the two states, the Solitaire, like so many of Ionesco's heroes, lives in a constant state of combat, torn apart by the dual postulations of existence which make even everyday life an almost impossible ordeal:

De la boue seulement, mais aussi un lac pur, mais aussi les neiges. Les gens normaux sont entre les deux. Ni la lumière, ni les ténèbres. Ils vaquent entre les deux à leurs affaires, à leurs soucis, leurs préoccupations quotidiennes, ils vivent de cela. C'est de cela qu'on vit. C'est cela l'humain. Moi je ne peux vivre qu'en état de grâce Pour moi, il n'y a pas de milieu entre la grâce et la merde.¹¹⁴

Thus, many of Ionesco's heroes, like Ionesco himself, are graced with the privilege of retaining a clear memory of a paradise of joy and harmony within the self and with the world and of experiencing transient glimpses of this wonder in later life. However, this privilege has a drawback for, unlike most people, they are not able to content themselves with a life of dull mediocrity in the grey, oppressive world into which they have been plunged. Surrounded by the relative, they long for the

¹¹³ Le Solitaire, p.100-101.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.101.

absolute they once knew, and, living the constant dialectic between the two basic states of consciousness, they ask, like Ionesco himself, 'Comment peut-on vivre sans la grâce? On vit, cependant'.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite the pain involved, Ionesco believes that to retain this childhood capacity for wonder is the most precious gift. He is proud to be considered, in the words of Muriel Reed, 'une sorte de charmant naïf',¹¹⁶ saying of himself, 'Je ne crois pas avoir changé, oui je suis resté le même avec une fidélité étonnante. Je regarde mes photos d'enfant à l'âge de quatre ou cinq ans, j'avais déjà un regard ahuri. C'est mon attitude fondamentale. C'est ainsi que je me retrouve quand je me pose la question "qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?" Quand je prends un bain d'inexplicable'.¹¹⁷ Although he finds this state of wonder less and less easy to recapture: 'Il n'est pas aussi spontané aussi violent. J'ai commencé à m'habituer à ce monde, comme n'importe qui, et il me semble normal alors que nous devrions avoir tout le temps l'impression que c'est une chose extraordinaire, bouleversante, invraisemblable',¹¹⁸ he remains confident that everyone does retain the faculty to experience joy, if only they could find a way to gain access to these hidden stores of grace. 'Le monde ensoleillé nous l'avons en nous-mêmes', he says, 'la joie pourrait éclater à tout instant continuellement ... Le froid le plus glacial ne peut résister à la chaleur du coeur. A condition de savoir sur quel bouton appuyer pour qu'elle s'allume'.¹¹⁹ Ionesco suggests that one method to recapture the primary state of astonishment is by contemplation, as a deliberately practised spiritual exercise, to recapture a fresh vision of life. 'La contemplation est indispensable ...', he stated in an interview, and he suggested that everyone should 'simplement deux ou trois fois par jour, interrompre son travail pendant deux minutes et regarder autour de soi, sans rien faire, en oubliant l'utilité des choses ... comme si l'on voyait les choses pour la première fois'.¹²⁰ To attain this awareness, Ionesco believes, the individual must re-create

¹¹⁵ Journal, p.28.

¹¹⁶ Muriel Reed, Visites chez les Français (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966), p.127.

¹¹⁷ 'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, p.30.

¹¹⁸ 'Moi et mes monstres', Interview with André Bourin, Nouvelles Littéraires, 48, 2210 (29 January 1970), 1.

¹¹⁹ Le Solitaire, pp.33-34.

¹²⁰ 'Rencontre avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with France Béquette, Culture et communication, 15 (March 1979), 26.

the situation of the newborn child by stepping back from the world and looking at it as a stranger or an outsider for, while he is caught up in its movement and routines, he will be unable to see its true beauty and wonder. 'Pour me sortir de mes angoisses, je me mets comme en marge du monde', Ionesco explains, 'et je le regarde, attentivement, comme si je voyais tout pour la première fois, comme au premier jour de ma conscience. A l'écart du monde, en retrait, je le contemple comme si je n'en faisais par parti. Il m'arrive alors parfois de me sentir transporté par la joie'.¹²¹ In his Notes, Ionesco compares this feeling with that of a spectator watching a play, fascinated by the movement and colour, but feeling a sense of well-being and peace from being free of involvement in its machinery.¹²² The Solitaire describes this experience:

Je voulais retrouver cette étrangeté 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. Entouré par le monde mais pas au monde. Quelquefois cela accroissait mon angoisse mais le plus souvent cela la faisait disparaître, au contraire.¹²³

Once the individual has rediscovered the freshness and wonder of creation, his inner attitude can transfigure the whole of the created world. 'Si je change, je change le monde', Ionesco states.¹²⁴ Objects, people, and places are not in themselves either beautiful or ugly; it is the individual who perceives them as such, according to the possibilities of his sensibility and imagination, as Ionesco told Claude Bonnefoy, 'Il suffit de savoir bien regarder, il faut voir. C'est admirable. N'importe quoi est merveille, tout est une épiphanie glorieuse, le moindre objet resplendit'.¹²⁵ This is the lesson which many of Ionesco's heroes have to learn; instead of searching for their lost paradise in a material place or person, it is within their inner selves that they should seek, for, by transforming their attitude to the world, the world itself can be transfigured. Jean, in La Soif, travels the world and finds nothing, but the banal insignificance of everyday life. Yet his life could have been a succession of meaningful

¹²¹ Antidotes, p.317.

¹²² Notes, p.295.

¹²³ Le Solitaire, p.59.

¹²⁴ Journal, p.137.

¹²⁵ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.30-31.

moments if only he had approached it with the right state of mind.

Simone Benmussa sums this up:

Deux regards étaient possibles sur le monde, celui de la disgrâce et celui de la grâce. Nous retrouvons ces deux états qui se partagent l'homme dans les pièces de Ionesco: celui de l'euphorie où la lumière, nimbant le monde, rend les menus faits miraculeux, sujets de stupeur émerveillée ... et celui, morose, pesant où rien ne se distingue sur l'immense plaine grise ...¹²⁶

Jean's wife had been trying to tell him all along that joy was the result of contemplation and a certain inner attitude. 'Tu ne regardes pas assez autour de toi. Tu ne regardes pas attentivement', she rebukes him, '... Le présent est un soleil, si tu veux, l'avenir, un ciel d'azur. Si tu as une bonne vue, elle perce au-delà des murs. Les murs ne cacheront plus l'horizon'.¹²⁷ Once Jean realizes this, he cannot understand what had prevented him from perceiving this beauty until it is perhaps too late. Ionesco describes his own identical experience:

'Le monde m'est apparu dans une autre lumière, dans une lumière toute neuve. C'est comme si les arbres, les maisons, les visages, l'eau et le ciel avaient été nettoyés, comme si tout était devenu propre, renouvelé rafraîchi Qu'avais-je donc fait depuis si longtemps? Où avais-je été? Qui m'avait empêché de regarder et de voir?'.¹²⁸ The Old Man, in Jeux, comes to understand the same thing in his turn, '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'.¹²⁹

Beauty and wonder are not to be found in the extraordinary, but behind the very banality of everyday life, the surprising in the ordinary, the amazing in the real. The freshness of wonder is hidden by routine and habit, but to contemplate this routine at close quarters is shattering. Madame Martin, in La Cantatrice, finds it amazing to see a man tying his shoelace for, as Ionesco explains, 'La Cantatrice est le jeu de l'étrangeté du monde et de sa banalité, l'une étant, curieusement, le second aspect ou la seconde phase de l'autre'.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Benmussa, Ionesco, p.35.

¹²⁷ Théâtre, IV, 83, 94.

¹²⁸ Journal, pp.136-137.

¹²⁹ Théâtre, V, 94.

¹³⁰ 'Nous sommes des casseurs d'assiettes', Pariscope, 22 (9 March 1966), 34.

In Jacques, Ionesco again shows how the amazing lies in the very heart of the ordinary by using the banality of the stage set to highlight the irreality and strangeness of the action. Magdalena van der Spuy points out, 'C'est justement là, à partir d'un objet ou d'un cadre quotidien, que l'irréel se glisse dans le réel. Ionesco accorde une grande importance à ce passage du banal à l'étrange: tout est soigneusement calculé ...'.¹³¹ Jean Kaminsky, in an interview with Ionesco on Le Solitaire,¹³² accused him of making a clear division in the novel between the extreme realism of the first part and the imaginary, fanciful nature of the second part. Ionesco replied that, for him, there was no break between the real and the imaginary and strange, that one lay within the other. It is by contemplating the ordinary that one can gain access to a world of wonder and the extraordinary, for each small object is the reflection of the whole of creation that had originally plunged the individual into wonder:

Lorsque le démon de l'ennui me tente, il me suffit de regarder attentivement un objet quelconque, un crayon, une montre, une main, un être qui ne bouge pas ou qui bouge, il me suffit de ne regarder que cette chose-là, que cet être-là, profondément absorbé et l'ennui fuit. Dans n'importe quel objet, c'est l'univers tout entier que je lis dans sa miraculeuse existence-odieux et superbe, absurde et majestueux, tragique et comique, étonnant surtout et incroyable, incroyable.¹³³

Some of Ionesco's characters manage to perform this transfiguration of the world through the transformation of their inner selves, and thus to perceive beauty in the smallest, most ordinary objects and events, like the Old Woman, in Jeux, for whom, 'Tout est beau. Même les égouts Tout est miracle. Chaque instant de la vie m'enchante'.¹³⁴ Others, such as Bérenger, in Tueur, or Le Piéton, only manage to achieve the transformation transitorily. King Bérenger, having lived a life surrounded by the greatest riches and majesty, only realizes on the point of death that beauty and joy were, in fact, to be found in the smallest, most ordinary things. Unfortunately, the majority of mankind passes

¹³¹Magdalena van der Spuy, 'Jacques ou la soumission et L'Avenir est dans les oeufs' (unpublished Masters dissertation, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 1978), p.9.

¹³²'Pour moi le réel est insolite', Interview with Jean Kaminsky, Combat (18 July 1973), p.9.

¹³³'Journal d'un citoyen malgré lui', Nouvelle Revue Française, 274 (October 1978), 183.

¹³⁴Théâtre, V, 89.

through life unaware of the beauty and mystery hidden just below the surface of life or, like the Solitaire, feel constantly dissatisfied and torn by unknown regrets, aware that they have failed to grasp the happiness offered: 'Je fus pris d'un regret énorme, amer. J'avais eu le bonheur à côté de moi. Une fois encore, je l'avais raté. Le destin veut m'aider et la providence m'envoie ses anges que je repousse, ou que je n'aperçois pas. Il devait y avoir plein de fontaines de vie dans les jardin, dans les rues que je ne voyais pas'.¹³⁵ Moreover, even those who manage to find harmony and joy, through contemplation and their inner attitude, cannot recapture the permanent and perfect harmony of individual identity and the world that gave rise to the initial wonder of the child, and the negative pole of existence is never far away. Ionesco, in the preface to Ilarie Voronca's Onze récits, describes how his friend had believed he had escaped the bipolar nature of existence and found true happiness in a certain method of contemplating creation:

Il m'affirmait qu'il avait le secret de la joie, qu'il pourrait me le communiquer, qu'il pouvait enseigner au monde le secret, la méthode d'être heureux. Qu'il suffisait de regarder le monde, qu'il fallait seulement savoir comment le regarder, il suffisait de savoir, et c'était bien simple, il savait ce qu'il fallait faire pour que les gens soient pleins d'amour, de paix, d'étonnement, d'extase. Il avait d'ailleurs presque terminé d'écrire un 'Manuel du Parfait Bonheur.' Quelque jours après, il le terminait, je crois, et le confiait à un éditeur. Deux semaines plus tard, il s'enfermait chez lui et se suicidait.¹³⁶

Ionesco has always stressed that every sensation and experience of his life has contributed to leading him to artistic creation, and this is particularly true of his sense of wonder, as Robert Abirached puts it, 'Si l'on demandait à Eugène Ionesco ce qui l'a fait écrivain il répondrait sans doute: une certaine ingénuité. Toute son oeuvre est issue de la même stupéfaction devant le spectacle de la vie, du langage et de la société',¹³⁷ and Ionesco confirms that for him the source of all creation is 'l'interrogation première devant le monde'.¹³⁸

¹³⁵Le Solitaire, p.128.

¹³⁶Ionesco, 'Avant-propos' to Onze récits, by Ilarie Voronca (Limoges: Rougerie, 1968), p.8.

¹³⁷Robert Abirached, 'Les Deux Eugène', Nouvel Observateur (14-20 December 1966), p.43.

¹³⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.135.

This sense of freshness and surprise, associated with the state of wonder, is, in fact, the basis of Ionesco's criteria of literary value, which he takes from Benedetto Croce; 'la valeur et l'originalité se confondent ... une oeuvre est grande quand elle est originelle, inattendue ...'.¹³⁹ Any true artist, he believes, retains this capacity to experience wonder to a greater extent than most men, and it is his duty to convey his perception to others. 'Je crois que le poète conserve cette intuition fondamentale', he says, 'et que c'est à lui de la faire partager aux autres'.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, it was the sense of wonder that led him to the theatre as principal mode of expression, for wonder is the dramatic vision par excellence. Even as a child, Ionesco felt a sense of amazement at the theatre. He recalls, 'Chaque spectacle réveillait en moi ce sentiment de l'étrangeté du monde, qui ne m'apparaissait nulle part mieux qu'au théâtre'.¹⁴¹ It was to express his stupefaction, when faced with the raw facts of creation, that he wrote his first play, to pose the metaphysical questions, 'Pourquoi et que sommes-nous? Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire?'. He elaborates, in his conversations with Claude Bonnefoy:

Il s'agit d'une question non formulée mais plus forte que si elle était formulée, d'une sorte de sentiment tout à fait primaire, originel devant le fait que quelque chose est là qui bouge ou qui me semble bouger C'était une mise en lumière de l'être, de l'insolite de l'être en bloc dans mon étonnement devant l'existence.¹⁴²

It is the same sense of the inconceivability of existence, now changed into terror, that nourishes his later plays, and he believes that, without this element of surprise and wonder, theatre cannot exist: 'Sans une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit, sans une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle, il n'y a pas de théâtre, il n'y a pas d'art non plus'.¹⁴³ It is, therefore, his desire to express the incomprehensible nature of existence and to convey it to the audience, through elements of shock and surprise, that first led Ionesco to write for the theatre.

We have already seen how Ionesco, in order to re-create an atmosphere

¹³⁹Entre la vie et le rêve, p.21.

¹⁴⁰'Moi et mes monstres', Interview with André Bourin, p.1.

¹⁴¹Notes, p.53.

¹⁴²Entre la vie et le rêve, p.60.

¹⁴³Notes, p.60.

of wonder, uses a technique of stepping back from creation, as though 'métaphysiquement distancié',¹⁴⁴ watching the actions and words of men from a distance so they appear totally strange and unfamiliar. This is exactly the same experience which he has when writing and watching his plays, as he explains to Nelly Murstein, 'Je me retire du monde et je regarde les gens faire. Ils semblent être des marionnettes. Tout ce que je peux dire de mes pièces, c'est que je ne comprends rien à ce qui se passe. L'étonnement est un état philosophique par excellence'.¹⁴⁵ He also uses the technique of deliberately plunging himself into the banal, to rediscover the extraordinary nature of everyday actions, in his theatre as in his life. By repeating and accelerating an ordinary action, such as bringing a chair for a guest or making a cup of coffee, he makes it appear strange and senseless. He does the same with language, repeating a word over and over until its usual sense and connotations are lost, and he stands amazed before the sheer sound, broken into disjointed vowels and consonants, for example, the 'C'est pas par là, c'est par ici',¹⁴⁶ sequence, in La Cantatrice, or the process which the Solitaire describes: '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'.¹⁴⁷ Thus, by presenting everyday objects, words, and actions in a new light, he can re-create for the audience the same sense of freshness and wonder which he himself experiences.

This idea of using art and theatre, in particular, to reawaken people to the strange and marvellous aspects of everyday existence, is an old one, stretching back from the modern techniques of the spontaneous experiences of the Happening through the experiments of such playwrights as Cocteau, Jarry, and Apollinaire, to Symbolism and Romanticism, and back to the very roots of theatre. Of all artistic experiences, the theatre is perhaps the most germane to this kind of sensation, because the flesh and blood presence of the actors and the raw presentation of existence, that had initially repelled Ionesco from the theatre, can be used to put the audience brutally face to face with a new vision of reality and to shock them into a sense of wonder. 'Le théâtre c'est

¹⁴⁴ Un Homme en question, p.21.

¹⁴⁵ 'Une entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly K. Murstein, French Review, XLV, 3 (February 1972), 611.

¹⁴⁶ Théâtre, I, 55-56.

¹⁴⁷ Le Solitaire, p.62.

peut-être cela: la révélation de quelque chose qui était caché. Le théâtre est l'inattendu qui se montre; le théâtre c'est la surprise',¹⁴⁸ Ionesco says. Ionesco, in his description of this sense of theatrical immediacy in Arrabal's theatre, outlines his own principles of dramatic construction:

From the very beginning we have an unexpected, surprising event; from the moment the curtain rises, it is as though we look at a world we didn't know and which we nevertheless recognize, a world in which only the important and essential appear, in which actions and gestures happen swiftly, distinctly, surely, each event being surprising; from the beginning, the situation is tense, simple, the image violent, dramatic.

This is what it is to have a dramatic vision of the world, and when the world appears to you in this way, you can only express it by theatre.¹⁴⁹

Comedy is one of Ionesco's most effective tools for creating a freshness of vision, as he explained to Carl Wildman, 'I believe that laughter is a very important thing ... from time to time one should burst out laughing and so burst the crust, the screen which gets between oneself and the virgin vision of things and the world'.¹⁵⁰ The explosion of humour is that of the sudden astonishment at seeing something familiar in a new way, for example, by the juxtaposition of incompatibles 'sur un plan qui en apparence ne leur convient pas',¹⁵¹ that Max Ernst describes in defining the Surrealist image. Humour also allies the real and the fantastic, thus corresponding to an idea that is basic to Ionesco's concept of the theatre and the world. Ionesco starts with a setting, or an action, that is studiously real and turns it to ridicule, showing the fantastic inherent in everyday life. Thus, humour, wonder, the vision of childhood, and the intermingling of reality and fantasy are closely linked, and, for this reason, humour is fundamental to all Ionesco's creation. In the words of Edouard Morot-Sir, 'l'humour c'est l'étonnement devant l'être, pour reprendre

¹⁴⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.153.

¹⁴⁹ Programme for Théâtre Montparnasse production of L'Architecte et l'Empereur d'Assyrie, cited by Ruby Cohn in Currents in Contemporary Drama (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p.31.

¹⁵⁰ 'Eugène Ionesco: Ionesco talking', Interview with Carl Wildman, Plays and Players, 12, 7 (April 1965), 9.

¹⁵¹ Max Ernst, cited by Edouard Morot-Sir, 'Apparition de l'humour dans la littérature française au XX^e siècle', Bulletin de la Société des Professeurs Français en Amérique (1970), p.44.

la formule d'Ionesco, est captation consciente de nos rêves et éveil de l'esprit d'enfance; il est cette puissance surréelle qui rend notre réel dérisoire.¹⁵²

Comedy also corresponds to the dual postulation of 'étonnement émerveillé' and 'étonnement angoissé'; laughter is first of all pleasant, as the audience sees everyday life in a new, strange, and amusing way, but amusement turns to terror as they realize that they are in fact laughing at themselves, at aspects of themselves of which they had not been aware. The two-sided nature of comedy explains the curious mixture of comedy and tragedy in Ionesco's plays, suggested by the genres he proposes: 'dramas comiques', 'pseudo-dramas', 'farces tragiques'.¹⁵³ As the two states of Being are indissolubly mixed, one opening out from the other, so tragedy and comedy, the two theatrical visions corresponding to those states, are indissolubly bound up in his plays. Rather than just juxtapose comic and tragic scenes, in Ionesco's plays, they coexist in a dynamic equilibrium corresponding with Ionesco's vision of the whole of existence:

Le comique est tragique, et la tragédie de l'homme, dérisoire Pour l'esprit critique moderne, rien ne peut être pris tout à fait au sérieux, rien tout à fait à la légère. 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; se mettent en relief l'un par l'autre; se critiquent, se nient mutuellement, pouvant constituer ainsi, grâce à cette opposition, un équilibre dynamique, une tension.¹⁵⁴

The multiple layers of reality and falsehood that the theatre plays upon coincides with his belief that there is no clear distinction between reality and fantasy, between the marvellous and the ordinary. The incomprehensible nature of existence can make the act of reading a newspaper in the Metro something marvellous, yet reduce the transmutation of a man into a rhinoceros to the level of an everyday event. The intermingling of the strange and commonplace on the level of action, of the prosaic and poetic in diction, and of tragedy and comedy, thus all serve to emphasize the basic dualism of 'mal d'être' and 'étonnement d'être' at the root of Ionesco's experience, his art and his philosophy

¹⁵² Morot-Sir, 'Apparition de l'humour dans la littérature française', p.48.

¹⁵³ Notes, p.61.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.61-62.

of life:

C'est en m'enfonçant dans le banal, en poussant à fond, jusque dans leurs dernières limites, les clichés les plus éculés du langage de tous les jours que j'ai essayé d'atteindre à l'expression de l'étrange où il me semble baigner toute l'existence. 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.¹⁵⁵

In the theatre, unlike other art forms, thesis and antithesis can co-exist without being resolved to form a coherent line of argument, and this is one reason why Ionesco felt the theatre to be his best means of self-expression:

Tantôt l'existence est insupportable, lourde, pénible, pesante ou stupéfiante, tantôt elle semble bien être la manifestation de la divinité, lumière. Et si j'ai fait surtout du théâtre plutôt que du roman, plutôt que de l'essai, c'est parce que l'essai et même le roman supposent une pensée cohérente, alors que l'«incohérence» ou les contradictions peuvent se donner libre cours dans une pièce de théâtre.¹⁵⁶

Rather than creating a universe that is, in the words of Nicolas d'Eu, in *Victimes*, 'irrationaliste',¹⁵⁷ Ionesco presents simultaneous contradictions in their stark nudity, an 'antagonistic dualism',¹⁵⁸ to use Stéphane Lupasco's term, thereby creating a fruitful tension which keeps the spectator's mind alive to the contradictory and incomprehensible nature of existence where, 'Rien n'est atroce, tout est atroce. Rien n'est comique. Tout est tragique. Rien n'est tragique, tout est comique, tout est réel, irréel, impossible, concevable, inconcevable. Tout est lourd, tout est léger ...'.¹⁵⁹

Thus Ionesco's work is dominated by a deep, personal intuition of his sense of Being and an awareness of the difficulty of establishing a single, unified individual identity when every aspect of his life and his self is in a constant state of conflict, torn by the dual postulations of existence. Generalizing from his personal experience, he attempts to present the individual's basic metaphysical situation in concrete theatrical metaphors, thereby awakening his audience or spectator to a deeper consciousness of their own existence and lack of individual

¹⁵⁵ Notes, p.62.

¹⁵⁶ *Entre la vie et le rêve*, p.61.

¹⁵⁷ *Théâtre*, I, 225.

¹⁵⁸ Stéphane Lupasco, *Logique et Contradiction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), p.ix.

¹⁵⁹ Notes, p.297.

identity. He describes the process by which the individual is caught up in the machinery of time and the world, separated from creation and himself. The new world of separation, terror, and imperfection that replaces the comfort and security of the infantile state is dominated by a system of dialectical antagonisms and oppositions which coexist, but can never resolve again into the original synthesis and harmony of the childhood paradise. Although the adult may still have experiences of joy and wonder, they no longer represent a total and permanent sensation of Being, but only a fleeting vision of grace which is marred by its ephemerality, and the inevitable return to the grey ennui of everyday life is made all the more unbearable by the memory of the vision. Ionesco retains, to a painfully acute degree, the nostalgia for this sense of wonder which, for him, is indissolubly linked with a sense of the wholeness of the individual identity, and he believes that, even if he is not able to retain the state permanently, to live under the influence of joy and wonder as much as possible should be the principal aim of his life and art. His obsession throughout his work with the places and events of childhood is an attempt to re-capture the vision of the child, which, he believes, would reconstitute his individual identity. However, even he cannot escape the domination of the negative pole of Being, and, although at one moment he claims, 'C'est de la lumière et de l'étonnement que j'aurai à parler',¹⁶⁰ at another he says, 'La littérature est faite surtout, me semble-t-il, pour exprimer cet égarement, cette chute, cet abandon malgré nous de l'état primordial qui est tout près de l'état paradisiaque'.¹⁶¹ Under the influence of ennui, he feels that exposing the tragic separation, between man and the world and between man and his identity, with such lucidity, has only served to make the schism worse: 'C'est comme si j'assistais à la désintégration de ce complexe de mouvements, de figures, de ces semblants d'êtres et de choses', he writes, 'En écrivant des pièces de théâtre, j'ai l'impression que je contribue à l'accélération du processus de désintégration'.¹⁶²

Whether or not artistic creation can be a practical means for either the author or his spectators and readers to regain their individual identities and sense of harmony and wonder, it is clear that the

¹⁶⁰ Découvertes, pp.93,96.

¹⁶¹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.136.

¹⁶² Notes, p.296.

tension between the dual postulations of Ionesco's perception of Being, although painful, has been very fruitful for his literary creation, as Ionesco admits, 'Je crois que la littérature est névrose. S'il n'y a pas névrose, il n'y a pas de littérature. La santé n'est ni poétique, ni littéraire'.¹⁶³ Moreover, by presenting basic states of Being, rather than expounding philosophies of existence, Ionesco does indicate the way to a fuller life, trying through his theatre to reawaken his audiences to a deeper awareness of the forces ruling their lives and of the possibilities of joy and wonder to be found, even in everyday objects, with a simple change of perspective and attitude. This, he believes, is the most significant thing each one of us can do. 'Vivons cependant dans l'émerveillement tant que cela nous est possible. La richesse de la création est infinie', he advises.¹⁶⁴ His plays, he believes, like all art of value, will help the audience to do this by recreating a sense of freshness, wonder, and joy, 'une naïveté lucide, jaillissant des sources profondes de l'être, les révélant, nous les révélant à nous-mêmes, nous restituant notre naïveté, notre être secret'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.37.

¹⁶⁴ Antidotes, p.323.

¹⁶⁵ Notes, p.57.

It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never really belong, who must always be a little in love with death.

Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night.

CHAPTER II

THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING

Torn between the dialectical opposites of wonder and depression, the individual finds everyday life an almost unbearable burden. Man is differentiated from the rest of creation by the consciousness he has of the self, existing as a separate, unique entity, and, by his passionate desire for ratiocination, he defines the world by a negative act of exclusion and separation, rather than by a positive act of acceptance and inclusion. 'En ce moment', Ionesco writes, 'le problème existentiel, la question, me met hors de l'intégration, me sort de l'univers, tandis que le "pourquoi" de l'enfant est une intégration, c'est un pourquoi qui accepte'.¹ However, instead of gaining a greater insight into the self, the individual now feels terrifyingly alone and insubstantial. The strangeness of the world, which in the state of wonder had been a source of joy, now engenders horror and fear. The universe seems absurd and unknowable and so merely confuses the individual's attempt to establish the margins of the self. Suffering from an acute sense of his inexistence, the individual shuns the horror of confrontation with the self, but this just increases his malaise. Finally, the individual is forced to try to escape the difficulty of Being, by setting off on a search for his individual identity that will enable him to fill his inner void and live again in harmony with creation. In this way, the pain of existence is an inescapable part of the search for self, as Ionesco writes, 'Heureusement, il y a crise. Ce que je craindrais, c'est qu'il n'y ait plus de crises. S'il y a crise, il y a recherche Tant qu'il y a crise, tant qu'il y a angoisse, il y a vie réelle, vie culturelle, vie spirituelle ...'.²

Isolated and uprooted, the individual first feels a terrible sense of loneliness, of being without any support or context. He is a

¹Découvertes, p.79.

²Entre la vie et le rêve, p.182.

'tremblante étoile dans un océan de ténèbres, île d'être entourée de rien',³ an 'île précaire dont on n'est pas sûr qu'elle sera rattachée à l'univers définitif',⁴ or a 'solitude absolue qui interroge l'univers'.⁵ He cannot understand why he has suddenly been separated from the rest of creation, and, without any frame of reference, he begins to doubt the reality of the self. He asks, 'Comment se fait-il que l'univers ne soit pas moi, pourquoi est-il autre chose, d'un côté il y a moi, de l'autre côté tout le reste. Tout est autre. Moi-même je me sens autre'.⁶ The individual feels very vulnerable, as though he were in contradiction with the rest of the created universe which threatens to crush him. 'Je sens sur moi tout le poids du monde', Ionesco says, 'Il est naturel que je me sente écrasé; je suis tout seul'.⁷ Moreover, unlike the anguish of the Existentialists, for whom man was born a 'néant', 'thrown into' creation and never at home in the universe, Ionesco's malaise takes on an increased poignancy by being tinged with nostalgia for a time when the individual was at one with nature and with himself. He is not striving to fill the void in his Being by creating his essence through definitive acts, but by delving backwards to the roots of his sense of Being. The presence of beauty in the world constantly fills Ionesco with sadness, for he is no longer a part of it. 'Oui la beauté est atroce', he admits, '... parce qu'elle ne m'appartient pas. Elle réveille en moi la nostalgie d'une absence essentielle, elle me rappelle que je n'ai pas, que je ne suis pas, que je ne suis pas, que je n'ai pas'.⁸

As the individual tries to perceive his own Being, he is faced with the dilemma that he can never know himself as a subject, but only as a thing, an alien object of his own perception. Even the basic question, 'Who am I', implies the singular pronoun has a two-fold referent, the 'I' who is the subject of the question and the 'I' who is asking it. 'Je suis dedans, je suis dehors', Ionesco writes, 'celui qui fait, qui est fait, qui voit comment il fait, se fait, comment cela est fait, sans bien comprendre. Ma pensée se detache de moi-même Je me pense.

³Théâtre, I, 205.

⁴Le Solitaire, p.124.

⁵Théâtre, V, 90.

⁶Journal, p.43.

⁷Antidotes, p.184.

⁸Présent passé, p.277.

Je suis un autre'.⁹ Thus the individual can never know himself completely, for, to perceive himself, he takes up a position outside himself, looking at himself, but then knowing becomes separate from Being. Moreover, in perceiving this, the enquirer is being questioned by a third 'I', and a network of 'I's can be built up ad infinitum, the differentiations between them diminishing as the process continues, until everything approaches a state of uncertainty and confusion. Ionesco no longer feels certain about the pronoun 'Je' and retreats into the impersonal 'on', writing, 'On se voit voir. On se voit parmi les choses parmi les autres, dans le décor, image dans laquelle on est pris et qui en même temps est hors de nous. Comme une âme verrait défilier sa vie, le film de sa vie ...'.¹⁰ Circling round and round the self, but unable to locate a definite sense of identity, Ionesco might echo the words of Artaud, in 'le Poème de St. François d'Assise'; 'Je suis cet éternel absent de soi-même | Marchant toujours auprès de son propre chemin'.¹¹

Since the question 'Who am I?' reveals only a multiplicity of partial, shifting, irreconcilable selves, the individual naturally begins to ask, 'Am I at all?'. 'Je suis un bonhomme de neige en train de fondre', Ionesco laments, 'Je glisse, je ne puis me retenir, je me sépare de moi-même. Je suis de plus en plus loin, une silhouette et puis un point noir'.¹² The story of the little girl, in Beckett's All That Fall, who has been treated by a psychoanalyst for years because she is dying, despite the fact that there is nothing medically wrong with her, encapsulates the problem that Ionesco and many other contemporary writers perceive in modern life. The doctors eventually discover that she is dying because, in fact, she has never really been born, in the sense that she has never acceded to any vital existence or individual identity.¹³ The characters, in Beckett's trilogy, are a vivid illustration of this picture of modern man 'not half alive nor anything approaching it'.¹⁴ The novels present a fluctuating mass

⁹Journal, p.42.

¹⁰Présent passé, p.34.

¹¹Antonin Artaud, 'Premiers Poèmes 1913-23', Oeuvres Complètes, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 336.

¹²Présent passé, p.280.

¹³Samuel Beckett, All That Fall (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp.33-34.

¹⁴Ibid., p.11.

of self and identity, merging and fusing, imperceptibly disintegrating and fading and occasionally re-emerging as specific selves. Molloy says that his 'sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness, often hard to penetrate',¹⁵ and Malone admits he doesn't know 'who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am'.¹⁶ Finally, in *L'Innommable*, Beckett presents a character who is no more than a minimal presence, forever fringing off into the void that surrounds him. For him, the division in the age-old question 'to be, or not to be?' loses its pertinence. 'Je ne sais pas si j'ai été en vie, je n'ai vraiment pas d'opinion là-dessus', he laconically states.¹⁷ It is the lack of individual identity that T.S. Eliot perceives in the 'Hollow Men'; 'Shape without form, shade without colour | Paralyzed forces, gesture without motion',¹⁸ or that Tardieu caustically describes in 'La Môme Néant':

Quoi qu'a dit?
- A dit rin.

Quoi qu'a fait?
- A fait rin.

A quoi qu'a pense?
- A pense à rin.

Pourquoi qu'a dit rin?
Pourquoi qu'a fait rin?
Pourquoi qu'a pense à rin?
- A'xiste pas.¹⁹

Both Ionesco's life and his art are inextricably bound up with the rhetoric of the basic uncertainties of existence and the individual identity. His characters 'vivent sans jamais parvenir à l'être, à côté du monde, dans sa marge'.²⁰ Yet, for Ionesco this situation is intolerable; man is endowed with a rational mind, yet he cannot perceive any rational order within himself or in the universe. Ionesco thus remains torn, like Beckett's heroes, 'incapable de se connaître elle-même, et incapable de supporter de ne pas se connaître',²¹ and,

¹⁵ Beckett, *Molloy*, p.41.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.65.

¹⁷ Beckett, *L'Innommable*, p.225.

¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), p.79.

¹⁹ Jean Tardieu, 'La Môme Néant', *Monsieur, Monsieur: poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p.31.

²⁰ Paul Surer, *Cinquante ans de théâtre* (Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1969), p.376.

²¹ Richard N. Coe, 'Le Dieu de Beckett', *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 44 (October 1963), 8.

unable to resign himself to his condition, or to change it, lives in a constant state of anguish.

To the individual's anguish, at the insubstantiality and incomprehensibility of the self, is added his fear of the even more unfathomable laws that govern the universe, that he must suffer without being able to control or even understand. Ionesco considers it intolerable that the individual is born, without asking to be, into this alien creation which resists any attempt to make sense of it, as all ultimate truths are beyond the compass of the human mind:

Je considère que notre existence est inconnaissable et que notre condition métaphysique est absolument inadmissible. On ne nous a pas demandé notre avis, on nous a plongés là-dedans. C'est un piège entre la naissance et la mort que nous devons assumer ... comment peut-on vivre dans l'ignorance? ... Nous ne pouvons concevoir ni un univers fini, ni un univers infini, alors si nous ne pouvons concevoir cela, il est inutile de penser Personne ne sait où ça va, où ça mène. ²²

Every sphere of life seems to be incoherent and discordant; 'la déraison, la contradiction; l'expression de mon désaccord avec le monde, de mon profond désaccord avec moi-même, du désaccord entre le monde et lui-même'. ²³ Ionesco, in his theatre, emphasizes this vision of the world by presenting 'personnages qui errent dans l'incohérent ... Des êtres noyés dans l'absence de sens'. ²⁴ The disparity between man and his context, the impossibility of contact beyond the self, an awareness of the arbitrary, pointless nature of existence and the contradiction between the human desire for infinity and immortality and the limits of the human condition all contribute to Ionesco's awareness of the absurdity of existence. 'L'Absurde', Ionesco writes, echoing the words of Albert Camus, in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, ²⁵ 'naît du conflit de ma volonté avec une volonté universelle ..., du conflit entre moi et moi-même, entre mes diverses volontés, impulsions contradictoires: ... un vers la mort, un vers la vie; eros et thanatos, amour et haine, amour et destruction'. ²⁶ The Absurd, for Ionesco, is not so much a state, for in

²² 'Nous avons la manie des révolutions', Interview with Sandra Stolojan, p.1.

²³ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.137.

²⁴ Notes, p.261.

²⁵ 'Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, l'acteur et son décor, c'est proprement le sentiment de l'absurdité'.

Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p.18.

²⁶ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.130.

his total ignorance, he feels unable to make any categorical statements about the universe, it is more a mode of awareness, a way of being in the world. 'Nous sommes plongés dans l'ignorance', Ionesco writes, 'nous faisons autre chose que ce que nous croyons faire, nous ne sommes pas maîtres de nous-mêmes ... Je ne sais pas s'il y a un sens ou non, si le monde est absurde ou non, pour nous il est absurde, nous sommes absurdes, nous vivons dans l'absurde. Nous sommes nés trompés'.²⁷

Ionesco differs from many other writers of the Absurd, in that for him, the notion of the Absurd is not just an abstract philosophical concept, a subject of objective discussion, but a profound inner conviction, a malaise in his spirit that makes the most simple and unavoidable act, that of living itself, strange and unacceptable. 'La vie est invivable', Ionesco states, in a neat paradox.²⁸ A feeling of futility vitiates every action and thought. 'L'à quoi bon ne me quittait pas', Ionesco says, 'Une blessure à vif, à aucun moment absente de ma conscience. Je n'avais que la conscience de dégoût. J'en étais l'incarnation. L'univers ne me convenait pas. D'autres univers ne m'auraient pas convenu'.²⁹ David Grossvogel, in his discussion of modern theatre, entitles his chapter on Ionesco, 'The Difficulty of Living', and Pierre Kyria likewise entitles an article on Ionesco 'La difficulté d'être' and elaborates:

Angoisse d'être tout simplement. Tout en découle ... De là une perpétuelle quête de la stabilité. De là une suite d'états contraires, de moments d'exaltation rompus par des brutales plongées dans l'angoisse Ionesco, au jour le jour, reste incertain et blessé entre le "qui suis-je?" et le "à quoi bon?", doutant de tout et même de son existence.³¹

Ionesco recognizes that he is more acutely aware of the difficulty of existence than the majority of men. As the Solitaire says, 'Je n'étais pas comme les autres. Avais-je une sorte d'infirmité, un esprit infirme? ... J'étais le seul à être pris de panique, d'une panique permanente, jour après jour, heure après heure, minute par minute'.³² Each morning,

²⁷ Antidotes, p.320.

²⁸ Ionesco, Preface to L'Avant-garde théâtrale, edited by Tom Bishop (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath & Co., 1970), p.ix.

²⁹ Ionesco, 'Journal d'un citoyen malgré lui', p.182.

³⁰ David I. Grossvogel, The Blasphemers: the theatre of Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Genêt (New York, Cornell University Press, 1965), p.49.

³¹ Pierre Kyria, 'Eugène Ionesco: La difficulté d'être', Combat (14 May 1967), p.8.

³² Le Solitaire, p.132.

he has to struggle with his feeling of the futility of existence and the temptation to end life that brings nothing but suffering conflict-
ing with an irrational but ardent desire for life: 'Je dois surmonter
tous les matins l'angoisse, la fatigue, le dégoût; l'impuissance, l'à
quoi bon, un trop grand désir de vivre, aussi grand que la tentation de
renoncer à l'existence paradoxalement mêlée à ma peur, à la fois d'être
et de ne pas ou de ne plus être'.³³ He can only get through the day
by artificially dulling his lucidity with alcohol or tranquilizers, as
he tells Gilbert Canne in an interview, he is 'angoissé de nature'
and believes, 'On peut se reconforter mais quand on a pris de l'amphét-
amine, il n'est pas facile de vivre dans le monde précaire, existentiel'.³⁴
He cannot understand how others can live peaceful lives, as though un-
aware of the metaphysical tragedy that makes the whole of existence
futile. Once, he telephoned a friend in the middle of the night, all
the way from Lucerne, to ask him, 'Comment fais-tu pour vivre? C'est
intolérable. Nous allons nous suicider tous les deux?',³⁵ or again,
he woke up another friend saying, 'Je ne peux pas dormir. Je suis
angoissé -Pourquoi? -Comment? Tu ne lis pas les journaux?'.³⁶ Ionesco
and his chief characters share this lucidity and awareness of the
absurdity of existence and the difficulty of Being, but, even those
who are oblivious of their existential alienation, cannot avoid suffer-
ing to some extent from the human condition, as they cannot help but be
a part of it. 'Ce malaise est inhérent à la condition humaine', Ionesco
explains, '... On ne peut pas ne pas en souffrir si l'on en prend
conscience. Si l'on n'en prend pas conscience, on en souffre quand
même, moins consciemment La Création est ratée. Elle est à
refaire'.³⁷

The difficulty of existence is a metaphysical ennui that results
from the separation of the individual from the universe and from his
sense of identity in early childhood. He strongly refutes any social
interpretations of the malaise, such as that of Gilbert Tarrab, who

³³ Antidotes, p.185.

³⁴ 'Ionesco attaque', Interview with Gilbert Canne, Nouvelles Littéraires
(3 February 1966), p.10.

³⁵ Ionesco, cited by François Caviglioli, 'Les terreurs d'Eugène Ionesco',
Nouvel Observateur, 210 bis (20 November-20 December 1968), 21.

³⁶ Ibid., p.22.

³⁷ Antidotes, p.206.

tries to link the difficulty of being to the pressures of the industrial society on the individual. 'Avant d'être accablé par elle [the industrial society]', Ionesco asserts, 'Je me sentais accablé par le problème de l'existence ... Quand j'étais tout jeune encore, j'avais déjà ce sentiment très aigu de l'inutilité des choses ce sentiment de la futilité des choses ne m'a jamais quitté'.³⁸ Material success and the superficial happiness, offered by the world, are equally incapable of alleviating this metaphysical despair. 'De toute façon, avec ou sans chagrin, avec ou sans succès, toutes les vies sont gâchées', Ionesco says.³⁹ Ionesco's own success as a playwright and the material well-being of his everyday life has not helped this deeper difficulty of being, just as social and scientific advances have been unable to make man any happier, as they are unable to solve the fundamental problems of existence, 'la question: qu'est-ce que vivre et qu'est-ce que tout cela veut dire, demeure intacte ... Tous les problèmes, en dehors de ce problème primordial, sont secondaires'.⁴⁰

Confrontation with the Absurd, in the heart of all Being, is therefore extremely painful, and it is for this reason that many individuals try to shun any confrontation with the self or identity, preferring to live a superficial, mechanical existence in ignorance of the conflict of forces governing all life. Pascal and Kierkegaard knew the fear of being alone and of being thus forced to confront the void inside the self. For them, however, the anguish resulted from an awareness of the absence of the true self without God, whereas, for Ionesco, the sense of emptiness is perceived as a burning nostalgia for something intangible that he had once known, rather than for anything concrete. From his first perception of himself as a separate being in childhood, Ionesco found it impossible to accept his own existence. Like the Sartrean hero, he felt himself 'de trop'. 'Je ne suis point parvenu ... à admettre l'existence et à m'admettre moi-même', he admits.⁴¹ He recounts how, as a child, the realization that he was a separate and unique individual, different from other people, filled him with

³⁸ Ionesco, Ionesco à coeur ouvert, Interviews with Gilbert Tarrab (Montreal: Cercle du Livre de France, 1970), p.116.

³⁹ Présent passé, p.151.

⁴⁰ Discours de réception d'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française et réponse de Jean Delay (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p.28.

⁴¹ Journal, p.25.

horror, as though his individuality was a crime:

Mais je ne m'aimais pas depuis que je m'étais vu et depuis que j'avais compris ma séparation, depuis cette rupture, ce péché fondamental de ne pas être comme les autres. C'est justement pour cela que je voulais parler de moi, sans doute parce que je n'étais pas comme les autres, parce que j'étais anormal, parce que j'étais monstrueux.⁴²

For the same reason, Ionesco has always disliked watching his own plays in performance. They refract back an image of himself that terrifies him. 'Je n'assiste jamais aux générales et presque jamais aux représentations', he asserts, 'Je me fais peur à moi-même. Comme lorsque j'étais petit et que je me regardais dans une glace'.⁴³ When he acted the leading role in the film version of his play La Vase, the horror of self-confrontation was even more painful. Watching his double act out aspects of his own life on the screen, he experienced, 'l'horreur de me découvrir sur un écran',⁴⁴ and admits, 'J'ai du mal à m'accepter J'étais agacé et gêné de me lancer à moi-même ma propre figure'.⁴⁵ But the individual cannot hide from himself and the perception of the inner void. 'Je m'opiomane comme je suis moi, sans quérir de moi',⁴⁶ Artaud wrote, and Ionesco compares himself to a prison, 'Moi-même, j'étais pour moi-même la prison. Une prison sans fenêtres, sans lumière et sans nuit à la fois'.⁴⁷ This situation of the inescapability of self-perception is presented in its essence in the semi-autobiographical novel, Le Solitaire. The hero is sheltered from the everyday necessities of work by an inheritance, but with no diversion to occupy his mind is thereby even more vulnerable to ennui and solitude. There is no escape from himself: 'Le drame c'est que l'homme n'a pas le pouvoir de rejeter sa propre existence. On l'a mis là'.⁴⁸

⁴²Découvertes, p.84,88.

⁴³'Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco dont le Rhinocéros est présenté mardi', Interview with Jacques Siclier, Le Monde (27 April 1965), p.15.

⁴⁴'Je suis devenu le petit industriel du spectacle', Interview with Monique Pantel, France-Soir (6 november 1973), p.19.

⁴⁵'Ionesco interprète Ionesco', Interview with Michel Delain, Express (12-18 November 1973), p.116.

⁴⁶Antonin Artaud, 'Appel à la jeunesse. Intoxication-Désintoxication', Oeuvres complètes, 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 25.

⁴⁷'Journal d'un citoyen malgré lui', p.132.

⁴⁸Lucien Guissard, 'Le premier roman d'Eugène Ionesco, Le Solitaire. Quand l'homme sait qu'il ne sait rien', Croix (1-2 July 1973), p.9.

The horror of self-perception and the emptiness of the individual identity are symbolized by physical deformations; the Schürz of Boris Vian in Les Bâtisseurs d'Empire and the cripples and deformed characters in the theatres of Beckett, Arrabal and Adamov have their counterparts in Edouard's twisted arm and wracking cough and the Killer's one eye in Tueur, the Pupil's toothache in La Leçon, Roberte's three noses in Jacques, and the chronic fatigue from which the heroes of Amédée and Rhinocéros suffer. The physical evidence of human existence is just as meaningless and therefore as terrifying to face as the inner void it reflects. Ionesco's hatred and disgust for the nauseating facts of existence is expressed in the playlet, Le Rhume Onirique, the text of which has been lost, but which, Ionesco claims, concerned a gentleman who had a bad cold and went to a chemist's shop for some medicine, whereupon the chemist launched into an endless catalogue of bizarre remedies, with outlandish names. Renée Saurel, who disliked the play, and found it 'franchement pénible', nevertheless took its implications seriously, writing:

Le dégoût du corps, la difficulté de s'accepter et d'accepter les autres comme des êtres de chair et de sang soumis à toutes sortes d'alchimies répugnantes, nous l'avons éprouvé et l'éprouvons encore plus ou moins. On s'efforce une fois pour toutes de s'en accommoder et de penser à autre chose. Ionesco, lui, s'y complait et les souligne avec une délectation un peu louche.⁴⁹

It is terrifying for man to contemplate himself both physically and spiritually, for he perceives the horrifying uncertainty of his individual identity. 'Somewhere [man] must know', Samuel Beckett has said, 'that self-perception is the most terrifying of all human observations. He must know that when man faces himself, he is looking into the abyss'.⁵⁰

The consequence of this terror is that many individuals try to avoid any confrontation with their personal identity, and Ionesco's plays, like Beckett's, are critiques of the evasions that prevent authentic self-perception. Winnie, in Beckett's Happy Days,⁵¹ distances herself from her misery by attributing it to a fictional character. Only thus can she express her suffering. The whole monologue in Not I⁵² is built

⁴⁹Renée Saurel, 'Sketches Dramatiques ou Spectacles de Cabaret?', Lettres Françaises, 478 (20-27 August 1953), 6.

⁵⁰Samuel Beckett, 'Samuel Beckett talks about Beckett', Interview with John Gruen, Vogue (December 1969), p.210.

⁵¹Samuel Beckett, Happy Days (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

⁵²Samuel Beckett, Not I (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

around M's refusal to relinquish the third person. The mouth screams to express the pent-up feelings of horror and fear claiming that she is merely showing how the woman in her story was unable to scream, but thereby essentially refusing to see herself for what she is, in the same way as *L'Innommable* who states, 'Je ne dirai plus moi, je ne dirai plus jamais, c'est trop bête. Je mettrai à la place chaque fois que je l'entendrai, la troisième personne'.⁵³ In plays such as *La Cantatrice* or *Les Chaises*, Ionesco portrays characters who deliberately avoid confrontations with their selves, hiding the terrifying reality of Being behind social conventions or fantasy worlds. Both Beckett and Ionesco condemn this inauthenticity. Beckett quotes Proust's words, 'One lies all one's life long notably to those that love one, and above all to that stranger whose contempt would cause one most pain - oneself'.⁵⁴ Ionesco concludes in similar terms, 'Voilà cependant où se trouve le mensonge, le crime: se mentir à soi-même, être en désaccord avec sa propre vérité, sa propre connaissance profonde des choses, telle qu'elle apparaît à une conscience. C'est bien cela: l'objectivité c'est être en accord avec sa propre subjectivité, c'est-à-dire ne pas mentir'.⁵⁵ But, whereas Beckett is content just to present this zone of non-being as something inevitable, with an occasional dry aside like that of *L'Innommable* about how shameful it is, 'faites un effort, à votre âge, être sans identité, c'est une honte'.⁵⁶ Ionesco's theatre, by presenting the decomposition of the ego, is a call to arms, to the attainment of awareness, however painful for himself and his audience. 'Je réclame le droit de me débrouiller avec moi-même', he asserts, 'D'être face à face avec moi-même. De ma confrontation avec moi-même peut-être en sortira-t-il un autre Mais de toute façon je ne puis me supporter, il est temps que je prenne conscience. Il est temps de vaincre'.⁵⁷

The characters in Ionesco's plays can be divided into two groups, those with a sense of irreducible identity, even if it is only a memory of something lost, and those in the shorter plays and sketches without identity who are merely objects. Paul Vernois classifies these two

⁵³ Beckett, *L'Innommable*, p.139.

⁵⁴ Beckett, *Proust*, p.47.

⁵⁵ *Journal*, p.200.

⁵⁶ Beckett, *L'Innommable*, p.184.

⁵⁷ *Journal*, p.126.

groups as 'personnages-rouages' and 'personnages-pivots'.⁵⁸ The 'personnages-rouages' are totally unaware of their lack of inauthenticity, either because they have never had an individual identity, or because they are sheltering themselves from the painful confrontation with their self by hiding behind material possessions or social facades. These mechanical characters are comical in the traditional Bergsonian sense, but, in Ionesco's theatre, comedy is never without a particular admixture of tragic for, whether or not his characters are aware of their lost dimension and lack of a firm sense of individual identity, they cannot escape the difficulty of Being that results from it; they must inevitably suffer from its consequences. This condition has been characterized by psychoanalysts by the term 'ontological security', a state which not only encompasses the way characters feel about themselves, but also the way in which they relate to others and to the surrounding world. For the ontologically insecure individual, relationships with others and with surrounding objects become both a necessity and a threat. He risks having his own unreality overwhelmed by the firmer reality of others and the physical presence of objects. Yet he has a fear of the anonymity of the outside world and a fear of losing even marginal significance, if deprived of the presence of familiar objects and people, for he believes he can establish an identity and recover his lost dimension by relating himself to material objects, a way of life, or the ideals of a particular society. R.D. Laing describes the ontologically insecure individual in these terms:

The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable.⁵⁹ And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body.

In his very first play, La Cantatrice, Ionesco puts on stage characters who are unaware of their metaphysical dimension, yet suffer from their loss in the discomfort they feel in the stuffy 'huis clos' of their living room, torn by underground hostility and rivalries. The characters are types, automatons, 'just blanks, emptiness moving amid

⁵⁸ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.133.

⁵⁹ Laing, The Divided Self, p.42.

a stage-full of furniture which is far more real than they; voids or deadness temporarily galvanized into action, temporarily decked-out with clothes and faces and personalities'.⁶⁰ If M. Martin saw no reflection of himself when he looked in the mirror, it was no coincidence for there was nothing but a void to see. 'C'est parce que je n'étais pas encore là...', he realizes.⁶¹ The Bobby Watson scene points to the same conclusion; it is impossible to differentiate these people from one another; without their central core of identity they have become interchangeable. The verbal refrain in the famous recognition scene 'Comme c'est curieux, comme c'est bizarre et quelle coïncidence!'⁶² is both literally true and patently false. The couple, although they have lived in the closest possible relationship as man and wife, cannot possibly recognize one another, for there is no unique, consistent identity on which to hinge the recognition. Donald's logic to prove they are man and wife is totally worthless as it is based on external facts and evidence, but lacks the basic corroboration of a consciousness of individual identity, without which all objective facts are irrelevant. Since the Martins look on themselves as objects, they need the validation of evidence to convince themselves of their existence. They materialize on stage Ionesco's perception of what ontological insecurity is like for the individual who 'feels that, like the vacuum, he is empty. But this emptiness is him'.⁶³ Nicolas Bataille, in his production of La Cantatrice, instinctively destroyed all psychological content. 'Ils étaient gracieux les jeunes comédiens de la troupe Nicolas Bataille', Ionesco recalls, '... du vide endimanché, du vide contemporain. Ils étaient malgré tout, eux-mêmes, charmants au-delà du rien'.⁶⁴ Ionesco's avowed aim in the play was to 'désincarner le plus possible'.⁶⁵ He believes that people are often made up of no more than a series of memories, a shifting multitude of selves, both inner and outer, different for everyone who looks at them and different to themselves, and this should be emphasized by their portrayal on stage. The characters must therefore be 'Personnages sans caractère. Fantoques.

⁶⁰R.N. Coe, 'Eugène Ionesco: The Meaning of Un-Meaning', Aspects of Drama and the Theatre (Sydney University Press, 1965), pp.22-23.

⁶¹Théâtre, I, 49.

⁶²Ibid., pp.29-31.

⁶³Laing, The Divided Self, p.45.

⁶⁴Notes, p.256.

⁶⁵Ibid., p.299.

Etres sans visage. Plutôt: cadres vides auxquels les acteurs peuvent prêter leur propre visage, leur personne, âme, chair et os'.⁶⁶

Feeling threatened with extinction from inside, these characters, like Beckett's, talk to try to convince themselves of their own existence. The disjointed truisms and endless clichés of La Cantatrice can thus be interpreted on one level as an attempt to create Being. However, their words give them no psychic continuity. Without any root in their inner being, words become empty sounds, banal anecdotes detached from any meaning or significance. 'Dans les mots sans suite et dénués de sens qu'ils prononcent', Ionesco writes, the actors 'peuvent mettre ce qu'ils veulent'.⁶⁷ Living without ever acceding to a vital, meaningful existence, these characters illustrate perfectly Beckett's aphorism, 'Coma is for the living'.⁶⁸ The central collapse of the individual devoid of identity is shown literally by the disintegration of the character on stage. The characters, Ionesco comments, in the Massin-Cohen edition of the play, 'devraient littéralement exploser ou fondre comme leur langage; on devrait voir leurs têtes se détacher des corps, les bras et les jambes voler en éclats, etc.'.⁶⁹ The interchange of the Smiths and the Martins at the end, as the play begins again with the roles reversed, emphasizes the bland neutrality of the characters. Without identity, they become merely indistinguishable facades. The circularity of the construction underlines the absurdity and futility of their existence in a world which appears to have lost any direction or guiding principle. As J.S. Doubrovsky puts it, 'That eternal return is not an eternal assertion of the self, as it was for Nietzsche, but its eternal negation'.⁷⁰

Les Chaises is also an exploration of the theme of the difficulty of existence in a world which lacks meaning or any underlying logic. The themes of the play, in Claude Abastado's words, 'composent la constellation de l'existence râée'.⁷¹ Ionesco again puts on stage

⁶⁶Notes, p.255.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Beckett, Malone Dies, p.24.

⁶⁹Notes by Ionesco in Massin-Cohen edition of La Cantatrice chauve (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p.188.

⁷⁰J. Serge Doubrovsky, 'Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity', Yale French Studies, 23 (Summer 1959), 6.

⁷¹Claude Abastado, Eugène Ionesco (Paris: Bordas, 1971), p.91.

characters whose individual identities are 'like that of a vacuum',⁷² but in this play their lack of awareness is less ingenuous and more the result of deliberate self-deception. The old couple have built false identities for themselves based on fears, hopes, aspirations, and distorted memories. The Old Man defines himself, not by what he is, but by what he could have been and therefore what he is not. He hides behind a world of make-believe, pretending that he is still an infant and so does not have to face the problem of establishing an individual identity in the world. His wife supports him in his self-deception and Sartrian 'mauvaise foi'. Schechner aptly describes the old couple as 'two playing cards angled against each other, shielding between them a nothingness'.⁷³ Each bolsters the other against the consciousness of their inner void. The play is tragic in that, in brief moments of lucidity, the characters realize the insubstantiality of the identities they have assigned themselves, but any awareness is rapidly concealed with the fantasy of the message to humanity, which turns out to be as unreal as their concepts of individual identity. The excuses which the Old Man invents for postponing the moment to deliver his message, such as the fact that his brother came to him with a flea, are an objective correlative of his flight from individual identity, and the flea the reductio ad absurdum of his inauthenticity. The old couple's suicide is the ultimate expression of their evasion of lucidity and refusal to face the meaninglessness of their lives. The sense of ontological insecurity is given a tangible reality in the thirty-two empty chairs on stage, but these non-existent people are no more or less real than the visible characters, as they too are hollow shells. Were it not for the technical difficulties involved, Ionesco would have liked to make the Orator invisible too,⁷⁴ but his unreality is made clear by his incomprehensible attempts to express himself which reflects his inner void. Thus the whole play is an attempt to materialize ontological emptiness on stage, to show the lack of individual identity and the unreality of the world, as only the individual can give the world substance and significance. It is, in the words of Richard Schechner, 'the enactment of the Not'

⁷² Doubrovsky, 'Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity', p.5.

⁷³ Richard Schechner, 'The Enactment of the "Not" in Ionesco's Les Chaises', Yale French Studies, 29 (Spring-Summer 1962), 70.

⁷⁴ Notes, pp.264-265.

and, as such, deliberately aims to create a therapeutic unease and anguish in the spectator, when he contemplates the nothingness within himself and sees he is no more real and substantial than the characters on stage. This will lead, Ionesco hopes, to a therapeutic self-questioning, as Schechner suggests, 'The Chairs leads us from the false Not of bad faith to the true Not of nothingness. By scrupulously enacting the Not, the play shows us the Not within each one of us'.⁷⁵

In Jacques, the hero is vaguely aware of the possibility of meaning in life, but he cannot escape the difficulty of existence, represented physically at the end of L'Avenir by the suffering Jacques undergoes and the disgust which he feels for himself and for life. Nor can he escape the erosion of individual identity; the setting calls for a picture on the wall that does not represent anything, and the play moves towards this conclusion as the identity of the hero is gradually annihilated by the fixed social persona which his family force him to conform to. Ionesco again materializes the lack of individual identity, by eliminating all semblance of psychology, aiming, in the words of Alain Bosquet, to 'se débarrasser du personnage'.⁷⁶ At the end of L'Avenir, there are no individuals or objectively valid characters left on the stage, only an endless stream of interchangeable puppet-like characters.

The difficulty of existence is again the central problem of Victimes. The notion of 'devoir' is many sided; the demands of society, political demands, the demands of the family and so on, but it is above all the duty to exist without a sense of individual identity, despite the suffering it inevitably involves. The orders of the Policeman and later Nicolas d'Eu, 'Avale! Mastique!',⁷⁷ represent the obligation to live in an absurd world, with the pain of inner emptiness and the futility of any effort to make existence meaningful by filling that void. Choubert is an ontologically insecure person who lacks a sense of integral selfhood or inner substantiality. 'Il est lourd quand il doit être léger, trop léger quand il doit être lourd, il est déséquilibré, il n'adhère pas à la réalité',⁷⁸ the Policeman says, echoing Ionesco's

⁷⁵Schechner, 'The Enactment of the "Not"', p.72.

⁷⁶Alain Bosquet, 'Comment se débarrasser du personnage', Cahiers des Saisons, 15 (1958-9), pp.242-244.

⁷⁷Théâtre, I, 229,235.

⁷⁸Ibid., p.221.

own words, 'La folie c'est d'être séparé de soi-même, c'est un manque d'accord avec la réalité'.⁷⁹ Ionesco seems to be putting forward a new theory of individual identity based on that described by Stéphane Lupasco, in his book Logique et Contradiction, where the individual, rather than having a fixed, stable identity, is defined as a crossroads of antagonistic and dynamic forces. Nicolas d'Eu explains, 'Nous abandonnerons le principe de l'identité et de l'unité des caractères, au profit du mouvement, d'une psychologie dynamique ... Nous ne sommes pas nous-mêmes ... La personnalité n'existe pas. Il n'y a en nous que des forces contradictoires ou non-contradictaires'.⁸⁰ However, although this may bear some affinity with Ionesco's concept of individual identity, it is not a solution, and Lupascian analysis becomes another form of tyranny for the individual. Similarly, the Freudian notion of an ego-constituted self, determined in early childhood, is discredited. Despite a descent into the depths of the psyche, despite the revelation of all his hidden complexes, Choubert is still unable to find the central identity which he is seeking. Psychological determinism is a fallacy, Ionesco believes, and using the word analysis in its literal sense, of to break into constituent parts, Ionesco shows us Choubert's personality disintegrating into a multiplicity of selves, destroying even his apparent self, which his consciousness and the synthesizing gaze of others had temporarily unified. The search for Mallot, for ontological security is hopeless. Choubert's individual identity is neither dynamic nor constituted, for individual identity cannot be found by analyses imposed by another.

Amédée is paralyzed by a sense of the difficulty of being. A writer by profession, he is unable to even get beyond the first phrase of the play he is writing. His prototype, in the short story 'Oriflamme', describes the ennui of an absurd existence. 'Ah! je suis paresseux, indolent, désordonné, brisé de fatigue à ne pas agir!', he says, 'Je ne sais jamais où je fourre mes affaires. Je perds tout mon temps, j'use mes nerfs, je me détruis à les chercher, à fouiller dans mes tiroirs, à ramper sous les lits, à m'enfermer dans des chambres noires, m'ensevelir sous les penderies'.⁸¹ The image of the growing corpse, which gradually reduces the living space of the couple, and the mushrooms, which spring up in the living room, are materializations of the oppressiveness

⁷⁹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.121.

⁸⁰ Théâtre, I, 226.

⁸¹ 'Oriflamme' in La Photo du Colonel (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p.10.

of the world and the difficulty of existence. 'J'ai essayé', Ionesco says, '... d'extérioriser l'angoisse ... de mes personnages dans les objets ... de donner des images concrètes de la frayeur, ou du regret, du remords, de l'aliénation'.⁸² In this play, Ionesco seems to discredit Existentialist modes of self-definition. For a writer like Sartre, the disintegration of the individual identity was the result of the disappearance of a God to comprehend it. Man is only what he wills and what he conceives of himself after already existing. However, when Amédée tries to make himself existentially by the necessary act which should have related him to the world, he becomes even more weightless and insubstantial and floats off into the night.

One manifestation of the lack of individual identity and the difficulty of being is the amnesia that is characteristic of the characters in these early plays. Ontological insecurity is frequently manifested in a feeling that the world and the self have no historical continuity and sameness, but are merely a random assemblage of unrelated phenomena and infinite coincidences. The words 'person' or 'individual' imply a sense of continuity of one's existence in time and space, but these characters are little more than a series of unrelated states of existence, arbitrarily confined within one material body, and thus they have no memory. At best there is Bérenger's 'souvenir d'un souvenir, comme une pensée devenue extérieure à moi-même, comme une chose racontée par un autre; image défraîchie que je ne pouvais plus rendre vivante',⁸³ and at worst the total amnesia of the Martins in La Cantatrice emphasizing the totally coincidental nature of all sense perceptions without a core of individual identity to filter them and give them shape and meaning. The same amnesia characterizes Amédée and Madeleine, who appear to have forgotten how the corpse came to be in their apartment, and Choubert, who ends up desperately chewing hunks of bread in order to 'boucher les trous de [la] mémoire'.⁸⁴

Lacking temporal continuity, the characters of Ionesco have no spatial continuity either. The ontologically insecure person, Laing says, feels his self to be separate from his body.⁸⁵ Thus personalities merge, fuse, exchange, duplicate, deviate, and become totally confused.

⁸²Notes, p.159.

⁸³Théâtre, II, 80.

⁸⁴Théâtre, I, 224.

⁸⁵Laing, The Divided Self, p.42.

The Concierge, in Tueur, graduates imperceptively into La Mère Pipe, and the Architect becomes the Commissaire de Police and then, with increased stature, the second policeman. Sometimes the characters fragment into infinite mirror-images of themselves, like the three Bartholeméus in L'Impromptu de l'Alma, the Robertes in Jacques, or the endless Bobby Watsons, all commercial travellers, in La Cantatrice. Other characters mutate or metamorphose in one physical body through endless contradictory personalities; for example Madeleine, in Victimes, becomes, by turns, the middle-class housewife, the alluring femme-fatale, the attentive hostess, the vicious virago, and the old lady imploring help. Speech betrays no psychological identity either. The same lines are repeated by different, even opposing, characters, for example in La Cantatrice, L'Impromptu, Rhinocéros, and Macbett. Moreover, in most of the plays, the blandness of the clichés reminds the audience that the speech is no longer rooted in any individual identity and therefore has become interchangeable. Human relationships undergo bizarre permutations. The Viscount, in La Nièce-Epouse, tries to promote his wife to the status of niece, and the Fireman's tale, in La Cantatrice, gets caught up in a maze of consanguinities. We are thus left with a world where neither character nor exterior events have any meaning or reality. It is the 'abolition des personnages' or 'théâtre d'ombres'⁸⁶ that Genet recommends or the 'univers des apparences, du paraître en perpétuelle métamorphose'⁸⁷ that Arrabal describes. The difficulty of existence therefore leads to a total evasion of the problem of individual identity. Marcel Brion sums up the inauthentic lives of these characters when he describes Ionesco's theatre as:

Un théâtre d'abîmes où s'agitent des démons déguisés en personnages burlesques, et qui changent si souvent de masques, qui enlèvent et remettent leurs masques avec une rapidité si étourdissante, que visages et masques se surimpriment les uns sur les autres jusqu'à confondre leurs natures et échanger leurs propriétés.⁸⁸

From the Bérenger plays onwards Ionesco's characters become increasingly lucid and aware of the difficulty of existence and their alienation from their individual identity. These characters suffer

⁸⁶ Jean Genet, 'Letter to Jacques Pauvert', in Les Bonnes (Paris: Sceaux, 1954), p.13,16.

⁸⁷ Fernando Arrabal, Entretiens (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1969), p.61.

⁸⁸ Marcel Brion, 'Sur Ionesco', Mercure de France, 1150 (1 June 1959), 273.

because they realize that they have been reduced to nothing by the absurdity of the universe, yet retain enough consciousness to perceive the nothingness they have become. In their search for individual identity, the heroes of the later plays become the dynamic elements of the action. The hero, Vernois explains, 'ne se heurte pas vraiment à d'autres êtres pour les vaincre ou les convaincre mais à lui-même, en s'interrogeant sans cesse sur le fait même de sa présence au monde. L'univers reflété par la pièce tourne donc autour de lui pour subir l'assaut à ses questions'.⁸⁹ Thus the difficulty of existence is no longer just presented from outside in the consequences it has for individual identity, but from the standpoint of an inner struggle, questioning and turmoil. These characters fit the definition of modern man given by Jean-Luc Nancy, for whom, 'nous sommes, occidentaux du XX^e siècle: des absents qui nous nous interrogeons, dans l'accumulation de nos savoirs, sur notre absence'.⁹⁰

In Tueur, Bérenger suffers from an awareness of the inner void, resulting from man's disharmony with the universe. 'Il se fit en moi une sorte de vide tumultueux', he tells the Architect. This 'vide' is the loss of his inner conviction of selfhood with the erosion of time. 'Pendant des années j'étais sûr', he continues, 'Sûr d'avoir été sûr ... mais ce souvenir n'a pas été assez fort pour résister au temps'.⁹¹ Like Ionesco himself, he had tried to keep alive the memory of his childhood wonder and completeness, but had failed, and the result was an acute consciousness of the difficulty of existence, 'l'hiver de l'âme'.⁹² This state was materialized in the ugliness and mediocrity of his surroundings and his fellow men and even in the hostile climate, all of which oppressed him. He alone felt conscious of the suffering all men undergo:

Depuis des années et des années, de la neige sale, un vent aigre, un climat sans égard pour les créatures ... des rues, des maisons, des quartiers entiers, des gens pas vraiment malheureux, c'est pire, des gens ni heureux ni malheureux ... des êtres tristement neutres, nostalgiques sans nostalgies, comme inconscients, souffrant inconsciemment d'exister. Mais moi j'avais conscience du malaise de l'existence.⁹³

⁸⁹Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.133.

⁹⁰Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Marx et la philosophie', Esprit, 34, 349, V (May 1966), 1087.

⁹¹Théâtre, II, 79-80.

⁹²Ibid., p.74.

⁹³Ibid.

However, the external discomforts of living are only the symbol of his metaphysical anguish, the feeling of inner emptiness that makes life absurd and unbearable. 'Les maux dont je souffre ne sont pas apparents', he confesses, 'ils sont théoriques, spirituels'.⁹⁴ He seems to have found an escape from the difficulty of existence in the dream of the radiant city, where man and the world and nature all appear to be once again in total harmony. But it is an artificial and superficial harmony, which fails to recreate the oneness of the individual with his individual identity which had originally been the source of wonder and joy. The fatal flaw in this newly-created paradise is materialized in the mysterious menace of the Killer. Béranger's final monologue with the Killer illustrates Ionesco's own recognition that, without the basis of individual identity to give existence shape and meaning, all traditional justifications of life based upon humanism, Christianity, science, self-respect, or any creed or belief are worthless. Béranger's inevitable defeat begins with his admission of a slight doubt: 'Ecoutez, je vais vous faire un aveu déchirant. Moi-même, souvent, je doute de tout. Ne le répétez à personne. Je doute de l'utilité de la vie, du sens de la vie, de mes valeurs et de toutes les dialectiques. Je ne sais plus à quoi m'en tenir, il n'y a ni vérité ni charité, peut-être'. A page later, he has argued himself into a complete awareness of the futility of life and admits, 'Il est possible que la vie du genre humain n'ait aucune importance, donc sa disparition non plus ... l'univers entier est peut-être inutile et vous avez peut-être raison de vouloir le faire sauter ou de le grignoter au moins, créature par créature, morceau par morceau ...'. Thus he concludes that life itself is a mistake, 'Peut-être c'est nous qui sommes dans l'erreur de vouloir exister ... L'existence est, selon certains, une aberration'.⁹⁵ His final submission to the Killer is, therefore, as much a suicide as that of the old couple in Les Chaises. When he comes face to face with the horror of an absurd existence the pain of awareness is too great, and, no longer able to evade reality in specious arguments and eloquent apologies for mankind, his only option is complete escape in suicide.

The Béranger of Rhinocéros is even more conscious of his own inner emptiness and the difficulty of existence. He suffers from a feeling of insubstantiality and of separation from himself. 'Je ne me suis pas

⁹⁴Théâtre, II, 92.

⁹⁵Ibid., pp.170-171.

habitué à moi-même. Je ne sais pas si je suis moi'. As a result, living from day to day is difficult, almost impossible, unless he drowns his awareness in drink. He feels, 'Des angoisses difficiles à définir' and is 'mal à l'aise dans l'existence, parmi les gens'. As is characteristic of the ontologically insecure person, he feels a stranger to his physical body which seems a burden to him. 'Je suis fatigué, depuis des années fatigué', he says, 'J'ai du mal à porter le poids de mon propre corps ... Je sens à chaque instant mon corps, comme s'il était de plomb, ou comme si je portais un autre homme sur le dos'. The little town where nothing happens, the failure of love and friendship, the lack of feeling and awareness in the other characters, all underline the absurdity of existence and contribute to Béranger's conclusion which is the same as that of his namesake in Tueur: 'C'est une chose anormale de vivre'.⁹⁶ But, unlike his predecessor who evades confrontation with the absurd in suicide, this Béranger clings to his humanity despite all the pain and suffering which it involves. However, this relative optimism is tempered by the fact that Béranger clings to existence not because he has any fundamental faith in the value of life, but, despite himself, because he is constitutionally incapable of doing otherwise.

The hero of Le Piéton is again a man who is more aware of the difficulty of existence than his contemporaries. In his opening discussion with the journalist he explains how his awareness of the absurdity of existence makes his career as a writer futile. Unlike the majority of mankind, he cannot ignore the fact that life has lost its guiding principle. 'Les gens font des choses bien qu'il n'y ait aucune raison d'en faire', he says, 'Toutefois, les âmes faibles se donnent des raisons apparentes de leurs activités. Ils font semblant d'y croire ... Je ne suis pas de ceux-là'.⁹⁷ He experiences the total physical and metaphysical exhaustion that characterizes the difficulty of being: 'Et puis la critique me fatigue, mauvaise ou bonne', he says, 'Et puis le théâtre me fatigue, les comédiens me fatigue^{nt}; la vie me fatigue'.⁹⁸ If the individual cannot comprehend the absurdity and atrocity of life, the writer cannot hope to express it in literature. Literature, therefore remains an irrelevant diversion and, as such, is of little worth.

⁹⁶Théâtre, III, 23-24.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.125.

⁹⁸Ibid., p.127.

'Nous vivons un cauchemar épouvantable', he states, 'jamais la littérature n'a eu la puissance, l'acuité, la tension de la vie; aujourd'hui, encore moins cette réalité dépasse la fiction; elle ne peut même plus être saisie par la conscience ...'.⁹⁹ However, Béranger retains a faith that the difficulty of existence is not the fundamental state of existence, but only a passing state which, like an illness, can be cured. 'Si la plupart du temps, je ne sais plus m'envoler', he says, 'j'ai gardé conscience qu'il m'est nécessaire de le faire. Je sais de l'absence de quelle chose je souffre. C'est une affaire de santé. Si nous ne volons pas, c'est que nous sommes infirmes'.¹⁰⁰ The central metaphor of flying, that gives the play its title, represents all that is contrary to the difficulty of being; joy, harmony, a sense of purpose and completeness. Béranger's exploration of the cosmos, however, only destroys his faith, and he returns with a vision of an absurd universe torn by destruction and disaster, empty of meaning, 'des gouffres sans fond'.¹⁰¹

In La Soif, the difficulty of being takes on an even greater acuity and is expressed in a state of being unable to be at rest anywhere, similar to Pascal's description of man's condition: 'inconstance, ennui, inquiétude'.¹⁰² Robert Frickx considers the phrase 'Je ne peux rester ni assis, ni couché, ni debout'¹⁰³ to be a symbolic expression of the difficulty of being. This phrase recurs twice in Jeux, several times in Le Solitaire, in the mouth of the second invalid in Macbett, as well as in La Soif and is echoed by Ionesco himself in his Journal: 'Je ne peux ni rire, ni pleurer, ni m'asseoir, ni m'allonger, ni me lever, ni ne pas désirer, car que désire-t-on ou que ne désire-t-on pas? Je suis paralysé'.¹⁰⁴ The individual is ravaged by his awareness of the difficulty of being and his inner void, torn by conflicting impulses which, like a thorn in his flesh, or the 'plaie vivante',¹⁰⁵ which Jean describes, prevent him from resting or finding peace and serenity. The physical torments of Jean, his 'soif et faim' are the counterparts of

⁹⁹Théâtre, III, 127-128.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p.167.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p.196.

¹⁰²Blaise Pascal, Pensées (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1973), p.56.

¹⁰³Frickx, Ionesco, p.217.

¹⁰⁴Journal, p.118.

¹⁰⁵Théâtre, IV, 118.

his metaphysical hunger for completeness and meaning. He is clearly aware of his lack of inner meaning and is unable to face himself without discomfort. Robert Hirsch, who played the role of Jean, describes his concept of the character as 'un type qui est malade dans sa peau. C'est un médiocre, un faible. Il réagit comme un vieux jeune homme'.¹⁰⁶ Jean, like Ionesco himself, would like to escape the pain of awareness, 'Qui va me faire oublier que je vis?', he asks, 'Je ne puis supporter mon existence'.¹⁰⁷ One way to escape awareness of the lack of individual identity is to displace the malaise it causes by attributing it to the material conditions of existence, making it a social rather than a metaphysical problem. Jean, therefore, sets out on a search for happiness, believing that, by changing his material condition, he can find a sense of joy and inner harmony. Such a search is obviously condemned to failure from the start, as the joy which he seeks is the result of a state of being not any physical place or situation. Jean carries his torment with him as he finally realizes, 'Je ne peux plus habiter nulle part'.¹⁰⁸

Like Béranger in Tueur and Rhinocéros, Jean feels an overwhelming emptiness inside himself, 'Le vide que je ressens!', he cries to Marie-Madeleine.¹⁰⁹ Like the earlier characters, his consciousness gives him no sense of personal continuity; his memories seem to be those of a different person or a different life and so, far from making him more substantial, only accentuate the fragmentation of his personality: 'Les souvenirs d'une vie que je n'ai pas vécue. Non, ce n'est pas ce que je veux dire: des souvenirs que je n'ai jamais eus, des souvenirs impossibles'.¹¹⁰ Reliving the experience of Roquentin, in Sartre's La Nausée, Jean can no longer bear to look at himself in a mirror, as the mirror reflects back the insubstantiality and irreality of his inner being.¹¹¹ This loss of his identity is made all the more agonizing by his dim recollections of a different state of plenitude. He sets off in search of a sense of firm individual identity, but only finds deceptions, absurdity, obstacles, and an even greater awareness of the

¹⁰⁶ Claude Morand, 'Cinq personnages en quête d'eux-mêmes', Arts, 22 (23 February - 1 March 1966), 17.

¹⁰⁷ Théâtre, IV, 83.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.114.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.94.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.114.

difficulty of being: 'Je cherche la vie, je cherche la joie. J'ai cherché l'accomplissement et je trouve la torture Toutes les anciennes plaies cicatrisées s'ouvrent et saignent. Dix mille couteaux s'enfoncent dans ma chair'.¹¹² Instead of identity he finds even greater pressure towards the disintegration of the self: the false monks who torture the individual to make him rescind his deepest beliefs, or the guide in the third episode who personifies the labyrinth of conflicting characters and shifting personas into which the person disintegrates without the unifying force of an individual identity. He presents himself:

A vrai dire, je suis Schaëffer. Oui et non. On m'a vu sous des aspects si divers, sous tant de masques, dans tant de pays et de continents que l'on finit par me reconnaître, à tort ou à raison. Celui qui se présente toujours sous le même aspect se perd dans l'anonymat et la banale, impersonnelle identité. Ce sont mes identités multiples, ce sont mes masques si différents qui me révèlent et me trahissent. C'est parce que, en changeant, on attire l'attention, on rompt des habitudes, des automatismes. Je fais chaque fois irruption dans le non-étrange. Comme je suis chaque fois un autre, il va sans dire que je ne suis jamais tout à fait moi-même.¹¹³

Instead of finding plenitude and joy, Jean's misdirected search only succeeds in plunging him further into the abyss of absurdity and malaise. The whole play, as Claude Abastado points out, is thus an illustration of all aspects of 'la difficulté d'être':

Jean évoque toutes les formes et les causes de la difficulté d'être: il dit la déception, le refus des certitudes médiocres, des satisfactions limitées; il décrit la laideur; il raconte ... le poids du remords. La fuite doit compenser son insatisfaction, le libérer de sa culpabilité; en fait sous ces deux sentiments se cache l'obsession de la mort ... La mort physique n'est d'ailleurs pas le seul mal. L'esprit aussi est menacé. Dans la scène des clowns le reniement n'est pas moins insupportable que le supplice de la faim. L'atrocité vient de l'humiliation

Le sentiment de plénitude, le ravissement, l'extase ne sont évoqués par Jean que comme un état irréel, un souvenir nostalgique ou un espoir inaccessible. La joie et la lumière, comme l'amour fou, figurent un paradis perdu.¹¹⁴

Simultaneously with these studies of the struggle of Ionesco's more sensitive heroes with an awareness of absurdity and inner emptiness, Ionesco continues to write plays portraying dehumanized characters, suffering subconsciously from their inner emptiness. The 'Nouveau

¹¹²Théâtre, IV, 114.

¹¹³Ibid., p.136.

¹¹⁴Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.182.

Locataire' is such a character. His existence as a person is so minimal that he only desires to entomb himself so as to finally cut off any painful awareness of himself and the world and to become as the furniture and objects with which he surrounds himself. With a void at the centre of their existence, these puppet characters can undergo infinite transformations; men can become cars, animals, machines, objects, or simply 'other', as George Craddock states, 'In Ionesco's metaphysical farce, nothing is conceived to be unchanging, immutable or clearly defined - least of all, man himself'.¹¹⁵

In Ce Formidable bordel, the enigmatic 'Personnage' drifts through his life, being constantly overtaken by events. His life seems to be that of a stranger over which he has no control. A revolution shakes his town, but he remains unmoved even by these events. The reason for his apathy is made clear, at the end, in the illumination which he experiences; there is no point in struggling to live a meaningful life for, in an absurd world, man's destiny is even more absurd. A Creator has tricked humanity by creating a meaningless universe as a joke and then abandoning mankind to search desperately for a meaning where there has never been, and never will be, one. 'Le monde n'est peut-être qu'une farce énorme que Dieu a jouée à l'homme', Ionesco says, 'C'est ce que s'écrit le personnage de ma pièce Ce Formidable bordel qui, à la fin d'une vie où il n'a fait que s'interroger ou qu'interroger le mystère, se met à rire, en croyant comprendre que tout n'aura été qu'une bonne ou une terrible blague'.¹¹⁶

The novel Le Solitaire, which is the development of this play, is a more extended exposition of the problems of individual identity and the difficulty of being. The form of the novel lends itself to close analysis of inner doubts and fears, and a more lucid, eloquent hero replaces the apathetic, silent Personnage. The novel is largely autobiographical, and the hero resumes most of the aspects of the difficulty of being experienced by the previous heroes and Ionesco himself. His malaise is not related to his social or personal circumstances, but is metaphysical in nature, inherent in the human condition from the very first moments of consciousness. Although spiritual in nature,

¹¹⁵George Edward Craddock, Jr., 'The Concept of "Identity" in the Theatre of Eugène Ionesco' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1966), p.12.

¹¹⁶Antidotes, pp.323-324.

it is manifested in physical discomforts, too. His own body seems alien and oppressive to him: 'Je me sentais mal à l'aise dans ma peau. Ne sachant pas comment bouger pour que je ne la sente pas ou que je la sente le moins possible', he says, or again, 'Je portais mon corps comme un fardeau'.¹¹⁷ The outside world is also hostile and oppressive; he describes it as a prison: 'Je suis né accablé. L'univers me semblait être une sorte de grande cage ou plutôt une sorte de grande prison'.¹¹⁸ Everyday life, far from being natural, seems to him bizarre and intolerable: 'Mais elle n'est pas facile à supporter la quotidienneté', he comments.¹¹⁹ However, for the hero, suicide is even more inconceivable for, although man knows nothing about the finite world, he is at least familiar with certain superficial aspects of its make-up, whereas the infinite world beyond is totally unknown and unfamiliar. The sense of being a displaced alien in an incomprehensible abyss leaves him with an acute feeling of malaise. 'Ne pas avoir la puissance de concevoir l'univers, de savoir comment est ce qui est, cela n'est pas admissible', he says, 'Depuis l'âge de douze ans cette question m'habitait périodiquement et me donnait le même sentiment d'horrible impossibilité, la nausée'.¹²⁰ As for Ionesco himself, the Solitaire's most acute sense of malaise occurs in the mornings, when the waking mind again takes full cognizance of the horror of living; the void that is existence. 'Le réveil est pénible', he says, 'Une journée devant moi, une immense plage déserte dont on ne voit pas le bout'.¹²¹ Although he suffers more from this malaise because of the acuity of his vision, he believes that all men must suffer from it, even if they try to hide the fact from themselves. 'Mis dans d'autres conditions, chacun d'entre eux vivrait la même angoisse, la même peur de la vie, le même malaise', he states, 'Mais ils ne s'approfondissent pas ... Elle est en chacun de nous, cette angoisse'.¹²² The hero is an amateur philosopher who is constantly questioning his individual identity and the meaning of his 'being in the world', but he differs from other philosophers, represented by the philosophy student, in his inability to stand back and look dispassionately at his situation as a philosophical or psychological case

¹¹⁷ Le Solitaire, p.23,105.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.26.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.64.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp.50-51.

¹²¹ Ibid., p.100.

¹²² Ibid., p.107.

history. He is obsessed by his own feelings of the difficulty of being and the uncertainty his consciousness has of itself. His fear of marginality on the edge of the void, and the uncertainty which his consciousness has of itself, is emphasized by the empty chaos which he perceived inside himself. 'J'ai beau interroger mon âme', he says, '... je n'y décèle aucune vibration profonde. Dans les espaces gris de l'intérieur, il n'y a que des décombres, sous d'autres décombres, sous d'autres décombres En fait il n'y a jamais eu rien d'autre, peut-être, que le chaos'.¹²³ It is only because the rest of mankind is unaware of their lack of identity that they are able to go on functioning and living, making plans, organizing societies, and elaborating scientific theories, whereas he realizes that, without an individual identity to give life and actions coherence, unity and a measure of continuity, no action has any meaning. He hovers on the edge of life, frightened to plunge himself into it, for, without identity, the world is absurd. 'Trop peu confiant pour essayer de vivre ma vie, ou pour faire ou refaire ma vie', he admits and wonders, 'Avais-je eu une vie d'ailleurs?'.¹²⁴ Not only does the sense of non-existence of the self make personal action pointless agitation in a void, but, as Laing has pointed out, ontological insecurity also puts in question the reality of others and of the surrounding world. All is tainted with the same sense of inexistence:

Je sais que la vie n'existe pas. Je sais que rien n'existe vraiment. Je sais que tout cela bouge et se mattraque. L'inexistence est sanglante. Nous ne vivons pas. C'est bizarre. On tue et on se tue pour prouver que la vie existe. Mais il n'y a rien, dis-je, il n'y a rien, il n'y a rien ...¹²⁵

The only possible reaction to this situation, the Solitaire concludes, is a 'paralysie morale',¹²⁶ an apathetic acceptance without emotion of the absurdity and futility of life, as Beckett's *L'Innommable* puts it, 'Il n'y a plus qu'à s'écarteler tranquillement, dans les délices de se savoir à tout jamais personne'.¹²⁷

In the short story and later film-script *La Vase*, Ionesco describes the symptoms of the difficulty of being in a detailed medical fashion,

¹²³ *Le Solitaire*, p.13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.120.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.105.

¹²⁷ Beckett, *L'Innommable*, p.105.

as though it were a pathological disease or contagion overcoming the body:

J'étais dans la force de l'âge, avais bonne mine, beaucoup de prestance, haute taille, de beaux costumes, traits réguliers, expression énergique, tout l'air d'un homme plein de vigueur et de santé, lorsque je ressentis les premiers symptômes du mal. Cela commença par de très légères, à peine perceptibles fatigues, tout à fait passagères mais se répétant.¹²⁸

The whole body is gradually taken over and paralyzed by this sense of the difficulty of being, with all its characteristic feelings of tiredness, of the body as a superfluous, dead weight and of the outside world as a hostile, incomprehensible void:

Le mal ... était descendu partout, en aucun endroit précis; cela n'était localisé en aucun organe; cela rayonnait, de façon diffuse, dans tout le corps qui, objet énorme, terriblement encombrant, ne m'appartenait pas, ne m'écoutait plus du tout une paresse sans bornes, une passive anarchie biologique s'était emparées des organes qui se boudaient aussi, se sabotaient réciproquement comme des ennemis irréductibles A mesure que mes organes s'engourdissaient, mon esprit se débattait dans une sorte de chaos pâteux.¹²⁹

The logical conclusion of the difficulty of existence is the final image of the man sinking into the mud, his body slowly decomposing. Although his final enigmatic words, 'Je recommencerai',¹³⁰ seem to suggest some hope for the future, it is not clear where that hope could possibly lie.

In Jeux, the feeling of the difficulty of existence is made all the clearer by the juxtaposition of the Old Man's ennui with his wife's joy in living. He experiences all the typical symptoms of the malaise: exhaustion, metaphysical anguish, fear and anxiety at the incomprehensibility of the world, and a feeling of being oppressed by physical matter. 'Il n'y a plus que la fatigue, l'ennui et la peur qui est toujours là, qui seule est restée depuis le commencement', he says, '... Le fardeau pèse de plus en plus. Tout est sombre'.¹³¹ Like Jean in La Soif, he cannot feel at peace anywhere. He cannot escape his anguish because he carries it within himself:

Notre condition n'est pas acceptable. Je ne peux plus vivre dans cette ville. Enfermé. Je ne peux plus vivre dans notre maison. Enfermé. J'ai horreur du foyer. De tous les foyers.

¹²⁸'La Vase' in La Photo du Colonel, p.131.

¹²⁹Ibid., pp.141-142.

¹³⁰Ibid., p.167.

¹³¹Théâtre, V, 90, 92.

On vous enferme. On vous enferme. Je ne veux pas rentrer et pourtant je sais que je rentrerai Hélas, je ne pourrai pas vivre dehors non plus. Je sors, c'est pour rentrer. Je rentre c'est pour sortir. Chaque fois que je suis parti, ce n'était que pour revenir Je ne peux rester ni assis, ni couché, ni debout.¹³²

Unlike Jean, however, the Old Man has never had the courage to try to escape from his existential condition. Ionesco thus underlines the fact that neither passive nor active resistance provides any escape from the difficulty of existence. The second invalid in Macbett, who comes to be treated by Duncan, perhaps provides the best description of the all-emcompassing spiritual and physical malaise that accompanies the impossibility of being resulting from the tragic separation from the world and the self. When asked to describe the nature of his malady, he addresses the King, saying:

Monseigneur, je ne peux vivre et je ne peux mourir. Je ne puis rester assis, je ne puis rester couché, ni debout sans bouger, ou courir. J'ai des brûlures et des démangeaisons depuis la tête jusqu'à la plante des pieds. Je ne puis souffrir la maison, ni la rue. L'univers est pour moi une prison ou un bagne. Regarder le monde me fait mal. Je ne puis souffrir la lumière, je ne puis supporter les ténèbres, j'ai horreur des humains et j'ai peur dans la solitude Je ne suis heureux à aucun moment.¹³³

Thus there is no escape from the horror of the human condition, for, as Philippe Sénart says, 'L'homme ne peut vivre nulle part. Il ne va nulle part, non plus. Toutes les voies de son salut sont des impasses'.¹³⁴

There is therefore no simple answer to man's suffering; political and social changes can only bring superficial and temporary improvements, they cannot change man's metaphysical condition, and the two means of escape, suicide or a Pascalian 'leap of faith', are equally unacceptable. The circularity of Ionesco's early plays emphasizes the tragic fatality of existence just as surely as Cocteau's vision of the circular motion of the unwinding of the infernal machine¹³⁵ or Anouilh's 'tragic mainspring' in Antigone.¹³⁶ The disparity between man's desires and his demarcation, his longing for rationality and the absurd irrationality

¹³² Théâtre, V, 93.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹³⁴ Philippe Sénart, Ionesco (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1964), p.112.

¹³⁵ Jean Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, Edited by W.M. Landers (London: Harrap, 1971), p.6. The same idea is found in Cocteau's poem 'La Crucifixion'.

¹³⁶ Jean Anouilh, Antigone (London: Harraps, 1954), p.103 (note).

of the world is a source of great anxiety. 'Vivre, c'est - pour moi - accepter une situation intolérable', Ionesco admits, 'mais répondre, c'est donner une solution fictive, une solution tout à fait provisoire'.¹³⁷ The difficulty of being stems from mankind's peculiar position in the universe; he is not omniscient like the Gods, yet he has not the security and contentment of non-conscious being. He has just enough lucidity to perceive his own ignorance of his self and of the world, as the Solitaire puts it, 'J'aurais voulu tout savoir. C'est cela qui me manquait. De ne pas avoir su. De ne pas savoir tout. J'étais ignorant mais pas assez pour ne pas me rendre compte que j'étais ignorant'.¹³⁸ Ionesco's theatre, therefore, presents us directly with Artaud's 'grande question':

Ainsi donc la question
toute la grande question
quelle est-elle?

Que foutons-nous à vivre?
Et pourquoi vivons-nous?

Et qu'est-ce que nous foutons là?¹³⁹

However, this act of questioning is, for Ionesco, a positive, meaningful act, for an awareness of the difficulty of being is at least proof of minimal existence, the guarantee of some irreducible core of Being and pain drives the individual to set out on a fruitful path of exploration for the individual identity. The situation of being an outsider in an alien cosmos is fundamental to Ionesco's concept of dramatic experience, which lies 'dans le fait de se rendre compte qu'on est homme, de se sentir là dans cette situation, face à face avec le monde que je ne sens presque jamais mien, situation inconfortable mais primordiale, fondamentale'.¹⁴⁰ In revealing the vulnerability of man's identity and being in the world, Ionesco aims to bring his audiences to share his awareness of man's metaphysical condition, so that they too can learn to come to terms with it. Thus, as Martin Esslin states, 'Behind the satirical exposure of the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life, the Theatre of the Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity - the absurdity of the human condition itself ... life must be faced in its

¹³⁷ Ionesco à coeur ouvert, pp.38-39.

¹³⁸ Le Solitaire, p.187.

¹³⁹ Antonin Artaud, 'Ainsi donc la question', Written October 1947 in response to a letter from M. Marcel Bataille, Tel Quel, 30 (Summer 1967), 12.

¹⁴⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.65.

ultimate, stark reality The Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe.¹⁴¹

If Ionesco believed that man was no more than an undefinable void, there would be little justification for his theatre and writing, which both revolve around the search for individual identity, nor would they have found such recognition from audiences throughout the world. He recognizes that behind the semantic fiction, the grammatic fiction of an 'I', one and immutable, there lies an identity that is fragmented and changing and of which he knows little. '"Je" est un carrefour', he writes, 'le lieu où s'entrecroisent les forces et les volontés universelles dont je ne saurai jamais ce qu'elles sont ontologiquement, essentiellement'.¹⁴² However, he believes that, underneath the succession of seemingly unrelated acts and external influences that make up a person's life, there is a guiding principle of selfhood and identity which provides an element of continuity and consistency, perhaps even of immortality, in the individual's reaction to all these situations. Therefore, although he cannot help but be affected and subjected by the universe, of which he is an insignificant part, yet he retains an element of himself that is free to define itself and to structure and interpret the surrounding world according to his individual consciousness, thus asserting his individual identity over and above his context. 'Le "moi" est-il si illusoire que cela?', Ionesco asks, 'Il y a des structures collectives, il y a une matière faite des aspirations, des obsessions, des désirs, des besoins, des angoisses générales, il y a aussi la structure personnelle et unique qu'une personne irréductible donne à ces angoisses, désirs, obsessions etc.'. ¹⁴³ It is this belief that, despite the fragmentary, insecure nature of man's individual identity in the modern world, there is a stable core of selfhood to be found, or rather re-discovered, and built upon, that distinguishes his theatre from the pessimism of that of Beckett and justifies the act of writing:

Mais que veut dire être soi-même? Suis-je simplement un carrefour, un noeud, où des forces diverses s'unissent et s'affrontent? Ou bien, suis-je un être unique ...? Peut-être l'un et

¹⁴¹ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, revised edition (London: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 391-392.

¹⁴² Journal, p.46.

¹⁴³ Présent passé, p.170.

l'autre? ... Ce "je" (qui pense, bien sûr), ce moi ... je ne puis la définir; cette pensée mienne est peut-être une pensée déterminée par les autres. Sommes-nous chacun d'entre nous interchangeable ou irremplaçable? Que cela soit l'un ou l'autre, ou bien l'un et l'autre, cela semble justifier suffisamment l'auteur d'être là et de dire ou d'essayer de dire quelque chose.¹⁴⁴

In the longer plays, Ionesco illustrates his belief in an indestructible residue of selfhood, despite the pressure of erosion and fragmentation which the self has had to undergo. The character whom he puts on stage is a 'hero in spite of himself'.¹⁴⁵ The protagonists of Victimes and Tueur combine a feeling of ontological insecurity and the difficulty of being with an awareness of some core of self. Although not strong enough to resist the onslaughts of the others and the universe, they bear witness, in the words of Hans Mayer, 'non seulement d'une humanité inattaquable, mais aussi d'une apparente faiblesse de caractère, qui, présentée d'une façon très particulière, doit finalement être reconnue comme une grande fermeté morale'.¹⁴⁶ However, it is Béranger in Rhinocéros who, despite all his faults and weaknesses or perhaps because of his acute awareness of being a misfit in life, has the most complete awareness of the irreducibility of his individual identity. Jean-Louis Barrault explained in an interview, 'Béranger est de cette famille des Hamlet et des Antigone, des Electre, des Kafka C'est ça la plus grande force, c'est que tout à coup, même avec les plus grandes faiblesses, on ne peut devenir les autres, on est obligé de rester soi-même, et c'est ça la personnalité. On voudrait bien mais on ne peut pas'.¹⁴⁷ Béranger's final words, 'Je ne peux plus changer. Je voudrais bien, je voudrais tellement, mais je ne peux pas Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu'au bout! Je ne capitule pas !',¹⁴⁸ are a close reflection of Ionesco's own experience. 'Mon essence est inaltérable Je me sens irréductible', he says.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, although

¹⁴⁴Notes, p.17.

¹⁴⁵Ionesco, cited by Rosette Lamont, 'The Hero in Spite of Himself', Yale French Studies, 29 (Spring - Summer 1962), 73.

¹⁴⁶Hans Mayer, 'Ionesco et les idéologies', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, edited by Raymond Laubreaux (Paris: Garnier, 1973), p.121.

¹⁴⁷Ahmad Kamyabi Mask, 'Entretien avec J.-L. Barrault', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 97 (Spring 1978), 64.

¹⁴⁸Théâtre, III, 117.

¹⁴⁹Présent passé, p.282.

the individual, since his rupture with himself and the universe, remains in ignorance of the true nature of his individual identity; he retains an irrational faith in an inalienable core of selfhood, stronger than reason itself: 'Une force passionnelle, une vitalité qui est plus forte que la raison et qui est peut-être la vraie raison'.¹⁵⁰

The pain of existence is, therefore, an inescapable part of man's existential condition, a natural result of the disharmony with the universe and his inner self which follows the self-conscious wresting of the rational individual from his context. The lack of correlation between his need to understand and order his surroundings and the impenetrable chaos of an absurd universe adds to his anxiety. However, this pain is a sign of lucidity and a unique core of identity that differentiates man from the animals and, as such, is a reason for hope. 'Ce qui caractérise une âme, une âme individuelle', Ionesco writes, 'c'est le fait d'être partagée entre l'angoisse et l'espérance. Tout le comportement de l'homme est fondé la-dessus'.¹⁵¹ This unique, structuring consciousness, even if it is only a consciousness of the identity as fragmented and precarious, is the starting point for a search for a firmer sense of identity. 'Mais le moi, c'est ce qui a conscience de cela', Ionesco says, 'c'est celui qui intègre ce tourbillon. Chaque moi est unique. L'homme-individu existe, même s'il n'est que cette conscience, même s'il n'est que ce regard Qu'est-ce que le moi? C'est la conscience d'être moi'.¹⁵² By presenting characters who have abdicated the responsibility of identity and those who are suffering because of the difficulties of the process of self-knowledge, Ionesco aims to bring his readers and audiences face to face with pain of lucid existence in order to encourage them to greater self-awareness. 'Présence physique et absence scénique ici se confondent', writes Alfred Kern, 'derrière les pantins nous devinons l'auteur, le spectateur qui voudraient retrouver leur existence'.¹⁵³ There is, therefore, no simple remedy for the difficulty of being. Ionesco quotes a friend's observation, 'L'homme moderne ... bricole dans l'incurable'.¹⁵⁴ However, man

¹⁵⁰ 'Ionesco attaque', Interview with Gilbert Canne, p.10.

¹⁵¹ Un Homme en question, p.140.

¹⁵² Présent passé, pp.216,217.

¹⁵³ Alfred Kern, 'Ionesco: Un Clown', Cahiers des Saisons, 15 (Winter 1959), p.237.

¹⁵⁴ Antidotes, p.322.

must not try to escape or disguise his pain, nor should he, like so many of Ionesco's heroes, become overwhelmed by despair so that it paralyzes his actions and vitiates even rare moments of happiness.

Man must walk a tightrope of awareness between hope and anguish:

'Nous vivons sur plusieurs niveaux de conscience', Ionesco advises, 'Puisqu'il n'y a rien à faire, puisque nous sommes voués à la mort, soyons gais. Mais ne soyons pas dupes. Conservons, à l'arrière-plan de notre conscience, ce que nous savons. Et nous devons le dire, parce qu'il faut mettre les gens dans la vérité'.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵Antidotes, p.322.



J'écris pour chercher. Pour ME chercher et
pour qu'on m'explique.

Ionesco, 'Êtes-vous notre Molière?'

Il y a longtemps que j'ai levé l'ancre.
Mon oeuvre me porte. Je voyage.

Ionesco, Antidotes

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

Ionesco's theatre is a theatre of searching, a search for self which is often confused with a search for some absolute purpose and meaning in life. The latter is, however, only a part of the search for individual identity, for the meaning of the universe and of life inheres in oneself and cannot be found without an integral sense of selfhood. The search is made difficult and complex by the continual process of change and destruction that occurs with the passing of time in a world where there are no longer any fixed points of reference, where the borderline between dream and reality has become blurred, where friendship and even communication is too often vitiated by hidden aggressions and the desire to objectify the other, and where the final end, death, may end the search for identity at any moment. Moreover, most of Ionesco's heroes have forgotten or lost sight of what they are searching for, or are tempted to avoid the anguish and hardships of the search for self by retreating into a 'mauvaise foi' of avoiding what they are, or persuading themselves that they are what they are not. The search motif in Ionesco's plays and writings is, therefore, no longer, as in the great quests of history, such as Homer's Odyssey and Vergil's Aeneid, a search for greater knowledge and experience, the perfection of the self, but a quest for the self itself. Bernard Pingaud describes the writers of the present age as, 'Les écrivains ... de la difficulté d'être. Ils décrivent un univers où l'on ne communique plus; leur espoir désespéré n'est pas tant de changer, se changer eux-mêmes, et le monde avec eux - que de devenir quelqu'un. Au sein de la littérature contemporaine se découvre ainsi un grand vide: "quelqu'un" n'est pas là'.¹ The search for individual identity is, therefore, of the utmost importance because the very survival of the self is in question. Ionesco stresses the gravity of the problem in his book of essays, Un Homme en question, the title of which underlines his

¹Bernard Pingaud, Ecrivains d'aujourd'hui, 1940-60. Dictionnaire anthologique et critique (Paris: Grasset, 1960), p.26.

obsession with the necessity of redefining and rediscovering the basis of the individual self. He writes, 'Si nous ne retrouvons pas les assises fondamentales, c'est vers l'involution de l'individu, c'est-à-dire vers une involution de l'humanité, que nous courons à toute allure Il s'agit tout simplement du problème de l'être, de la survivance de l'être humain dans le monde'.²

The theme of the search shows the close interrelation, in Ionesco's work, of 'fond' and 'forme' and the inseparability of both of them from the character and obsessions of the writer himself. All three are shaped to the form of the quest. Ionesco describes his own life as a search for self, 'Lorsque je veux raconter ma vie, c'est une errance que je raconte. C'est d'une forêt illimitée que je parle, ou d'une errance dans une forêt illimitée'.³ He uses exactly the same metaphor to describe the act of artistic creation which is, for Ionesco, a means of discovering the self: 'La création d'une oeuvre théâtrale, c'est une marche dans la forêt, une exploration, une conquête, c'est la conquête de réalités inconnues, inconnues parfois de l'auteur lui-même au moment où il commence son travail'.⁴ The adventures and setbacks of this personal quest are the shaping force of all his plays, even though the theme is sometimes approached obliquely, disguised by other intrigues, as Robert Desnues perceives:

Les pièces de Ionesco nous montrent souvent des hommes astreints à des tâches qui ont l'allure de laborieuses enquêtes policières. Cela symbolise peut-être, en la dissimulant, la véritable enquête, celle de l'homme à la recherche de lui-même, anxieux de retrouver sous les apparences superficielles, sa vérité profonde.⁵

This search not only takes the form of an exploration in the outer world, but also that of an inner search through the traditional mediums of psychoanalysis and the analysis of dreams, in addition to a regressional search to the world of his childhood where the individual had known a sense of identity. As Ionesco believes, the inner and outer worlds reflect and affect one another to such a great degree that they virtually coincide; the two forms of the voyage are, in fact, inseparable. Saint Tobi underlines this close interrelation, writing, 'Le voyage

²Un Homme en question, p.51.

³Présent passé, p.251.

⁴Entre la vie et le rêve, p.155.

⁵Robert M. Desnues, 'Eugène Ionesco ou les insuffisances de la littérature', Livres et lectures, 249 (December 1969), 554.

d'exploration - initiation n'est pas seulement destiné à la connaissance de l'univers extérieur, mais également à la connaissance de l'univers intérieur de l'homme: chaque pièce de Ionesco peut être analysée en même temps d'un point de vue ou de l'autre'.⁶ It is the vicissitudes and deceptions of this personal odyssey that form the basis of Ionesco's artistic creation and personal life. Although inevitably difficult and painful, and although it is perhaps in vain, Ionesco believes the search to be of vital importance for the individual. Guy Dumur describes Ionesco as:

Un homme qui marcherait dans une capitale étrangère à la recherche d'un objet perdu. Ceux qui connaissent son théâtre savent bien qu'Ionesco ne se rappelle plus quel objet est-ce exactement, ni même s'il a été perdu. Mais il continue à chercher, à se perdre et à se retrouver. Son théâtre est le récit de cette recherche peut-être vain. Mais qui sait?⁷

The theme of the search for self has reached a particular acuity in modern literature, framing the same question as Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, 'When am I going to get to the heart?'.⁸ The desire to discover oneself runs through Kafka's harassing quest through the labyrinth of existence, the search of Camus's heroes for an impossible escape from absurdity, the search of Genet's characters for a sense of authenticity where the outward mask of appearance and gesture would correspond to the inner reality, and it drives Beckett's characters to keep on living to find some significant event that might distinguish them from the others and so establish their identity. Artaud too, was painfully aware of what he called 'un effondrement central de l'âme',⁹ and much of his writing was devoted to searching for a cure for the sickness of the self. In his article 'Position de la chair', he wrote, 'Je pense à la vie. Tous les systèmes que je pourrai édifier n'égaleront jamais mes cris d'homme occupé à refaire sa vie'.¹⁰ The twentieth-century Ulysses differs from his predecessors by his awareness that the quest for self-fulfilment will probably be in vain, yet he is unable to renounce his search, as Adamov says, 'La vie dissimule sous ses apparences visibles un sens éternellement caché à la pénétration de l'esprit qui erre à sa

⁶Tobi, A la recherche du paradis perdu, pp.151-152.

⁷Guy Dumur, 'Ionesco des pieds à la tête', Arts, 758 (20-26 January 1960), 1.

⁸'What a tremendous number of layers! | Will the heart of it never come to light?', Henrik Ibsen, Peer Gynt, translated by Christopher Fry (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.396.

⁹Artaud, Letter to Jacques Rivière, 29 January 1924, Oeuvres complètes, I, 35-36.

¹⁰Antonin Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, III (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 351.

découverte, pris entre la double impossibilité de trouver et de renoncer à cette recherche sans espoir'.¹¹ Ionesco's theatre thus makes its own particular contribution to this theme, which has taken on a renewed relevance in modern times, and he might equally well have been talking of his own theatre, or that of any of these other writers, when he wrote of Claude Mauriac's play, La Conversation, 'Si on veut réveiller, si on veut comprendre pour un soir, ce que c'est que vivre sans vivre, à la recherche de soi, pour comprendre aussi ce qu'il faudrait faire pour que nos existences soient riches ... il ne faut pas manquer d'assister à ce spectacle'.¹²

The search for individual identity is the dominant force of all Ionesco's plays, from La Cantatrice to Voyages chez les morts. Spurred by a feeling of inner emptiness, the heroes are rarely able to perceive that this stems from a lack of integral identity, and try to escape it by changing their material surroundings or circumstances. Longing for an 'ailleurs' where they will feel contented and happy, they are never able to rest because they take their emptiness with them, as Beckett's L'Innommable puts it:

On essaie la mer, on essaie la ville, on se cherche dans la montagne et dans la plaine, que voulez-vous, on se veut, on se veut dans son coin, ce n'est pas l'amour, ce n'est pas la curiosité, on est inquiet, c'est la fatigue, on veut s'arrêter, ne plus voyager, ne plus chercher, ne plus mentir, ne plus parler, fermer les yeux ...¹³

The desperate chattering of the puppet-like characters in La Cantatrice translates a subconscious longing for a sense of self which they hope to locate in fragmentary memories and dreams. The frantic, seemingly aimless search in which they engage in at the end is, Richard Schechner believes, a search for identity.¹⁴ Ionesco confirms this intention, telling Claude Bonnefoy, 'J'ai essayé de montrer des personnages qui seraient à la recherche d'une vie, à la recherche d'une réalité essentielle. Ils souffrent d'être coupés d'eux mêmes'.¹⁵ The characters finding nothing, the play explodes. Amédée flies off into the night sky, carried by the corpse blown up into a balloon, but

¹¹ Arthur Adamov, cited by Paul Surer, Cinquante ans de théâtre, p.362.

¹² 'Allez au théâtre', Combat, 6729 (8 February 1966), 9.

¹³ Beckett, L'Innommable, p.232.

¹⁴ Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', p.187.

¹⁵ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.180.

the answer which he is seeking is there within himself, as Pierre Cunier points out, 'Amédée s'envole parmi les astres ou en lui-même, c'est équivalent. Cet envol n'est après tout qu'une prise de conscience de soi-même et de l'univers'.¹⁶ Béranger, in Le Piéton, also searches in an 'antimonde' for the certitude he longs for. Yet he too, only finds death and emptiness. It is not another world, but in this one, Ionesco believes, that we discover the self. The deceiving brilliance of the other world is again demystified in La Soif, where Jean rejects his home and family to seek his accomplishment in another cosmos, where death would be outlawed. His cry, 'Mon existence est ailleurs',¹⁷ echoes Baudelaire's 'N'importe où! n'importe où! pourvu que ce soit hors de ce monde!',¹⁸ and Ionesco's own confession, 'Je voyage souvent ... J'ai beaucoup de mal à partir, beaucoup de mal à revenir, toujours le désir d'être ailleurs'.¹⁹ Jean externalized his inner emptiness, persuading himself that he is searching for a woman who would restore his happiness and wholeness, but the sun-drenched terrace which he at first believes to be paradise is a sham and foreshadows the hell of the monastery-barracks-prison of the final episode. Having forgotten or being ignorant of the true goals of his search, Jean's journey is not so much a quest for consciousness as an attempt to escape from the responsibilities of individual identity and is, therefore, doomed to failure from the start. Ionesco says, 'C'est une errance, un quête sans espoir. Jean ne sait pas ce qu'il cherche et son chemin n'a pas de but. Finalement il est perdu, il est condamné parce qu'il n'a rien fait de sa vie'.²⁰ In this, Ionesco suggests, he is like all of us, 'Nous sommes tous à la recherche de quelque chose d'une importance extraordinaire dont on a oublié ce que c'était'.²¹ The progression and attainment that should accompany a quest for fulfilment are absent. Jean finds no key to his individual identity, or to the enigmas of

¹⁶Pierre Cunier, Pages commentées d'auteurs contemporains, II (Paris: Larousse, 1965), 185.

¹⁷Théâtre, IV, 96.

¹⁸Charles Baudelaire, 'Anywhere out of the world', 'Petits Poèmes en prose', Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1955), p.1061.

¹⁹'Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Denise Bourdet, Revue de Paris, 68, 12 (December 1961), 142.

²⁰'La médiocrité est plus dangereuse chez un critique que chez un écrivain', Interview with Nicolas Zand, Le Monde (27-28 February 1966), p.14.

²¹Présent passé, p.252.

existence, only fragments 'des sentiers menant nulle part'.²²

'L'ouvrage', Ionesco tells us, 'conte l'histoire d'un homme à la recherche de son accomplissement. Deux événements restent immuables: le départ du héros et son échec'.²³ It is true that Jean sees the familiar images of the garden and the silver ladder and his wife beckoning to him to join them, but the image is glimpsed through bars, and, at the end of the play, Jean, like the Sisyphus of Camus, seems to assume his quest as an eternal punishment, accompanied by an insatiable hunger and thirst for fullness and accomplishment that can never be assuaged: 'Je m'en vais, je continuerai tant qu'il fera nuit, tant qu'il fera jour, tant qu'il y aura des crépuscules'.²⁴ Thus, like Baudelaire, Ionesco's heroes try to escape their ennui, but find that everywhere they see nothing but a reflection of their inner emptiness:

Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage!
Le monde, monotone et petit, aujourd'hui,
Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image:
Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui!²⁵

Ionesco, therefore, acknowledges the failure of physical journeys of self-discovery, both in his plays and in his own life, as he admitted in an interview with Jacques Depallens:

J'ai quitté Paris parce que je veux être un peu tranquille.
Et aussi parce que je veux être toujours ailleurs C'est une fuite apparente, une fuite matérielle si vous voulez.
Mais tous les problèmes, vous voyez bien que je les porte en moi, je ne nourris pas l'illusion de pouvoir leur échapper en franchissant une frontière.²⁶

If the search for individual identity is to be found in the present time and place, then the individual must search for it in his inner depths, his hidden fears, obsessions, dreams, and fantasies, as Beckett said of Proust, 'The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contradiction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy'.²⁷ Ionesco believes that the inner life of the individual is rich and complex, yet virtually unknown.

²²Théâtre, IV, 155.

²³Cited by François de Santerre, 'Le Rêve de Ionesco: innover la feuilleton théâtral', Figaro (21 January 1965), p.18.

²⁴Théâtre, IV, 118.

²⁵Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p.159.

²⁶'Eugène Ionesco à Zurich', Interview with Jacques Depallens, Gazette de Lausanne (5 October 1968), 12.

²⁷Beckett, Proust, p.65.

'L'espace est immense à l'intérieur de nous-même', he says, and adds, 'Qui ose s'y aventurer? Il nous faut des explorateurs, des découvreurs de mondes inconnus qui sont en nous, qui sont à découvrir en nous'.²⁸

However, to search inside the self is not easy, there is an automatic barrier put up by the conscious self between itself and the unconscious depths. Ionesco explains, 'Nous avons deux personnalités distinctes; dans la vie consciente, il y a barrage à tout ce qui vient des profondeurs'.²⁹ The light of knowledge is not only difficult to attain, but can be unbearably painful:

Aujourd'hui, il me semble que le trajet nécessaire est une descente, il n'est plus ascension comme autrefois: à ce moment, j'avais l'impression qu'il fallait me défaire d'un vêtement de plomb pour pouvoir monter, aujourd'hui il me semble que je dois rentrer dans des profondeurs suffocantes et les traverser. Mais, aujourd'hui comme alors, le point d'où on ne peut plus retourner est toujours entouré de cette lumière très forte, très dure, l'éclat froid des larmes des épées. C'est une lumière insupportable, non humaine.³⁰

Ionesco's theatre is, therefore, in the words of Jacques Mauclair, a 'théâtre d'aventure intérieure'³¹ and takes 'the form of a chaotic voyage into the interior'.³² This situates him firmly in the tradition of introspection, defined by Mansell Jones in his book, French Introspectives from Montaigne to André Gide, as 'the conscious examination of the mind by itself',³³ as distinct from the systematic approaches of philology or psychology. Although Ionesco's search for self follows no particular methodology, writing in the twentieth century, he cannot help but be influenced by the philosophical works of William James and Bergson, picturing the consciousness as a dynamic flow, emphasizing the obscure flux of subjectivity and the self as a plurality of fragmented selves, as well as by the findings of modern psychologists, especially those of Freud and Jung, the former with his theories of the personality as the product of laws buried deep in the subconscious and his division of the personality into the tripartite structure of

²⁸Notes, pp.313-314.

²⁹'Une entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly R. Murstein, p.612.

³⁰Présent passé, p.243.

³¹Jacques Mauclair, cited by Raymond Laubreaux, in 'Situation de Ionesco', Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, 9 (January-February 1959), 44.

³²Hermione S. Brunner, 'Myth and Identity', in Myth and Mythmaking, edited by Henry A. Murray (New York: George Braziller, 1960), p.286.

³³P. Mansell-Jones, French Introspectives from Montaigne to André Gide (London: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p.1.

id, ego and superego and the latter's theories of the 'collective unconscious' and fundamental archetypes of behaviour. However, despite the obvious debts to psychoanalysis in Jacques and Victimes, it is inappropriate to apply the 'grille psychanalytique' exclusively to any other plays, for as Paul Vernois has pointed out, Ionesco had little respect for psychoanalysis.³⁴ Moreover, although Ionesco toys with psychoanalytical ideas, he also explores many other avenues of sociological and metaphysical investigation, including those of the more occult Eastern philosophies, in his search for individual identity.

Psychoanalysis is, however, the directing force of the drama in Victimes, the first play based exclusively around an inner search for identity. Simone Benmussa compares this play to the beginning of a pilgrimage or 'passion' that Ionesco pursues in later plays. 'C'est à partir de cette pièce que Ionesco entreprend cette quête douloureuse, cette 'Passion' qu'il poursuivra dans Amédée, Le Roi se meurt, Le Piéton de l'air et La Soif et la faim', she writes.³⁵ Ionesco considers this play to be the best he has written, with no faults of construction, possibly because in the play the theme of the search for identity is inseparable from the dialogue and construction of the play. The play puts on stage an individual searching for his identity and simultaneously parodies itself and all plays which from ancient times, Choubert claims, have been 'policière', that is concerned with the search for the solution to some mystery: 'Toutes les pièces qui ont été écrites, depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours, n'ont jamais été que policières Toute pièce est une enquête menée à bonne fin. Il y a une énigme, qui nous est révélée à la dernière scène'.³⁶ Ionesco's own play fits the description exactly, except that the search is more specifically for the individual identity, and the enigma, therefore, remains unresolved, for Ionesco has no simple solution to the search for self. Victimes is obviously a parody of Freudian and Lupascan psychology. The Policeman represents the psychoanalyst trying to locate Choubert's identity by making him delve into the depths of his psyche, his neuroses and childhood memories. Ionesco explains the play in basically Freudian terms saying, 'Le policier c'est la Sur-Moi; Choubert Le Moi. Complexe

³⁴Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.120.

³⁵Simone Benmussa, Ionesco, p.100.

³⁶Théâtre, I, 185.

du père'.³⁷ The Freudian schemas evoked are easily identifiable: the guilt complex, especially in the father-child relationship; the ambiguous mother figure who is simultaneously wife, mother and lover; the importance of childhood traumas as the basis of personality; and the dual instincts of Eros and Thanatos. The technique of investigation itself is that of the waking dream used by Freud. In the investigation, Choubert's self is fragmented and spatially presented on stage with all his past obsessions and traumas and future virtualities laid out before us without causal determination. Like Artaud's *Ucello*, in *Paul les Oiseaux*, Choubert is able to make 'cette vue sur soi-même s'étende et s'essentialise devant lui, ainsi qu'un paysage mesurable et synthétisé'.³⁸ He discovers 'les traumatismes de l'enfance, l'angoisse de la vieillesse, et de la mort, l'incompréhensibilité réciproque des êtres, l'impossibilité de l'amour, ainsi que la fausse, la décevante liberté dans l'espace irresponsable ...'.³⁹ However, none of the relationships, that in Freudian theory are believed to give coherence and substance to the individual identity, relationships with father, mother, wife, and the cosmos, help him to locate any solid sense of self. In fact, they only lead to a greater disintegration of the identity, without the possibility of synthesis. If the Freudian ego-constituted psyche proves an illusion, so too does the Lupascan notion of the dynamic self⁴⁰ which Ionesco parodies through the character Nicolas d'Eu. The net result of either method of psychoanalysis is tyranny; the subject is tortured because he cannot find what the doctor is looking for. Psychoanalysis only reveals fragments of the self. This play, therefore, recounts the failure of psychoanalysis to locate the individual identity, or to free the individual from the burden of his complexes, as Ionesco explains in the magazine *Arts*:

Je raconte l'histoire d'une invasion manquée: un homme est prisonnier de son passé, de sa culpabilité, sa conscience est envahie par des forces contradictoires, déchirée, désarticulée. Ni sa descente dans son propre enfer, ni sa tentative ascensionnelle, ne parviendront à lui faire retrouver son insaisissable soi; il ne dépassera pas l'humaine condition, il demeurera prisonnier du bien et du mal, de ses remords, de ses scruples, de sa

³⁷ 'Une entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly K. Murstein, p.612.

³⁸ Artaud, 'Paul les Oiseaux ou la place de l'amour', *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 30.

³⁹ Geneviève Serreau, *Histoire du 'Nouveau Théâtre'* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p.48.

⁴⁰ Lupasco, *Logique et contradiction*, p.61.

timidité, d'une tyrannique et incompréhensible 'conscience morale', paralysé dans le chaos.⁴¹

However, psychoanalysis is not important so much for the ideas Ionesco takes from it as for the close relationship between the procedures of psychoanalysis and those of the artist. Freud himself acknowledged his affinity with the work of the artist, writing, 'We are probably drawing from the same source, working over the same material, each of us with a different method ...'.⁴² The psychoanalyst uses conscious observation of psychic processes to discover and express their laws, whilst the artist learns the laws of the unconscious from his own psyche and, even without consciously recognizing them, can express them 'incarnate in his creatures'.⁴³ The obsessions and complexes which Ionesco discovers deep in his psyche are objectified, materialized, and projected on to the stage, and it is in this sense that Robert Frickx's classification of Ionesco's theatre as 'un théâtre psychanalytique' should be read.⁴⁴ The other characters in Victimes are, therefore, other manifestations of Choubert's self. They are 'L'essai de projection sur la scène d'un drame intérieur: les personnages ne sont pas des "caractères" mais l'expression de tendances, de volontés incohérentes en conflit'.⁴⁵ This confirms Ionesco's famous statement of intent in his Notes: 'Je projetai sur scène mes doutes, mes angoisses profondes, les dialoguai; incarnai mes antagonismes'.⁴⁶ These internal conflicts between the irrational impulses of the psyche are immediately theatrical and replace the traditional movements of characters and plot as the dynamic elements of the play. Thus, the theatre becomes a means of investigation and externalization of the inner world:

Ainsi donc, à l'étude des caractères, telle que la concevait le théâtre classique, Ionesco substitue l'exploration de l'inconscient, de ses contradictions latentes et de ses instances virtuelles: aux structures superficielles du langage, fondées sur la logique normative et la fidélité du signe à la pensée, il oppose des structures profondes, révélatrices de situations conflictuelles ou de pulsions refoulées; il déréalise le drame psychologique en l'entant sur le rêve, et, seul maître de

⁴¹'Les Avant-Premières', Arts (27 February - 5 March 1953), p.4.

⁴²Sigmund Freud, Delusion and Dream. An Interpretation in the light of Psychoanalysis of 'Gradiva', a Novel by Wilhelm Jensen, Part II, translated by Helen M. Downey (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1917), p.240.

⁴³Ibid., p.241.

⁴⁴Frickx, Ionesco, p.225.

⁴⁵'Les Avant-premières', Arts (27 February - 5 March 1953), p.4.

⁴⁶Notes, p.132.

ses personnages qu'il oblige d'incarner ses hantises, il transforme en psychodrame la comédie traditionnelle.⁴⁷

A comparison with psychoanalysis can also elucidate other plays. The pervading sense of guilt and the ambiguous relationships with one's parents, that Ionesco himself and many of his characters experience, have been interpreted as traditional Freudian complexes, and J.-H. Donnard sees the image of fire in La Cantatrice and La Leçon as a Freudian symbol of the libido.⁴⁸ Amédée has been interpreted as a 'psychodrame', in particular the scene between Amédée II and Madeleine II where traditional notions of time are eliminated and Amédée's different levels of consciousness, dreams, terrors, and memories, are reconstructed spatially in a dream-like sequence. Claude Abastado states:

La technique de Ionesco est psychanalytique. La plongée à fond d'âme prend la forme d'un rêve: les images-souvenirs fondent les divers moments de la durée en un présent 'absolu' et reconstruisent le temps dans l'espace Amédée II et Madeleine II ne sont pas des fantômes mais des phantasmes; leur affrontement est une forme de psychodrame.⁴⁹

The theme of the descent into self is taken up again in Le Roi, where Marguerite guides the dying King through the images, memories and fears of his past, just as a psychoanalyst directs his patient: 'Ne tourne pas la tête pour regarder ce que tu ne pourras plus jamais voir, concentre-toi, penche-toi sur ton coeur, entre, entre, il le faut'.⁵⁰ She systematically severs his ties with the material world. He seems to come face to face with his inner reality which encompasses the whole world. He exclaims, 'Je me vois. Derrière toute chose, je suis. Plus que moi partout. Je suis la terre, je suis le ciel, je suis le vent, je suis le feu. Suis-je tous les miroirs ou bien suis-je le miroir de tout?'.⁵¹ He has to learn that this self is not the whole, but an integral part of the whole to which it must be unified. Marguerite tells him, 'Il s' imagine qu'il est tout. Il croit que son être est tout l'être. Il faut bien lui faire sortir cela de la tête. Tout sera gardé dans une mémoire sans souvenir. Le grain de sel qui

⁴⁷ Frickx, Ionesco, p.231.

⁴⁸ Donnard, Ionesco dramaturge, p.33.

⁴⁹ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, pp.110-111.

⁵⁰ Théâtre, IV, 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.67.

fond dans l'eau ne disparaître pas puisqu'il rend l'eau salée'.⁵²

Ionesco seems to be drawing on Jungian ideas of the collective unconscious and the re-marriage of earth and sky which he treats again in his Journal, written during a course of treatment by a Jungian psychiatrist, which revived his interest in Jungian theories. Here he confirms his belief that 'la vérité, la plénitude, ne peut résulter que du mariage du ciel et de la terre il faut ... que la terre monte au ciel'.⁵³

However, in Le Roi, Ionesco could equally well be drawing on his interest in the Gnostics who 'essayaient de retrouver leur identité première par-delà le monde, et à travers le monde'.⁵⁴

Mircea Eliade describes how Ionesco, as a young man, had been associated with an endeavour to connect Roumanian culture to its 'autochthonous' or oriental roots and had read not only Pseudo-Areopagite and some of the Greek fathers, but also Cusanus, Buber, the Upanishads, many Buddhist texts and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and the impression left by the latter and the Brhadaranyaka-Upanishad, he believes, is reflected in Le Roi.⁵⁵

Following Claude Abastado's idea that 'Ionesco reprend la démarche hassidique',⁵⁶ Warren Tucker has drawn a lengthy parallel between the play and the initiatory rites of the Upanishads, where the 'atman' (self or individual aspect of the limitless reality) is unified with the 'brahman' (self or universal aspect of limitless reality) in the 'cela'.⁵⁷

This is the universal intelligence, or ocean of light, the atemporal reality and supreme principle which Ionesco appears to be describing in Présent passé, when he talks of 'la sève, la puissance, l'énergie universelle de laquelle nous participons et à laquelle nous participons'.⁵⁸

Here the individual finds his true identity, an 'existence pure, ineffable [-] une plénitude unifiée au-delà des définitions et des limites'.⁵⁹ However, Le Roi is not written to illustrate any one method of psychoanalysis or mystical philosophy, for it is the play itself which is, for Ionesco, an attempt at exorcism,

⁵² Théâtre, IV, 71.

⁵³ Journal, pp.99-100.

⁵⁴ Un Homme en question, p.14.

⁵⁵ Eliade, 'Eugène Ionesco and "La Nostalgie du Paradis"', pp.22-23.

⁵⁶ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.185.

⁵⁷ Warren Tucker, '"Le Roi se Meurt" et les Upanishads', French Review, XLIX, 3 (February 1976), 397-400.

⁵⁸ Présent passé, p.81.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.225,227.

albeit in vain, and, through its techniques of materializing the conflicting amalgam of desires and tendencies in the psyche of the King in other characters, it is also an attempt at self-discovery. The two queens represent the demands of love and duty, the desire to escape reality and the necessity of accepting it. The Guard represents the official side of royal life, court etiquette and military show; Juliette the everyday and commonplace; and the Doctor-Surgeon-Executioner, who has been described as a 'sorte de remords vivant du Roi',⁶⁰ represents the more unpleasant aspects of royal life. Thus Ionesco materializes the search for self by personifying the different facets of the self in the form of a 'psychodrame'.

The end of Le Roi is too vague to conclude that Béranger has at last found his individual identity in these intimations of a transcendental consciousness, and the next time Ionesco introduces psychoanalysis, in Act III of La Soif, the inefficacy of these methods is again underlined. Frère Tarrabas represents the ambiguous figure of the psychoanalyst, and his methods are equated with torture as the interrogation turns into an inquisition. By his 'lapsus linguae' Jean lays bare his inner thoughts, but in vain, for he finds no inner core of self, and at the end he is even more tortured by his hunger and thirst for knowledge of the self and is compelled to continue his search. Thus any systematic inner search, such as that constituted by psychoanalysis, is bound to end in failure and cruel coercion. Psychoanalysis only sheds a limited fragmentary light on the inner life, thereby revealing its inability to fathom the great depths it glimpses. As Ionesco said to the author in an interview:

Je ne crois pas que la psychanalyse est une méthode efficace de la recherche de l'identité individuelle. D'ailleurs, la psychanalyse a fait faillite. Elle ne nous a appris qu'une seule chose qui est très importante; c'est que nous ne savons pas qui nous sommes, que nous ne savons pas ce que nous faisons, que nous faisons le contraire de ce que nous voulons faire, que tout est acte manqué et que la civilisation elle-même est peut-être un acte manqué. L'intérêt donc de la psychanalyse serait seulement celui-ci; elle nous fait connaître que nous sommes autre chose que ce que nous croyons être, mais ce que nous sommes vraiment, elle ne peut pas nous le dire.⁶¹

Ionesco believes that investigation of the self cannot be undertaken by

⁶⁰ Collette Audry, Introduction to Le Roi se meurt (Paris: Larousse, 1972), p.24.

⁶¹ Interview with the author.

another person on the individual's behalf; each person must continue his own search and find his own answers:

L'exploration décisive du coeur est le commencement de la voie dans la vie de l'homme, mais cette exploration n'est décisive que si elle mène vraiment à la voie, car il y a une sorte d'investigation du coeur qui est stérile, qui ne conduit qu'à la torture de soi-même, au désespoir et à un empêchement encore plus profond Chacun doit trouver sa voie lui-même.⁶²

Ionesco is, however, in agreement with psychoanalysis in the importance it accords to dreams as a means of direct access to the subconscious. Already, thirty years before Freud, writers, such as Strindberg, in his Préface to A Dreamplay,⁶³ and Ibsen, presenting on stage the desires, fears, and obsessions that make up the 'Gyntian self', had demonstrated how life is dominated by subconscious forces. The Surrealists used the technique of the waking dream to break the bounds of logic and conscious control, to portray pure thought, undisturbed by the rationalization of the conscious mind. Artaud took these surrealist principles and applied them to his theatre, talking of 'l'hallucination ... principal moyen dramatique',⁶⁴ and defining the aims of his theatre in these terms: 'Si nous faisons un théâtre ce n'est pas pour jouer des pièces, mais pour arriver à ce que tout ce qu'il y a d'obscur dans l'esprit, d'enfoui, d'irrévéle se manifeste en une sorte de projection matérielle, réelle'.⁶⁵ However, as Vernois has pointed out,⁶⁶ Artaud and the Surrealists were theorists rather than actual creators of a dream theatre, and the importance now accorded to them is a result of the success of the modern theatre, works like Adamov's Le Professeur Taranne and Arrabal's theories of Le Panique,⁶⁷ including an insistence on the need to reconcile the traditional opposition between dream and reality into a total apprehension of a superior reality.⁶⁸ As the overall motivating force of Ionesco's theatre is a search for individual identity, it is inevitable

⁶² Journal, pp.82-83.

⁶³ August Strindberg, Plays, translated and with an introduction by Edwin Björkman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p.24.

⁶⁴ Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry', Oeuvres complètes, II (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 34.

⁶⁵ Artaud, 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorte', Oeuvres complètes, II, 22.

⁶⁶ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.52.

⁶⁷ Fernando Arrabal, 'Le théâtre comme cérémonie panique', Théâtre, IV (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1967), pp.188-190.

⁶⁸ Arrabal, Entretiens, p.64.

that his theatre is based to a large extent on dreams, both in form and content, for the dream is a privileged means of penetrating the sub-conscious of a person's psyche. Ionesco explains to Claude Bonnefoy:

J'accorde beaucoup d'importance au rêve parce qu'il me donne une vision un peu plus aiguë, plus pénétrante de moi-même. Rêver c'est penser et c'est penser d'une façon beaucoup plus profonde, plus vraie, plus authentique parce que l'on est comme replié sur soi-même. Le rêve est une sorte de méditation, de recueillement. Il est une pensée en images. Quelquefois il est extrêmement révélateur, cruel. Il est d'une évidence lumineuse.⁶⁹

Dreams are vital in the search for identity, for Ionesco believes that reality is rooted in the irrational, disordered depths that give rise to dreams; a belief attested to, Ionesco tells us, by Buddha, Shakespeare, John of the Cross, and Job.⁷⁰ Ionesco states unequivocally, 'La fantaisie est révélatrice; elle est une méthode de connaissance: tout ce qui est imaginaire est vrai; rien n'est vrai s'il n'est pas imaginaire'.⁷¹ Imagination and dreams are not only vital, when in harmony with rational experience, to give a total picture of the individual instead of merely concentrating on the superficial, cognitive being, but at times they are in contradiction with outer reality, piercing through to a more fundamental reality and exposing everyday reality and logic as being irrelevant to the basic problems of existence. 'Le rêve est naturel, il n'est pas fou', Ionesco exclaims, '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 est en dehors de la vie'.⁷² Much of Ionesco's theatre is oneiric. The events of the plays are often direct transpositions of Ionesco's own dreams, and the structure of the plays conforms to the shape of a dream, in the apparent illogicality and unmotivated nature of events, the lack of chronological causality and the incoherence of the language which inadvertently exposes the hidden manias and obsessions of the principal characters. As in a dream, the action and other characters of the play are usually seen through the eyes of the person at the centre of the dream and are, in fact, only expressions of the 'multiform aspect of

⁶⁹Entre la vie et le rêve, p.12.

⁷⁰Cited by Leonard C. Pronko, Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p.63.

⁷¹'La démystification par l'humour noir', Avant-Scène, 191 (15 February 1959), 5.

⁷²Entre la vie et le rêve, p.121.

[their] inner reality'.⁷³ The individual's rational mind, reviewing the recurrent images and common elements of his dreams, can distinguish his most fundamental obsessions, which are normally obscured by the conscious mind and thus begin to attempt an interpretation of these concrete projections of his inner life. 'Les rêves sont plus objectifs que toute pensée qui n'est alimentée que par la passion; ils sont vraiment sincères, ils sont des réalités d'une évidence indiscutable. Ils sortent de nous et nous échappent, ils sont là, devant nous, concrets. Il ne reste plus qu'à les comprendre'.⁷⁴ In this, the dream has much in common with the theatre which, through the complexity of multidimensional poetic images, can express an intuition of being inexpressible through conceptual thought. Dreams are naturally dramatic in form, having a natural progression and being composed of a series of images, and therefore need little transposition for the theatre. 'Le rêve, c'est le drame même', Ionesco states, 'En rêve, on est toujours en situation'.⁷⁵ Thus the oneiric theatre, where the dream itself is put on stage, telescopes the two methods of penetration of the self and becomes, in the words of Gary O'Connor, 'a show piece of the unconscious'.⁷⁶

Although Jacques is the first truly oneiric play, the earlier plays already show a total devaluation of realism, logic, and deductive methods as a means of discovery of the self. Realism, Ionesco believes, undermines man by denying his inner depths and reduces him to a two-dimensional marionette, like the characters of La Cantatrice. Logic leads to ludicrous absurdities, as in the doorbell episode, for it can only comprehend the superficial illusion of reality and has no frame of reference for a world of irrationality and infinite coincidence. The Pupil, in La Leçon, makes the same terrifying discovery that is ultimately fatal for her, that it is no longer possible to shelter in a haven of rationality and logic, for in a world of total absurdity, it is no longer safe to assume that two and two make four.

Jacques contains all the main oneiric themes that Ionesco was later to develop in his plays and journals. The dream world is subtly

⁷³ 'Absurd Person Singular', Interview with Janet Watts, Guardian (12 November 1974), p.10.

⁷⁴ Antidotes, pp.280-281.

⁷⁵ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.12.

⁷⁶ Gary O'Connor, French Theatre Today (London: Pitman & Sons, 1975), p.41.

emphasized by the contrast with the realistic, material decor in which it takes place, showing the intimate links Ionesco perceives between everyday reality and the imagination and between the logical and irrational aspects of life, as Magdalena van der Spuy writes, 'Toute la pièce est structurée autour de ces deux espaces de la vie rêvée et de la vie réelle, où le quotidien et l'étrange, la réalité et l'onirisme se confondent et s'opposent à la fois'.⁷⁷ The decor thus corresponds closely to the author's recurrent dream images, as Paul Vernois, analyzing 'les objets et les lieux signifiants' in Ionesco's plays, points out: 'Ces objets ou portions privilégiées de l'espace sont étroitement liées aux lignes de polarisation des rêves de Ionesco'.⁷⁸ He distinguishes four groups of recurring object-images: evoking feelings of clausturation, the problems of communication, the idea of evasion, and the exigencies of passing time. These groups, he states, form the 'éléments essentiels d'une technique onirique'.⁷⁹ Apart from the obvious erotic dreams in Jacques, the dream archetypes of evasion and clausturation are also evident, represented symbolically by the attic and the cellar. Within the main dream there are other dreams; the Guinea Pig dream, which is accompanied by a feeling of suffocation, is linked with Ionesco's obsession with proliferation and death, like the dream of the spreading cancer which he describes in his Journal.⁸⁰ But it is also related to the other oneiric pole of the play, eroticism, for, as Michael Issacharoff points out, in Freudian terms the animals in the water can be interpreted as the maternal desire for procreation and carnal satisfaction.⁸¹ The second dream within a dream confirms this interpretation, for Roberte dreams of a drowned baby and, according to Freud, drowning symbolizes birth. Roberte is therefore the incarnation of a dream figure representing sexuality and procreation, as Ionesco confirms, 'J'avais pensé ici à certaines divinités mésopotamiennes agricoles représentant la Terre, donc la fécondité, la sexualité'.⁸² Thus, in this multi-level dream, this creature of dreams herself has dreams which symbolize the same obsessions she represents. Similarly,

⁷⁷ van der Spuy, 'Jacques ou la soumission', p.5.

⁷⁸ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.157.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.168.

⁸⁰ Journal, pp.75-76.

⁸¹ Michael Issacharoff, 'Métaphore et métamorphose dans Jacques ou la soumission', French Review, XLVIII, 1 (October 1974), 116.

⁸² Entre la vie et le rêve, p.102.

Jacques's dream that he becomes a stallion with blazing mane translates metaphorically the progressive mounting of carnal desire to orgasm and links with the thematic of fire and water that runs throughout Ionesco's work.

The deformation of language that accompanies these dream sequences, the accumulation of words by their assonance or associative value, is based on the illogical associations of dream images, but has a revelatory logic of its own, as Jean Pierrot explains:

Ces associations de représentations mentales avaient souvent pour origine des rapprochements de nature verbale: rapprochements de mots par homonymie ou synonymie, coq-à-l'âne, etc. Ainsi l'incohérence apparente des scénarios de rêves pourrait révéler le jeu d'une certaine logique, si l'on ramène les images mentales aux idées correspondantes, et les idées à leur tour aux mots: le rêve serait, au sens précis du terme, un rébus.⁸³

In Jacques, the apparently nonsensical phrases are not just the empty chatter of La Cantatrice or Les Chaises, but reveal deep obsessions surging up in a deformed manner through language. Moreover, Ionesco points out that these are not even unassociated dream images, but carefully selected words and images reflecting the basic themes of the play. 'Ici, j'ai l'impression que les mots et les images sont liés', Ionesco affirms, 'Ce sont des images oniriques, certes, mais triées et qui doivent toutes exprimer la matérialité, la non-spiritualité de la sexualité: l'enlissement de l'homme dans l'érotisme'.⁸⁴ When Jacques discovers he is 'chronométrable', he realizes that he has to submit himself to the laws of time and that it is therefore impossible to live one's life as a dream, which is by nature outside the norms of temporality, and the sequel, L'Avenir, shows the painful awakening of the dreamer from his dream to the material constraints and responsibilities of life.

The same fundamental dream archetypes form the basis of Amédée. This play is based on the short story, Oriflamme, which transcribes one of Ionesco's dreams of a corpse lying in a corridor of a house where he was living.⁸⁵ The dream was already theatrical in that it already had a series of images, situations, and characters and had its own progression by metamorphosis and proliferation, so its transposition for the theatre was natural. The chief symbol, the corpse, is probably

⁸³ Jean Pierrot, Le Rêve de Milton aux Surréalistes (Paris: Bordas, 1972), p.11.

⁸⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.144-145.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.72.

a materialization of the guilt complex which recurs frequently in dreams and which, together with the encroachment of the other oneirical elements such as the mushrooms, contributes to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the hermetically sealed apartment. It was to emphasize the oneiric, nightmarish quality of the original vision, that Ionesco intransigently refused to allow his director, Jean-Marie Serreau, to cut down the proportions of the corpse. He wanted it to seem 'vraiment fantastique et non pas granguignolesque',⁸⁶ for, as Claude Abastado explains, 'Ionesco ne cherche pas à donner des frissons d'épouvante aux spectateurs; il veut figurer un monde qui sorte des normes, un monde onirique, dont les objets incarnent des "présences intérieures"'.⁸⁷ Ionesco again skilfully uses the technique of the dream within the dream in the flash-back sequence and shows how, in a dream state, the individual is double and extremely lucid so that, if he is able to recall this deeper self when returned to the waking state and to reintegrate it into himself, the dream will be therapeutic and heal the neurosis stemming from the separation from individual identity typified in the character of Amédée. Jean Pierrot, in his analysis of dreams, describes this process: 'La seule prise de conscience par le malade, en permettant de réintégrer dans la conscience les contenus conscients, constitue déjà une étape essentielle de la guérison'.⁸⁸ He concludes the dream 'a donc une fonction de réadaptation permanente et constante du psychisme humain'.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, Amédée is unable to recall the import of the dream sequence and to resolve his inner schisms, so the final situation is one of a nightmarish stalemate. However, the material necessities of the stage compelled Ionesco to adapt this logical conclusion into a resolution so that the play could end:

Dans la logique et la vérité des personnages, tout aurait dû continuer indéfiniment jusqu'à l'étouffement complet. Le cadavre 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.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.92.

⁸⁷ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.113.

⁸⁸ Pierrot, Le Rêve, p.16.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.18.

⁹⁰ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.109.

To provide a solution, Ionesco used the archetypal dream of flying, closely linked with the theme of evasion, but the ending is purely fantastical, and the audience is left with the atmosphere of the suffocating inescapability of the nightmare rather than a feeling of liberation suggested by the flight.

Apart from the regression to childhood traumas in Victimes that has already been discussed because of its close association with the psychoanalytical techniques of the waking dream, there are numerous other dream elements in this play. The enigmatic figure of La Dame, like Tante Adelaïde in La Soif, has her origin in Ionesco's dream 'd'une personne morte, que je revoyais et qui était habillée d'une façon bizarre',⁹¹ and seems to represent the indifference of the anonymous crowd helping in the torture out of curiosity. The theme of 'gavage' which he takes up again in La Soif has its origin in one of Ionesco's dreams where, he tells us, 'Pour vaincre mon angoisse, je mange de gros morceaux de pain'.⁹² The inordinate desire for food can be interpreted as a desire for life or love, as in the case of Josette who eats the breakfast of the whole family in Ionesco's 'Premier conte pour enfants de moins de trois ans', where, Rosette Lamont tells us, 'food is substituted for love'.⁹³ It can also be interpreted in Jungian terms as the neurosis stemming from separation with the earth-mother figure. Ionesco recounts that:

Z m'explique (ce que je sais) qu'il y a là les éléments d'une obsession orale. Lorsque l'enfant est angoissé, on lui donne le sein. Son angoisse se calme. Boire, manger, obsessions orales. On sait très bien que les gros mangeurs et les buveurs sont souvent des névrosés ou des sous-névrosés. Vouloir boire et manger et ne pas pouvoir, c'est encore être séparé de la mère qui nourrit.⁹⁴

Whatever its origin, this raw material is transposed into theatrical form, becoming a multi-faceted symbol that indicts the onslaught of social pressures on the individual, the cruelty of all psychoanalytical methods, and equally reflects Ionesco's obsession with the oppressiveness of the world and proliferation. It is not true to state therefore, as Leonard Pronko does, that 'the distance from dream to drama is perhaps

⁹¹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.73.

⁹² Journal, p.49.

⁹³ Rosette C. Lamont, 'Father of the Man', in The Two Faces of Ionesco, p.34.

⁹⁴ Journal, p.85.

not sufficient',⁹⁵ for the dream elements, transformed by the creative mind, takes on a richness of significance and symbolism far removed from the crude original.

In La Soif, the dream elements are considerably more developed and complex, taking the overall form of three isolated dream episodes, each of which consists of juxtaposed fragments of Ionesco's own dreams. The first episode takes place in a damp basement which is slowly sinking in the mud. It is presented as one of Jean's recurrent nightmares, materialized in the diurnal world and is also a materialization on stage of one of Ionesco's most frequent dreams. In psychoanalytical terms the dark apartment represents both the fear of death, by its association with the tomb, and the simultaneous fear and attraction of regression to the infantile stage, by its links with the womb and the mother images. For Ionesco, this apartment is a very precise memory of a dark basement in Bucharest rented by his mother just before her death, so that it has become for him both a memory of her and 'l'image même du tombeau'.⁹⁶ On a wider scale, it is part of a thematic network in all Ionesco's work, where water, earth, and mud are associated with sinking and death, as in La Vase, Le Roi, the ornamental pond of Tueur, or the stagnant water in Les Chaises. This reflects a recurrent dream that is always associated with a sense of malaise and claustrophobia, as in Gaston Bachelard's analysis of the dream: 'Le rêveur de cave sait que les murs de la cave sont des murs enterrés, des murs à une seule paroi, des murs qui ont toute la terre derrière eux. Et le drame s'en accroît, et la peur s'exagère'.⁹⁷ This is a reversal of the traditional interpretation of the image, where the security of the house and womb is a comforting experience, and the earth is associated with fruitfulness and rebirth, as Ionesco explains:

Pour moi, la terre n'est pas nourricière, elle est la boue, elle est la décomposition, elle est la mort qui m'épouvante. Les caves, les intérieurs des maisons sont pour les autres des nids, des abris; pour moi, ce sont des tombeaux. Quand je rêve de l'intérieur d'une maison, elle s'enfonce dans la terre humide. La terre n'est pas la sécurité pour moi. Elle est la décomposition. Ce à quoi je m'oppose.

L'eau pour moi n'est pas l'abondance, ni le calme, ni la

⁹⁵Leonard C. Pronko, Eugène Ionesco, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers No.7 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p.20.

⁹⁶Ionesco, cited by Benmussa, in Ionesco, p.10.

⁹⁷Gaston Bachelard, La Poétique de l'espace (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), p.37.

pureté. Elle m'apparaît généralement comme sale. Elle est image d'angoisse. L'eau engloutit ou au moins salit (salir, c'est menacer de mort). Elle est encore décomposition.⁹⁸

Within this main dream are the dreams of a woman consumed by flames and of Tante Adelaide. The woman in the flames is another incarnation of the feeling of guilt towards one's mother and towards woman in general that recurs in Amédée, Les Chaises, Victimes, Tueur, Rhinocéros, Le Solitaire, La Vase, and Le Roi and reflects the guilt which Ionesco assumed for his father's cruelty to his mother.⁹⁹ On a wider scale it betrays an all-pervading sense of guilt in Ionesco's theatre, the 'culpabilité "sans raison"'¹⁰⁰ that so impressed him in Kafka's work. It is also the transposition, Ionesco tells us, of one of his own dreams where he saw a woman burning, but was unable to save her because of the intensity of the flames. The next day, on waking, he learned that the woman had actually died during the night, and he felt an intense sense of guilt for not having helped her.¹⁰¹ Tante Adelaide, according to Simone Benmussa, is based upon Ionesco's mother's sister who, after a stroke, suffered from aphasia and begged on the streets dressed like a pauper. Finally, she set fire to her own house and blamed it on a neighbour.¹⁰² 'Donc, vous voyez', Ionesco claims, 'Tante Adelaide est un souvenir très précis'.¹⁰³ Ionesco emphasizes the different levels of the dream by presenting Tante Adelaide as an immaterial presence, as Jean remarks, the blood that streams from her veins does not resemble real blood. This contrasts with the initial nightmare episode which is characterized by the peculiar sharpness and vividness of detail inherent to the dream state. The vision of the garden and ladder that ends the first episode is a direct transposition of a vision which Ionesco's wife claims to have had at the age of six. Her description of it made such a deep impression on Ionesco that he himself saw it in a dream, which he here materializes on the stage.¹⁰⁴ These memories and dreams are, however, only a departure point. Once transformed by Ionesco's imagination and incorporated into the drama, they gain a

⁹⁸ Journal, pp.189-190.

⁹⁹ Présent passé, pp.28-29.

¹⁰⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.40.

¹⁰¹ Ionesco, cited by Benmussa, in Ionèsco, p.16.

¹⁰² Benmussa, Ionèsco, p.12, 15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁰⁴ Un Homme en question, pp.157-157.

universal significance and become part of Ionesco's unique poetic universe, as Simone Benmussa explains:

Les souvenirs vont se fondre, au creuset de l'imagination. Ils deviennent toujours plus intensément le monde de Ionesco. Les personnages acquièrent une surpuissance. En leur métamorphose, ils sont tous les désirs, tous les regrets, s'accroissant encore hors de toutes dimensions ... ces souvenirs ont leur propre dynamique et s'inscrivent dans une constellation d'univers ionesciens. C'est ainsi que, pour nous, ils apparaissent poésie théâtrale vivante.¹⁰⁵

The second episode is the transposition of another dream that again takes place out of time in an oneiric, ambiguous present. The 'terrace' suspended in the air is both a dream vision and part of the bipolar system of Ionesco's work: the elevation, brilliant light and open space contrasting with the dark, oppressive claustrophobic atmosphere of the first and last episodes. The characters Jean encounters are dream figures, perceived only through the sensibility of the dreamer, as Claude Abastado points out:

Les personnages de la Soif et la faim sont de ceux qui surgissent dans les rêves: ils ne sont que des projections de la sensibilité du rêveur. Un trait caractérise chacun; ils figurent un désir ou un obstacle déterminé; ils créent autour de Jean une situation de conflit et n'existent que pour lui permettre de réaliser sa destinée onirique.¹⁰⁶

In this way Marie-Madeleine represents Jean's temptation towards apathy and conformity; the museum keepers represent inertia and the obstacles to the search; Tripp and Brechtoll's self-denial rehearses Jean's own renunciation of his faith; and the woman Jean expects is an emptiness within himself who 'n'existe que pour lui, en lui; c'est une absence présente'.¹⁰⁷

The episode entitled 'Le Pied du mur', which has never been performed as part of the play, is the most purely oneirical in quality and the least shaped by the conscious mind of the artist. The central image of the wall is a recurrent symbol in Ionesco's dreams and an archetypal dream recognized by psychoanalysts, as Ionesco acknowledges: 'J'ai eu d'autres rêves archétypiques, plus négatifs. Par exemple le rêve du mur: se trouver devant un mur qu'on ne peut franchir'.¹⁰⁸ The wall symbolizes the barrier of consciousness and of knowledge that separates

¹⁰⁵ Benmussa, Ionesco, p.17.

¹⁰⁶ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.183.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.181.

¹⁰⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.34.

the individual from his identity: 'Il symbolise entre autres la séparation d'avec moi-même. Il est aussi ce qui me sépare de la vérité ou d'une connaissance plus exacte, plus étendue. Il faut que je sache ce qu'il y a derrière'.¹⁰⁹ The wall Jean perceives is in the image of Ionesco's dream, even to the 'petite porte close',¹¹⁰ in the wall, and Jean is tortured by the same desire to know what it conceals. Other dream sequences, such as the girl who changes into a white cat or the woman whose husband had shrunk until he fitted into the palm of her hand, are incorporated into the general dream without deeper interpretation or relation to the overall progression of the episode, thus reproducing the unrelated, illogical juxtaposition of images in dreams. The image of mud is used again, associated with sinking and rotting.¹¹¹ The figure of Schaëffer, who shifts imperceptibly from one character to another, is another direct transposition from Ionesco's dreams and, with his love of tyranny and authority and his ability to change political colour, is also a memory of Ionesco's obsessional hatred for his father.

From this confused dream Jean passes into a nightmare sequence. Frère Tarrabas incarnates the cruel harshness of authority and the nature of the place; convent, prison, hospital, college, Hell or purgatory and the characters, monks, torturers, and victims, are dream-like in their ambiguity. The atmosphere of a dream is also created by the language, ranging from poetry to incoherence, making use of free associations, enumerations, and metonymic and phonetic associations. Yet there is evidence of the controlling mind of the author in the irony of certain replies and the satirizing of the vocabulary of ideologies. At the end, the situation reaches an inescapable, unbearable climax that usually causes the dreamer to wake, but, instead of producing a facile way out as in *Amédée*, Ionesco leaves the dream at this point of unendurable tension. Jean, who is described by Ionesco as an 'inveterate dreamer',¹¹² has come face to face with his dreams and realizes that they are but dreams, yet he is caught up in the nightmare which he has created, like a dreamer who is unable to wake and return to reality. Simone Benmussa is

¹⁰⁹ *Journal*, p.109.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Théâtre*, IV, 123.

¹¹² Rosette C. Lamont, 'An Interview with Eugène Ionesco', *The Massachusetts Review*, X, 1 (Winter 1969), 144.

thus right to judge the dream element of La Soif 'la plus riche de son oeuvre' which 'contient toutes les théories de son théâtre, en les développant'.¹¹³

In Le Piéton, Ionesco creates a dramatic world where dream and reality are inseparable. The most fantastic events no longer seem exceptional, and dreams, in equilibrium with the order imposed by the conscious mind, are shown as being the key to the true nature of reality. The play is not merely, as Henri Gouhier dismisses it 'a kind of fairy spectacle without fairies',¹¹⁴ but an attempt to break beyond two-dimensional reality by the systematic use of dreams and the irrational. In a state of meditation, sheltered from diurnal activity and from the blocks erected by the conscious mind, the individual has the time and freedom to discover certain fundamental truths, with an immediacy unknown in the waking state:

Dans le rêve. je 'vois' tout d'un coup: dans la conscience du rêve, je prends conscience de vérités que j'avais oubliées, d'angoisses dont je n'avais pas senti la vérité fondamentale. On se réveille pour réfléchir sur ce qui s'est passé. Dans la vie éveillée il y a une sorte d'oubli ou de sommeil qui est une sorte d'inconscient du conscient: nous nous cachons certaines choses dans la vie éveillée et nous n'avons pas le loisir de réfléchir et de voir certaines choses: on n'a pas le temps de recueillement, ou d'une certaine méditation.¹¹⁵

The archetypal dream of flying is at the basis of the play, a dream usually interpreted by psychiatrists as an erotic dream, but which Ionesco prefers to interpret in terms of the positive pole of being as 'un rêve de liberté et de gloire'.¹¹⁶ For Ionesco, the imagination prefigures reality and explains it so that Bérenger's flight is presented more realistic than reality itself. Ionesco explains, 'Notre vérité est dans nos rêves, dans l'imagination ... La fiction a précédé la science. Tout ce que nous rêvons, c'est-à-dire tout ce que nous désirons, est vrai (le mythe d'Icare a précédé l'aviation, et si Ader et Blériot ont volé, c'est parce que les hommes avaient rêvé l'envol'.¹¹⁷

The concept of the 'antimonde' is real for Ionesco too. In Un Homme en question, he describes the 'événements inexplicables qui me sont

¹¹³ Benmussa, Eugène Ionesco, p.8.

¹¹⁴ Henri Gouhier, cited by Pronko, in Eugène Ionesco, p.36.

¹¹⁵ Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.115.

¹¹⁶ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.34.

¹¹⁷ Notes, p.48.

arrivés,¹¹⁸ such as finding money when he desperately needed it and seeing a statue of Buddha bowing to him, as well as a number of premonitory dreams that had indeed prefigured reality. He believes these events have a scientific, rather than supernatural, explanation, although it may be beyond the scope of present scientific knowledge. The philosopher, Stéphane Lupasco, once explained to Ionesco the fact that a spoon which he dropped disappeared before it hit the floor as a scientifically justifiable phenomenon, saying, 'La cuillère a disparu dans le monde négatif C'est une structure qui s'est désintégré'.¹¹⁹ Similarly, in Le Piéton, the disappearing column and tree and the 'Passant de l'Anti-monde' are given a pseudo-rational explanation by Bérenger who says, 'C'est pour rétablir l'équilibre je veux dire les équilibres mondains et ultra-mondains. Lorsque quelque chose sort, une autre chose doit entrer. Car tous ces objets font partie des accessoires des cosmos, ils sont comptés, il y a plusieurs infinis, bien sûr, mais il y a des finitudes à l'intérieur des infinitudes ... les limites de l'infini'.¹²⁰ Ionesco is not satirizing the belief in the irrational forces governing his life, for he believes they are nearer to reality than superficial logic and realism. 'Quand on entre dans le monde de l'incroyable', he says, 'ce monde vous paraît normal et croyable. Dans cette perspective, c'est le monde du réel quotidien où rien ne se passe qui vous paraît incroyable'.¹²¹

Within the overall dream situation there are fragments of dreams and nightmares, sometimes recounted, sometimes materialized on stage. The bombing episode is rooted in dreams and perhaps also reflects Ionesco's own miraculous escape from being hit by a shell at Marseilles in 1944, an incident that he recounts in Un Homme en question.¹²² The manner in which everyone accepts the event virtually without question suggests the logic and reality which the most incomprehensible dreams have for the dreamer. Similarly, in Josephine's nightmares, the characters are real and their manner natural rather than fantastic. The 'Employé des Pompes Funèbres' reflects Ionesco's obsession with death and the recurrent dream of returning home to find his long-dead relations

¹¹⁸Un Homme en question, pp.142-157.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p.102.

¹²⁰Théâtre, III, 152.

¹²¹Un Homme en question, p.85.

¹²²Ibid., p.154.

still alive that he develops in Voyages chez les morts, as Vernois explains, 'L'intervention de l'employé des Pompes funèbres tend à reproduire un rêve fréquent: celui où l'on imagine vivante une personne mort; le songe refait une réalité selon le coeur du rêveur: il nie la mort. Ionesco a masqué l'aspect pathétique de ce rêve sous une affabulation comique mais la matière et le sens de la séquence onirique demeurent.¹²³

John Bull, with his cruelty and stature, is like a character from a fairytale. So too is the Judge, who in his white robes, seems to be a prefiguration of the final judgement day. Martin Esslin, in his analysis of the close links between Ionesco's oeuvre and the fairytale tradition, suggests that Ionesco deliberately introduces this genre because of its fluidity.¹²⁴ The poetic and grotesque can coexist, and cosmic problems can be intertwined with light-hearted jesting. It is true that the terrifying intensity of these dreams within a dream are relieved by the more pleasant dream atmosphere of other passages, for, as Béranger says, 'Si nous avions tout le temps la conscience pénétrante que nous avons dans nos rêves, nous ne pourrions plus vivre'.¹²⁵ However, it is not true, as he suggests, that the overall atmosphere of these plays is 'reassuring', nor that Ionesco's endings 'are on the whole happy',¹²⁶ as can be seen from the conversations of the Englishwomen that repeat the overall structure of the play in a nutshell. The first woman describes a dream of claustrophobia and depression, reflecting the negative pole of being, followed by a dream of a beautiful road, accompanied with a deep sense of joy. However, the dungeon at the end of the road contains the threat and inevitable failure that accompanies the efforts of Ionesco's characters to escape. The other old woman too admits she has experienced this dream: 'Moi aussi, j'ai rêvé, parfois, que je me promenais dans des villes de rêve. Toute seule, absolument toute seule'.¹²⁷ The microcosm of these dreams parallels the macrocosm of the play and gives it structural unity. The old women discover what Béranger does from his journey to 'L'antimonde' 'que le

¹²³ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.181.

¹²⁴ Martin Esslin, 'Ionesco and the Fairytale Tradition', Interplay I, edited by Moste Lazar (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), pp.21-31.

¹²⁵ Théâtre, III, 137.

¹²⁶ Esslin, 'The Fairytale Tradition', p.23,22.

¹²⁷ Théâtre, III, 142.

rêve idyllique s'effondre sous l'effet du sentiment de solitude ou de néant qu'il ne parvient pas à conjurer et qu'inversement la déception la plus complète comme la boîte de Pandore laisse intact l'espoir'.¹²⁸

Despite the unifying theme of the dual postulations that the play illustrates so vividly, the multiplicity of characters, symbols, and scenes has made some critics think the play lacks coherence. Robert Frickx considers that Le Piéton 'est une des pièces les plus sombres d'Ionesco, une des plus confuses également en raison de la multiplicité des thèmes et des symboles'.¹²⁹ However, the overall unity of the play is not based on the traditional elements of chronology or character. It is a unity of atmosphere centred around the different registers of dream to which it approximates. Le Piéton is not fundamentally, as Ionesco once said, a political play, 'une satire, une description réaliste de la vie de cauchemar dans les régimes totalitaires, une prophétie de malheur',¹³⁰ but rather an attempt to explore the close links between dreams and life, the incomprehensible and the real, the irrational and the logical and, by going beyond reality to the obsessive fundamental truths, to liberate these forces. As Paul Vernois says, 'Les séquences oniriques libèrent à la scène toutes les forces anxiogènes assiégeant une conscience désemparée et perpétuellement tourmentée par l'obscurité des grands problèmes métaphysiques'.¹³¹

In Tueur, Ionesco again exploits the multiple levels of the dream. The play is based on one of Ionesco's own dreams which he transcribed into a short story 'La Photo du Colonel' on which the play is based. The play takes the shape of a dream through its use of dream language and characterization and the materialization of dream archetypes on stage, and it incorporates the dreams which the hero Béranger recounts within the author's dream. In an article for Combat, Ionesco describes the dream at the origin of the play: 'En effet, j'ai eu un rêve curieux. Figurez-vous que je cherchais un assassin. Tout à coup dans le pénombre, je l'aperçois. Je vais vers lui, c'est alors que j'aperçois son couteau. Ce couteau a coupé le fil de mon rêve. Mais le matin même j'écrivais une nouvelle intitulée "La Photo du Colonel"'.¹³²

¹²⁸ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.181.

¹²⁹ Frickx, Ionesco, p.120.

¹³⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.63.

¹³¹ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.182.

¹³² 'J'ai rencontré mon tueur sans gages dans un cauchemar', Combat (26 February 1959), p.2.

The décor of the radiant city, in which Béranger finds himself, is the exteriorization of a dream that he and his creator had nursed for years, and he feels a blissful harmony as his inner imagination becomes one with his material surroundings. He tells the Architect, 'Cette lumière ... vous l'avez de toute évidence recréée, matérialisée Et chez vous ce n'est pas le produit irréel d'une imagination exaltée. Ce sont de vrais^e maisons, des pierres, de la brique, du ciment, c'est concret palpable, solide je suis heureux d'avoir touché du doigt la réalité de mon souvenir'.¹³³ However, Béranger's comment that there is nothing more real than a mirage is ironically disproved by the material facts of the play, for, when he tries to touch the bricks, he is seen 'touchant dans le vide',¹³⁴ and the Architect is strangely reluctant to let him go to look at the ornamental pool that materializes at the back of the stage, and, when he goes to look at the flowering hawthorn instead, the pool disappears. Nightmare and reality suddenly become blurred when Béranger looks around him and finds everywhere deserted. 'Dans un rêve cela se comprend, mais pas dans la réalité', he says.¹³⁵ The atmosphere is dream-like in the fluidity of the narrative, the metamorphosis of characters, and the unlikely but universally unquestioned method by which the murderer lures his victims to the pool.

The second episode is equally dream-like. Edouard does not know how he came to have the Killer's briefcase, and in the framework of the dream the logic of the question seems totally irrelevant anyway. The endless stream of bizarre objects that come out of this briefcase, especially the box within a box stretching to infinity, is a nightmare apparition. The subtle balance between dream and reality is emphasized in the third scene which, although deliberately unrealistic, is terrifyingly real, with Mère Pipe and the policeman materializing Ionesco's childhood fear of his father. The last scene is, however, the most purely nightmarish. Once again Ionesco leaves the audience at the paroxysm of the dream as time and space are frozen in an absolute present, 'un temps, un crépuscule figé'.¹³⁶ The frustration at the inability to communicate and the panic that comes when walking or running afford no real progression are both symptomatic of nightmares, just as Béranger's

¹³³ Théâtre, II, pp.80-81.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.80.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.85.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p.159.

gun is as powerless to stop the Killer as any material tool is to affect a nightmare vision. The Killer has no objective presence except in the mind of the dreamer so can only be destroyed by breaking the thread of the dream.

In L'Homme aux valises, Ionesco, for the first time, uses both a fluid dream situation and illogical, oneiric language which changes in register as the characters and scenes metamorphose. He explains:

Dans les premières pièces, j'utilisais des images oniriques dans des situations oniriques mais avec un langage logique et normal A partir du Roi se meurt j'ai adopté la tradition classique, sauf dans La Soif et la faim, où je suis revenue au langage de rêve mais avec une situation traitée comme si elle était réaliste. Dans L'Homme aux valises j'ai essayé d'accommoder des situations oniriques à un langage un peu déformé, un peu irréel. Un langage qui se transforme à mesure que les personnages se métamorphosent.¹³⁷

The action, losing one's way in a labyrinth pervaded by a sense of menace, is one of the most common dream archetypes. Jean Pierrot in his survey of dreams describes:

Une autre forme typique de structure onirique, celle du labyrinthe; labyrinthe qui est expérience angoissée de la perte de direction, de la progression dans une prison dont les murailles reculent à mesure que l'on avance. Lorsque ce labyrinthe est souterrain, viennent s'ajouter les angoisses de la soif et de la faim, la peur de l'écrasement par des tonnes de matière, l'angoisse de la minéralisation.¹³⁸

He seems to be describing exactly one of Ionesco's most recurrent nightmares, one that he puts on stage in La Soif, Tueur, and Voyages chez les morts, for example, and that he recounts several times in his personal journals. In Un Homme en question, he dreams he has to change airports in an unknown town and cross the town on foot. He becomes embroiled in some strange and terrifying factories and machinery. Sometimes he finds a corridor with a door at the end promising escape, but, when he opens the door, there is an impenetrable wall behind it. There is no escape from his inextricable situation, even in waking, for reality is as terrifying as the dream. "'On" me dit', he recounts, 'ce n'est pas la peine de vous réveiller, c'est inutile, parce que ce sera la même chose. Il faut que vous trouviez la sortie maintenant, autrement, de toute façon, il vous faudra recommencer'.¹³⁹ In Antidotes, Ionesco recounts a dream

¹³⁷ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, Figaro (29-30 November 1975), p.24.

¹³⁸ Pierrot, Le Rêve, p.22.

¹³⁹ Un Homme en question, pp.94-95.

of a voyage on a ship which he says is part of a cycle of dreams, but he is unable to embark because he has lost one of his suitcases.¹⁴⁰

In Un Homme en question, he describes another version of the nightmare where he misses his train because his suitcases are too heavy to pick up, and he will not leave them behind.¹⁴¹ Both of these dreams are almost exact parallels of the situation of this play, where the chief character has lost one of his suitcases. The quest motif of the play is once again a search for individual identity. Ionesco explains, 'Cette pièce raconte deux voyages: celui d'un touriste qui, brusquement, devient coupable et un autre, une randonnée à l'intérieur de soi-même'.¹⁴² As such, the play is intensely personal. Ionesco admits, 'Dans L'Homme aux valises, le personnage, au fond, c'est moi-même ... La recherche qui anime la pièce est celle de l'identité de ma mère et de mes grands-parents, la recherche de ma propre identité'.¹⁴³ However, the symbol is also a universal one. Rosette Lamont calls it 'an eloquent symbol for the state of estrangement and spiritual exile which characterizes contemporary man. To wander aimlessly, to be exiled and self-exiled, to lose one's roots, one's papers, one's name and identity, such is our lot'.¹⁴⁴ The third suitcase would seem to represent the third dimension of the self, the metaphysical dimension, that Ionesco believes modern man has lost, but, as a multi-faceted image, these suitcases also represent the weight of the personality, habit, the past and guilt which ties the individual to the material world. 'C'est ce qui nous encombre, notre angoisse, notre passé. Le fardeau de la vie, notre culpabilité. Tout ce qui nous empêche de nous détacher, de circuler librement, de nous évader'.¹⁴⁵ The dual nature of the dream symbol of the journey dictates the ambiguous atmosphere of the play, as Ionesco says, 'Les voyages ... sont habituellement agréables, agréables, mais toutefois inquiétants, vaguement inquiétants, comme si l'agréable était une apparence, quelque chose comme pour masquer un piège'.¹⁴⁶

The labyrinthine nature of the nightmare dictates the dramatic form.

¹⁴⁰ Antidotes, p.296.

¹⁴¹ Un Homme en question, pp.13-14.

¹⁴² Antidotes, p.265.

¹⁴³ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.169.

¹⁴⁴ Rosette C. Lamont, 'L'Homme aux valises: Ionesco's Absolute Stranger', The Two Faces of Ionesco, p.249.

¹⁴⁵ 'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, p.28.

¹⁴⁶ Antidotes, p.296.

Nico Satijn, in his study of 'Le labyrinthe de la cité radieuse',¹⁴⁷ focuses on the motif of the labyrinth as one of the most pervasive of Ionesco's later plays, and Paul Vernois distinguishes an obsession with the form of the spiral, linked with the recurrent dream of the labyrinth, throughout Ionesco's work:

L'errance à travers les labyrinthes, la descente d'escaliers piranésiens ou kafkaïens, hantent l'imagination de Ionesco. Les mouvements circulaires que nous avons signalés sont en général rendus impressionnants par leur complication en spirale. Ils évoquent par exemple un enfoncement tragique, une démarche psychanalytique tortueuse. Appelé à donner un dessin de sa main au Pavillon français de l'Exposition de Montréal en 1967, Ionesco proposa l'image d'un cylindre sur lequel on remarque des lignes verticales et des cercles enchevêtrés, preuve d'une obsession qui s'exprime aussi par des graphismes spontanés.¹⁴⁸

As the play is composed around a series of situations Ionesco had lived through in his dreams, it is disjointed and illogical, lacking chronological sequence or clear outlines. One episode fuses into another in the 'vertiginous spiral of the time/space continuum',¹⁴⁹ and characters change personality before our eyes so that, Ionesco tells us, the thirty characters are played by only seven actors.¹⁵⁰ The language follows the associative logic of dreams, where one image calls up another, totally unconnected to the conscious mind, but significant to the dreamer.

The unnamed hero, both Everyman and No Man, is condemned to an eternal search for his self and his ancestral past. In the first scenes, he is assailed by a crescendo of voices of invisible people who are described as waving 'drapeaux de feu et ... drapeaux de sang',¹⁵¹ the eternal symbols of wars and revolutions. In Scene V, the hero finds his maternal ancestors, but he cannot recognize them or their country. The theme of searching for one's ancestors to find a key to one's individual identity is one that Ionesco develops in Voyages chez les morts. In this idea of meeting with the dead, Ionesco may have been influenced by Jung's later writings,¹⁵² in particular his Septem Sermones, where he talks of establishing a relationship with the dead,

¹⁴⁷Nico Satijn, Le Labyrinthe de la cité radieuse: Les pérégrinations de Bérenger chez Ionesco (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982).

¹⁴⁸Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.96.

¹⁴⁹Lamont, 'L'Homme aux valises', p.247.

¹⁵⁰'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, p.28.

¹⁵¹Theatre, VI, 10.

¹⁵²This idea is suggested by Rosette Lamont in 'L'Homme aux valises', p.253.

'the land of ancestors',¹⁵³ through the anima. Jung writes, 'These conversations with the dead formed a kind of prelude to what I had to communicate to the world about the unconscious: a kind of pattern of order and interpretation of its general contents'.¹⁵⁴ However, for Ionesco's hero this meeting provides not enlightenment, but further bewilderment. In Scene XIII, the hero arrives in a foreign country which, by the pervading atmosphere of menace and suspicion, is clearly communist. He knows it is his native country, but can no longer recognize the place or his childhood friends who have become faceless bureaucrats. Having lost all his papers and forgotten his own personal details which they should contain, he can only identify himself as 'Existant spécialisé'.¹⁵⁵ He obtains worthless papers to protect him against his lack of identity and makes his way to what is supposed to be a hotel, but which merges with dream-like fluidity into a hospital or psychiatric ward, giving Ionesco an opportunity to fuse his metaphysical concern with the absurdity of death and his political concerns, in particular, his hatred of the right of life and death which he feels doctors have over their patients and which he equates to euthenasia¹⁵⁶ and his sympathy for the oppression of those he calls 'les fous de la liberté',¹⁵⁷ suffering unknown tortures, for their beliefs, in Russian concentration camps. The play closes with a garden party scene that takes place in a lovely, formal garden with fountains, music, champagne, and fireworks, but the hero's hopes and expectations are soon dampened by the threatening armed men behind the bushes. The hero feels unable to enter the dance, as he is still oppressed by the impelling necessity of his search. In the final image, the man is seen sitting on one of his cases, amid a proliferating crowd of dancers, all carrying cases, symbolizing their own lives or obsessions. The final image may suggest death or even a contemplative state, as Rosette Lamont believes, 'the ultimate metaphysical image, that of Man as inveterate dreamer, and by this very fact perfect mediator',¹⁵⁸ or just the inextricable paroxysm that ends many of these dream plays. Whether it is one or all of these is unimportant

¹⁵³C.G. Jung, Psychology and Religion (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1938), p.191.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p.192.

¹⁵⁵Théâtre, VI, 65.

¹⁵⁶'Le droit de tuer', Antidotes, pp.300-305.

¹⁵⁷'Pour les fous de la liberté', Ibid., pp.135-138.

¹⁵⁸Lamont, 'L'Homme aux valises', p.265.

anyway for the fundamental obsessions that the play reveals, Ionesco believes, are brought to light more clearly by these vague, multi-faceted images of the dream, than by the limiting logic of consciousness.

'L'angoisse fondamentale, c'est souvent en rêve que je la vis', Ionesco admits, 'C'est ce que j'ai voulu exprimer dans L'Homme aux valises'.¹⁵⁹

The overall unity of the play is not therefore a thematic unity, but 'une unité d'obsessions',¹⁶⁰ both the obsessions of the dreamer who is always at the centre of his dream and the underlying obsession that gives all of Ionesco's writing its coherence and unity: that of the search for individual identity. Ionesco explains:

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 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.¹⁶¹

The dream elements of L'Homme aux valises are continued and developed in Voyages chez les morts which recounts a more detailed search into the self through the hero's confrontation with his ancestors in the medium of dream. Through the mouth of Jean, Ionesco questions why he was inspired to write this play, perhaps because of a feeling of his own impending death or a desire to finally settle his accounts with his parents: to assuage his sense of guilt, to justify his life and free himself from his obsessions. 'Je n'avais plus rêvé de vous tous pendant des années, des dizaines d'années', Jean tells his father, 'Que signifie ce retour vers vous? Est-ce que je vais bientôt vous rejoindre? On n'a pas fini de régler nos comptes? Toujours en revenir à ces débuts effroyables'.¹⁶² The atmosphere of the play is very dream-like, as one scene slips imperceptibly into another, with many heterogeneous elements such as the two old women who play at being chickens and are swept out with a broom. The logic is that of a dream; the telephone rings, and there is no telephone, yet on another occasion someone answers the phone when it does not ring. However, behind the seemingly irrelevant, unconnected scenes many of Ionesco's fundamental obsessions surface. For example, in the passage where Jean talks about 'la spéculation

¹⁵⁹Antidotes, pp.265-266.

¹⁶⁰'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, p.28.

¹⁶¹Entre la vie et le rêve, p.171.

¹⁶²Theatre, VII, 27.

valentinienne, le chant de la perle', ¹⁶³ there are again indications of Ionesco's interest in Gnostic beliefs: the song of the pearl being a famous Gnostic text attributed to Bardesanes and Valentinus being one of the prominent leaders of the movement.¹⁶⁴ In a mysterious and poetic passage near the beginning of his quest, Jean evokes another vision of the radiant city of Tueur or of La Chapelle-Anthenaise, a harmonious, self-sufficient village where everyone and everything seem complete:

C'est très harmonieux. Il y a des places, pas trop grandes, des rues, pas trop étroites, des boulevards, pas trop larges, des maisons bien équilibrées, ni trop hautes, ni trop basses, on sent qu'à l'intérieur les appartements sont confortables, il y a des balcons. Pas beaucoup de monde dehors, sans doute parce que les habitants se sentent bien chez eux, ils ont tout ce qu'il faut.¹⁶⁵

The name of the country is Boganda and its capital Bocal. In the opinion of Rosette Lamont, 'The initial "B" cannot fail to suggest Bucharest, although the word "Bocal" evokes the vas of the alchemists, the vessel in which all foul matter undergoes the process of transubstantiation. This dream city could be the New Jerusalem where opposites are reconciled ...'.¹⁶⁶ Towards the end of the play, the radiant city is glimpsed again. The town is significantly called 'Aluminia' and exists with the more penetrating inner reality of all dream visions, as Jean exclaims, 'Aluminia, ville de mon coeur, Aluminia, ville de mon rêve, Aluminia, ville de ma vraie réalité'.¹⁶⁷ However, the vision soon fades, replaced by darkness, and Jean is not sure whether he has woken from a dream or whether his dream has become a nightmare.

As in L'Homme aux valises, Ionesco plays on the idea of the relativity of time and relationships in the dream world. Jean's father is younger than his son, as Jean is now older than his father was when he died, and Jean's uncle claims he is not dead, but that he simply reached the age of ninety and decided to fix his age there. Jean is unable to distinguish his mother from his wife, his daughter or his sister, yet she is as old as his great-grandparents. When he expresses his surprise at her age, she explains, 'J'ai rattrapé l'âge de mes parents. On

¹⁶³ Théâtre, VII, 50.

¹⁶⁴ Rosette C. Lamont, 'Journey to the Kingdom of the Dead. Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', Interplay I, edited by Moste Lazar (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), p.96.

¹⁶⁵ Théâtre, VII, 15.

¹⁶⁶ Lamont, 'Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', pp.98-99.

¹⁶⁷ Théâtre, VII, 99.

vieillit aussi dans l'au-delà. On arrive jusqu'à cent ans et puis on s'arrête. Tu vieilliras aussi quand tu seras chez nous'.¹⁶⁸

Another unnamed woman, however, gives a different explanation: 'C'est qu'elle ne se sent pas bien là-bas. Autrement, quoi qu'elle en dise, elle paraîtrait toute jeune. Quand on est bien là-bas, le temps est compté à rebours'.¹⁶⁹

One of the most important themes of the play is that of the hero's search for his dead mother. This theme is linked with the recurring image of the gloomy low-ceilinged apartment, recalling that in the Rue Claude-Terrasse which Ionesco admits in his personal writings is inseparable from the memory of his mother. For him, this apartment of his dreams is more real than any reality. 'Les vraies maisons sont celles dont on se souvient, mais aussi et surtout celles dont on se souvient dans les rêves, que l'on retrouve et où l'on entre dans les rêves', and he adds, 'C'est la plus vraie puisque c'est la maison où j'ai vécu avec ma mère'.¹⁷⁰ In La Terre et les rêveries du repos, Gaston Bachelard writes, 'Le retour au pays natal, la rentrée dans la maison natale, avec tout l'onirisme qui le dynamise, a été caractérisé par la psychanalyse classique comme un retour à la mère'.¹⁷¹ The apartment gradually changes into the mill of La Chapelle-Anthenaise, then into the Château of Cerisy-la-Salle, forming a background of the most significant places in Ionesco's memory. Ionesco takes this opportunity to make an ironic comment on the nature of the search for individual identity. Bérenger, in Tueur, after years of searching for the radiant city, found it close at hand, unnoticed, until that moment. He exclaims, 'Pour y arriver, rien que ce tout petit voyage, un voyage qui n'en est pas un, puisqu'il a lieu, pour ainsi dire, sur les lieux mêmes'.¹⁷² In the same way Jean discovers that the greatest journeys take place, not through ardent travelling and searching, but, like Alice Through the Looking Glass, by inadvertantly crossing an invisible border into an adjacent world. He expresses his amazement, saying:

J'ai voyagé dans le monde à des centaines de kilometres, et maintenant pour venir ici, une porte s'est entrebaillée ou bien

¹⁶⁸Théâtre, VII, 37.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., pp.38-39.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., pp.117-118.

¹⁷¹Gaston Bachelard, La Terre et les rêveries du repos (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1948), p.121.

¹⁷²Théâtre, II, 71.

je suis passé par une fenêtre ou à travers une glace. Cela est arrivé tout à fait à mon insu. Et c'est le plus grand voyage.¹⁷³

At one point in this dream the hero seems to have found a world of archetypes, of Platonic essences, but he is warned that he is still in a world of approximation, a sort of purgatory that prefigures the absolute: 'L'air pur du tout à fait vrai, vous le sentez déjà ici. Cependant ce n'est que l'antichambre du vrai qui ne bouge pas. Je dois vous emmener plus loin'.¹⁷⁴ If the characters, even in death, are unable to enter the paradise of eternal rest, it is, Ionesco suggests, because of their unresolved quarrels and bitterness. In the course of the Symposium held at the University of Southern California, he stated, 'These are family quarrels and although the contenders are no longer among the living, and the contenders as dead as they are, the inveterate strife continues. Night after night I dream of the members of my family, night after night they feud'.¹⁷⁵ Jean warns his father that he must forgive his first wife, Jean's mother, 'Tu lui en voudras pour l'éternité. Tant que tu lui en voudras, tu n'iras pas au paradis'.¹⁷⁶ However, it is in vain; ancient rivalries and recriminations are infinitely repeated in death, and Jean's father's two wives squabble over their inheritance and over which was the one he loved the best, although it is suggested that the only time he was truly happy was when he lived with a gypsy mistress after his second wife's death. Jean's attempt to settle his accounts with his father and to justify his choice of writing as a career also ends in failure. His father finally gives him the opportunity to prove himself, saying, 'Montre-moi ce que tu as fait pour que je sache un peu et pour que je sois détruit davantage par ma défaite et que j'estime ta gloire et que je t'admire en connaissance de cause'.¹⁷⁷ Jean opens his desk drawers, but finds only bits of rusty wire, rags, broken pencils, a cook book; his writings disintegrate into pieces of yellowed paper that are covered with illegible scribbles. Finally, he pulls out a bottle of ink which spills over everything. He cries in despair, 'Tout est à remettre en question. Tout à reprendre'.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³Théâtre, VII, 61.

¹⁷⁴Ibid.

¹⁷⁵Cited by Rosette C. Lamont, 'Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', p.93.

¹⁷⁶Théâtre, VII, 45.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p.48.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p.50.

This passage is reminiscent of the theme of La Lacune and of many passages in his journals where, despite his undeniable success and fame, Ionesco expresses a lack of confidence in his life and achievements. This fear is repeated in a scene towards the end of the dream where he finds himself an old, outmoded writer, his life's work counted as nothing. His wife warns him: 'L'estime qu'on avait pour toi diminue et s'effrite. Il y a des pays où on ne te connaît plus. Même en France, on t'oublie'. He realizes suddenly: 'J'ai lutté pendant des années contre ma paresse. Et après je me suis laissé prendre par la paresse. J'ai sacrifié ma vie spirituelle et le salut de mon âme pour ma célébrité et maintenant, plus de notoriété'.¹⁷⁹ This play is like a summary of Ionesco's anxieties, obsessions, his fundamental psychological states and dreams. He comes face to face with these states of mind, concretized on stage, in an attempt to free himself from them. The play is thus, in the words of Rosette Lamont, 'the dramatized story of a realized individual, a writer (not unlike Ionesco himself) who has achieved world renown, but who must face his ghosts, put to rest numerous grudges, transcend his bitterness, and, above all, be re-united with his 'anima', his dead mother'.¹⁸⁰ Ionesco has indeed faced his ghosts in this play, but it is uncertain whether he has been able to transcend and come to terms with his obsessions. The play ends on a pessimistic note, and Jean's long soliloquy, full of neologisms, free associations, enumerations, onomatopoeias, and pseudo-intellectual calculations, is totally negative, an exercise in destruction, beginning and ending with 'Je ne sais pas'.¹⁸¹

The plainly autobiographical nature of the dreams in Voyages chez les morts may be considered a weakness. Whereas in earlier plays the dream elements were carefully transcribed and reworked by the creative mind, they are here presented crudely and blatantly. As dreams are dominated by a small number of archetypes and obsessions that occupy the subconscious, a direct presentation of dreams over an extended period lays itself open to a charge of monotony and repetition, as Bernard Poirot-Delpech points out: 'Le propre de l'inconscient étant de se répéter inlassablement, tout auteur qui y puise aussi ouvertement et directement sa matière dramatique s'expose à autant de redites que le

¹⁷⁹ Théâtre, VII, 94-95.

¹⁸⁰ Lamont, 'Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', p.101.

¹⁸¹ Théâtre, VII, 129,134.

patient sur le divan du psychanalyste'.¹⁸² However, as Ionesco gets older, he finds it harder to disassociate dreams from memories, dreams of memories and memories of dreams from reality, and his life, as he looks back on it, seems increasingly to have just been a dream. 'Je ne sais pas très bien si je rêve ou si je me souviens, si j'ai vécu ma vie ou si je l'ai rêvée', he admits, 'Le souvenir, autant que le rêve, me fait profondément ressentir l'irréalité, l'évanescence du monde, image fugitive dans l'eau mouvante, fumée colorée'.¹⁸³ Moreover, although it is true that these dream plays centre around a small number of fundamental obsessions, these are universal archetypes that dominate the subconscious of all individuals and, as such, Ionesco believes, never become esoteric or repetitive as they take on a multiplicity of different forms and significances according to the situation and sensibility of the reader. Because the dream is universal and multiform in nature it can never become a stereotype: 'L'homme dont l'esprit est nourri par les rêves retrouve peut-être les archétypes; en tout cas, il n'est pas prisonnier des clichés. L'archétype n'est pas le stéréotype'.¹⁸⁴

Therefore, Ionesco stresses the importance of dreams and the irrational, subconscious realms of the psyche not to indicate another world, but to give a deeper insight into this one. He condemns realism in the arts, for by emphasizing only the superficial it 'aliène l'homme de sa profondeur qui est la troisième dimension indispensable, à partir de laquelle l'homme commence à être vrai'.¹⁸⁵ The liberty of the imagination in dreams reveals what realism denies: 'Les réalités humaines les plus profondes: l'amour, la mort, l'étonnement, la souffrance et les rêves de nos coeurs extra-sociaux'.¹⁸⁶ The conscious mind is often surpassed by the revelations of the subconscious, and the artist must not try to control these insights, only to give them shape and significance by incorporating them as meaningful images into the framework of the play: 'Il faut laisser s'épancher le flot, mais, après, on trie, on dirige, on comprend, on saisit'.¹⁸⁷ Ionesco's dream theatre is, therefore,

¹⁸² Bernard Poirot-Delpech, 'La Soif et la faim, d'Eugène Ionesco', Le Monde (2 March 1966), p.16.

¹⁸³ Présent passé, p.280.

¹⁸⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.123.

¹⁸⁵ Notes, p.274.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ 'Le Rire? l'aboutissement d'un drame', Interview with Edith Mora, Nouvelles Littéraires (24 December 1959), p.9.

always tinged with the irony of the transcriber. As dreams present so many elements that are already theatrical in nature, the theatre is the ideal form for their presentation and the one that requires the least distortion of the original images. Both dreams and the theatre are a means of investigating one's inner identity, by seeing subconscious fears and obsessions shaped into concrete forms and images on the stage or in the dream, thus affording the individual the necessary distance and perspective to perceive and perhaps interpret these manifestations of the inner self. The oneiric theatre, where the dream itself is put on stage, telescopes the two methods of penetration of the self. The interior of the consciousness is spread out before the audience, freed from the restraints of temporality and logic, and the scenes, images, and characters act like spiritual mediums guiding the spectator to his inner self, as George Anex writes, 'Les acteurs de ce théâtre sont les médiums qui nous font accéder à l'intérieur de notre propre rêve, qui dégagent les forces latentes et spontanées de notre conscience la mieux cachée'.¹⁸⁸ The dream theatre can do this by virtue of the universality of dream archetypes. Even if one does not accept Jungian theories that dreams are part of the collective unconscious, it is remarkable that the same basic dream patterns recur throughout history and through all nations and that, as Freud has pointed out,¹⁸⁹ it is the same symbolism that underlies myths and fairytales. Ionesco's theatre is thus a quest for lucidity, both for himself and his spectator so that the individual, seeing his subconscious fears and obsessions objectified and materialized on stage, can begin to liberate himself from them with his conscious mind. Ionesco told Alain Schiffres that he sees the artist's role as that of a 'rêveur éveillé' and, he continued:

J'essaie personnellement d'être le plus près possible de cet état-là. Mais alors on se dédouble; la lucidité, ce n'est pas le critique qui l'a, mais le poète qui se retourne sur soi-même Tous mes actes sont dictés par des réalités très profondes qu'on n'a pas toujours décélées. Si la conscience lucide démystifie le rêve, le rêve à son tour démystifie la fausse réalité diurne. Il n'y a pas le conscient et l'inconscient. C'est comme s'il s'agissait de deux états de conscience différents qui servent tantôt à se masquer, tantôt à s'éclairer l'un l'autre. Voilà peut-être le sens de ma quête'.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Georges Anex, 'Ionesco, le médium', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 66.

¹⁸⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis', The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated by James Strachey, XI (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 36.

¹⁹⁰ Antidotes, p.264.

However, although dreams are a valuable means of access to the individual identity, especially when materialized in theatrical form, they are not in themselves the key to total knowledge of the self. Ionesco claims on several occasions to have seen the ultimate reality he seeks in a dream within a dream and to have, therefore, understood the enigmas of the cosmos and the individual identity, but, on waking, the barrier of consciousness is too strong, and he is unable to recall what the dream has revealed:

Je rêve que l'on me dit: 'Vous ne pouvez avoir la chef des énigmes, vous ne pouvez avoir la réponse à toutes vos questions que par le rêve. Il faut donc que vous fassiez ce rêve.' Je m'endors donc en rêve et je rêve, en rêve, que je fais ce rêve absolu, révélateur. Je me réveille, en rêve. Je me souviens, en rêve, du rêve du rêve, 'je sais' maintenant, je suis pris d'une immense joie sereine. Au réveil, au vrai réveil, je me souviens d'avoir rêvé que j'ai rêvé le rêve révélateur, mais je ne me souviens plus du tout de son contenu; encore une fois le rêve qui explique tout, ce rêve de la vérité absolue, m'a échappé.¹⁹¹

This dream within a dream, symbolizing a wish-fulfilment fantasy, is the nearest Ionesco comes to the absolute truth he seeks, and the inextricable situations of stalemate with the dream becoming fixed that end the majority of these oneiric plays, shows that, although dreams afford valuable insights into the individual, they are not alone sufficient to give him the key to the individual identity.

One of the reasons why Ionesco attributes so much importance to the revelatory powers of dreams is that dreams can reconstitute memories, particularly childhood memories in all their original vigour. The subconscious, Ionesco tells us, remains that of a child, 'La psyché n'a pas d'âge! Je suis toujours jeune, je me vois toujours jeune dans mes rêves. L'inconscient ne vieillit pas'.¹⁹² It is not surprising that the individual's journey in search of his identity is often not a search for new things and new places, but a regressional search to try to recapture the original source of himself from which he has been severed by the pressures and habits of life. 'Je voyage; ce n'est pas pour connaître les choses, ce n'est pas pour m'instruire', Ionesco explains, 'Pour moi, les voyages reconstituent ma jeunesse, me reconstituent. Ils reconstituent la jeunesse du monde. C'est pour retrouver l'état primordial que

¹⁹¹ Journal, pp.200-201. The importance which Ionesco accords to this dream can be seen by the fact that he repeats this passage twice, in his Journal (pp.31-32) and in Antidotes (p.292).

¹⁹² Théâtre, VII, 96.

je voyage, pour ne plus m'y reconnaître'.¹⁹³

The supremacy of childhood experiences is a fact accepted by both writers and psychologists. Baudelaire and later the Surrealists celebrated the joys of the 'vert paradis' of childhood, and Baudelaire saw the poet as a man who could recapture the freshness of wonder of the child and express it in adult terms. Max Primault, in the book Terres de l'enfance, discerns in modern literature a 'culte moderne de l'enfance',¹⁹⁴ after its absence from literature for about three centuries. He believes that childhood is no longer seen just as a stage towards adulthood, but as a precious entity in itself. The literary importance of childhood has been reinforced by the discoveries of psychoanalysis, revealing that early experiences of the infant are the most important factor in forming the basic obsessions and traits that make up the adult personality. Thus, the unhappy childhood of writers, like Genet and Arrabal, shapes the whole of their subsequent work, which becomes an attempt to exorcise the traumas and ties of childhood, whereas for writers, like Ionesco, who had a happy childhood, the trauma is the separation from the world of childhood, and their work takes the form of a search to regain the lost paradise, a 'voyage autour du monde pour voir s'il n'y a pas, quelque part derrière le Paradis, une nouvelle entrée'.¹⁹⁵ This constant return into the self prevents any desire to strive for a new goal in life:

Je ne puis partir d'un début, d'une aurore, d'une enfance, pour arriver à quelque chose d'autre, à une fin. D'ailleurs je ne le veux pas, d'ailleurs je ne le désire pas, d'ailleurs cela ne m'intéresse plus. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est le germe. Voilà pourquoi je reviens toujours, en retournant sur mes pas, au commencement des commencements.¹⁹⁶

'Tout ce que nous avons vécu laisse des traces',¹⁹⁷ Ionesco told Claude Bonnefoy, but not all events mark the individual equally. This is why, although he loves confessions and reminiscences, Ionesco refuses any systematic biography. On the dust cover of his Entretiens with Claude Bonnefoy, he caustically refers the reader to a dictionary for the facts of his life: 'En vous racontant ma vie j'aurais peur de me

¹⁹³ Découvertes, p.106.

¹⁹⁴ Max Primault, Terres de l'enfance, edited by Max Primault, Henry Lhong and Jean Malrieu (Paris: P.U.F., 1961), p.9.

¹⁹⁵ Von Kleist, in Terres de l'enfance, p.9.

¹⁹⁶ Découvertes, p.78.

¹⁹⁷ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.18.

tromper tandis que les dictionnaires me prêtent une histoire objective que je ne puis que respecter'.¹⁹⁸ His journals, Journal en miettes and Présent passé, are confused, with no chronological or even logical order; memories and dreams surge up, linked by association of ideas and the fundamental obsessions which they betray. However, by the dominance of certain images it is possible to single out the most significant events that determined Ionesco's future life. The inward-looking, meditative moments when he was filled with wonder or anguish take a more important place than any historical event, and the two most striking childhood memories coincide with the positive and negative poles of being, as he explains to Claude Bonnefoy:

C'est la tristesse de ma mère, c'est la révélation de la mort, c'est la solitude encore de ma mère, tout cela étant l'aspect négatif. Et puis c'est l'enfance à la campagne, à La Chapelle-Anthenaise, ce sont les jours de plénitude, de bonheur, de lumière que j'ai vécus là-bas.¹⁹⁹

These fundamental impressions are vital in Ionesco's search for his origins, a search that not only throws valuable light on his individual identity, but also on the principles of his artistic creation. Thus, in the words of Paul Vernois, 'Ces vagues d'un retour immuable conduisent à l'essentiel puisque Ionesco va jusqu'à en appeler à ses balbutiements et à ses étonnements d'enfant pour justifier les principes de son esthétique. Aussi bien essayerons-nous de rejoindre ab initio, dans l'émerveillement de ses premières années, la source de son existence et de son art'.²⁰⁰

Ionesco remembers his experience of spending three years in the country, at La Chapelle-Anthenaise, as a sort of paradise equivalent to the archetypal image of the Garden of Eden. When asked in an interview whether he liked the stretches of green in the Tuileries Garden, this childhood memory immediately surged into his mind: 'L'herbe? La campagne? J'ai oublié. Je suis incapable de retrouver ce que je ressens lorsque je suis dans la nature. Je ne sais plus ce que c'est. J'ai passé trois ans de mon enfance dans la Mayenne. Je m'en souviens comme d'un paradis. D'un paradis perdu'.²⁰¹ This childhood world was perceived as a paradise,

¹⁹⁸ Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco, Interview with Claude Bonnefoy (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1966).

¹⁹⁹ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.12-13.

²⁰⁰ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, pp.10-11.

²⁰¹ 'Les colères de M. Ionesco', Candide (7-14 December 1961), p.9.

for it was a place of harmony between the individual and the world; it was a place of magic, of wonder and light, and a place where time and death did not exist. All these factors contributed to giving the individual a firm sense of his identity, so that the search for the lost paradise and for the individual identity are synonymous. The fascination with childhood memories is not simply nostalgia, but an attempt to recapture at its maximum intensity the sense of plenitude of self. It is this memory of completeness that creates the sense of exile and dissatisfaction which Ionesco and his heroes experience and which makes the present reality intolerable by contrast. Sometimes the nostalgia for this childhood paradise is gentle and sad:

C'est surtout au printemps que je vibraï mystérieusement, nostalgiquement, avec le souvenir d'un monde perdu qui remontait de l'abîme pour un peu de temps, pour un jour, qui était et n'était pas ce qu'il semblait avoir été, qui était son apparence ou un goût de ce qu'il était ou le parfum qui reste de quelqu'un qu'on aime passionnément.²⁰²

At other times the memory becomes a burning pain that makes the present unacceptable and drives the individual to search for a means to recapture the state of joy. Ionesco describes it as, 'Une nostalgie profonde, poignante. Je suis torturé par des désirs sans nom, par des choses que j'ai perdues à jamais, que je n'ai jamais eues, jamais vues, dont je n'ai jamais su ce qu'elles sont'.²⁰³ Ionesco's writing is an attempt to express and understand this nostalgia: 'C'est pour retrouver cette beauté intacte dans la boue, que je fais de la littérature. Tous mes livres, toutes mes pièces sont un appel, l'expression d'une nostalgie, je cherche un trésor enfoui dans l'océan, perdu dans la tragédie de l'histoire'.²⁰⁴

Childhood is equated with paradise in the mind of Ionesco because it was the source of the state of wonder described in the first chapter, but in childhood, it was not transitory, part of a bipolar system, but a relatively stable state. The sense that everything is a miracle, fresh and amazing, seen for the first time, is inseparable for Ionesco from the memory of childhood. Loss of this state of wonder and plenitude accompanies the maturing of the child into an adult. As Richard

²⁰² Découvertes, p.108.

²⁰³ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, pp.176-177.

²⁰⁴ Antidotes, p.315.

Coe has pointed out in his article entitled 'On Being Very, Very Surprised ... Eugène Ionesco and the Vision of Childhood', it is in an attempt to recreate the vision of childhood and the sense of harmony with his self and his surroundings that Ionesco so often portrays experiences of 'émerveillement' in his plays. He writes: 'that at the root of Ionesco's dramatic vision there lies a dream-reminiscence of certain unforgettable experiences of childhood: not in the Freudian sense ... but rather in the sense that the child-Self retains vivid impressions of "one-ness with the Totality" of which the adult-Self only exceptionally is aware'.²⁰⁵ Ionesco himself admits, 'C'est pour retrouver cette vue pleine de fraîcheur du monde que je me penche sur le temps de mon enfance'.²⁰⁶ However, to recapture this state is one of the most difficult of tasks. 'Retrouver l'étonnement de l'enfant, est ce qu'il y a de plus difficile', Ionesco confesses.²⁰⁷

Indissociable from the childhood paradise is a certain luminosity, an all-pervading light. 'Enfance et lumière se rejoignent, s'identifient dans mon esprit', Ionesco writes.²⁰⁸ This 'lumière de l'enfance',²⁰⁹ is not only associated with a sense of wonder, but with the light of illumination, in a mystical sense; in Richard Coe's words, 'This vision of "pure light" is a direct experience of Essence'.²¹⁰ Ionesco has stated that, at the age of seven or eight, a child knows all the most essential facts of life and death and that all he learns from that age onwards merely obscures this fundamental knowledge.²¹¹ Ionesco believes that, if this light of childhood could be rediscovered like a 'source fraîche',²¹² it would give direct insight into the individual identity. Vernois describes this light as:

Euphorique ou euphorisante, elle écarte toutes les ombres ambiguës que la vie accumule. Ardente, elle conduit au coeur de l'Etre par une connaissance à la fois privilégiée et mystérieuse ... La lumière submerge le monde quotidien des

²⁰⁵ Richard N. Coe, 'On Being Very, Very Surprised', Interplay I, pp.18-19.

²⁰⁶ 'Découvertes de Ionesco', Interview with Ritta Mariancic, Réforme (14 March 1970), p.12.

²⁰⁷ 'Rencontre avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with France Béquette, p.23.

²⁰⁸ Antidotes, p.316.

²⁰⁹ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.182.

²¹⁰ Coe, 'On Being Very, Very Surprised', p.13.

²¹¹ Découvertes, p.78.

²¹² 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.177.

apparences, le transfigure en épiphanie insolite et révèle à l'homme sa finalité profonde.²¹³

Therefore, the search for this lost light that illuminates Being becomes one with the search for individual identity and can be perceived throughout Ionesco's writing. 'C'est la lumière que je cherche et qu'il m'arrive de sembler retrouver de temps à autre', he writes, 'C'est la raison pour laquelle non seulement je fais de la littérature, c'est aussi la raison pour laquelle je m'en suis nourri. Toujours à la recherche de cette lumière certaine par-delà les ténèbres La pièce ou la confession intime, ou le roman restent ténébreux si je ne débouche pas, au bout des ténèbres sur la lumière.'²¹⁴

There are many glimpses of the light in Ionesco's plays, occurring spontaneously and unexpectedly as a sort of illumination. Ionesco explains, 'La plupart du temps, ces images de lumière, vite étouffées ou, au contraire, arrivant naturellement au bout du trajet n'ont pas été voulues mais trouvées'.²¹⁵ There is the city of light, Aluminia, glimpsed in Voyages chez les morts and the visions of light that close Le Solitaire, Ce Formidable bordel, and La Soif. Amédée escapes from his dark apartment into the brilliant light of the Milky Way. In Les Chaises, there is just a memory of a church in a brilliantly illuminated garden. In Tueur, Bérenger finds his memories of the light materialized in the radiant city, although this artificial reconstruction inevitably carries the seeds of its own destruction. Each play is a search for the light, but Ionesco shows us no easy resolution, and these plays end either in failure or, at best, with the freedom to continue the search, as Ionesco admits:

Dans mes pièces de théâtre ou dans ma prose, j'ai le sentiment d'effectuer une exploration, à tâtons dans la nuit, dans une forêt sombre. Je ne sais pas où j'arriverai ou si j'arriverai quelque part, j'écris sans plan. La fin vient d'elle-même: constatation de l'échec ... ou réussite lorsque la fin peut ressembler à un recommencement.²¹⁶

As the child becomes an adult, Ionesco believes he loses touch with the sources of wonder and light and so loses contact with his individual identity. The end of childhood is thus a spiritual death preceding the individual's biological death. The theme of the death of

²¹³Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, p.15.

²¹⁴Antidotes, p.315.

²¹⁵Ibid.

²¹⁶Ibid., p.316.

children which recurs so frequently in Ionesco's collection of poetry, 'Elégies pour des êtres minuscules',²¹⁷ symbolizes this loss of self at adulthood; as Tobi says, 'au-delà de la mort physique d'un enfant quelconque, il s'agit de la mort symbolique d'un âge'.²¹⁸ This is confirmed by Ionesco at a conference in Bucharest in 1965, on the occasion of the presentation of Rhinocéros, where he stated that each individual, once he becomes an adult, puts on a social mask to hide his lack of individual identity. He concludes, 'Lorsque l'homme meurt, ne vous lamentez pas trop: c'est le masque qui est mort car le vrai homme était mort depuis longtemps; dès la fin de son enfance'.²¹⁹ For Ionesco, there was thus a triple rupture, which affected the whole of his future life and writing; geographically he was compelled to leave the beautiful countryside and harmonious village atmosphere of La Chapelle-Anthenaise to return to the ugliness and anonymity of city life; metaphysically he lost his capacity for wonder as the world's freshness became dulled by habit and with it the joy and certainty of Being that accompanies the experience, and physically he became an adult, aware of the process of aging and the passing of time. 'Être chassé de l'enfance, c'est être chassé du paradis, c'est être adulte', he laments.²²⁰ He begins his life in exile from himself and from paradise with only the memory to torment him, 'la vie exilée, garnie de la peine de vivre. Ce qui est pire, c'est que le souvenir ou la nostalgie restent inoubliables tout en s'éloignant'.²²¹

Jacques explores the problems which an individual has in becoming an adult and the pressures which society puts on him to accept his responsibilities and leave the childhood paradise. Growing up is a painful process, Ionesco believes, as all men wish to remain children: 'Nous sommes tous des enfants, d'après la psychanalyse et d'après Dieu s'il y a Dieu. Des enfants qui vieillissent mal et qui espèrent que tout va recommencer, qu'on va retrouver une nouvelle forme de paradis'.²²² Jacques tries to resist the metamorphosis into an adult, but the discovery that he is 'chronométrable',²²³ subject to the laws of time,

²¹⁷ Elegii pentru fiinte mici (Bucharest: Cercul Analelor Romane, 1931).

²¹⁸ Tobi, A la recherche du paradis perdu, p.102.

²¹⁹ Cited by Tobi, A la recherche du paradis perdu, p.102.

²²⁰ Journal, p.55.

²²¹ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.182.

²²² 'Ionesco interprète Ionesco', Interview with Michel Delain, p.116.

²²³ Théâtre, I, 103.

causes a dramatic reversal in the play, equivalent to Ionesco's own discovery of time. The stage set created in the March 1977 production by M. Lucian Pintillie²²⁴ emphasized this longing for the world of childhood by creating a door in the centre of the back wall which opened out onto fields of corn, a symbol of Ionesco's childhood paradise and the harmony of nature. As Jacques is about to alienate his identity, in L'Avenir, in the machine-like purgatory of production, he catches a final glimpse of the brilliant fountain of light and vivid sensations of the lost paradise that is being submerged, perhaps forever.

The childhood paradise is glimpsed by the old couple of Les Chaises in their distant reminiscences of the garden:

La Vieille: Dans le jardin l'herbe était mouillée.

Le Vieux: Il y avait un sentier qui conduisait à une petite place; au milieu, une église de village [-] cette ville a existé, puisqu'elle s'est effondrée ... C'était la ville de lumière, puisqu'elle s'est éteinte, éteinte, depuis quatre cent mille ans.²²⁵

In this paradise it was light even at midnight, whereas their present life is increasingly engulfed in darkness which the Old Man links with the processes of time: 'C'est à cause de la terre qui tourne, tourne, tourne, tourne ...'.²²⁶ The other childhood memories of the couple belong to the negative aspects of childhood; their confused memories of leaving their parents to die betray a guilt complex similar to the one that comes through Ionesco's own journals. The pathetic attempt of the Old Man to return to infancy and pretend that his wife is his mother shows that the desire to return to childhood can be an attempt to escape from the responsibility of awareness of self, rather than the return to a fuller, more intense existence, and it is for this reason that the old couple tire of waiting 'près d'une grande grille',²²⁷ which separates them from the lost paradise, and take the easy way out in suicide.

Patrick Roberts, in The Psychology of Tragic Drama, makes an interesting, if rather exaggerated, exegesis of the role of primitive infantile fantasies in Ionesco's plays. He believes that La Leçon is based on an experience of infantile envy as a result of the child's awareness of his own helplessness and dependence which turns into a primitive, sadistic

²²⁴ van der Spuy, 'Jacques ou la soumission', p.71.

²²⁵ Théâtre, I, 134.

²²⁶ Ibid., p.132.

²²⁷ Ibid., p.134.

impulse and interprets images of proliferation and emptiness in terms of infantile greed and anxiety at the withdrawal of the breast, thus claiming 'that Ionesco understands how ubiquitously a primitive infantile sadism operates in normal adult affairs in a concealed and displaced form'.²²⁸ It seems more likely, however, that the infantile fantasy at the basis of La Leçon is a memory of Ionesco's fear and hatred of his father's tyrannical authority and physical brutality, an interpretation confirmed by the recurrence of this childhood memory in other plays, especially Victimes. In Victimes, Choubert relives a thinly disguised transcription of Ionesco's own memories. The memories of the Rue Blomet where he lived during the war, the walks in the dark streets, his mother's attempt to commit suicide, and the conflicts with his father, interspersed with regrets and vain attempts at reconciliation, together with the vivid memories of the two states of depression and euphoria and the discovery of time and death that Ionesco experienced so keenly are all in the play, relived by Choubert. Finally, Choubert retraces Ionesco's steps to the beginnings of Being, where the individual was one with himself. Claude Abastado explains:

Il retrouve son enfance, spécialement la prime enfance, l'âge où selon les théories freudiennes, la personnalité se forme, les complexes se nouent et les traumatismes déterminent le caractère de façon indélébile. Il atteint même des sensations fugitives qui précèdent l'éveil de la conscience, un état purement végétatif, une sensibilité prénatale.²²⁹

These impressions are bathed in the intense light of the lost paradise of which Choubert feels an integral part. He cries, 'Je baigne dans la lumière. La lumière me pénètre. Je suis étonné d'être, étonné d'être ... Je suis lumière! Je vole!'.²³⁰ Light, wonder, and harmony with the world are again associated with awareness of individual identity in the lost paradise of childhood. However, like Jacques, he is unable to remain in this paradise regained as he cannot escape from time. The mythical fall from grace is bathetically symbolized by Choubert's fall into the waste-paper basket and the attendant sensations of physical discomfort. This is linked to the process of becoming an adult in the 'Avale! Mastique!'²³¹ episode where Choubert is treated like a child

²²⁸ Patrick Roberts, The Psychology of Tragic Drama (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.123.

²²⁹ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.99.

²³⁰ Théâtre, I, 219.

²³¹ Ibid., p.229.

who must grow up physically and mentally by being force-fed with crusts of bread. Thus the play rehearses the whole pattern of the search for the childhood paradise, the fall from grace and the alienation from the self in the maturing to adulthood and the lonely exile of adult life:

'Des silhouettes surgissent entre les pans des murs [-] Leurs yeux s'éteignent... Tout rentre dans la nuit'.²³²

Amédée is a play again concerned with the difficulties of escaping the weight of the past and the ravages of time that separate the individual from himself, as Claude Abastado explains:

La question posée par le titre: 'Comment s'en débarrasser?' trouve aussi une réponse dans le rêve éveillé d'Amédée. On ne se débarrasse pas de son passé. Le passé, fût-il de plomb, de nuit et de boue, attache l'être à l'existence. Le passé enchaîne; même une liane est un lien. C'est pourquoi au moment d'agir, Amédée hésite à se défaire du cadavre, témoin muet de tout un passé.²³³

However, the corpse represents not only the past but guilt. Whether it was a lover of Madeleine's that Amédée killed or a woman he failed to save from drowning or a baby he let die from negligence is unimportant, for its import is much larger; it represents the original sin that led to the expulsion from the paradise of eternity. Ionesco says, 'Le cadavre, c'est pour moi la faute, le péché originel. Le cadavre qui grandit, c'est le temps'.²³⁴ Amédée does glimpse the lost paradise on two occasions. In the dream sequence, he sees a world bathed in light and the plenitude of an eternal present: 'Le matin ne vieillit pas ... Clarté vivante'.²³⁵ Again, when he is dreaming in front of the open window, he sees a vision, combining the radiant city and the Garden of Paradise: 'Des ruisseaux d'argent liquide des rivières, des étangs, des fleuves, des lacs, des océans, de la lumière palpable ... Des bouquets de neige fleurie, des arbres dans le ciel, des jardins, des prairies ... des dômes, des chapiteaux ... des colonnes, des temples ... Et de l'espace, de l'espace, un espace infini!'.²³⁶ These images and the final scene, where Amédée floats off into the night sky, lead Robert Frickx to call Amédée 'la pièce du salut possible'.²³⁷ However, Ionesco's own admission that he devised this fantastic ending to conclude a static,

²³² Théâtre, I, 202.

²³³ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.115.

²³⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.83.

²³⁵ Théâtre, I, 288.

²³⁶ Ibid., p.298.

²³⁷ Frickx, Ionesco, p.74.

inextricable situation would seem to indicate that, despite moments of lucidity, Amédée has not the strength of character to undertake a search for his lost identity and the former paradise and that his flight is more an act of escape than of mystical initiation.

The radiant city of Tueur, like the city of Aluminia and the mysterious city Choubert glimpses through the tempest, is an obvious materialization of the lost paradise. The myth of the lost paradise, Ionesco believes, is the basis of the doctrines of communism and political revolution: 'Par le dépassement de l'économie et par le dépassement de l'Histoire c'est encore, inconsciemment, le monde édénique dont on rêve'.²³⁸ The whiteness and newness of the houses, the bright blue light, and the gardens full of flowers accentuate the Eden-like nature of the city. It seems to Béranger to recall the harmonious world of childhood and his sources of joy and wonder and to have materialized them: 'Vous me l'avez rendu, ma lumière oubliée ... ou presque'.²³⁹ This 'presque' betrays the fact that this is not truly a paradise regained, only an artificial soulless reconstruction that betrays the dream and destroys it. Béranger, like Jacques, Choubert, Amédée, and Ionesco himself, is an adult who remains under the charm of childhood and, therefore, finds himself ill-adapted to ordinary life. This is why he alone, of all the inhabitants of the radiant city, cannot accept the presence of death in the world and, like the young Ionesco, obstinately refuses mortality only to find that he too must succumb to its laws. As Hans Mayer states, 'Les décisions, apparemment morales, qu'il prend de lutter contre l'assassin qui terrorise la ville, ou contre l'aberration des rhinocéros, sont moins des décisions pesées, réfléchies, que les entêtements d'enfant'.²⁴⁰ It is partly because of this that they inevitably fail.

Richard Eastman comments that Ionesco's plays deal with little people who have grown up, not with true adults, people living in a hostile world they want to escape.²⁴¹ Ionesco develops this idea in Le piéton by putting these grown-up children on stage alongside a genuine child Marthe, Béranger's daughter. It is significant that only the

²³⁸ Découvertes, p.115.

²³⁹ Ibid., p.80.

²⁴⁰ Mayer, 'Ionesco et les idéologies', in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, pp.123-124.

²⁴¹ Richard M. Eastman, 'Experiment and Vision in Ionesco's Plays', Modern Drama, 4, 1 (May 1961), 10.

child is able to understand the natural ease of Béranger's flight and that it is she who voices the message of hope at the end, evoking the image of the garden. Although the 'ailleurs' Béranger seeks is not specifically a childhood paradise, but rather a contiguous universe, the search takes a similar form. Like Ionesco, Béranger believes that people have lost part of their true selves or forgotten it in the process of growing up, and they suffer from the loss so there is an innate desire in man to escape the constraints of social existence and rediscover his true identity. The acute sense of nostalgia which he feels for this lost joy, he believes, is a proof of its continuing existence and of the possibility of rediscovering it. Béranger, in Le Piéton, describes it as 'une de ces joies oubliées, oubliées et pourtant bien connues, comme une chose qui m'appartient de toute éternité, que l'on perd tous les jours et qui cependant ne se perd jamais. La preuve, c'est qu'on la retrouve, qu'on la reconnaît'.²⁴² He is able, like a child, to feel a sense of wonder at the freshness of the universe: 'Je regarde, c'est comme si c'était la première fois que je voyais. Je viens de naître'.²⁴³ Like a child, he can accept existence without understanding it, for, Ionesco believes, it was the desire to reduce the miracle of existence to the bounds of reason that constituted the original sin. Béranger says, 'Même si je ne me comprends pas, qu'est-ce que cela peut faire? Je serais moins heureux si je comprenais'.²⁴⁴ Despite his insights, Béranger's search only ends in chaos and disaster, for he has taken the wrong route. It is not by trying to escape the human condition, but by searching inside himself and recreating it afresh that the adult can find his individual identity and the harmonious paradise which he seeks. Therefore, as Philippe Senart states:

Le héros de M. Ionesco, en s'élevant, n'a fait que basculer dans le vide. Pour avoir voulu échapper à la condition humaine, pour avoir voulu faire l'ange, quand il est déjà tellement difficile d'être un homme, il a été précipité dans une chute sans fin. C'est en remontant en lui-même, c'est en s'efforçant de retrouver l'enfance, la fraîcheur, la beauté, c'est en creusant la terre, non pour s'y enfoncer et s'y fondre ... mais pour y 'chercher une mère' pour y plonger des racines, qu'il pourra enfin atteindre l'autre monde.²⁴⁵

Death is frequently linked with a return to childhood, for example, in

²⁴²Théâtre, III, 155-156.

²⁴³Ibid., p.155.

²⁴⁴Ibid., p.157.

²⁴⁵Philippe Senart, 'Eugène Ionesco', Revue des Deux Mondes (March 1970), pp.522-523.

the ambiguous symbol of the house, representing both the womb and the tomb. The position of a man, stripped of all social pretences, facing the unknown of death is very similar to that of the terror and wonder of the child. Ionesco explores this idea in Le Roi where the dying King returns to a state of childhood. Martin Esslin compares the spirit of the play to that of a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale.²⁴⁶ The whole kingdom has a child-like quality, with the elevated thrones and the simplistic social divisions of the secondary characters. The King's tantrums, his rapidly changing, violent sensations of terror and pleasure, and the sudden interest which he takes in even the simplest things, as though he had never seen them before, are characteristic of the world of the child. He is led, like a child by the hand, into the kingdom of the dead, but his lack of insight into his self during his lifetime makes it impossible to conclude with certainty that he found his lost paradise in death.

The theme of the search for the lost paradise of childhood is again dominant in La Soif. Geneviève Serreau classifies the play as 'une pièce proustienne à thème goethéen'.²⁴⁷ Jean is indeed like Faust and Proust, 'à la recherche du temps perdu', and it is nostalgia for his origins which compels Jean to return to the damp, gloomy apartment from which he had escaped. Yet he cannot find any trace of paradise there, for his concept of paradise would be embodied in a beautiful house, full of light and flowers, suspended in an azure sky. However, by searching for a stereotyped picture of what he imagines paradise to be, Jean passes by the true sources of joy without ever noticing them. His imaginary paradise represents an escape from, not a descent into, his past and his self. He tries to exchange his own genuine memories for artificial ones of a past he had not lived. Marie-Madeleine, however, realizes that paradise is not in another realm of experience, but in the self, in a change of mental attitude that transfigures the present. She asks, 'Où donc veut-il aller chercher ce qui est à portée de sa main, ce qui se trouve à ses pieds? ... Nous ne voyagerons plus. Où peut-on aller? Nous sommes au but. Hors de cette maison, hors de nous deux, hors de nous trois, tout est nulle part'.²⁴⁸ At the end of the first act, her faith is confirmed by an apparition of the garden of paradise, but

²⁴⁶ Esslin, 'Ionesco and the Fairytale Tradition', p.27.

²⁴⁷ Geneviève Serreau, in 'Pas de soupe pour les dogmatiques', Interview with Ionesco, Nouvel Observateur (16-20 February 1966), p.29.

²⁴⁸ Théâtre, IV, 95.

it is too late for Jean, who has already left on his 'Gaal irrational'.²⁴⁹

The elevated terrace of the second episode seems to be the materialization of Jean's dim memories of a past life of joy and wonder in a place of light, for which he has been searching ever since, because 'on ne peut pas ne pas revenir quand on est venu une fois'.²⁵⁰ At first, it seems to be a rebirth into the eternal present, the harmony and wonder of childhood, and Jean exclaims, 'Je me réveille dans l'étonnement d'un matin, de ce matin qui, j'espère, ne finira jamais plus; je renais, je recommence, c'est pour commencer que je suis venu'.²⁵¹ However, the falseness of this paradise is betrayed by the dust and lack of vegetation, a bareness that corresponds to Jean's own feelings. Moreover, he has an acute awareness of time: the time of the rendezvous, the closing time of the museum which will end Jean's hopes of meeting the mysterious woman. This is not the plenitude and timelessness of Paradise. The woman for whom Jean waits represents, according to Robert Frickx, 'l'Eve idéale, celle d'avant la faute, le symbole de l'amour chaste et parfait auquel tout homme, inconsciemment, aspire'.²⁵² However, Jean has rejected love and so is now rejected in his turn and has to continue on into Purgatory. As he describes his journey, it is obvious that the world that was once luminous and wonderful has become hollow and commonplace, an echo of the fall from the visionary state of childhood that Wordsworth describes so well in his 'Intimations of Immortality':

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it has been of yore;-
 Turn whereso'er I may
 By night or day
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?²⁵³

In the final moments, when Jean at last realizes his mistake, he glimpses

²⁴⁹ 'Pas de soupe pour les dogmatiques', Interview with Jean-Marie Serreau, p.29.

²⁵⁰ Théâtre, IV, 106.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.107.

²⁵² Frickx, Ionesco, p.128.

²⁵³ William Wordsworth, 'Ode [Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood]', Poetry and Prose (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p.576.

the garden of paradise, but significantly from the other side of bars, like the old couple in Les Chaises. It seems that he will have to continue his now impossible search for a paradise that was once within his reach, in the way he has chosen. Jean Delay commented to Ionesco, 'Les trois épisodes de ce spectacle auront, dites-vous, une suite, mais peuvent-ils avoir une fin? C'est parce que le paradis est perdu, c'est parce que la terre est promise, que l'éternel errant ne s'arrête pas de chercher avec une nostalgie ardente'.²⁵⁴

The hero of Le Solitaire, one of Ionesco's most autobiographical works, recognizes what Jean did not, that paradise is there within himself, but that the individual realizes this too late, having lost access to the inner world of beauty and joy: 'Le passé est toujours beau et tendre et on le regrette, on s'en aperçoit trop tard', he says, 'Il nous faut une certaine perspective'.²⁵⁵ Unlike Ionesco's other heroes, the Solitaire renounces the search for past memories as a futile distraction, saying, 'Peut-être en retournant sur mes pas, en refaisant la route inverse, je pourrais de nouveau toucher, sentir, ce qui fut. Hélas, c'est comme si cela n'avait jamais été, le passé, images qui se disloquent. Qui peut prouver que cela fut? Le passé est un mort sans cadavre. Il était une fois ... il était une fois'.²⁵⁶ As he grows older, however, instead of sinking deeper into pessimism, he feels a sense of expectancy and optimism, until one day he sees a vision of the radiant garden with a silver ladder suspended in the blue sky, a vision denied to Ionesco's more determined seekers or only glimpsed when it was unobtainable. Moreover, he is not only observing this vision, but is part of it, in harmony with his surroundings, and time stands still as he explains, 'La lumière était très forte mais cela ne faisait pas mal aux yeux. Les échelons brillaient. Le jardin s'approchait de moi, m'entourait, j'en faisais partie, j'étais au milieu. Des années passèrent ou des secondes'.²⁵⁷ The vision fades, but the flowers that he plucked from the tree and the radiance that remains with him attest to its reality. It is obviously a symbol, perhaps of the possibility of finding a new attitude to life and death or of rediscovering an older one, of finding one's individual identity and the forgotten harmony of

²⁵⁴Jean Delay, in Discours de réception d'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française, p.83.

²⁵⁵Le Solitaire, p.33.

²⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p.134.

²⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p.191.

childhood. Whatever the symbol, it seems that, for the first time, the narrator finds deep satisfaction and contentment and can say, 'Je pris cela pour un signe'.²⁵⁸ However, Ionesco later regretted even this relative optimism and told Sandra Stolojan, in an interview, that he found the phrase savoured too much of mysticism and intended to replace it in the second edition with the phrase 'Je fus pris d'un grand éclat de rire'. He dismisses any deeper interpretation of the episode, saying, 'on ne sait pas si les visions de mon personnage sont les visions d'un fou ou d'un mystique, ou les hallucinations d'un alcoolique. Je laisse au lecteur le soin de choisir entre ces différentes possibilités d'explication'.²⁵⁹

Ionesco's last two plays explore a different route to rediscovering one's origins and individual identity. By finding, albeit in a dream state, the long-dead relations who surrounded him in his formative years, Ionesco's hero hopes to define himself more clearly. The hero of L'Homme aux valises, Ionesco tells us, 'est toujours hanté par sa jeunesse et les problèmes qu'il a vécus'.²⁶⁰ However, the hero cannot find his dead relatives or, when he does, they do not recognize him or he does not recognize them. Wherever he goes, he finds himself isolated and alone 'comme congénitalement étranger'.²⁶¹ The play is made up, Ionesco admits, of personal memories of childhood and adolescence; earlier than those he recounts in Présent passé, and these memories reveal another side of childhood, the distressing conflicts which he had with his father, his step-mother and her brothers and the nightmarish memory of having to return to Roumania and witness the rise of totalitarianism there. Once again, the search ends in failure, and this is perhaps why Ionesco continues to look for clues to the individual identity among the dead in Voyages chez les morts. This extremely autobiographical work is made up of an amalgam of memories, dreams, and nightmares aimed more at exorcising an obsessive feeling of guilt towards his mother, than recapturing the joy of a lost paradise. Many of the themes are already familiar. His shock at how much his mother has aged recalls his childhood terror when he realized his mother would die. His mother's love of their cosy home calls to mind Marie-Madeleine in La Soif. In one

²⁵⁸ Le Solitaire, p.191.

²⁵⁹ 'Nous avons la manie des révolutions', Interview with Sandra Stolojan, p.1.

²⁶⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.172-173.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p.173.

sequence, situated in a decor that significantly merges from a gloomy basement of the rue Claude-Terrasse to the windmill of La Chapelle-Anthenaise to the Château of Cerisy-la-Salle, Ionesco describes the progressive loss of the childhood paradise. 'J'ai tellement eu peur du vide noir', he recalls, 'd'un tunnel sombre dans lequel je me serais précipité, dans lequel je tomberais dans une chute sans fin'.²⁶² He describes too the loss of the faculty for wonder, the process of entering into an adult society, the hostility of the world after his separation from the harmony of childhood, and his loss of individual identity:

Pendant près d'un siècle, je ne savais pas d'où j'arrivais. Je ne savais pas où j'allais, je ne savais pas où j'étais. Et puis, l'inhabituel étant devenu habituel et l'anormalité étant devenue la norme, je me suis dit que j'étais peut-être chez moi tout de même ... j'étais pris dans l'engrenage des choses. J'avais un métier que je prenais pour une vocation. Je fonctionnais, pour oublier ma peur. Mais oui, c'est que je me suis senti chez moi à partir d'un certain moment, il y avait des formes, il y avait des objets dans l'espace, puis tout d'un coup les objets prirent des formes monstrueuses pour me rappeler sans doute que je n'étais pas pas chez moi.²⁶³

Repeating an idea outlined in Le Piéton, Jean wonders if there are not a number of different states of existence, several distinct universes interwoven together, and that paradise might, therefore, lie hidden nearby. 'Il y a peut-être des espaces imbriqués les uns dans les autres', he says, 'séparés par des rideaux imaginaires, par des cloisons. Il y a peut-être des temps dans le même temps à la fois réunis et séparés'.²⁶⁴ Then, in a conversation with his friend Alexandre, Ionesco, speaking through the mouth of Jean, broaches the question of the desire to return to the marvellous freshness of the world of childhood, counteracted by the ties of habit and the fear of the new and unknown. Jean says:

Et on voudrait recommencer à condition que tout soit neuf. Mais ce neuf, on s'y attend. On aime recommencer mais on n'aime pas commencer Si nous et les autres pouvions redécouvrir la fraîcheur du premier matin! ... J'ai une âme bourgeoise, ce qui veut dire une âme des mêmes habitudes Si on pouvait avoir une idée quelconque, une petite idée du nouveau pays, si on le savait, il n'y aurait plus de dépaysement. Je ne sais pas si j'aime l'aventure ou si j'ai horreur de l'aventure.²⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Jean does physically retrace his steps to childhood by

²⁶² Théâtre, VII, p.60.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p.103.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., pp.109-111.

returning to La Chapelle-Anthenaise. 'Je cherche l'espace perdu',²⁶⁶ he tells the village boy. The key to paradise is not to be found, however, in any geographical location, but in the self, and Jean finds no traces of his paradise. The house has been demolished, replaced by three skyscrapers, thus destroying the embodiment of his memories, as Jean laments, 'Dommage que la maison soit démolie, il n'en reste rien. Pas même le souvenir. C'est pourtant ce que je suis venu chërcher'.²⁶⁷ There are only glimpses of paradise, short and fleeting, like the momentary illuminations which Ionesco experienced as an adolescent, and, lacking the stability and timelessness of the original paradise, they leave an even more bitter sense of nostalgia and loss when they recede. Jean describes one such experience, incorporating the images of the countryside, light, elevation, and the radiant city:

Il y a de grands champs, une côte. Cela vous remet le coeur en place. Oui, je la revois, cette côte et je revois cette campagne, pleine de lumière. Quelle lumière c'était! Une lumière différente de la lumière. Et puis, on grimpait la côte et tout en haut, au sommet, on arrivait dans la ville claire Alors pourquoi l'ombre revient-elle? Lumière, reste! ... Hélas, tout s'obscurcit. Je n'ai plus assez de force pour garder en moi la lumière d'Aluminia.²⁶⁸

This play makes a comprehensive tour of Ionesco's childhood memories, but affords no access to recapturing the state in its entirety and immutability. Thus, Ionesco remains obsessed with the search for his childhood, without being able to free himself from its dominance or to grasp his memories and fully understand them, as the last words of the play suggest, 'Je ne sais pas. Je sais seulement que j'ai gardé sur moi les bribes et les miettes des cellules. Je ne sais pas'.²⁶⁹

The obsession with childhood not only affects Ionesco's plays thematically, but also stylistically. The desire to express something in a striking, original manner is synonymous with a desire to rediscover the freshness and wonder of the child. 'Ce n'est pas que je veuille l'originalité littéraire', he states, 'ce que je veux réaliser c'est l'expression de l'origine'.²⁷⁰ Many of the superficially absurd elements of Ionesco's theatre and language reflect the attempt to recreate a child-like world

²⁶⁶ Théâtre, VII, 114.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.116.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.99.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.134.

²⁷⁰ Découvertes, p.89.

where everything appears in a strange, unfamiliar light and where the irrational and the illogical can be accepted without surprise and disbelief; as Michel Corvin points out, 'Ce que l'on prend volontiers pour insolite dans le théâtre de Ionesco n'est peut-être qu'une interprétation du monde vu par les yeux d'un enfant'.²⁷¹ Nostalgia for the vision of the child also shapes much of Ionesco's humour, which depends on strange juxtapositions of characters, words, and situations, forcing the audience to reconsider aspects of the world which they had taken for granted and to see them in a new light. Ionesco's defence of humour and the liberty of the imagination is also a defence of the viewpoint of the child, for all three depend upon fantasy and the total liberty of the imagination, as André Breton has observed:

La complaisance envers l'absurde rouvre à l'homme le royaume mystérieux qu'habitent les enfants. Le jeu de l'enfance comme moyen perdu de conciliation entre l'action et la rêverie ... à commencer par le simple 'jeu de mots' se trouve de la sorte réhabilité et dignifié il y a de la résistance foncière que l'enfant opposera toujours à ceux qui tendent à le modeler, par suite à le réduire, en limitant plus ou moins arbitrairement son magnifique champ d'expérience.²⁷²

Many of Ionesco's techniques of characterization and staging also reflect his childhood memories. As a child, he loved the Punch and Judy shows in the Luxembourg Gardens, not because he found them funny, but, on the contrary, because he found them tragically real, recapturing as they did a sense of the strangeness of the world. 'C'était le spectacle même du monde', he says, 'qui, insolite, invraisemblable, mais plus vrai que le vrai, se présentait à moi sous une forme infiniment simplifiée et caricaturale, comme pour en souligner la grotesque et brutale vérité'.²⁷³ It is this sense of strangeness which he tries to recreate in his theatre through the use of puppet-like characters and spectacles reminiscent of the circus. As a child, Ionesco also remembers being very impressed by the diorama, or magic lantern,²⁷⁴ and its influence can be discerned in some of his stage sets. Vernois sees in Ionesco's use of 'paysages-jouets' an attempt to recreate his childhood world:

La plus grande originalité de Ionesco s'affirme néanmoins avec l'utilisation du paysage miniature, à l'occasion de jouets

²⁷¹ Michel Corvin, Le Théâtre nouveau en France, third edition (Paris: P.U.F., 1969), p.64.

²⁷² André Breton, cited by Morot-Sir, 'Apparition de l'humour dans la littérature française', p.44.

²⁷³ Notes, p.53.

²⁷⁴ Présent passé, pp.8-9.

intégrés au décor. Il s'agit là indubitablement^b pour le dramaturge d'une résurrection d'un monde enfantin cher à son coeur. Ce cadre féérique s'inspire de la technique des dioramas ... Un paysage de rêve, recréé en réduction matérialise ce que l'enfant a conçu de plus merveilleux.²⁷⁵

An example is the miniature scene in the background of Le Piéton, with a silver bridge and cable cars going up and down the mountain and a tiny brightly coloured railway. The whole set is like a fairytale, deliberately idyllic, simplistic and child-like. Ionesco states that it should recall the style of one of the primitive painters, like Douanier Rousseau, Chagall or Utrillo,²⁷⁶ a style appropriate to the fantastic character of the play: 'L'histoire faussement naïve, dans une ambiance faussement naïve, avec des images de scènes voulues naïves'.²⁷⁷ The diorama also probably inspired the technique of the painted backcloth that rolls on to suggest various decors. This is used in Le Piéton, Tueur, and in Voyages chez les morts where the images clearly depict the loss of the sense of wonder: 'Quelques instants encore se déroule dans le fond le paysage avec de belles maisons et des jardins ... Puis apparaissent, toujours dans le fond, des rues de moins en moins belles, anonymes, sales, la lumière vive a disparu'.²⁷⁸ Ionesco's use of lighting and colour, the alternation of brilliant light and grey shadows, is also an attempt to recreate the violent, immediate sensations of the child perceiving the dialectical oppositions of existence. Vernois comments, 'Quant à la féerie de l'enfance, elle restituera le goût des sensations violentes, des couleurs brutales, des disparates, des réflexions naïves et fondamentales qui caractériseront la nouvelle écriture théâtrale'.²⁷⁹ In these ways, the stage techniques reproduce the memories and dreams of childhood surging up afresh in the adult mind of the artist. 'Je me souviens', Jean says in La Soif, 'Toutes ces images étaient enfouies quelque part dans la nuit de la mémoire. Elles me reviennent une à une; elles surgissent de plus en plus pures, comme lavées par les eaux d'un oubli provisoire'.²⁸⁰ Indeed, the vision of the artist must of necessity approximate to the simple wonder of the child. 'Bien souvent, sinon

²⁷⁵ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, pp.153-154.

²⁷⁶ Théâtre, III, 121.

²⁷⁷ Antidotes, p.260.

²⁷⁸ Théâtre, VII, 55.

²⁷⁹ Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale, pp.17-18.

²⁸⁰ Théâtre, IV, 106.

toujours, la poésie est enfance, langage d'enfance',²⁸¹ he states. Ionesco believes that in order to understand his theatre the reader must also enter his world, the world of the child, and look at reality anew: 'Je pense que mon théâtre est très simple, très aisé à comprendre, visuel, primitif, enfantin. Il s'agit simplement de se débarrasser de certaines habitudes mentales raisonneuses'.²⁸²

This naïvety, the return to the sources of his own being with the advantages of the mature, shaping vision of the artist, parallels a return to the sources of the theatre, a return to classicism and the fundamental archetypes of the theatre. This aim, Ionesco believes, is that of all avant-garde authors:

Une véritable tentative de retour aux sources. Quelles sources? Celles du théâtre. Un retour à un modèle intérieur de théâtre; c'est en soi-même que l'on retrouve les figures et les schèmes permanents, profonds, de la théâtralité Pour la découvrir, il faut peut-être une certaine ignorance, une certaine naïveté, une audace qui vient de cette naïveté, mais il s'agit d'une naïveté qui n'est pas simplicité d'esprit, d'une ignorance qui ne supprime pas le savoir: elle l'assimile, le rajeunit.²⁸³

Therefore, the obsession with childhood memories is not only a nostalgia for the happiness of the past, but a search for the plenitude of experience and certainty of self by a return to its sources. By retracing the processes of disintegration of the identity, Ionesco hopes to find some landmark, an irreducible core of self that is resistant to time and change, remaining constant from childhood to the present. In the words of Geneviève Serreau, 'Ionesco épelle sa préhistoire avec l'espoir qu'elle lui apporte, à défaut d'une réponse, la certitude de la territoire en lui à l'abri du Temps et de ses massacres: l'intact Paradis perdu de l'enfance, immobile au fond de l'âme ... comme une terre où aborder?'.²⁸⁴ At time the memory seems very distant, like the memory of a memory, so he is no longer longer sure it is even his: 'Des débris de souvenirs. Je me demande, parfois, s'ils m'appartiennent. De vagues lueurs dans la nuit. Quelques îlots émergent sur l'océan infini du néant. Prêts à s'engloutir, à leur tour. Dernières survivances'.²⁸⁵ All the irrelevant processes of life and habit separate the

²⁸¹ Antidotes, p.281.

²⁸² Notes, P.192.

²⁸³ Ibid., p.86.

²⁸⁴ 'J'avais deux ans', Interview with Geneviève Serreau, Quinzaine Littéraire, 34 '1 September 1967), 8.

²⁸⁵ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.179,199.

individual from his fundamental identity, and his great enemy, Time, acts in concert to erode the memories which are the last lifeline by which the adult can retrace his steps to the childhood paradise. Yet it is paradoxically in this past life that the key to individual identity is to be found. 'Je suis perdu dans les milliers de mots et d'actes manqués qui sont "ma vie", qui désarticulent, qui détruisent mon âme', Ionesco laments, 'Cette vie, elle est entre moi et moi-même, je ne la reconnais pas comme mienne, et pourtant c'est à elle que je demande d'être révélé'.²⁸⁶ However, Ionesco's explanation of the theme of the search for lost paradise of childhood emphasizes over and over again the futility of any external search for a new place, an Eldorado, or for an old place, as Ionesco found himself returning to La Chapelle-Anthenaise in 1939. He searched in vain for the traces of his lost paradise, lamenting, 'Ici, le paradis perdu que je suis venu retrouver mais qui n'est plus lui-même. Il s'est éloigné de ces lieux, n'y laissant que des images, des odeurs, un peu d'âme Où donc tout cela a-t-il disparu? Dans quel abîme? ... Sans trace, dans le grand trou noir'.²⁸⁷ Ionesco wonders, 'Ne suis-je pas trop adulte pour retrouver le monde de rêve, le paradis enfantin?',²⁸⁸ and the reply betrays a deep illusionment: 'Il est bien tard, maintenant, passé la trentaine, bien tard pour faire sortir de mes profondeurs, de mes caves, cet univers de lumière, cet univers caché, enseveli, ou ses lueurs; ou ses lueurs fragmentaires d'un univers'.²⁸⁹

There is, however, a recurrent assumption in Ionesco's writing that the desire to believe in something and a continuing sense of nostalgia for something implies its existence, as Bérenger says in Tueur, 'Ce ne peut être une illusion puisque j'en ressens terriblement l'absence'.²⁹⁰ If the individual rejects his memories and abdicates his search for identity, it is, Ionesco tells us, as though the whole of his existence had been retrospectively effaced,²⁹¹ whereas, whilst the nostalgia for the childhood state remains intact, there is still a distant contact with this world and with the individual identity. 'Il ne me reste que le

²⁸⁶ Présent passé, p.248.

²⁸⁷ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.179.

²⁸⁸ 'Une Entrevue avec Ionesco', Interview with Nelly K. Murstein, p.619.

²⁸⁹ Présent passé, p.16.

²⁹⁰ Théâtre, II, 76.

²⁹¹ Présent passé, p.246.

regret d'être un autre', Ionesco says, 'C'est ce regret qui fait que je suis toujours moi-même, ou l'enfant que j'étais, que je suis, oh, mes couleurs, les couleurs du monde, mon autre ciel, mon autre monde, mes autres océans, mon continent d'autrefois'.²⁹² The conviction that the individual was once in harmony with the cosmos and himself reassures him that this ideal can be realized again. Paradise is to be found in ourselves, Ionesco believes, and what the individual should seek in re-tracing the steps to his childhood paradise, is not a place, but an attitude to the world, the capacity for astonishment, and a magical freshness of vision. Ionesco seeks this naivety and wonder in the act of writing, as Saint Tobi explains:

Le mythe de l'âge d'or chez Ionesco acquiert un sens nouveau: le paradis n'a jamais existé, c'est une création mythique du premier homme qui, à cause de son étonnement, a vu le monde dans une lumière transfigurée. Ce que cherche donc l'homme et l'écrivain Ionesco, n'est pas un pays imaginaire mais un certain sentiment devant le monde. Toute l'évolution artistique de Ionesco se trouve sous le signe de cette recherche, la recherche de 'la stupeur émerveillée' de l'enfant et du premier homme.²⁹³

For Ionesco, literary creation is like being born anew: 'Je naissais par la littérature, une seconde fois; une seconde fois, j'étais le nouveau-né',²⁹⁴ and it is the light of childhood that guides Ionesco through all the difficulties of the search for identity:

Peut-être que, aujourd'hui encore, après des dizaines d'années, c'est toujours cette lumière qui me nourrit, qui me tient vivant, qui a été plus forte que mes détresses et mes dépressions et qui m'a guidé dans mes abîmes et qui a fait que j'ai retrouvé le chemin sinon des cimes du moins celui de la pente qui monte. C'est de pouvoir être émerveillé qui me maintient en vie. Aujourd'hui comme hier.²⁹⁵

Therefore, Ionesco's theatre and other writings all portray the search of the author and of his characters for their individual identities. The search for self takes on many different material forms. It can be a place, a new country, perfect city, the 'antimonde' or the lost paradise, or it can take the form of a person, 'Mallot' in Victimes, or the many changing faces of the woman for whom Jean is searching in La Soif. Whatever form it takes, however, the vital importance of the quest is not in question: 'Cette rencontre ... est la plus nécessaire de toutes

²⁹² Présent passé, p.42.

²⁹³ Tobi, 'A la recherche du paradis perdu', p.159.

²⁹⁴ Découvertes, p.92.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., pp.60-61.

les rencontres'.²⁹⁶ These searches are never conclusive, however, for the individual finds himself, like Jean in the third scene of La Soif, 'Au pied du mur', blocked by a barrier, a wall of consciousness, from his goal. Ionesco suggests that these barriers are perhaps there to protect the individual, to enclose him in the small part of the universe that man has been able to tame and reduce to reason and to try to go beyond them would reveal only disaster and emptiness:

Ces murs qui s'élèvent, ces murs impénétrables que je m'acharne à vouloir trouer ou abattre ne sont peut-être que la raison. La raison a élevé ces murs pour nous préserver du chaos. Car derrière ces murs, c'est le chaos, c'est le néant. Il n'y a rien derrière les murs. Ils sont la frontière entre ce que nous avons réussi à faire de ce monde et le vide. De l'autre côté c'est la mort. Ne pas franchir ces murs.²⁹⁷

If Bérenger, in Le Piéton, learns the futility of searching for the individual identity beyond these walls in an 'au-delà' that is revealed as being nothing but chaos and destruction, it is Jean, in La Soif, who carries the lesson to its logical conclusion and finds that the search cannot be an escape from the self, for the answers are in the individual's life not in a mythical paradise. Ionesco himself had to learn this lesson: 'J'ai tellement couru après la vie qu'elle m'a toujours échappé', he admits.²⁹⁸ He realizes that by his ardent desire to search the world for his identity, he had not given himself the time and solitude for contemplation to search within himself, his dreams, nightmares, and memories and recreate the wonder and wholeness of childhood: 'Il ne faut pas tenter de saisir les rêves. Ils nous saisissent'.²⁹⁹ Man possesses all the keys in his own nature. Paradise is a state of soul, not an objective reality. 'Je vous retrouve', Ionesco writes, 'oui, comme un scaphandrier qui ne peut pas faire remonter à la surface les vaisseaux naufragés ... Dans les profondeurs, vous êtes, mes trésors'.³⁰⁰ It is not until he accepts his human nature, with its inevitable mortality and imperfections, that he can discover himself. Camus had already outlined 'la seule règle qui soit originale aujourd'hui: apprendre à vivre et à mourir, et, pour être homme, refuser d'être Dieu'.³⁰¹

²⁹⁶ Théâtre, IV, 111.

²⁹⁷ Journal, pp.178-179.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29.

²⁹⁹ Théâtre, V, 94.

³⁰⁰ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.197.

³⁰¹ Albert Camus, L'Homme Révolté (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p.366.

Ionesco's heroes find that their dissatisfaction and attempts to escape from life only make them more prisoners of that life, for true freedom comes, paradoxically, in turning their backs to the wall and living with as much intensity as possible. 'Que l'homme accepte de se vouloir homme', Ionesco says, 'et le "réel merveilleux" se découvre dans sa nature même ... sa misère vient d'avoir oublié qu'il est capable de s'envoler'.³⁰²

If the paradise of the integrated self and the harmony of the cosmos is present all the time, unobserved, is the search for it a waste of time? Ionesco obviously considers the search for individual identity worthwhile, even if it can never be pursued to a definite conclusion, because the journey represents a series of questions, of interrogations posed by the individual to himself, to others, and to the surrounding world. Although this state of interrogation is a cause of great suffering, it is like a state of purgatory through which the individual must pass in a process of initiation and purification. Saint Tobi writes:

Du point de vue initiatique, la recherche du paradis est plus importante que sa découverte, découverte qui est, soit dit on passant, assez incertaine. L'homme est obligé par sa nature de chercher, de chercher éternellement son sens, son idéal, son bonheur ... même s'ils n'existent pas. A travers cette recherche, il atteindra un autre but, plus profond: l'initiation. (Les héros des romans chinois n'arrivent pas toujours au but de leurs voyages, mais en revanche, ils les terminent toujours plus sages, enrichis par l'expérience. Le but de ces voyages est initiatique).³⁰³

Ionesco admits that he has found no simple answer, 'Je n'ai rien résolu; depuis toujours, dans le même état d'interrogation'.³⁰⁴ This is because there is no neatly encapsulated solution to be found, only a unique, infinite interrogation, a 'question sans réponse, question qui se suffit à elle-même, question qui est comme sa propre réponse'.³⁰⁵ The state of total interrogation rejoins the adult to childhood much more directly than the rational, deliberate search which he undertakes, for this fundamental metaphysical question represents 'un étonnement aveuglant qui nous dissoudrait dans la lumière'.³⁰⁶ The journey in search of the self is, therefore, enriching and worthwhile, even if it can never reach its goal;

³⁰² 'Eugène Ionesco à Zurich', Interview with Jacques Depallens, p.12.

³⁰³ Tobi, A la recherche du paradis perdu, p.171.

³⁰⁴ Journal, p.56.

³⁰⁵ Découvertes, p.73.

³⁰⁶ Présent passé, p.240.

's'interroger sans répondre est plus vrai que de ne pas s'interroger',³⁰⁷
for, Ionesco tells us, 'ce n'est pas la réponse qui éclaire, c'est la
question'.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷Notes, p.20.

³⁰⁸Découvertes, p.16.

A man who is ill-adjusted to the world is always on the point of finding himself. One who is adjusted to the world never finds himself but gets to be a cabinet minister.

Herman Hesse, Reflections.

The search for myself is ended.
I am buried in the world.

Samuel Beckett, Malone dies.

CHAPTER IV

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE WORLD

In his search for individual identity, the individual inevitably looks to the world of objects as a wider frame of reference, a context which will reflect and confirm his existence and enable him to define the limits of the self more closely. Despite the tragic separation between the world and the self in childhood, the individual is unable to escape his material surroundings to which he is intimately linked through the physical body. As in the concept of 'Umwelt', introduced by the German ethologists, Ionesco believes that the environment and the object world not only surround the individual, but are part of the individual, as are former environments, for the individual is indelibly shaped by the objects and places of his experience. He tries to situate himself in the world of objects by establishing some measure of control over his possessions and by identifying with objects and places that are familiar or with which he feels a sense of involvement. However, far from extending his sense of self, he finds that the material world is actively hostile towards him and threatens his existence through the antithetical poles of 'le vide' and 'le trop plein', reducing him to an inanimate object by destroying his unique living presence. The world is impenetrable to human reason, both in its physical manifestation, as the individual can only see a subjective projection of himself, never the essence of an object, and in its metaphysical dimension, for modern man is deprived of transcendence. Ionesco's work bears witness to a continual struggle to find a balance between the opposing poles of the individual identity and the world, between spirit and matter, by finding a firm sense of identity with which to withstand the pressures of the world. In the words of Alexandre Rainof, 'Son oeuvre tout entier est donc basé sur une tension très élevée entre le Moi et le non-Moi, devenant ainsi une recherche d'équilibre. L'Etre, au sens absolu du terme est justement

cet équilibre'.¹

The individual tries to affirm his self over and against his surroundings by classifying these external elements and reducing them to his reason. However, Ionesco is painfully aware that not only the universe in its infinite extra-temporal aspects, but even the familiar universe of objects, defies analysis by the processes of traditional logic. The mind which is abstract cannot grasp the three-dimensional, but can only reduce it to facts and measurements that fail to penetrate its true essence. As Camus wrote, 'Si je puis par la science saisir les phénomènes et les énumérer, je ne puis pour autant appréhender le monde'.² All the individual can know of the world of phenomenal reality is his own subjective perception of it. Following Kant's Critique, Ionesco believes that the world is a creation of the mind, and time and space are not features of reality but forms of human perception. Man's knowledge of the world is only his knowledge of his personal relationship with a part of that world. Thus, in the words of T.S. Eliot, 'The world ... exists only as it is found in the experiences of finite centres, experiences so mad and strange that they will be boiled away before you boil them down to one homogenous mass'.³ Ionesco explains the subjective nature of the world, the true essence of which remains impenetrable, in terms of the Kantian concept of the 'noumenon', an object of purely intellectual intuition, devoid of all phenomenal attributes:

Il y a un monde. Je ne puis le connaître qu'en fonction de moi, réalité fondamentale, bien que ce soit un moi pris dans le monde. Je connais le monde comme moi-monde, comme monde-moi: donc, le monde hors de moi, auquel je crois mais qui ne m'est pas connaissable, c'est bien le monde nouménal kantien Mais alors le monde en soi n'est pas connaissable. Puisqu'il n'y a que conscience du monde, cela revient à dire ... que la réalité en soi, est insaisissable ou incompréhensible, elle est, mais elle n'est pas pour moi.⁴

Reality, as the individual perceives it, is only a distorted reflection or projection of the self. '"La réalité" n'est bien pour moi que ce que j'impose à ce qui est, à ce quelque chose qui est, à cette sorte de matière extérieure ... l'interprétation que je donne de ceci, de cela,

¹Alexandre Rainof, 'Mythologies de l'être chez Ionesco' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1969), p.1.

²Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, p.36.

³T.S. Eliot, Knowledge and Experience in the philosophy of F.H. Bradley (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p.168.

⁴Présent passé, pp.42-43.

est projection de moi-même'.⁵ Inevitably there are as many different realities as there are people to perceive them. 'Cela prouve tout simplement', Ionesco concludes, 'que la réalité, que le monde apparaît sous des aspects multiples, a des tempéraments multiples ou divers, que ces tempéraments ressentent donc le monde selon leur nature'.⁶ The individual is faced with a picture of the universe like that in Béranger's vision, in Le Piéton, 'plusieurs univers, imbriqués les uns dans les autres Un nombre indéterminé de quantités. Ces mondes s'interpénètrent, se superposent, sans se toucher, car ils peuvent coexister dans le même espace'.⁷

If the world is a subjective creation, it follows that it has no inherent permanence or stability. Ionesco confesses that he experiences:

Un sentiment déchirant, de l'extrême fragilité, précarité du monde, comme si tout cela était et n'était pas à la fois, entre l'être et le non-être ... Pour moi, c'est comme si l'actualité du monde était à tout moment parfaitement inactuelle. Comme s'il n'y avait rien; comme si le fond des choses n'était rien, ou comme s'il nous échappait. Une seule actualité, pourtant: le déchirement continu du voile de l'apparence Rien ne tient, tout s'en va.⁸

The individual longs to establish a stable, permanent exterior world to act as a context and mirror for his individual identity, but, perceiving the shifting, uncertain nature of external reality, he feels his inner existence threatened. 'Tout semblait prouver l'inexistence des choses et ma propre inexistence', the hero of Le Solitaire laments, 'J'avais peur de disparaître'.⁹ Confused by the contradiction between his inner reality and the outer reality whose essence his mind is unable to encompass, the individual no longer feels able to define himself. Richard Schechner analyzes the individual's predicament, writing, 'The gap between the inner and outer reality lays bare the alienation of his heroes from themselves and from the world. They lose contact not only with that world but also with themselves'.¹⁰ Man feels the insubstantiality of his self dissolving in face of the anonymity of the outside world. His feelings, Leonard Pronko tells us, are those 'of man uprooted, man

⁵ Antidotes, p.272.

⁶ Ibid., p.275.

⁷ Théâtre, III, 146.

⁸ Notes, pp.196-197.

⁹ Le Solitaire, p.111.

¹⁰ Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', p.192.

lost, man disintegrating in an absurd universe'.¹¹

Ionesco's heroes relive this problem of the alienation of the self that results from their lack of relatedness with the outside world. Like Camus's description of modern man, they are 'étranges citoyens du monde, exilés dans leur propre partie'.¹² Amédée feels a constant opposition between himself and the world, which makes everyday life a struggle. 'Je suis désarmé dans la vie', he says, 'Je suis un inadapté ... Je ne suis pas fait pour vivre dans ce siècle'.¹³ Béranger, in Rhinocéros, and Choubert, in Victimes, are equally 'inadaptés', unable to adjust to society or to themselves. Faced with the overwhelming, monolithic and unknowable weight of the world around her, Joséphine, in Le Piéton, searches in vain for familiar and reassuring things or people, but can only see the anonymous and the inanimate crushing the personal and the unique. She cries, 'Je suis minuscule dans ce monde énorme. Je suis une fourmi égarée, affolée, qui cherche ses compagnes'.¹⁴ The hero of Le Solitaire explicitly connects his loss of individual identity with the individual's rupture with the world. He complains, 'C'était le malaise. Ne pas être chez soi. Ne pas avoir un chez soi. Ne pas avoir un soi'.¹⁵ Béranger, in Tueur, describes the same problem in more detail. In the ideal world, he says, outer and inner worlds would be in complete harmony, reflecting and confirming each other:

En somme, monde intérieur, monde extérieur, ce sont des expressions impropres, il n'y a pas de véritables frontières pourtant entre ces deux mondes; il y a une impulsion première, évidemment, qui vient de nous, et lorsqu'elle ne peut s'extérioriser, lorsqu'elle ne peut se réaliser objectivement, lorsqu'il n'y a pas un accord total entre moi du dedans et moi du dehors, c'est la catastrophe, la contradiction universelle, la cassure.¹⁶

Thus, a stranger to the phenomenal world and to himself, the individual feels himself to be empty, unable to live a meaningful existence.

'C'est la stérilité', he confesses, 'et la stérilité pour ma vie c'est la non-vie, c'est l'incapacité de vivre, c'est l'accablement et le vide, un vide paradoxalement lourd: un poisson je suis, hors de l'eau dans un

¹¹Leonard C. Pronko, 'The Prelate and the Pachyderm', Modern Drama, 4, 1 (May 1961), 64.

¹²Camus, L'Homme Révolté, p.311.

¹³Théâtre, I, 269.

¹⁴Théâtre, III, 180.

¹⁵Le Solitaire, p.111.

¹⁶Théâtre, II, 73.

univers où il n'y a rien ...'.¹⁷

This experience of being crushed by a 'vide paradoxalement lourd' characterizes another major obstacle that the individual encounters in trying to establish a relationship with his material context. He discovers that, not only is the individual in conflict with the world, but the world appears to be in contradiction with itself. In keeping with the dichotomy that governs all being, the world manifests itself sometimes as a 'vide', empty, insubstantial, and unreal, and at other times it seems 'trop plein', full of an over-abundance of objects, heavy and oppressive. 'Le monde me semble tantôt trop lourd, tantôt vide de toute substance', Ionesco says.¹⁸ Both states threaten the individual's struggle towards self-definition, one by threatening to dissolve the world into a void, the 'trou noir',¹⁹ so aptly named by the Old Man in Les Chaises and the other by asphyxiating the individual with a proliferation of amorphous, inanimate matter. Although superficially opposites, the two states are intimately linked; the 'trop plein' of matter often disguises 'le vide' lying beneath it. Thus, as Jean Vannier points out, underneath all the shock and fury of Ionesco's plays, there lies the silence of an empty world,²⁰ or, as Marguerite repeats in Le Roi, 'Au-dessous il y a le trou, au-dessus il y a le trou'.²¹

'Le monde est désert', Ionesco laments, 'Peuplé de fantômes aux voix plaintives, il murmure des chants d'amour sur les débris de mon néant! Revenez pourtant, douces images'. However, if Gérard de Nerval's words in Promenades et souvenirs are a beautiful poetic evocation of the 'néant' that Ionesco perceives beneath the surface of reality, his own experiences, he points out, have none of the 'douceur' that Nerval's words convey.²² His first experience of this 'void at the centre of things',²³ was as a child near the Square de Vaugirard, where he was living at that time. He was seized with anguish and terror at a world which was suddenly revealed to him as empty and insubstantial. 'Tout me paraît ombre', he recalls, 'évanescence, en effet. Je suis pris de

¹⁷ Découvertes, pp.92-93.

¹⁸ Notes, p.191.

¹⁹ Théâtre, I, 134.

²⁰ Jean Vannier, 'Langages de l'avant-garde', Théâtre populaire, 18 (1 May 1956), 33.

²¹ Théâtre, IV, 61.

²² Notes, p.269.

²³ Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, pp.78-94.

vertige, d'angoisse. C'est bien cela, le monde: un désert ou des ombres moribondes'.²⁴ The emptiness that characterizes 'le vide' is not like that which accompanies the state of joy and wonder, where the individual feels elation in a world that seems to be freed from the burden of material objects and restrictive significances. It is a metaphysical emptiness in which all life and existence seem unjustified and threatened with extinction or a return to the original state of chaos from which they were formed. Ionesco describes this emptiness in the preface to R.J. Chauffard's book, Les Pirogues, saying, 'Le monde se raréfie. Evanescant, il se dissipe. L'évanescence n'est pas douceur, quelque chose de cruel transperce le monde'.²⁵ It is the terrifying emptiness and absence that Ionesco materializes at the end of Les Chaises, the climax to which the whole play is leading: 'Irréalité du réel. Chaos originaire le monde s'en va en fumée, en sons et couleurs qui s'éteignent, les derniers fondements s'écroulent ou plutôt se disloquent. Ou fondent dans une sorte de nuit'.²⁶

In the face of the emptiness of existence, the inviolability of the individual identity remains the only meaningful assertion of life against the 'néant', but this identity is extremely vulnerable. The individual is threatened both from the outside, by his fear of being engulfed by 'les ténèbres du néant',²⁷ and from the inside, because he has looked to the false illusion of external reality to give him a substantial basis for his life. His search for identity, therefore, becomes an attempt to 'remplir le vide avec de l'être'.²⁸ This obsession is represented metaphorically by what Senart describes as Ionesco's 'hantise des trous',²⁹ reflecting Ionesco's reference in his Notes to 'les trous de la réalité'.³⁰ In Victimes, Ionesco describes 'un trou béant',³¹ and Choubert is stuffed with crusts of bread to fill up the holes in his memory. Amédée observes 'il n'y a que des trous',³² and fears to get rid

²⁴Notes, p.220.

²⁵Ionesco, Preface to Les Pirogues, by R.J. Chauffard (Paris: La Coincidence, 1980), p.11.

²⁶Notes, p.268.

²⁷Journal, p.36.

²⁸Théâtre, I, 205.

²⁹Senart, Ionesco, p.81.

³⁰Notes, p.264.

³¹Théâtre, I, 209.

³²Ibid., p.289.

of the growing corpse, which is gradually encroaching on his vital living space, because 'la maison nous paraîtra bien vide quand il ne sera plus là ...'.³³ Jean, in La Soif, fills himself with bread and wine to try to fill the gaps in his experience, and Les Chaises is built round an attempt to fill up the holes left by a life lived with the absence of any significance. The world hangs on the edge of a vacuum. At the end of Le Roi, characters and decor gradually slip away until 'enfin, il n'y a plus que cette lumière grise'.³⁴ Similarly, in L'Avenir, the characters, without noticing it, begin gently to 's'enfoncer et disparaître sans interruption du jeu',³⁵ and Le Nouveau locataire ends in silence and death. Ionesco recounts that in 1952 he was invited to a conference on the new theatre at Cerisy-la-Salle, and he was asked what La Cantatrice signified. After having thought about his reply all morning, he had answered simply, 'La vacuité, rien d'autre que rien', and he adds, apologetically, 'En effet, je ne pouvais que dire que je ne tâchais d'exprimer rien d'autre que le vide ontologique'.³⁶ The theme of this 'vide', by revealing, as Rosette Lamont states, 'the insubstantial basis on which we build our lives',³⁷ presents a picture of metaphysical emptiness, an environment in which the individual identity cannot survive and from which there is no escape. Josephine implores Bérenger, in Le Piéton, 'Envole-nous, plus loin que l'autre côté, plus loin que les Enfers', but he replies, 'Hélas! je ne peux pas, mes chéries. Après, il n'y a plus rien'.³⁸

The whole of the last chapter of Les Chaises is a theatricalized experience of nothingness. The dilapidated decor, the seven doors opening onto the circular corridor, leading nowhere and everywhere and used indiscriminately by the actors, the ghostly green light, and, above all, the central metaphor of the chairs representing society, inanimate matter, or anything that separates the individual from himself clearly express the author's perception of emptiness in a theatrical way. Ionesco here creates thirty-two non-existent characters, but the

³³Théâtre, I, 296.

³⁴Théâtre, IV, 74.

³⁵Théâtre, II, 229.

³⁶Ionesco, Preface to Ionesco: Situation et perspectives, Colloques du centre culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle, edited by Marie-France Ionesco and Paul Vernois (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1981), p.15.

³⁷Rosette C. Lamont, 'The Metaphysical Farce', French Review, 32, 4 (February 1959), 323.

³⁸Théâtre, III, 197.

three visible characters are no more or less real than the others.

They are necessary only from a technical viewpoint. Ionesco explains:

On ne peut créer l'absence que par opposition à des présences, les deux ou trois personnages qu'on voit dans Les Chaises ne sont en quelque sorte que les pivots d'une architecture mouvante, en grande partie invisible, évanescence, précaire, destinée à disparaître, comme le monde, les personnages étant eux-mêmes irréels, et cependant les points d'appui indispensables de cette construction.³⁹

However, the characters are not simply figments in the senile imagination of the old couple, as Ionesco emphasizes by the muttering which the audience hears, even after the obliteration of the couple's consciousness in suicide. 'La foule compacte des inexistants doit acquérir une existence tout-à-fait objective', Ionesco stresses.⁴⁰ The theme of the play is metaphysical; the character study is incidental. 'Le thème de la pièce n'est pas le message', Ionesco says, 'ni les échecs dans la vie, ni le désastre moral des vieux - mais bien les chaises, c'est à-dire l'absence de personnes ... l'absence de Dieu, l'absence de matière, l'irréalité du monde, le vide métaphysique; le thème de la pièce, c'est le rien'.⁴¹ Emptiness is suggested by a series of contrasts between the stage, cluttered with material objects, and the absence of living characters, the unending flow of words and the absence of meaning or ideas, the desires of the old couple and their inability to satisfy them. The coexistence of over-abundance and total emptiness comes the closest together in Les Chaises. It is, in Ionesco's paradoxical phrase, a 'vide solide'.⁴² He explains to Claude Bonnefoy, 'C'était à la fois la multiplication et l'absence, à la fois la prolifération et le rien'.⁴³ The tangibility of the chairs only emphasizes the vast emptiness of the stage, the victory of the inanimate over any human presence that would give it perspective and significance.

The world of matter is inevitably triumphant in this play, as the characters have no individual identity to oppose it. The old couple desperately try to give a retrospective reality and purpose to their lives by delivering a message to mankind, but the Orator's dumbness is symptomatic of the nothingness which their lives represent. The couple

³⁹Notes, p.268.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.266.

⁴¹Letter to Sylvain d'Homme, Spectacles (July 1956), p.9.

⁴²Entre la vie et le rêve, p.72.

⁴³Ibid.

indulge in self-deceit, trying to convince themselves and each other that they are something which they are not and never could have been. The Old Woman encourages her husband's illusion with her constant refrain, 'Tu es très doué. Si tu avais eu un peu d'ambition dans la vie, tu aurais pu être un Roi chef, un Journaliste chef, un Comédien chef, un Maréchal chef'.⁴⁴ The Old Man's retreat into infancy is another attempt to hide from himself the anguish of the realization that he has no individual identity. Adamov writes of Les Chaises, 'La pièce de Ionesco découvre quelque chose que l'on n'a pas envie de reconnaître en soi, la vieillesse fondamentale qui n'a rien à voir avec l'âge et qui, à un certain niveau de conscience, représente un état de l'existence humaine'.⁴⁵ The spectator also experiences anguish when confronted with what Schechner terms the 'Enactment of the Not', the revelation of his absence of individual identity and of the insubstantiality of the world. Ionesco describes this experience in Non. 'J'ai peur de regarder par la fenêtre le vide noir', he says, 'C'est pourquoi je ferme les yeux. Je vous demande humblement, je vous supplie, n'ouvrez pas mes yeux sur le vide! Tout s'écroule! Tout s'écroule! Mon hurlement est faible comme un soupir'.⁴⁶ But, by making the audience face the theatricalized experience of 'la présence de cette absence',⁴⁷ Ionesco hopes that each individual will be woken from his lethargy and will look honestly into himself, continuing the search for individual identity which is the only valid assertion against the emptiness that the world presents.

As in Les Chaises, the feeling of metaphysical emptiness, of lack of individual identity, is frequently indicated in Ionesco's theatre by a paradoxical over-abundance of material objects. The Solitaire cannot understand this opposition. He asks, 'Comment ce rien pouvait-il peser si lourdement? Et comment cette lourdeur pouvait-elle être en même temps si légère? Trop matérielle et immatérielle à la fois'.⁴⁸ The two phenomena are symptoms of the negative state of being where matter dominates spirit, and heaviness and depression overcome lightness and wonder, separating the individual from himself, from others, and from the world. 'L'Univers, encombré par la matière, est vide, alors, de

⁴⁴Théâtre, I, 134.

⁴⁵Arthur Adamov, 'Pour Ionesco et Tardieu', Arts, 359 (15-21 May 1952), 4.

⁴⁶Non, cited by Tobi, in A la recherche du paradis perdu, pp.118-119.

⁴⁷Notes, p.264.

⁴⁸Le Solitaire, p.112.

présence', Ionesco explains, 'le "trop" rejoint ainsi le "pas assez" et les objets sont la concrétisation de la solitude, de la victoire des forces antipsychiques, de tout ce contre quoi nous nous débattons'.⁴⁹ There is a constant state of tension between the overabundance of objects and things and the lack of justification for the fact of their existence. Ionesco's characters cannot comprehend or relate to the objects of the world in any meaningful way, yet these objects are his only connection with the outside world. The contrast between the emptiness, that the individual feels within himself, and the fullness of the world presents a threat to the individual identity that Laing characterizes by the word 'implosion' which he describes as 'the full terror of the experience of the world as liable at any moment to crash in and obliterate all identity as a gas will rush in and obliterate a vacuum'.⁵⁰ The search for individual identity is thus a constant combat of the inner life against materialism and the inanimate, anti-spiritual forces. Claude Bonnefoy explains:

[D'] un côté vous avez le mécanisme, le non-psychologique, tout ce qui est automatisme du comportement, dérèglement du langage. De l'autre il y a la psychologie des profondeurs, le rêve, l'angoisse, l'obsession Le mécanisme avec ce qu'il a de fascinant et d'inquiétant serait ce qui menace la vie intérieure.⁵¹

We have seen that the negative pole of being is characterized by feelings of weight and claustrophobia. Proliferating matter is both a visual theatrical metaphor and an underlying cause of this depressive state. The physical invasion of objects crushing the fragile human presence also represents a psychological invasion in which dead thoughts, stereotyped reactions and inertia gradually take over the living, vital part of the mind, replacing the individual identity. Thus, in the words of Simone Benmussa, Ionesco describes 'un état intérieur envahissant, hypertrophié, asphyxiant qu'il traduit en langage-objet sur scène Il s'ensuit un encombrement de l'espace scénique équivalent à l'encombrement moral'.⁵² It is a state of being, aptly described by Gaston Bachelard as a 'psychologie de la pesanteur', which makes mankind 'des

⁴⁹Notes, 232.

⁵⁰Laing, The Divided Self, p.45.

⁵¹Entre la vie et le rêve, p.122.

⁵²Simone Benmussa, 'Les Ensevelis dans le théâtre d'Ionesco, Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 22-23 (May 1958), 201.

êtres lourds, las, lents, des êtres tombants'.⁵³ Encircled by inanimate matter, the individual feels that the world has become a claustrophobic prison where he may asphyxiate. 'Le monde pèse; l'univers m'écrase', Ionesco complains, '... la matière remplit tout, prend toute la place, anéantit toute liberté sous son poids, l'horizon se rétrécit, le monde devient un cachot étouffant'.⁵⁴ Or again, it is the world which he describes in Découvertes, 'il est là m'enfermant, hostile, comme une énorme boule de plomb, une prison dans lequel je suis emprisonné et étouffé'.⁵⁵ The proliferation of matter is thus a vivid and far-reaching theatrical metaphor, representing all that is inimical to the individual identity: the erosion of time and habit, the stultifying effects of stereotyped thought and language, the deadening of wonder through habit, and the over-reliance on and identification with material objects or places. Simone Benmussa distinguishes six main causes of the claustrophobia from which Ionesco and his characters suffer, all of which combine to enclose and crush the individual identity:

Encerclés, les personnages de Ionesco le sont par leurs souvenirs et par le monde. Toutes les formes deviennent obstruantes, toutes les pensées équivalentes, donc encombrantes. Opacité du langage: encerclement à l'intérieur de conversations tournantes. Opacité des mots devenus objets (prolifération), opacité des objets construisant des lieux coincés ... opacité des maisons qui s'effritent, qui s'enfoncent, se couvrent de champignons, se réduisent à l'espace du tombeau, maisons de l'"éternel automne"; opacité du temps, roulant comme un tapis mécanique sur lequel l'homme ne peut que perdre l'équilibre; opacité enfin des idéologies agressives, entrecroisées, annulées.⁵⁶

Proliferating matter is thus the concrete image of a state of being, or rather of non-being, in which amorphous matter severs the individual from his deeper self, leaving him objectified, in a state of living death. In the words of R.N. Coe, proliferation represents 'cette perverse faculté d'accroissement et d'empiétement, inhérent à ce qui est mort; c'est plus que le pouvoir qu'a la mort de l'emporter sur la vie; c'est une sorte de plan d'existence intermédiaire entre la vie et la mort, une sorte de troisième plan qui n'est ni la vie, ni la mort'.⁵⁷

⁵³Gaston Bachelard, cited by Michel Lioure, in 'L'Imagination matérielle dans l'oeuvre de Ionesco', Situation et perspectives, p.178.

⁵⁴Notes, p.232.

⁵⁵Découvertes, p.92.

⁵⁶Benmussa, Ionesco, p.68.

⁵⁷Richard N. Coe, 'La Farce tragique', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 49.

This feeling of anguish at the overwhelming proximity of inert matter is similar to that of other modern writers. Sartre's Roquentin, in La Nausée, feels a physical disgust with the viscosity and contingency of things, combined with their lack of reason or justification. 'Je compris qu'il n'y avait pas de milieu entre l'existence et cette abondance pâmée',⁵⁸ he says. Like himself, material objects are 'de trop'; unnamable, uncontrollable, they surround him from all sides, like wild animals, and impose their presence upon him. Objects are no longer the property and possession of man with a constant identity reflecting that of their owner. They are not even merely passive and separate from man. They take on a life of their own. This is no comforting animism, however, that gives meaning and spirit to these objects. Their existence remains empty of significance, and their actions are, at best, irrelevant and absurd, like the random striking of the clock in La Cantatrice. At worst, objects are actively hostile to the individual. They are, in the words of Simone Benmussa, 'doués d'une vie aveugle mais dirigée par l'instinct d'ensevelir, une vie qui progresse sans repos, encombrante, puis oppressante, enfin criminelle sans crime car elle enterre sans tuer'.⁵⁹ In Tardieu's play, Le Meuble, the furniture replaces man, taking over all his human faculties, memory, knowledge, even his soul and recites Musset before finally shooting its prospective owner,⁶⁰ and in Ce que parler veut dire, the record not only reproduces the words of his master, like 'un malicieux écho', but comments on them and derides them too.⁶¹ 'Things are like the nightmare of consciousness', Doubrovsky concludes.⁶² The 'Chosisme' of Ionesco, as Richard Coe points out, differs from that of Tardieu and the authors of the Nouveau Roman, only in that the collection of heteroclite objects, with which he surrounds his characters, are even more sinister and perverse. 'Chez Ionesco, pourtant', he notes, 'les objets ne se contentent pas de vous épier. Ils attaquent, ils envahissent ... ils s'emparent du langage, du son et de l'image; tout ce qu'ils touchent est changé en pierre et devient, par suite, leur allié'.⁶³ Thus, the individual attempts to give himself a

⁵⁸ J.P. Sartre, La Nausée (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p.162.

⁵⁹ Benmussa, 'Les Ensevelis dans le théâtre d'Ionesco', p.200.

⁶⁰ Jean Tardieu, Théâtre de Chambre, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 33-41.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.177.

⁶² Doubrovsky, Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity, p.6.

⁶³ Coe, 'La Farce tragique', p.49.

sense of substantiality by surrounding himself with objects which he believes he can control and order to facilitate his existence. However, he discovers that, without a firm sense of integral identity to give these objects significance, they become senseless and absurd and, with an irrational, mechanical power, turn against the individual to reduce him to the realm of dead, inert matter like themselves. Georges Lerminier describes this process:

Faute de se posséder soi-même, l'homme s'assure la possession d'objets qu'il s'efforce de rendre familiers, d'appriivoiser, mais qui, toujours, se révoltent. Ils prolongent son corps, étendent son règne, confirment sa maîtrise, jusqu'au moment où ils se substituent à l'être vivant, qu'ils réduisent à composition et, bientôt, à décomposition, c'est-à-dire à la mort. Ils n'attendaient que cette démission, ce transfert de pouvoir, pour triompher à leur tour.⁶⁴

Whereas for Sartre the impression of 'La nausée' in the face of matter is qualitative, for Ionesco, it is quantitative; the viscous substance of existence is replaced by a numerical over-abundance, a proliferation of objects. If the object itself is absurd and its existence unjustified, then the proliferation of objects is many times more absurd. A real gesture, such as that of making a cup of coffee, is repeated in Victimes until it becomes at first comical and then tragic, as the number of cups bears no relation to the number of guests, and the action thus becomes totally divorced from its meaning. Ionesco's plays abound with examples of the absurd proliferation of material objects: the mushrooms that sprout in the apartment in Amédée, the noses and fingers of the fiancées in Jacques, the eggs that invade and demolish the stage in L'Avenir, the briefcases and the traffic in Tueur, the suitcases and pushchairs in L'Homme aux valises, the plates and numbers in the last scene of La Soif, the spiders' webs that gradually appear around the stage in Le Roi, the mud that envelopes everything in La Vase, the rhinoceroses that increase like an epidemic in Rhinocéros, the furniture that entombs the nouveau locataire, or the chairs that proliferate in a whirlpool of frenzied activity in Les Chaises. Abstract emotions can proliferate in exactly the same way as concrete objects, as in La Colère, where individual anger escalates to world-wide proportions. Contagion is another form of proliferation. In Jeux, which was originally entitled L'Epidémie, the plague is a proliferation of death, 'une progression

⁶⁴ Georges Lerminier, 'Clés pour Ionesco', Théâtre d'aujourd'hui, 3 (September-October 1957), 4.

géométrique de la mort'.⁶⁵ In Rhinocéros, there is a moral contagion, and in Macbett, evil itself seems to proliferate. Michel Lioure writes:

Les processus irréversibles et accélérés de l'addition, de la multiplication, de la progression arithmétique et géométrique ont ici trouvé leur plus sinistre et plus parfaite application, comme si les mécanismes du mal, de la mort et du massacre étaient ceux par excellence ou s'exercent et s'épanouissent pleinement les vertus malignes de la prolifération.⁶⁶

Without the safeguard of a unique, individual identity, people can proliferate like the objects which they have become. The Bobby Watson family, in La Cantatrice, young and old, male and female, are indistinguishable clones. 'Comme ils avaient le même nom, on ne pouvait pas les distinguer l'un de l'autre quand on les voyait ensemble',⁶⁷ explains Mrs. Smith, with a curiously reversed logic. Similarly, in Jacques, the whole family has the same name, differentiated only by their family position, and in the sequel, L'Avenir, reproduction becomes the very image of absurd proliferation. In Macbett, the Banco dynasty proliferates into infinity. In the 'Premier conte pour enfants de moins de trois ans',⁶⁸ Ionesco emphasizes, in a burlesque tone, the fact that man is reduced to the level of objects by his abdication of identity. Here, not only are all the members of the family called Jacqueline, but so are the servants, friends, and the dolls and other toys. In Amédée, it turns out that a third of Paris bears the unlikely name of Amédée Buccinioni, and in La Leçon, the theme of proliferation, first announced in the mathematical lesson, leads to a pattern of murder repeated endlessly as the forty-first victim arrives. The world of Ionesco is choked with inert matter. Things proliferating absurdly lose their shape and distinctiveness; objects are indistinguishable from people and from other objects, leaving only a chaos, 'une immense nature morte',⁶⁹ where, in the words of Beckett's Molloy, 'there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names'.⁷⁰

Objects not only increase numerically but spatially, for example, the

⁶⁵Théâtre, V, 25.

⁶⁶Michel Lioure, 'La Prolifération dans le théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco', in L'Onirisme et l'insolite dans le théâtre français contemporain. Actes et colloques de Strasbourg, edited by Paul Vernois (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974), p.140.

⁶⁷Théâtre, I, 22.

⁶⁸Présent passé, pp.45-49.

⁶⁹Lerminier, 'Clés pour Ionesco', p.4.

⁷⁰Beckett, Molloy, p.41.

'progression géométrique',⁷¹ of the corpse in Amédée which, as it grows in size, gradually reduces the vital living space of the couple. In Le Nouveau locataire, the furniture not only proliferates, but increases in size, from small stools to the huge sideboard that finally seals the room from the outside world. To the proliferation in space corresponds an acceleration of time. For Ionesco, space and time are intimately linked. As a child, Ionesco felt himself to be outside both time and space. He recalls, 'Le monde était un décor ... se déroulant sous nos yeux, tandis que nous-mêmes restions à la même place, regardant passer le temps, nous-mêmes restant en dehors'.⁷² The 'force centrifuge', that he describes as having plunged him into the world of the relative and ephemeral, significantly threw him 'parmi les choses qui vont et viennent'.⁷³ Time, in Ionesco's theatre, accordingly represents a process of intensification rather than of development. It is 'un temps d'accumulation beaucoup plus qu'un temps d'évolution, c'est un temps qui est fait d'additions, d'instantanés identiques'.⁷⁴ He admires the 'accélération vertigineuse dans le mouvement', the 'progression dans la folie' that he distinguishes in the farces of Feydeau because, he tells us, 'je crois y voir mon obsession de la prolifération'.⁷⁵ This rhythm of acceleration and accumulation is an integral part of Ionesco's theatrical vision and, he claims, was present even in the first play that he wrote as a child. 'Accélération et prolifération font partie de mon rythme, de ma vision',⁷⁶ he says, and he describes a play as 'une construction, constituée d'une série d'états de conscience, ou de situations, qui s'intensifient, se densifient'.⁷⁷

This tempo is most apparent in the shorter plays. In La Cantatrice and La Leçon, the action builds up to a paroxysm, with an increase of tension and acceleration of pace as words, used as objects, are hurled across the stage with growing aggression and frenzy. The same crescendo of movement and action, intensifying to bursting point, dictates the shape of the sketches, such as La Colère, Les Salutations, Scène à quatre,

⁷¹Théâtre, I, 265.

⁷²Journal, p.13.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Jacques Petit, 'Discussions sur la communication de M. Lioure', in L'Onirisme et l'insolite, p.152.

⁷⁵Notes, p.310.

⁷⁶Entre la vie et le rêve, p.56.

⁷⁷Notes, p.329.

and Le Tableau. The movement of Les Chaises is compared to a 'tourbillon',⁷⁸ and Ionesco stipulates that the parts of the old couple should be played by young actors to achieve the necessary agility and rapidity of movement. In Le Nouveau locataire, the movements of the removal men become more and more swift and rhythmical until they constitute a sort of ballet. The final scene of La Soif ends with a picture of the 'rythme accru, rapide, saccadé du service de Jean',⁷⁹ as Jean rushes up and down the tables, filling the monks' bowls at an ever-increasing speed, his movements punctuated by chanted numbers. L'Homme aux valises ends in a similar fashion, with prams being pushed around at an accelerating pace; 'un mouvement rythmé par les coups de sifflet, accompagnés eux-mêmes par une sonorisation musicale qui fait que tout cela a l'allure d'un ballet'.⁸⁰ In Macbett, the healing and execution scenes take place with the same precipitous movement, 'soutenu par une musique s'accélération de plus en plus'.⁸¹ Acceleration, like proliferation, represents a loss of man's control over the world, a world no longer made to the measure of man. Acceleration is like the centrifugal force that ruptured the harmony and immobility of Ionesco's childhood paradise. 'La vitesse n'est pas seulement infernale, elle est l'enfer même', Ionesco believes, 'elle est l'accélération dans la chute'.⁸² Acceleration and proliferation are images of the 'néant', the emptiness of the world, and the inner emptiness of the individual. 'Ce mouvement de tourbillon est la figure du vide', Claude Abastado explains, 'Il crée un monde imaginaire qui sombre brutalement à la fin comme un rêve doré au néant'.⁸³ To live again in harmony and peace, the individual would have to find a means of synchronizing the movement of his inner life and the tempestuous motion of the world. In the words of Simone Benmussa, 'Cela nécessite cet effort de réadaptation pour rétablir l'équilibre entre la pulsation du coeur humain et l'accélération du monde'.⁸⁴

As objects proliferate, the individual becomes enclosed, encircled,

⁷⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.84.

⁷⁹Théâtre, IV, 193.

⁸⁰Théâtre, VII, 99.

⁸¹Théâtre, V, 178.

⁸²Journal, p.14.

⁸³Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.93.

⁸⁴Benmussa, Ionesco, p.68.

and imprisoned. The impression of claustrophobia that results is emphasized on stage by the decors and what Marianne Kesting calls the 'organisations spécifiquement choréographiques de l'espace',⁸⁵ whereby physical objects take up an increasing amount of the stage space.

Theatrical space is no longer just a background for the movements of the characters, but has an independant role equivalent to theirs. 'Aux temps classiques', Michel Corvin remarks, 'on joue dans un espace ... aujourd'hui on joue avec l'espace'.⁸⁶ Michel Pruner has drawn attention to Ionesco's predilection for the 'espace clos' as the setting for his plays and points out that all his plays, with the exception of Le Piéton, take place either in an enclosed space or in the open but alternating with scenes of enclosure and imprisonment that are made even more oppressive by this juxtaposition. He also analyzes how Ionesco's use of precise indications about the imaginary, contiguous world beyond the stage-set accentuates the claustral nature of these interiors and contributes to the threatening atmosphere that pervades them.⁸⁷ In Délire à deux, the couple are trapped in a claustrophobic interior by a civil war raging outside, as are the couple in Ce Formidable bordel, who spend three or four years besieged, their windows shuttered and blocked with mattresses. The Personnage even wants to increase their isolation and imprisonment, saying, 'Qu'on s'enferme, qu'on tienne tout avec des cordes bien serrées, que l'on bouche les trous, les trous, les trous'.⁸⁸ In Rhinocéros, there is a progressive restriction of space, from the open-air setting of the beginning to the office scene which, although indoors, is still a public place until it becomes severed from the outside world by the rhinoceroses destroying the staircase. Bérenger's living space becomes gradually reduced as the scene moves from Jean's apartment to his own, and he ends up totally surrounded and alone, barricaded from the world. In Tueur, the claustrophobic interior of Bérenger's house 'basse de plafond'⁸⁹ and the oppressive crowd scenes are thrown into contrast by the open-air atmosphere of the first act. 'Le décor du deuxième acte est lourd, laid, et contraste fortement avec

⁸⁵ Marianne Kesting, cited by Hildegard Seipel, in 'Entre réalisme et surréalisme', Critiques de notre temps, p.37.

⁸⁶ Michel Corvin, 'Contribution à l'analyse de l'espace scénique dans le théâtre contemporain', Travail théâtral, 22 (January-March 1976), 62.

⁸⁷ Michel Pruner, 'L'espace dans la dramaturgie de Ionesco', in Situation et perspectives, pp.217-239.

⁸⁸ Théâtre, VI, 187.

⁸⁹ Théâtre, II, 99.

l'absence de décor ou le décor uniquement de lumières du premier acte', Ionesco notes.⁹⁰ Similarly in La Soif, the decor passes from the constricting, gloomy basement to the luminosity of the airy terrace, only to fall back into the sinister 'monastère-caserne-prison' with its grey walls and the prison within a prison of the Tripp-Brechtoll scene. In La Vase, the hero is encircled by matter; not only is his own body a crushing weight, but the world around him has become so heavy that he experiences 'une invincible résistance matérielle',⁹¹ which ends up absorbing him as he sinks deeper and deeper into the mud, losing his limbs one by one. Man is no longer free in the world. 'Nous sommes des ensevelis vivants, des murés, des encerclés', Simone Benmussa concludes.⁹²

Some of Ionesco's characters accept claustrophobia, for example, Marie-Madeleine, in La Soif. 'Ici, c'est la maison de l'habitude',⁹³ she admits, a phrase that, as Michel Pruner points out, 'pourrait s'appliquer à tous les intérieurs dans lesquels les personnages de Ionesco sont si englués qu'ils semblent ne jamais les avoir quittés'.⁹⁴ For Marie-Madeleine, being enclosed brings comfort and security. She says, 'Nous mettrons une nouvelle serrure à la porte, une serrure avec une bonne grosse clef, qui ferme bien; une barre à travers. Nous serons à l'abri des voleurs, des malheurs'.⁹⁵ The nouveau locataire calmly and deliberately buries himself amidst objects, conducting his own funeral ceremony with a terrifying precision. The characters of La Cantatrice also accept imprisonment within the confines of their own living room, but through apathy and moral paralysis rather than through a conscious effort of self-adjustment like Marie-Madeleine. Other characters try to escape their prisons. The old couple, in Les Chaises, finally break free from the nightmare which they have created in their circular lighthouse, surrounded by evil-smelling water and mosquitoes, but their only escape is in death. Amédée and Madeleine have lived shut off from the rest of the world for fifteen years, their living-space being progressively reduced by the ever-increasing size of the corpse. Amédée, it is true, attempts to escape and flies up into the night sky, an image of

⁹⁰ Théâtre, II, 100.

⁹¹ 'La Vase', La Photo du Colonel, p.138.

⁹² Benmussa, 'Les Ensevelis dans le théâtre d'Ionesco', p.203.

⁹³ Théâtre, IV, 81.

⁹⁴ Pruner, 'L'Espace dans la dramaturgie de Ionesco', p.229.

⁹⁵ Théâtre, IV, 95.

liberation and joy, but the fact that he is attached to a corpse makes his escape, at best, ambiguous. Jacques is imprisoned in another bourgeois interior. He cries, 'Comment sortir? Ils ont bouché les portes, les fenêtres avec du rien, ils ont enlevé les escaliers'.⁹⁶

His desire to escape is indicated both by the fact that his clothes are too small, suggesting that he is trying to cling to the world of childhood, and by the hat that he wears, as though in preparation for leaving the house. Significantly, it is when he is renouncing his ideals and being seduced by Robarte that he removes his hat. However, there is no real escape. The Monsieur, in Scene VII of Ce Formidable bordel, sums up the situation when he says:

Nous vivons dans une sorte de prison qui est une boîte. Cette boîte est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, qui est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, qui est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, qui est emboîtée dans une autre boîte, emboîtée dans une autre boîte, et ainsi de suite, à l'infini.⁹⁷

Claustrophobia is also expressed by the circularity of the construction of plays, such as La Cantatrice and La Leçon, suggesting not only the senselessness of all actions, but also the inescapability of human destiny. In Le Roi, the King is trapped by the inevitability of death and, as his hold over life decreases, so does his power, first of all his power over others and finally his control over his own body. As matter triumphs over life, his kingdom decreases like a 'peau de chagrin'. In Jeux, matter, in the shape of death, again traps the individual. The inhabitants of the town, who have been fortunate enough to escape from the plague, find their town decimated by fire. 'Nous sommes pris au piège. Comme des rats', the play concludes.⁹⁸ Thus, proliferation leads to the encirclement of the individual and finally to his physical and spiritual death as, obsessed with material concerns, he loses touch with his individual identity. 'La matière remplit tout l'espace qu'occupe l'homme et finalement l'écrase'.⁹⁹

Language too can become an object no less dangerous than visible objects. When language loses its living core, it becomes solidified into dead matter, the 'cadavres des mots'¹⁰⁰ of which Ionesco speaks,

⁹⁶Théâtre, I, 121.

⁹⁷Théâtre, VI, 140.

⁹⁸Théâtre, V, 110.

⁹⁹Marie-Claude Depraz-McNulty, 'L'Objet dans le théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco, French Review, 41 (october 1967), 94.

¹⁰⁰Notes, p.131.

and can proliferate and crush the individual. Artaud had already recognized that language has a physical presence and can be used 'comme un objet solide qui ébranle les choses'.¹⁰¹ As David Grossvogel has suggested, Ionesco's Roumanian origin may have made him more conscious of words as non-assimilable objects.¹⁰² Looking at language from the outside, without an immediate awareness of its meaning, words seemed like empty sounds divorced from any human intention, objects in their own right. Ionesco recreates this experience in his theatre, as Jean Vannier has pointed out, by exposing language on stage like a theatrical object and creating a drama of language itself. He explains:

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.¹⁰³

Ionesco believes that language has a strong tendency to become objectified, for much of it is already dead. He is fascinated by the dead parts of language; truisms, clichés, platitudes, forms of politeness, and slogans. Richard Coe talks of Ionesco's 'necromantic obsession with the carcasses of words'.¹⁰⁴ Whenever a phrase or word can be listened to or repeated without an immediate awareness of its meaning or lack of meaning, it no longer serves any purpose and becomes no more than its objective presence, as an assemblage of words. 'Dès qu'une forme d'expression est connue, elle est déjà périmée', Ionesco states, 'Une chose dite est déjà morte, la réalité est au-delà d'elle. Elle est une pensée figée'.¹⁰⁵ As will be shown in more detail in Chapter IX, this natural wear to which language is subjected is accentuated when the individual has no individual identity to invest in his words. Language loses even subliminal meaning. Words are no more than 'écorces sonores',¹⁰⁶ which, Ionesco tells us, 'retombent comme des pierres, comme des cadavres'.¹⁰⁷ As in the other realms of the material world, there

¹⁰¹Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre et son double', Oeuvres complètes, 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 87.

¹⁰²Grossvogel, The Blasphemers, p.52.

¹⁰³Vannier, 'Langages de l'avant-garde', p.34.

¹⁰⁴Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.64.

¹⁰⁵Ionesco, in Les Entretiens d'Helsinki, edited by Paul-Louis Mignon (Paris: M. Brient, 1961), p.13.

¹⁰⁶Notes, p.252.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p.232.

is a paradoxical juxtaposition of absence and presence. The physical presence of the words as objects emphasizes the emptiness of thought and meaning which the sounds should convey and the emptiness of the characters who use them.

Language as a dead, amorphous object follows the same pattern as the other physical objects in Ionesco's world; it proliferates and encircles man and eventually crushes his living spirit. The use of language to destroy is most clearly seen in La Leçon. In the light of the conclusion of this play, the Professor's speech should perhaps be taken seriously. He proclaims:

Si vous émettez plusieurs sons à une vitesse accélérée, ceux-ci s'agripperont les uns aux autres automatiquement, constituant ainsi des syllabes, des mots, à la rigueur des phrases, c'est-à-dire des groupements pour cela capables de se maintenir sans danger à une altitude élevée dans les airs. Seuls, tombent les mots chargés de signification, alourdis par leur sens.¹⁰⁸

The Professor becomes, in the words of Michel Lioure, 'le type accompli de l'apprenti rhéteur, irrésistiblement entraîné par le torrent de son propre verbe'.¹⁰⁹ Language no longer serves man, but rather uses man as its vehicle. As the Professor delivers his speech on philology, shouting down all interruptions and continuing at an increasingly frenzied pace, his words are no longer expressions of his personality, but autonomous objects proliferating according to their own dynamism. Inevitably, they end up by crushing and killing the object of their aggression, for, as the maid had warned, 'l'arithmétique mène à la philologie, et la philologie mène au crime'.¹¹⁰

When writing La Cantatrice, Ionesco experienced at first hand the way in which language, like other objects, can take control and defy its creator. 'Les propositions se décantèrent au bout d'un certain temps, bougèrent toutes seules, se corrompirent, se dénaturèrent', he noted.¹¹¹ A slow process of acceleration and proliferation begins as words, devoid of any meaning or intention, are used just as sounds, for example, the rapid repetitions in the maid's poem, 'Le Feu'. Finally, the words, divorced from any content that would give them coherence, lose their shape too, and the play ends with the characters vehemently hurling

¹⁰⁸Théâtre, I, 77.

¹⁰⁹Lioure, in L'Onirisme et l'insolite, p.144.

¹¹⁰Théâtre, I, 91.

¹¹¹Notes, p.251.

dislocated syllables and letters at each other. Ionesco explains:

Le langage s'était désarticulé, les personnages s'étaient décomposée; la parole, absurde, s'était vidée de son contenu et tout s'achevait par une querelle dont il était impossible de connaître les motifs, car mes héros se jetaient à la figure, non pas des répliques, ni même des bouts de propositions, ni des mots, mais des syllabes, ou des consonnes, ou des voyelles! ... Pour moi, il s'était agi d'une sorte d'effondrement du réel. Les mots étaient devenus des écorces sonores, dénuées de sens.¹¹²

The sickness of language becomes an epidemic which Philippe Senart compares to a spreading cancer.¹¹³ This pattern is repeated in Les Salutations, which ends with a paroxysm of proliferating words, L'Avenir, which closes with shrieks of 'Produisons! Produisons!', punctuated by the sounds of 'Cot-cot-codac!!',¹¹⁴ and Victimes, where all the characters end up shouting at each other, 'Mastiquez! Avalez! Mastiquez! Avalez!'.¹¹⁵ Thus, words proliferate and take over control from the individual who presumes to use them and end up by stifling him, as Ionesco describes in his experience of writing La Cantatrice, 'envahi par la prolifération des cadavres de mots, abruti par les automatismes de la conversation, je faillis succomber au dégoût, à une tristesse innommable, à la dépression nerveuse, à une véritable asphyxie'.¹¹⁶

With the combination of proliferation and acceleration, simple arithmetical proliferation becomes an even more terrifying exponential proliferation. Man loses control of objects and the world and can no longer anticipate or comprehend the results. Paul Vernois comments, 'Lorsqu'on additionne des nombres on a l'affaire à une progression arithmétique. On peut encore savoir où l'on va; on peut prévoir le résultat de l'opération. En revanche, très vite la progression exponentielle atteint des chiffres effarants, apparemment incontrôlables pour l'homme; l'angoisse naît alors sur-le-champ'.¹¹⁷ Ionesco compares the terror of the individual who has created a world of objects which he can no longer control to the alarm of a magician who finds his spell turning against him. He says:

Cela devient étouffant, tragique parce qu'on a l'impression que

¹¹² Notes, p.252.

¹¹³ Senart, Ionesco, p.73.

¹¹⁴ Théâtre, II, 229.

¹¹⁵ Théâtre, I, 235.

¹¹⁶ Notes, p.131.

¹¹⁷ Vernois, in L'Onirisme et l'insolite, p.150.

le monde échappe à notre esprit Cette impression angoissante du monde qui nous échappe, c'est celle que doit avoir l'apprenti sorcier ... Maintenant nous ne sommes plus maîtres des moyens mécaniques extraordinaires que nous mettons en mouvement. La planète peut sauter ... paraît-il.¹¹⁸

Proliferation and acceleration combine to produce an image of the world slipping from man's control in La Colère. Ionesco explains the subject of the film scenario to Claude Bonnefoy: 'J'ai l'impression que le monde lui-même peut se dérégler, comme une machine. Dans La Colère, c'est le monde qui devient fou, qui explose, emporté par nos passions. Il y a un mécanisme passionnel qui dépasse ses buts'.¹¹⁹ The scene shows an idyllic Sunday in spring in a small provincial village. The sun is shining and the church bells are ringing. Everyone is contented and smiling. After this series of 'images joyeuses',¹²⁰ we see a young husband returning home for lunch after buying his wife cakes and flowers. Simultaneously, other husbands enter the other flats in the building with flowers and cakes for their wives, and the conversation and love scene between the first couple is repeated by each couple in the flats. All the wives give their husbands ties for presents, and they all sit down to lunch. Suddenly there appears the fatal flaw as each of the husbands finds a fly in his soup. This trivial incident begins an acceleration of the tempo of the play to a furious paroxysm of rage. Each husband insults his wife's parents, then throws the soup tureen at her. The soup is shown flowing in a torrent down the stairs of the building from all the different flats. A cloth thrown accidentally on the stove starts a fire. Scenes follow faster and faster as the disaster proliferates. The policemen arrive, then the firemen, and Ionesco recommends that the producer should use pieces from documentary films showing riot scenes or the tanks at Berlin moving against the workers. There is war, Poincaré and Clemenceau, Hitler and Mussolini, then cataclysmic disaster on a cosmic scale, fires, floods, earthquakes, and finally the atomic bomb. It is 'un monde dont nous aurions pu et dont nous ne pouvons plus être les maîtres'.¹²¹ These scenes are put in perspective by two characters who appear at crucial points in the action: a television announcer and a man sitting alone in a café. The man is at first totally calm, but

¹¹⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.118.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Théâtre, III, 298.

¹²¹Ionesco, Preface to Inventaire, 104 objets apprivoisés, by Philippe (Paris: Denoël, 1965), p.10.

gradually becomes enraged without any obvious reason. Through him Ionesco points out the parallel between the macrocosm and the microcosm: 'Avant que n'éclate la planète, son visage, devenu cramoisi, éclatera aussi'.¹²² Thus, Ionesco believes, cosmic disasters that destroy mankind are only the monstrous proliferation of each individual's lack of self-control. The second character, the television announcer, again incriminates all mankind by his apathy to the impending catastrophe and her unwillingness to face the truth. Despite the crisis, the announcer talks only of spring flowers and fields, and, just before the final explosion, 'elle annonce, avec son plus beau sourire en montrant ses belles dents: "Mesdames et Messieurs dans quelques instants il y aura la fin du monde"', leaving the audience with the 'dernière image: la planète explosant'.¹²³

Ionesco's world is no longer, to quote Jacques Guicharnaud, just 'un monde hors de contrôle',¹²⁴ but rather, as Pronko would have us believe, a battle in which the inanimate is winning, the 'Anti-spiritual victory'.¹²⁵ Ionesco's plays express one of the paradoxes of modern society, that man, in a culture of material abundance, believes that, with technology, he can produce more and more objects to serve him, but these objects end up by enslaving him, for, as these objects increase in number, so does his reliance on them, and he becomes tied to a chain of production like that at the end of L'Avenir. Ionesco even wonders whether man's obsession with creating objects might not stem from his own self-hatred. He writes, in the introduction to Philippe's book of macabre drawings of '104 objets apprivoisés':

Et que les objets nous soient hostiles, cela semble bien paradoxal puisque nous les avons fabriqués nous-mêmes, apparemment pour qu'ils nous servent et s'ils se retournent contre nous c'est bien que nous sommes nos propres ennemis et que les objets ne sont simplement que les instruments de notre auto-punition.¹²⁶

As objects proliferate, they reduce man's living space, the man-made destroys the natural; the need for production means that he has less time for contemplation and artistic creation and obscures the metaphysical

¹²²Théâtre, III, 304.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Jacques Guicharnaud, 'Un monde hors de contrôle', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 14-24.

¹²⁵Leonard C. Pronko, 'The Anti-Spiritual Victory in the Theatre of Ionesco', Modern Drama, 2, 1 (May 1959), 29-35.

¹²⁶Ionesco, Preface to Inventaire, 104 objets apprivoisés, p.9.

dimension which is unique to mankind. As Marx had warned in his Economic and Political Manuscripts, man alienates himself in the productive process:

The more the worker expends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself - in his inner world - becomes, the less belongs to him as his own The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he had conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.¹²⁷

Thus, man tries to fill his inner void with these objects of his own making, but the plan misfires, and the fullness which he has created only serves to further emphasize his emptiness. As Serge Doubrovsky points out, 'Cette croissance géométrique et incontrôlable d'objets pour la plupart de fabrication humaine et qui finissent par chasser l'homme traduit à la fois le vain effort de l'homme pour se donner par une production matérielle insensée l'être qui lui manque et la victoire ontologique inévitable de l'en-soi sur le pour-soi'.¹²⁸

The affinity between Ionesco's obsession with proliferation and the writings of such people as Marx and Lucien Goldman has led certain critics to interpret his plays as a social comment on the evils of the Industrial Revolution. Claude Abastado refers to his plays as 'la satire d'un nouvel esclavage, la consommation',¹²⁹ and Dr. Tarrab, quoting Marx, claims that Ionesco's plays illustrate 'le fétichisme de la marchandise' and represent 'un phénomène social d'époque, qui est à la fois "littéraire", "historique" et "social". C'est le phénomène de la momification, de la réification, ... de la bureaucratisation technocratique du capitalisme d'organisation, tel qu'il se présente actuellement dans les sociétés industrielles d'Occident'.¹³⁰ One play that particularly lends itself to this interpretation is Le Nouveau locataire. The Monsieur acts like a technician with his tape-measure and careful calculations, and the play parallels the evolution of industrial processes. In the same way that, at the beginning of the

¹²⁷ Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, translated by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p.108.

¹²⁸ Serge Doubrovsky, 'Le Rire de Ionesco', Nouvelle Revue Française, 86 (February 1960), 318.

¹²⁹ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.117.

¹³⁰ Tarrab, in Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.60, 29.

machine age, the production of a few objects required much manpower and a disproportionate expense of energy, the removal men at first move small objects slowly and with difficulty. Gradually larger and larger objects are brought in at an increasing rate, just as technical developments made production more streamlined. Finally, the doors open automatically and the room has a 'plafond roulant',¹³¹ that moves at the clap of the hands. Thus, technical progress makes man superfluous in the production process. But the objects so produced begin to form a screen between man and the world. The Monsieur orders that a sideboard be placed across the window, and, when the removal men point out that he will have no light, he phlegmatically replies, 'Il y a l'électricité',¹³² preferring the man-made and artificial to natural light. Furniture continues to arrive, as though pushed by an invisible force; the roads are blocked; the Metro is stopped, and even the Seine is dammed by furniture. As objects take on more and more life, mankind becomes more passive. Objects created to facilitate man's life get out of control and end up crushing him, so, like the Monsieur with his calm 'Merci. Eteignez',¹³³ man, devoid of any individual identity, passively accepts his death. However, although Ionesco agrees that the modern industrial society is a major cause of the dehumanization of the individual, his main concern, he claims, is metaphysical, the wider problem of the individual in search of his identity being oppressed by the hostility of the world and matter. He states:

Cette prolifération est typique, caractéristique de l'homme qui peut se sentir choisifié, réifié par les objets qui l'entourent, mais c'est un aspect qu'on peut déceler à des époques qui ne sont pas nécessairement industrielles. On se trouve là plus près de l'aspect métaphysique des choses ... c'est la prolifération de la matière, perçue comme accablante, mais ceci n'est pas obligatoirement dû à la société industrielle. C'est plutôt dû, à mon sens tout au moins, au fait de se trouver en face d'un monde proliférant, de la matière qui prolifère, qui vous écrase, c'est dû à une existence superflue, 'de trop', comme dirait Sartre.¹³⁴

Ionesco's obsessional fear of the proliferation of matter, therefore, stems from the fear of its objectifying influence of mankind, which negates all that the search for individual identity represents. When

¹³¹Théâtre, II, 200.

¹³²Ibid., p.193.

¹³³Ibid., p.202.

¹³⁴Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.116.

asked in an interview, 'Quel est le sens de cette prolifération?', he replied, 'C'est la hantise de la matière. La sensation que la matière prolifère aux dépens de l'esprit. En somme, j'ai peur que la vie ne devienne mort. C'est de cette horreur, de cette peur que j'ai de la matière, c'est de là que vient, je crois, ce thème de la prolifération'.¹³⁵ At first, the process of mechanization is comic, as in the famous formula that Ionesco quotes from Bergson, 'un peu de mécanique plaqué sur du vivant',¹³⁶ but, as man follows empty mechanical routines, the mechanism takes on a life of its own and comedy turns to tragedy. In the words of Simone Benmussa, 'Tous ces gestes que l'on rend mécaniques pour ne plus y penser de peur d'en mourir vous tuent sans qu'on ait songé à lutter contre eux, parce que, justement, ils sont mécaniques'.¹³⁷

In the early plays and sketches the marionette-type characters, lacking individual identity, are easily assimilated into the world of objects, without their even noticing it. Alienated from their inner-life, they have nothing with which to oppose the world of matter that challenges them. Leonard Pronko explains, 'The self is separated from the world, and also from its real self, spirit dies and matter is victorious. After brief moments of euphoria man is inevitably thrown back into the oppressive world of things'.¹³⁸ Without a spiritual dimension these people are no more than their physical presence so are logically and painlessly absorbed into the world of things. 'Ils ne sont que des machines', Philippe Senart comments, 'Aussi ne menacent-ils pas l'ordre des choses. Choses eux-mêmes, ils s'y intègrent sans difficulté'.¹³⁹ Richard Coe agrees that nothing is more natural than the victory of matter over these characters, for their loss of individual identity leaves an inner void which, like a vacuum, must be filled. 'Un vide, en vertu de cette loi naturelle des plus élémentaires, demande à être comblé', he says, 'Le négatif attire en soi le positif et l'absorbe. Or, dans ce contexte, le positif est la totalité de cet univers matériel amorphe et épais qui entoure l'esprit'.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, as

¹³⁵ 'L'Express va plus loin avec Ionesco', Interview with Frédéric Towarnicki, Express (5-11 October 1970), p.172.

¹³⁶ Henri Bergson, Le Rire (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1945), p.35.

¹³⁷ Benmussa, 'Les Ensevelis dans le théâtre d'Ionesco', p.205.

¹³⁸ Pronko, The Experimental Theater in France, p.62.

¹³⁹ Sénart, Ionesco, p.77.

¹⁴⁰ Coe, 'La Farce tragique', p.48.

these characters have no individual identity to set them off from one another, they proliferate into endlessly repeated stereotypes. This inevitably draws them further into the world of matter, for one of the characteristics of proliferation is that it blurs the differentiations between objects. As Paul Vernois asks, 'Comment défendre son identité dans le monde de l'addition, quand le monde proclame l'identité des autres et de moi?'.¹⁴¹ Thus, the world of these plays shows the victory of matter and the disappearance of the individual. 'La matière se multiplie et prolifère; les êtres s'y enlisent ou se confondent avec elle, ils deviennent eux-mêmes matière. Le monde cesse d'être humain'.¹⁴²

In the longer plays, such as Rhinocéros, Tueur, Amédée, and La Soif, and in Le Solitaire, there is a more dramatic conflict between the individual and the world, mirroring that which Ionesco himself experiences. 'Je me sens envahi par des forces pesantes contre lesquelles je mène un combat où je ne puis avoir que le dessous', he says.¹⁴³ Caught by the contradiction between his fear of the dizzying emptiness of the world and his fear of being crushed by the heaviness of inert matter, the individual feels lost and confused. The hero of Le Solitaire experiences in turns 'la nausée du vide' followed by 'la nausée du trop plein'.¹⁴⁴ He says:

Un pas en avant, une chute, je serais happé, englouti, dissous par le rien Le cosmos basculait. Ce monde était-il trop pesant ou bien évanescent? D'un instant à l'autre il peut disparaître. Ou bien m'écraser par sa lourdeur. Entre le plein et le vide, je m'écroulai.¹⁴⁵

Ionesco describes himself as living 'à la limite de l'être',¹⁴⁶ or 'à la frontière de l'existence', precariously balanced between these two extremes, 'tout est menacé-y compris moi-même-d'un effondrement imminent, silencieux, dans je ne sais quel abîme, au-delà du jour et de la nuit'.¹⁴⁸ Once again Ionesco shows that the survival of the individual can be

¹⁴¹Vernois, in L'Onirisme et l'insolite, p.150.

¹⁴²Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.249.

¹⁴³Notes, p.232.

¹⁴⁴Le Solitaire, p.112.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p.131.

¹⁴⁶Notes, p.225.

¹⁴⁷Journal, p.59.

¹⁴⁸Notes, p.224.

maintained only in a constant state of conflict with the forces that oppose him. The harmony and unity of the individual and the world that characterized the paradise of childhood are lost forever. Michel Lioure concludes:

A cet équilibre idéal, lieu de bonheur et de la perfection, ont succédé pour l'homme une oscillation perpétuelle, un constant va-et-vient, un mouvement de pendule épuisant entre les pôles opposés de la lourdeur et de la légèreté, de la terre et du ciel, de la matière et de l'esprit. Impuissant à se fixer en un lieu privilégié de l'être, Ionesco paraît condamné à cette incessante errance entre l'être et le non-être.¹⁴⁹

Thus, the individual, trying to find his individual identity by situating himself in the world of the 'non-moi', finds the world sometimes 'trop-plein' and sometimes 'vide', but always hostile, threatening to overwhelm the individual, to objectify him, and to absorb him into the sphere of the inanimate. Even before Morvan Lebesque first drew Ionesco's attention to his obsession with proliferation, at the first performance of Amédée,¹⁵⁰ Ionesco's plays bear the constant hallmark of the schemas of proliferation, acceleration, and encirclement. His only evolution has been in the direction of a more serious involvement in the struggle between man and the forces of matter, a development 'from "armchair" proliferation to cosmic proliferation As the protagonist becomes progressively humanized the "inhuman" pole of the inner conflict gains increasing independence, exteriority and scope'.¹⁵¹ Not only is proliferation a striking means of exteriorizing an inner state on stage, but it corresponds to the negative pole of the two states of existence and therefore has far-reaching implications that, Ionesco believes, govern all life. Describing proliferation in an interview Ionesco says:

Cela répond à ce sentiment confus et vague: pourquoi tout ce qui existe existe, pourquoi l'être, pourquoi l'existence? Il y a, si vous voulez, deux Ionesco en moi: un Ionesco pris dans la matière, et un Ionesco pour lequel tout semble léger, pour lequel il n'y a plus de matière oppressante. Cela répond à un état de grâce et à un état de pesanteur très lourde, et ces deux états alternent successivement, ou plutôt cycliquement en moi il y aurait des raisons biologiques à cela, sans doute, ou deux structures qui auraient préexisté en moi: d'abord l'enfance, où les sentiments de vitalité, d'accord avec le monde

¹⁴⁹ Michel Lioure, 'L'Imagination matérielle dans l'oeuvre de Ionesco', in Situation et perspectives, p.190.

¹⁵⁰ Suzanne Lion, 'A Propos d'Ionesco', Lettres et médecins (July 1970), p.14.

¹⁵¹ Jacques Guicharnaud, Modern French Theatre from Girandoux to Beckett (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1967), pp.228-229.

auraient le dessus, ensuite l'homme mur, où la fatigue, la lassitude, l'accablement, le vieillissement prédomineraient. On ne voit plus à travers les choses, le monde devient opaque.¹⁵²

As this state of dialectical opposition forms the inescapable basis of Ionesco's perception of existence, neither his characters nor himself can ever hope for the complete triumph of what Guicharnaud calls the 'sunlit forces',¹⁵³ over the proliferating world of matter. However, from the 'soumission' of Jacques, the suicides of Les Chaises, the calm 'Eteignez' of the nouveau locataire, and Choubert's acceptance of his 'devoir', Ionesco seems to develop to a position of greater optimism. The 'quête de lumière' of Tueur, the 'soif et la faim' of Jean, the ambiguous flights of Béranger and Amédée in Le Piéton and Amédée, even though they end in failure, represent the continued assertion of the value of the individual identity in face of the overwhelming pressures of the world. Ionesco never loses his faith in the individual identity as he admitted to the author in an interview, 'Oui, par les contraintes du monde et des autres, l'homme se perd lui-même. Mais y a-t-il autre chose que les contraintes du monde? J'espère toujours que oui'.¹⁵⁴ The constant revolt of the individual to safeguard his metaphysical dimension against the stultifying effects of materialism, even if it can never achieve a total victory, at least saves the individual from total defeat, and it is in this opposition and constant search for balance that hope lies. It is this position that Ionesco himself adopts and which forms the basis of his artistic creation. He says:

Pour moi, être pris dans les objets, être pris dans la prolifération de la matière; ce n'est pas quelque chose à quoi je me sou mets, à quoi je me résigne, mais c'est que j'espère, d'une façon obscure, qu'à travers cela, il y a un règlement autre. Que tout n'est pas cela ... c'est-à-dire que, en somme, je me révolte; mais contre quoi? Contre le matérialisme; je subis la matière, mais je ne suis pas matérialiste. Et je n'accepte pas le matérialisme. C'est-à-dire que mon attitude est quand même encore ... je ne sais quel mot dire; 'spiritualiste', peut-être, ou peut-être métaphysique. Mais enfin, il y a un refus chez moi de me laisser engluier par les objets, par la matière.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Ionesco à coeur ouvert, pp.116-117.

¹⁵³ Guicharnaud, Modern French Theatre, p.226.

¹⁵⁴ Ionesco, Interview with author.

¹⁵⁵ Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.67.

Mais, derrière ce voile de douceur et de calme la nuit galope et viendra se jeter sur nous pffft! comme ça-au moment où nous nous y attendrons le moins. C'est comme ça que ça se passe sur cette putain de terre.

Samuel Beckett, En attendant Godot.

Et mort qu'est ce que c'est
C'est que soi-même
on n'est plus là
on est absent.

Antonin Artaud, Ainsi donc la question.

CHAPTER V

THE INDIVIDUAL AND DEATH

Having established an uncomfortable *modus vivendi* with the world of objects, the individual has to face the ultimate threat that the world holds for the individual, that of death and extinction. 'C'est cela l'invraisemblable', Ionesco complains, 'aimer une existence que l'on m'a imposée, qui m'est reprise au moment où je l'ai acceptée'.¹ Even though painful, physical existence is the only mode of being that the individual can experience, and he inevitably fears the unknown of non-existence, which may be synonymous with the total extinction of the individual identity. Ionesco admits:

La vie est malheur, cela ne m'empêche pas de préférer la vie à la mort, exister à ne pas exister, car je ne suis pas sûr d'être une fois que je n'existerai plus. Exister étant la seule manière d'être que je connaisse, je m'accroche à cette existence car je ne puis m'imaginer, hélas, une manière d'être hors de l'existence.²

Death represents, for Ionesco, the final confrontation with the absurdity of the world, the final 'Néant' separating him from his individual identity and reducing him to nothing. 'C'est surtout à la mort que je demande: "Pourquoi?" avec effroi', he cries, 'Elle seule peut fermer, elle seule fermera ma bouche'.³

In an age that has abandoned a general religious faith and hope of transcendence, the fear of death becomes more acute. Ionesco's attitude to religion is ambiguous; after a Christian upbringing, he cannot totally disregard the notion of God; 'ça vous marque, le catéchisme de votre

¹ Journal, p.44.

² Ibid., p.26.

³ Ibid., p.38.

enfance',⁴ he claims. However, he cannot believe in God sufficiently to give him a sense of security and purpose. 'J'ai toujours essayé de croire en Dieu', he explains, 'Pas assez naïf. Certaine insuffisance métaphysique. Mais je n'ai pas tout à fait coupé les ponts avec Dieu'.⁵ Although on rare occasions, such as the death of his friend Fritz Wotruba, he expresses a belief in meeting again in an afterlife,⁶ more often, life seems to him to be only what man makes of it in this world, 'une courte promenade dans une allée fleurie, une promesse non tenue, un sourire qui s'est refermé'.⁷

For the infant Ionesco, time and death were not immediately linked. At first, he seemed to be in an infinite world of perpetual presence that put no limits on his being. At the age of four, he became aware that he would die, and, at the age of seven, Ionesco realized with terror that his mother would die before him, but death was still only seen as 'une interruption définitive du présent'.⁸ It was not until the age of fifteen, Ionesco claims, that the idea of time passing and the inevitability of death became inseparable. He describes 'un reversement; c'est comme si une force centrifuge m'avait projeté hors de mon immuabilité, parmi les choses qui vont et viennent et qui s'en vont. Pire, c'est moi qui tout d'un coup eus le sentiment que les choses restaient et que je m'en éloignais'.⁹ From the moment when he realized that 'le monde pouvait être sans moi',¹⁰ all pleasures and objects were fleeting and transitory, vitiated from the outset by their inevitable end. Time is seen as the ally of death, bringing the individual always closer to extinction. Time is linked with the mechanisms of proliferation and acceleration which combine to crush the individual. 'Le temps use et tue', Ionesco says.¹¹ The erratic striking of the clock in La Cantatrice, like the face without hands of the 'horloge municipale' in Adamov's La Parodie,¹²

⁴ Interview with Ionesco, Los Angeles, March 1978, in Artiste et Mélègue a Paris, edited by Lise Bloch-Marchange and David Alper (Paris: Buchet, Chastel, 1980), p.131.

⁵ Présent passé, p.59.

⁶ Hommage à Fritz Wotruba (St. Gallen: Erker Press, 1975), p.1.

⁷ Théâtre, IV, 37.

⁸ 'Au Moulin. Images en mille morceaux', Biblio, XXXI, 8 (October 1963), 12.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Découvertes, p.81.

¹¹ Notes, p.222.

¹² Arthur Adamov, Théâtre, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 11.

emphasizes that it is the acute subjective sense of time passing, rather than actual clock time, that is so painful. Ionesco describes the sense of time gnawing at his vital being through the rhythm of the prose poem 'Chocs':

Je reçus le premier choc. Il me plia. Je reçus le second choc. Je ne rompis point. Puis ce fut le troisième choc. Ensuite ce fut le quatrième. Puis ce fut le cinquième choc. Ensuite ce fut le sixième choc. Puis ce fut le septième choc. Ensuite ce fut le huitième. Puis ce fut le neuvième choc. Ensuite ce fut le dur dixième. Puis ce fut le onzième choc, plus dur encore. Cela tombait de tous les côtés. Sur ce, survint le treizième choc suivi du quatorzième. Puis ce fut le quinzième choc, ensuite ce fut le seizième. Puis ce fut le dix-septième choc. Ensuite ce fut le dix-huitième. Puis ce fut le dix-neuvième choc. Ensuite ce fut le vingtième. Au vingt-et-unième j'arrêtai ma montre.¹³

An obsession with death pervades Ionesco's life and work. 'Je suis Damoclès', he claims, 'et j'ai cette épée au-dessus de la tête depuis toujours, depuis que je me connais'.¹⁴ The title of his unfinished doctoral thesis, 'Les thèmes du péché et de la mort dans la poésie française depuis Baudelaire', already betrays a morbid fascination with death, and the poem 'Ballade', in his first volume of poetry Elégies pour des êtres minuscules, evokes his ever-present fear of death and his desire to escape his mortal condition:

Chez nous aussi
une fois elle viendra
et frappera à la porte ...
Elle passe sur les eaux:
personne ne l'accompagne.
Elle s'arrête dans le village
et aucun aboiement.
Elle arrive dans la cour
avec des pas de neige.
Accrochez des rideaux noirs
pour qu'elle ne voie pas à travers eux!
Cadenassez la porte
pour qu'elle n'entre pas.
Ne parlons pas,
ne bougeons plus.
Si nous restons sages,
peut-être elle ne nous sentira pas.¹⁵

In his volume, Non, published in 1934, he describes his sensations at the prospect of death as 'une débandade, une panique, un cri de toutes mes

¹³ Journal, p.71.

¹⁴ Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.111.

¹⁵ Elégies pour des êtres minuscules, cited by Tobi, in A la recherche du paradis perdu, p.118.

fibres, un refus horrifié de tout mon être'.¹⁶ For Ionesco, all the activity of a lifetime is only a pretext to forget the inevitability of death. For him, however, nothing can disguise its threatening presence. When asked in an interview, 'Quel est pour vous le comble de la misère?', Ionesco replied, 'La condition mortelle'. 'Qu'elle serait mon plus grand malheur', he continued, musing almost to himself, 'Il sera: mourir'.¹⁷ For Ionesco, the presence of death in life is not just a matter of intellectual curiosity and abstract discussion, as he believes it was for other writers of the absurd, such as Sartre and Camus. It is a deep-rooted part of his being that he experiences 'd'une manière presque irrationnelle et viscérale'.¹⁸ Nor can his fear be linked to any particular historical or political circumstances, for the terror of death is universal and timeless, belonging to religious and atheistic ages and times of peace and upheaval alike. He tells Gilbert Tarrab:

Il y a toujours eu cette peur. Mais alors, on ne meurt pas seulement à cause de la bombe atomique, on ne meurt pas seulement à cause de la guerre, on ne meurt pas seulement à cause des camps de concentration, on ne meurt pas seulement parce qu'on est assassiné dans la rue: on meurt parce qu'on meurt.¹⁹

Ionesco's plays explore every aspect of death, from the cataclysmic destruction that Bérenger glimpses in the 'anti-monde' of Le Piéton to the struggle of one individual to come to terms with death in Le Roi. Violence and death on both a personal and a universal scale form the background to many of his plays. In La Leçon and Tueur, there are mass murders, and a murder also takes place in Victimes. There are two suicides in Les Chaises and a corpse in Amédée which, George Wellwarth suggests, is an image of 'the ever greater and greater encroachment of death on our lives'. The ending, he adds, is 'a hilarious parody of the funeral procession'.²⁰ Le Nouveau locataire puts on stage a man who willingly abets his own burial amidst the proliferating mass of objects created by the materialism of modern life, and the disparate scenes and characters of Jeux are held together only by the common theme of death, which strikes at random and spares no-one. Macbett, like its Shakespearean

¹⁶Non, cited by E.H. van der Linden, in 'Ionesco', Neophilologus, LIX, 3 (July 1975), 362.

¹⁷'Ionesco répond au questionnaire Marcel Proust', Biblio, XXXI, 8 (October 1963), 14.

¹⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.132.

¹⁹Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.110.

²⁰George E. Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p.63.

counterpart, is a play much concerned with violent deaths, and man's complicity with death is emphasized by Ionesco, for example, in the execution scene. L'Homme aux valises revolves around an attempt to establish contact with dead relatives and friends, and Ionesco's most recent play, Voyages chez les morts, as its name suggests, betrays an ever increasing personal obsession with death. The theme of death also pervades Ionesco's work more subtly in the imagery that he uses, which translates his subconscious fears and obsessions. The dreams of a spreading cancer, which he describes in his Journal,²¹ are transcriptions of the fear of death, as are the recurrent images of mud and sinking. Ionesco's fear of claustrophobic rooms and tomb-like basements stems from the childhood association of such places and dying, when his mother, not long before her death, rented a basement flat in Bucarest, and it seemed to the child that it was a premonition of her death and burial, 'comme si elle se résignait à mourir. Si bien que, pour moi, ce lieu dans lequel elle n'a pas vécu, est l'image même du tombeau. Chaque fois que je rêve d'une telle maison, ma mère s'y trouve'.²² It is as if the menacing 'moine noir' that appears at the end of Jeux is constantly in the background of his work, 'tout le monde le frôle, personne ne le voit, il s'installe debout, au milieu du plateau'.²³

However, in keeping with the dual postulations that rule all existence, no phenomenon shows one single, unified face. Thus, although Ionesco undoubtedly fears and loathes the prospect of death, yet he discovers within himself, despite himself, a mysterious attraction to death. Already in Non he was aware of this paradox. 'J'ai peur de la mort', he wrote, 'J'ai peur de mourir, sans doute parce que, sans le savoir, je désire mourir. J'ai peur donc du désir que j'ai de mourir'.²⁴ Twenty-six years later, he repeats exactly the same words in his Journal, but now sees in this internal conflict a source of his drama. 'Si je vis c'est que ma volonté de ne pas exister est recouverte, dominée par ma soif d'exister. Ces deux volontés sont en conflit permanent, c'est ce conflit qui est le drame, l'angoisse qui fait que ma vie est malaise, mauvaise conscience, culpabilité'.²⁵ Death promises a return to stillness

²¹ Journal, pp.75-76.

²² Ionesco, cited by Benmussa, in Ionesco, p.10.

²³ Théâtre, V, 110.

²⁴ Non, cited by Hélène Vianu, in 'Préludes Ionesciens', Revue des Sciences Humaines (January-March 1965), p.110.

²⁵ Journal, p.210.

and rest, freedom from the agitation and contradictions of the world.

'L'Etre entier porte en soi l'instinct de mort, l'aspiration au repos, "l'instinct de Nirvana"',²⁶ Ionesco says, following the words of Freud.

Death is an escape from the machinations of time into an eternity or void where, as in childhood, 'il n'y a pas de passé, il n'y a pas de futur il y a un présent jusqu'au bout, tout est présent'.²⁷ The inevitability of death also makes all life absurd, Ionesco believes, and this, although more often a source of anguish, can also be attractive, for the belief that no thought, actions, or feeling can have any lasting repercussions in the eternal scheme of things frees the individual from any ultimate responsibility. At times, Ionesco finds this a comfort, writing:

La pensée que tout cela, tout ce que j'aime, tout ce dont j'ai peur, tout ce que je hais, tout ce que je veux repousser, tout ce que je veux garder, quand je pense que tout cela ne sera plus, je suis consolé, je peux m'endormir. Tout cela n'est rien, tout cela va mourir, tout cela va s'effacer, savoir que tout cela va mourir me soulage, me permet de vivre.²⁸

In general, however, Ionesco's attachment to life is stronger than the attraction of death, and the fact that death makes life absurd leads to sterility and frustration. Bérenger, in Le Piéton, tells the journalist that, until man is able to 'guérir la mort', there will be no sense in any activity or in life itself. 'Nous pourrions tout supporter d'ailleurs si nous étions immortels', he explains, 'Je suis paralysé parce que je sais que je vais mourir'.²⁹ Death makes all lives equally absurd; it is 'une dévalorisation absolue'.³⁰ For those like the old couple of Les Chaises, who have done nothing with their lives, death closes the account and seals them for eternity in absurdity, but, even for those who have tried to lead a positive and meaningful existence, the fact that it is effaced and forgotten in death, makes it worthless. 'C'est comme si notre existence était rétroactivement annulée à partir du moment même où elle commençait à être'.³¹ Death to Ionesco is the final metaphysical insult, confirming his belief that the human condition is unacceptable. He believes that if men had been created to be mortal, they would accept

²⁶ Journal, pp.73-74.

²⁷ Théâtre, IV, 41.

²⁸ Présent passé, p.55.

²⁹ Théâtre, III, 128.

³⁰ Antidotes, p.196.

³¹ Présent passé, p.246.

death willingly. In his Notes, he states, 'Nous ne voulons pas mourir; c'est donc que nous sommes faits pour être immortels mais nous mourons'.³² He elaborates in a conversation with Ronald Hayman, 'Yes, I think we should be immortal. That's why we are afraid of dying. We feel that we should be made to be immortal The human condition is inadmissible Having to die is a condition which I reject'.³³ The ultimate absurdity of an absurd life is death, as the King asks in Le Roi, 'Pourquoi suis-je né si ce n'était pas pour toujours?'.³⁴

As death is absurd, all rational attempts to escape it are in vain. Living a good life will not circumvent death, as is shown in Jeux. Death strikes good and evil alike, for it is not a punishment, but an absurdity. Religion is no longer a plausible escape from the reality of death, and the modern substitute faiths, science and medicine, prove equally ineffective. In Le Roi, the Doctor is powerless to halt the inevitable encroachment of death, as are the medical fraternity portrayed in Jeux, who see death as the greatest insult, for their job is to eradicate death. Only two of the six doctors accept death as natural and, that these two die first, seems to their colleagues a suitable punishment, although they too die soon after, for no amount of medical knowledge is able to resist death. Society and politics are equally powerless to address the most crucial of human problems, and Ionesco, therefore, finds it impossible to take any serious interest in them. 'La condition essentielle de l'homme', he believes, n'est pas sa condition de citoyen, mais sa condition de mortel La mort n'est ni bourgeoise ni socialiste'.³⁵ He asks:

Comment peuvent encore me passionner ou sinon me préoccuper des problèmes économiques, sociaux, politiques puisque je sais
1) que nous allons mourir; 2) que la révolution ne nous sauve ni de la vie ni de la mort; 3) que je ne peux pas m'imaginer un univers fini, un univers infini, un univers ni fini, ni infini.³⁶

The 'fonctionnaire', in Scene 2 of Jeux, even though he admits that he is unable to understand the cause of the plague ravaging the town, nevertheless presumes to propose certain measures to limit the disease so that at least he and his followers might be able to survive: 'Nous

³²Notes, p.166.

³³Interview with Ionesco, in Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.6.

³⁴Théâtre, IV, 37.

³⁵Notes, P.311.

³⁶Journal, pp.34-35.

pouvons essayer de le limiter, de cette façon peut-être, nous réussirons, quelques-uns d'entre nous, à survivre.' However, even he admits the hopelessness of the task and confesses, 'Mais qu'on ne compte pas la-dessus'.³⁷ In scene 13, another political activator tries to use the crisis to gain power. 'Cette mort est politique', he claims, '... cela a été machiavéliquement manigancé',³⁸ and, therefore, the establishment that allowed it to happen must be overthrown. However, like all politicians, Ionesco believes he is not really promising to alleviate the situation, but only to disguise the truth, thereby making true reality ultimately more difficult to face. He announces, 'Je ne promets pas la disparition du mal, mais je promets que la signification en sera différente'.³⁹ Oblivious of the niceties of interpretation, the plague carries him off, and he is hailed as a martyr. A second orator takes over, also trying to turn the disaster to political advantage. He promises a socialist paradise, 'un monde nouveau. Le royaume des cieux ... sur terre'.⁴⁰ He suggests that everyone should totally ignore the impending crisis in the town which, he claims, was brought about solely by the policies and attitudes of the old regime, 'un régime morbide et décadent'.⁴¹ He promises happiness and prosperity for all. The Marseillaise strikes up as he leaves, but three of his audience collapse, and the singing is ironically blended with the cries of 'Ambulance!'. If irrational political clichés are powerless against death, so too are the rational arguments with which Bérenger confronts death in Tueur. Arguments of humanism, love, friendship, and self-interest fail, not because they are invalid in themselves, but because they are irrelevant in the face of death. In the light of man's mortality all his struggles and petty quarrels are no more than futile agitation. Ionesco quotes Cocteau's words:

Nous sommes tous dans un train qui se dirige, à toute allure, vers la station finale (c'est-à-dire la mort); les voyageurs se querellent pour avoir les meilleures places; mais que nous voyagions confortablement installés ou que nous voyagions debout, cela n'a, dans le fond, que très peu d'importance puisque nous arriverons, de toutes façons, au but final.⁴²

Moreover, all mankind is an accomplice of death, through apathy and

³⁷Théâtre, V, 27.

³⁸Ibid., pp.75,76.

³⁹Ibid., p.77.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.78.

⁴¹Ibid., p.80.

⁴²'Pour Cocteau', Cahiers des Saisons, 12 (October 1957), 468.

a deliberate refusal to admit to the presence of death. The prevalence of wars and murders throughout history testifies to the fact that man himself is actively an instrument and ally of death, as well as its victim. Ionesco writes, 'Nous ne pouvons être, à la fois, que des assassins et des assassinés, fonctionnaires administrés naturels, instruments et victimes de la mort triomphante'.⁴³ In Tueur, the impassive Edouard turns out to have the briefcase of the Killer, and identical briefcases are found in the possession of a host of other characters. Ionesco is not suggesting that Edouard is the Killer, but that all men are murderers by their indifference to the fundamental problems of life and death. Nor are the victims of the Killer totally innocent, for they are lured to their deaths by the curiosity to see the 'Photo du Colonel'. The figure of the Colonel may symbolize authority and military power, both agents of death, one through the use of arms, and the other through the abdication of personal freedom. The reasons why man deliberately precipitates death are complex, Ionesco believes. On the simplest level, men kill one another because they hate themselves. Ionesco explains, 'People detest themselves and they kill themselves in others. They kill the other so as not to have to kill the self'.⁴⁴ In killing, rather than passively waiting to be overtaken by death, man also tries 'to be ahead of death',⁴⁵ and thus to deny death its power, as Clov points out in Beckett's Fin de partie, 'Si je ne tue pas ce rat il va mourir'.⁴⁶ Finally, men kill one another, Ionesco believes, from a deep-rooted anger at the human condition as if, by inflicting death on another, they kill their own mortality. 'Que c'est bon de vivre', Ionesco laments, 'Je fus pris de tendresse pour cette vie qui m'apparut féérique; une fantasie lumineuse de la nuit. Nous nous entretenons parce que nous savons que nous serons tous tués. C'est par haine de la mort que nous nous entretenons'.⁴⁷ If death is absurd, man's attempts to expedite it are even more absurd. Bérenger questions his assassin in vain to find the reasons for his hatred for, as Ionesco explains, 'La haine peut avoir des prétextes, elle n'a pas de raisons. L'assassin tue parce qu'il ne peut faire autrement, sans motivation, avec une sorte de candeur et de

⁴³Notes, p.230.

⁴⁴Interview with Ionesco, in Hayman, Eugène Ionesco, p.7.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Beckett, Fin de partie, p.90.

⁴⁷Journal, p.323.

pureté. En tuant d'autres, c'est nous-mêmes que nous tuons'.⁴⁸ All nature follows the same law of violence and aggression; even insects and microbes, Ionesco observes, kill to try to avoid the encroachment of their own death. Even a stone resists attempts to break up its integrity. 'Vivre c'est mourir et c'est tuer', Ionesco concludes, 'chaque créature se défend en tuant, tue pour vivre'.⁴⁹

Death is, however, a significant part of life, for in death, Ionesco believes, the individual finally comes face to face with his innermost self, stripped of all pretences. When asked in an interview why he accorded so much importance to the last moment of life, he replied categorically, 'Il est révélateur de tout'.⁵⁰ However, instead of being tragically ennobled by the imminence of death, Ionesco shows man degraded, his fear, selfishness, and cruelty revealed without deception. This is most clearly underlined in Jeux, a play based, Ionesco tells us, on accounts of the plague of London and the siege of Leningrad.⁵¹ The play is a vast panorama that Ionesco compares to Hieronymous Bosch's painting, 'The Triumph of Death'.⁵² It has no central character, as though to emphasize that the pattern of human life is repeated endlessly, always sealed by the inevitability of death. The plague, an extreme and rapid cause of death, is, as Artaud had perceived, an appropriate means to shake his audience from their lethargy and an impelling memento mori. Ionesco told Tom Bishop: 'I wanted to go beyond the absurd, to underline the scandalous aspect of death - an elementary truth that people know but dismiss too readily'.⁵³ Death is the great revealer, the moment of truth when the masks fall. Claude Abastado comments about this play, 'L'heure de la mort est aussi celui de la vérité. Aucune décence aucune retenue ne maquille plus les sentiments. On meurt tel qu'on est à fond d'âme'.⁵⁴ Jeux presents a spectacle of men totally degraded, looting and trading upon one another's misfortunes. In scene 17, which was omitted from the Gallimard edition, but which was included in the first Paris production, Ionesco develops themes of cannibalism and murder.

⁴⁸Antidotes, p.323.

⁴⁹Notes, p.230.

⁵⁰'Ionesco attaque', Interview with Gilbert Canne, p.10.

⁵¹'Tuons-nous les uns les autres', Interview with Claude Cézan, Nouvelles Littéraires (17 September 1970), p.13.

⁵²Interview with Yvon Toussaint, p.5.

⁵³Cited by Thomas Bishop, in 'Ionesco on Olympus', Saturday Review, 53 (16 May 1970), 23.

⁵⁴Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.187.

A woman sells pâtés of human meat in the streets, and the scene ends with people trying to steal bodies from the funeral cart and a policeman chasing after a man who has stolen two human heads. Ionesco believes that it is death which reveals these terrifying hatreds and cruelties at the depth of the individual. He explains in his Journal:

C'est l'horreur et la colère d'être mortelle qui fait que l'humanité est comme elle est Nous ne nous sentons pas bien ici, nous ne nous sentons pas chez nous. Tant que l'on ne nous garantira pas l'immortalité, nous ne serons pas comblés et nous nous haïrons les uns les autres malgré le besoin que nous avons de nous aimer Chacun hait dans l'autre le mortel qu'il est lui-même. Dicton: mes enfants, méfiez-vous les uns des autres.⁵⁵

In contrast to the panoramic view of death, in Le Roi Ionesco considers a personal reaction to death. The play is a long, one-act play, exploring the increasing awareness of an individual that he is dying, and leads with straightforward linear development, without suspense or climax, to the inevitable conclusion. Ionesco admits that he identified very closely with this play, which was, for him, 'un essai d'apprentissage de la mort',⁵⁶ and recounts the difficulty that he had in writing the play and the anguish and psychic refusal that he experienced before the subject which concerned him too closely. However, as Ionesco is always at pains to point out, if he draws the material for his plays from his own personal obsessions, it is not because he wishes to create a theatre that is inward-looking and esoteric, but because he believes that the most personal and archetypal meet when the individual is closest to his intimate being. He writes, 'Je suis moi-même les autres, mes problèmes ne peuvent être essentiellement que ceux des autres. Je suis comme tout le monde. On est, qu'on le veuille ou non, tout le monde. "Tout le monde" ne s'en rend pas toujours compte'.⁵⁷ Thus, Ionesco states, 'le moi de chacun est le reflet du monde'.⁵⁸ He emphasizes this by making Bérenger a king, a kind of Everyman, an embodiment of the human condition. Bérenger cries, 'Des milliards de morts. Ils multiplient mon angoisse. Je suis leurs agonies. Ma mort est innombrable. Tant d'univers s'éteignent en moi'.⁵⁹ Moreover, by making the protagonist a king,

⁵⁵ Journal, pp.146-147.

⁵⁶ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.78.

⁵⁷ Notes, p.191.

⁵⁸ Antidotes, p.191.

⁵⁹ Théâtre, IV, 45.

Ionesco underlines the platitude well known from the Testament of Villon to Gray's Elegy, that death is a great leveller, 'the paths of glory lead but to the grave'.⁶⁰ Ionesco often compares this play to the lesson of Shakespeare's Richard II, who reminds his warders that even a king has no power over death:

For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a King?⁶¹

Ionesco's king is shown as being only too pathetically human. He stands up and falls over, like a character in a Punch and Judy show. But, Ionesco reminds us, this is a 'guignol tragique'.⁶² Juliette is surprised to discover how ordinary a king is when, stripped of all his pomp and glory, he faces death. 'Il n'est plus au-dessus des lois, pauvre vieux', she realizes, 'Il est comme nous. On dirait mon grand-père'.⁶³

If a King who is dying is only a man, however, Ionesco shows us that a man who is dying is also a king, for, when an individual dies, a whole world dies with him in the sense that his personal image and experience of the world that existed only through his perceiving consciousness is extinguished with him. In an interview, Ionesco recalled that 'l'homme est roi, le roi d'un univers. Chacun de nous est là comme au coeur du monde, et chaque fois qu'un homme meurt, il a le sentiment que le monde entier s'écroule, disparaît avec lui'.⁶⁴ As the individual dies, the light of his world is gradually extinguished, like night drawing in. The Old Man, in Les Chaises, describes the experience of aging:

Il est 6 heures de l'après-midi ... il fait déjà nuit. Tu te rappelles, jadis, ce n'était pas ainsi; il faisait encore jour à 9 heures du soir, à 10 heures, à minuit Peut-être, parce que plus on va, plus on s'enfonce. C'est à cause de la terre qui tourne, tourne, tourne, tourne ...⁶⁵

This recalls Ionesco's own childhood memory when he heard the old farmer's wife, Marie, at La Chapelle-Anthenaise saying:

Les jours, maintenant, sont plus courts qu'avant: tu te rappelles, quand tu étais petit? L'été, il faisait jour jusqu'à dix heures! Je ne sais pas ce qu'ils ont fait. Ils ont changé l'heure. Ou

⁶⁰ Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', The Complete English Poems (London: Heinemann, 1973), p.63.

⁶¹ Richard II, act 3, scene 2, lines 174-177.

⁶² Théâtre, IV, 25.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Interview with Claude Sarraute, Le Monde (19 December 1962), p.14.

⁶⁵ Théâtre, I, 132.

p'têt'e ben que plus on va, plus on s'enfonce! ... C'est à cause de la terre qui tourne.⁶⁶

The death of the world that accompanies the death of the individual is given concrete realization on stage in Le Roi. The secondary characters and the stage decor are used as the representation of the King's world. They are products of his awareness and exist only by his perceiving consciousness. 'Il respire encore puisque nous sommes là', says Juliette.⁶⁷ In a Swedenborgian 'correspondance', the sound of his heart-beat fills the whole kingdom and causes the walls of the palace to crumble. As he dies, his power over the objects and people of his consciousness ends, and the characters, walls, and decor gradually disappear. Finally, even the King and his throne disappear, leaving only a cold grey light and empty stage.

Because each individual carries his own unique world within, that he takes into his grave, death is a very solitary experience. Ionesco explores the paradox that, although death is part of the universal metaphysical condition shared by all men, yet it is something that must be experienced each time in complete solitude. Ionesco comments:

Ce qu'il y a de plus extraordinaire, c'est que finalement chacun de nous est conscient de la tragédie universelle. Et que chacun de nous est le centre de l'univers, chaque être vit dans une angoisse qu'il ne peut partager avec les milliards d'autres êtres qui, pourtant, vivent la même angoisse; chacun d'entre nous est comme Atlas qui supporte tout le poids du monde.⁶⁸

King Bérenger pleads for one of his subjects to volunteer to take his place, but in death there can be no substitutions. In Ionesco's earlier notes for the play there is a passage where the Queen tells the King:

On ne viendra pas t'aider. Tu as beau crier, tu as beau pleurer, tu as beau te désespérer. Cela leur est indifférent. Quand leur tour viendra, ce sera la même chose pour chacun ... ils ne sont pas cruels, ils sont indifférents. Ils portent en eux leur propre mort, ils ne peuvent pas porter la tienne.⁶⁹

Moreover, as death is such a personal experience, it is impossible to communicate the sensation of dying to another or to experience death vicariously. Death is an abstraction to Bérenger until his own death suddenly becomes frighteningly real and concrete when the doctor tells him he will not be there to have his breakfast the next day, nor even

⁶⁶'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.177.

⁶⁷Théâtre, IV, 63.

⁶⁸Antidotes, p.321.

⁶⁹Journal, p.62.

his dinner that evening. It is as if, as Marie says, 'Tout le monde est le premier à mourir'.⁷⁰

However, in Le Roi, Ionesco suggests that death and non-being, although terrifying, are not totally new experiences, but in part a return to the state that the individual had known as a child, when he perceived himself as an undifferentiated and inseparable part of the cosmos. Children die more easily, Ionesco suggests, for 'ils ne sont pas encore enracinés, ils ne sont pas installés, ils n'ont pas encore l'instinct de conservation. Nous prenons des habitudes déplorables. Retourne en arrière, redeviens un enfant pour mourir'.⁷¹ As Marie guides the King to his death, she gradually frees him from his attachments to his own familiar world that try to pull him back like 'broussailles' or 'mains gluantes',⁷² and finally frees him from his attachments to the self. Having thus been separated from all that is merely contingent, the King is led by Marie to the essential integrality of his individual being. 'Ne sois plus qu'une interrogation infinie', she says.⁷³ In death each individual must undergo this painful process of detachment and separation from earthly ties and habit. Ionesco explains:

Chacun d'entre nous est au centre du Monde. Chacun d'entre nous est un roi. Se séparer de l'existence à laquelle nous nous sommes tellement habitués, que vivre nous semble une chose normale, s'arracher au nid douillet dans lequel nous nous sommes enfoncés, cela constitue un effort douloureux, pénible, c'est comme la réapprentissage d'un état perdu, de connaissances oubliées. La Reine Marguerite aide le Roi à se déshabituer de vivre; les mauvaises habitudes sont tenaces; cette difficulté de non-exister doit être surmontée, c'est cette bataille qui est décrite dans la pièce.⁷⁴

On a personal level, Ionesco considers the play a failure. It did not help him to exorcise his fear of death nor to communicate the experience of death to others. It was too literary in style, he believes, and, therefore, instead of being an 'exercice spirituel', degenerated into no more than an 'exercice de style'.⁷⁵ Like Béranger, he finds himself

⁷⁰Théâtre, IV, 34.

⁷¹Journal, p.63.

⁷²Théâtre, IV, pp.72-73.

⁷³Ibid., p.41.

⁷⁴Note in Harraps edition of Le Roi se meurt, edited by Robert J. North (London: Harraps, 1966), p.49.

⁷⁵Unpublished interview with Ionesco, cited by Pascal Charvet and Stéphane Gompertz, in Le Roi se meurt d'Eugène Ionesco (Paris: Armand Collin/Gallimard, 1977), p.84.

repeating, 'Je meurs, vous entendez, je veux dire que je meurs, je n'arrive pas à le dire, je ne fais que de la littérature'.⁷⁶

Death, as the final confrontation with the universal and the 'Néant', is, therefore, intimately linked with the problem of the search for individual identity. The individual is revealed to himself, stripped of all pretences, but perhaps risks losing himself in the void before he has had a chance to establish his identity. Death is unknown and terrifying, something that Ionesco, like the hero of Tueur, can never accept; although he realizes that his resistance is 'une agitation bien inutile'.⁷⁷ Faced with the prospect of his own death, Ionesco's attitude is like that of a child at the end of a party. 'On devrait vivre au moins deux fois', he says 'et j'ai envie de crier bis'.⁷⁸ However, Ionesco believes that death is part of life, and life only exists in relation to death, just as the individual identity cannot be understood without the framework of death which limits its scope and, perhaps, finally obliterates it. Ionesco believes that much of the pain of death is the result of modern society, which places too much emphasis on life and never openly faces the presence of death. 'La civilisation est bien mal partie qui mise tout sur l'existence, sur la vie ...', he says, 'C'est parce que nous avons tout misé sur la vie que nous ne pouvons pas vivre'.⁷⁹ The tragedy of death, he considers, is not so much death itself, but the fact that man is unable to come to terms with it and so lives his life obsessed with repressed fear and anguish. To try to close one's eyes to death is to become as dehumanized as the Architect in Tueur, who calmly eats his sandwich, unmoved by news of the murder of his secretary. Ionesco greatly admires the calm acceptance of death that he found in Zen Buddhist writings and claimed, in an interview, 'Je voudrais me rapprocher de cette idée Zen que la vie et la mort sont la même chose'.⁸⁰ Death should be present throughout life, not as a hidden fear, but as an awareness. Marguerite tells Béranger, in Le Roi, 'Tu aurais dû garder cela comme une pensée permanente au tréfonds de toutes les pensées'.⁸¹ In accordance with his own precept, Ionesco

⁷⁶Théâtre, IV, 43.

⁷⁷Ibid., p.74.

⁷⁸'Quatre fois Ionesco', Interview with Béatrix Andrade, p.30.

⁷⁹Journal, p.203.

⁸⁰'Académicien ou non, Ionesco reste Ionesco', Interview with Claudine Chonez, Le Soir (6 February 1970), p.5.

⁸¹Théâtre, IV, 31.

throughout his theatre emphasizes the continual presence of death in life. Although a constant awareness of his mortality has not helped him personally to come to terms with death, nor has he been able to exorcise his fear by exteriorizing it in his writing, he hopes that one day man will learn to accept death. In an interview he says of Le Roi, 'Peut-être y aura-t-il un jour un monde où les hommes auront acquis l'instinct de la mort, et où ils ne la craindront plus. Alors ma tragédie sera une comédie'.⁸²

As for the difficult question of the effect of death on the individual identity, Ionesco's plays and writings are ambiguous. Le Roi is the play that most clearly suggests the possibility of a mystical transfiguration or initiation in death, but the grey light that ends the play might equally indicate emptiness, the 'Néant'. However, Ionesco does seem in this play to propose a theory similar to the Atomism of Democritus, whereby the irreducible essence of the individual identity persists even in death, but in a universal, undifferentiated form. Marie tells the King:

Ce n'est pas fini, les autres aimeront pour toi, les autres verront le ciel pour toi Entre dans les autres, sois les autres. Il y aura toujours ... cela, cela Tout cela qui est. Cela ne périt pas Tu as été une étape, un élément, un précurseur. Tu es de toutes les constructions. Tu comptes. Tu seras compté Tout ce qui a été sera, tout ce qui sera est, tout ce qui sera a été. Tu es inscrit à jamais dans les registres universels.⁸³

Marie's reference to the 'cela' recalls Ionesco's frequent references in his journals and other writings to the idea of the 'atman', a kind of universal spirit of which the individual is a part and in which he can be most truly himself. Ionesco describes it as 'une sorte d'extra-conscience ou de conscience au-delà de la conscience à laquelle je participe, qui est mon 'moi' réel'.⁸⁴ It is in reuniting with this universal principle of life that the individual will find his true self. 'C'est dans cet universel, dans cette extra-conscience', Ionesco says, 'que je me trouve moi, dans ce que j'ai d'essentiel: c'est là mon essence ultime'.⁸⁵ Ionesco often uses the analogy of the individual as an eddy in a stream to express his belief in the immortality of the individual

⁸²Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Rosette Lamont, Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 53 (February 1966), 29.

⁸³Théâtre, IV, 54-55.

⁸⁴Présent passé, p.213.

⁸⁵Ibid.

identity. The eddy is indistinguishable from the stream, yet it forms an important part of that stream, with its own movement and shape and identity. Thus, Ionesco concludes, 'Le Moi particulier, l'âme individuelle qui est comme un tourbillon dans l'écoulement du fleuve ne peut pas ne pas avoir une grande importance puisqu'elle existe'.⁸⁶ Thus, however absurd, human life is meaningful, even in the presence of death, for, if one individual leaves his work unfinished, others will take up where he left off. Humanity continues, as Richard Schechner points out, 'However this gratuitous self ... is still there, nothing can compel it not to be. It may not forestall death in each of us, but it affirms the life of the race of man Human life is gratuitous, but it persists'.⁸⁷ Despite the dark comedy of many of his plays and despite his immense personal anguish at the thought of death, Ionesco is, therefore, able to adopt a position of relative optimism:

Arraché d'un seul coup au réel, ce rêve-je mourrai: je ne me souviendrai pas de ce théâtre, de ce monde, de mes amours, de ma mère, de ma femme, de mon enfant. "Je" ne se souviendra pas. Et "je" ne sera pas "je".

Pourtant, tout cela aura été. Rien ne peut empêcher l'existence d'avoir existé, d'être inscrite, quelque part, ou d'être la substance assimilée de toutes les transformations futures.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Présent passé, p.84.

⁸⁷Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', p.208.

⁸⁸Notes, p.330.

No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe;
every man is a peece of the Continent,
a part of the maine.

John Donne, Meditation XVIII,
Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.

La présence inadmissible des autres.

Ionesco, Journal en miettes.

CHAPTER VI

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE OTHER

At the age of seven Ionesco recounts that he became aware of the others as an entity different and totally separated from his own self as though by an 'abîme infini'.¹ The others all resembled one another; he alone was different, and he felt ashamed to be shut out of their homogeneous community by the uniqueness of his individual identity. Ever since that time Ionesco has found social contacts difficult and often painful. However, he recognizes that all mankind shares the same metaphysical condition and that men's destinies are inextricably linked. 'Others are everywhere and oneself is also in Others', he admits.² From the moment he is born, man is in a social context outside of which he cannot live and which shapes and defines him. Interaction with others is a vital medium through which the individual can undertake his search for identity, for his sense of identity is inevitably influenced by others' appraisal of him and by comparisons which he makes between himself and others. However, when an individual who has no firm sense of individual identity enters into relationships with others, others are seen as a threat, just as the fullness of the material world threatened the individual's weak sense of self. The individual tries to force the other to give him a sanction and confirmation of some sense of identity, but the other is powerless to give him this confirmation for he, in turn, is seeking the same thing. Therefore, interpersonal relations, Ionesco believes, are more often characterized by a struggle for dominance and possession than by harmony and togetherness. In the larger social matrix the individual tries to achieve a vicarious sense of identity by complete adherence to a social or political group or creed or by the total identification of the self with a social position or rule. However, in identifying the self with an impersonal abstraction, the individual must

¹Découvertes, p.84.

²Interview with Richard Schechner, p.165.

abdicate his unique identity and ends up totally dehumanized, no more than a cog in the social machine. Thus society, ostensibly a means of supporting and uniting men, only serves to further separate the individual from himself and from others. 'La société (extérieure) m'aliène', Ionesco states, 'c'est-à-dire elle me sépare de moi-même et des autres à la fois'.³ Ionesco concludes that, in the same way that the individual can only survive in the world by a constant assertion of the self through his search for individual identity against the opposing forces of matter, so his relationships with society and others must be based on a constant emphasis of the uniqueness of the individual identity, a part of society, but not limited to its social demarcation, thus creating a fruitful balance between the social and the individual:

L'être humain n'est ni le zéro de l'individu absorbé par le collectivisme, ni l'homme bourgeois appauvri dans sa singularité et dans son isolement. La personne est le résultat de la confrontation du moi et de l'autre, un équilibre dynamique et constant entre le moi et l'autre.⁴

Approaching the problem of identity formation and social interaction from a psychological perspective, Erikson writes that 'the conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity'.⁵ Erikson, however, is talking about a balanced person. For the individual who lacks a firm sense of his own autonomous identity, any relationship with another threatens him with extinction, the 'engulfment' of which R.D. Laing speaks and which he describes as the 'complete loss of being by absorption into the other person'.⁶ Richard Schechner uses these terms from existential psychoanalysis to explain the pattern of relationships in Ionesco's plays. He writes, 'Ontological insecurity is the realization 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'.⁷ Ionesco finds it difficult to relate to other people, especially in a

³Notes, p.167.

⁴Antidotes, p.239.

⁵Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis, p.50.

⁶Laing, The Divided Self, p.44.

⁷Schechner, The Inner and the Outer Reality, p.202.

group. 'A vrai dire, les gens me gênent', he admits, 'je ne suis jamais senti à l'aise dans une foule, même si cette foule ne compte plus de trente personnes'.⁸ At times the friction between himself and the other becomes so powerful that it is intolerable. 'La présence des gens m'était devenue insupportable', he says, 'Horreur de les entendre; pénible de leur parler; atroce d'avoir affaire à eux ou de les sentir dans les parages'.⁹ Obsessed with his own problems of his search for individual identity, he is unable to give freely of himself to another. Ionesco admits that he would have liked 'de me tourner davantage ... vers les autres, au lieu d'être le prisonnier de moi-même', but, he asks, 'Comment se tourner vers les autres quand votre moi vous accable?'.¹⁰ Ionesco's plays explore the consequences of social interaction when the individual has no firm sense of identity to give him integrality and coherence. As he warns, 'Ce n'est que lorsque le mystère de mon existence ne m'inquiétera plus qu'il me restera un peu de loisir pour régler mes différends avec mes compagnons du voyage'.¹¹

Forced into society despite the discomfort and pain it involves and aware of the impossibility of mutual adjustment or understanding, the individual often seeks refuge in isolation within himself. From Leibniz's vision of windowless 'monads', floating blindly through space, merely bumping accidentally into one another, to Beckett's Play, where three characters, imprisoned in urns facing forward, soliloquize in total unawareness of their proximity, modern literature gives a vivid illustration of the individual, hermetically sealed in his own impenetrable world. 'Un et un font un', states Franz von Gerlach, in Sartre's Les Séquestrés d'Altona,¹² pessimistically resuming the sense of alienation and separateness that characterizes modern man. This isolation is interior not physical. It is the 'solitude dans le côtoïement'¹³ that Adamov describes. Ionesco's characters feel lonely in spite of, or maybe because of, being members of an organic community which they cannot penetrate or communicate with. Faust Bradesco explains:

L'angoisse qui broie l'esprit naît de l'isolement de l'individu,

⁸'Moi et mes monstres', Interview with André Bourin, p.11.

⁹Notes, p.303.

¹⁰Journal, pp.33-34.

¹¹Notes, p.305.

¹²J.-P. Sartre, Les Séquestrés d'Altona (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p.222.

¹³Arthur Adamov, 'Introduction au "Théâtre II"', Ici et maintenant (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p.17.

isolement intérieur de nature psychique, bien étendu, qui ne fait qu'accentuer depuis l'offensive brutale et exclusiviste du gregarisme social. Cet isolement intime au milieu de la foule bruyante provoque un état endémique d'"incommunicabilité humaine" qui accentue les complexes de l'individu.¹⁴

Thus, even though they live in society in close contact with other people, Ionesco's characters are often isolated, unable to establish a deep relationship with one another. Bradesco concludes, 'Au fond tous ces personnages sont des solitaires, comme nous le sommes tous, qui se supportent réciproquement sans jamais se connaître'.¹⁵

The mutual isolation of mankind is suggested both visually and metaphysically in Ionesco's plays. The lighthouse on the island in Les Chaises, the hermetically sealed apartments of Jacques and Amédée, the single room to which Béranger retreats in Rhinocéros, and the tomb of furniture in which the nouveau locataire encloses himself are vivid materializations of man's isolation. A name is an expression of one's identity for others, so it is significant that Ionesco's two most solitary heroes, the Solitaire and his prototype the Personnage of Ce Formidable bordel, have no names. The Solitaire compares the gulf between himself and the others to a 'cloison invisible',¹⁶ and Ionesco frequently uses a similar image, that of the wall, to express his feelings of overwhelming isolation from his fellows. He describes the wall in these terms, 'Il me sépare d'une communauté: il est donc l'expression de ma solitude, de la non-interpénétration; je n'arrive pas aux autres, les autres n'arrivent pas jusqu'à moi'.¹⁷ As a result of the invisible barrier between the self and the rest of mankind, other men seem strange and so different that they are like creatures of another species or from another planet. 'Comme il est difficile de pénétrer l'âme des autres!', the Solitaire sighs, 'Pour moi, ce sont des martiens, mes semblables! Est-ce que c'est eux qui étaient là dernière la vitre, comme dans un zoo, ou est-ce que c'était moi?'.¹⁸ In the same way the Personnage of Ce Formidable bordel is a displaced person, suffering from his separation from the rest of society. The theme of the play, Jacques Mauclair says:

Est celui de la solitude de l'homme dans le monde. Il n'arrive

¹⁴ Faust Bradesco, Le Monde étrange de Ionesco (Paris: Promotion et Edition, 1967), p.123.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.82.

¹⁶ Le Solitaire, p.66.

¹⁷ Journal, p.89.

¹⁸ Le Solitaire, pp.91-92.

pas d'abord à comprendre ce qu'est la société, ce que sont les hommes autour de lui. Il les regarde comme des êtres bizarres et ^{un} peu monstrueux Il a l'angoisse continuelle, il ne peut être heureux parce qu'il ne peut pas participer ... il ne peut pas s'y inclure. Et bien, il finit par être abandonné aussi par tout le monde.¹⁹

It is the same feeling that Béranger experiences in Rhinocéros, as the last human being facing a society of animals, and it is the feeling that Béranger expresses in Tueur, wishing to be close to a humanity to which he can never quite belong. 'J'ai toujours été seul', he laments, 'Pourtant j'aime l'humanité, mais de loin'.²⁰ The sign of his isolation is that, despite his efforts to preach the fraternity of mankind, he is unable to find a common language with which to reach the Killer. His words sound hollow like the empty clichés which they are: 'Les hommes sont tous des frères, bien entendu, ce sont des semblables qui ne se ressemblent pas toujours. Il y a cependant un point commun. Il doit y avoir un point commun, un langage commun ... Lequel? Lequel?'.²¹

The individual, therefore, feels isolated and uncomfortable in the presence of others, yet he cannot totally withdraw from society for, without the confirmation and acknowledgement of his existence by others, he is overwhelmed by a sense of his own unreality. 'Hors du monde non plus je ne pouvais vivre ...', Ionesco admits, 'Privé de tout. L'aliénation authentique'.²² The Solitaire hates the company of others, yet paradoxically fears solitude. 'Leurs paroles indifférentes ou amicales ou désagréables ne me parvenait pas ou je les repoussais, je les fuyais. Les voir passer un à un, dans la rue, me donnait la nausée. Le coude à coude, que le sort m'en préserve. Mais je ne pouvais supporter non plus la solitude', he says.²³ Béranger, in Rhinocéros, echoes his words, saying, 'La solitude me pèse. La société aussi'.²⁴ At the end of the play, when he is totally isolated, he begins to doubt if he is a man, or whether it is not he who is the monster. He no longer even understands his own language. This need for the recognition of others attracts men into groups, even though they detest one another. The

¹⁹ Jacques Mauclair, Interview with J.K. Newberry, in J.K. Newberry, 'An Evaluation of the Plays of Eugène Ionesco' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Nottingham University, 1974), p.218.

²⁰ Théâtre, II, 160.

²¹ Ibid., p.168.

²² Découvertes, p.105.

²³ Le Solitaire, p.82.

²⁴ Théâtre, III, 24.

homme aux valises, seeking for his homeland and friends, still finds himself a stranger, isolated from those around him. He begs to be admitted to their society: 'Madame, je vous connais. Je suis votre compatriote', he pleads, 'Je suis votre voisin. J'habite le même quartier Nous sommes partis ensemble. Je me suis égaré du groupe. En fait, j'aurais dû être avec vous. Reprenez-moi avec vous'.²⁵

Ionesco finds himself in the same uncomfortable position as these heroes, unable to tolerate social life, yet finding himself unable to totally withdraw from the companionship of others because of his awareness of their common human condition and his fear of being totally alone:

Mes contemporains m'agacent. Je déteste mon voisin de droite, je déteste celui qui est à ma gauche. Je déteste surtout celui de l'étage du dessus. Autant d'ailleurs, que celui du rez-de-chaussée Et pourtant, lorsque mes contemporains meurent, j'en ressens une peine énorme Je me sens de plus en plus seul. Que puis-je faire sans eux? Que vais-je faire parmi 'les autres'?²⁶

From the moment a child is born, he is inscribed in a particular social context. His relationships with his parents and with his childhood friends are no less social relationships than those which he will establish later in the wider social groups and classes of the mature man. To try to reduce the question of the individual's relationship with others to a class conflict, as, Ionesco believes, the socially engaged writers try to do, is not only limiting for the individual, but impoverishes the rich variety of levels of interaction between the individual and others:

Mes rapports avec mon voisin sont aussi des rapports sociaux. Les rapports entre deux époux ou deux amants sont également des rapports sociaux. L'homme n'étant pas seul, tout est naturellement social. On peut parler d'une sociologie du mariage, d'une sociologie du voisinage, d'une sociologie de l'usine, d'une sociologie concentrationnaire, hélas, d'une sociologie des communautés religieuses, d'une sociologie écolière ou militaire ou du travail, qui fait que le social et que les conflits ne sont pas uniquement de classes. Réduire tout le social à cela, c'est donc diminuer et le social et l'homme.²⁷

Although Ionesco sketches several friendships in his plays, such as those between Bérenger and Edouard in Tueur and Bérenger and Jean in Rhinocéros, these are not, in general, analyzed in great detail. The particular forms of relationship between the self and the other, within the

²⁵Théâtre, VI, 49.

²⁶Notes, p.315.

²⁷Ibid., p.195.

confines of the family, however, are treated in unusual depth. A surprising amount of Ionesco's plays are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the problems of family relationships, in particular, those within a marriage, and, as Richard Coe has pointed out, even his lovers envisage their relationship in terms of a conventional marriage.²⁸ Ionesco accords much importance to family relationships because the bonds that the child establishes with his parents are the first interaction between the individual and the other, and in a family situation the individual lives in the closest proximity and the greatest degree of intimacy with another person. Moreover, Ionesco believes that the relationships in a family or the relationship between a man and his wife are of universal significance, for the pattern established in the association between two individuals dictates the shape of all social involvement, even the relationship of one nation with another. As Beckett's tramps realize, in En attendant Godot, 'l'humanité c'est nous, que ça nous plaise ou non'.²⁹

Ionesco's treatment of the family reflects his own experience as a parent and husband and his vivid memories of the stormy relationships that characterized his own childhood, as well as his observations of the 'bourgeois' institution of marriage that he sees around him. For Ionesco, his present family is a place where he can feel secure and integrated, an external world of which he is the centre, linked by a spiritual bond:

Un cosmos s'est développé à partir de ce germe, s'est constitué et je suis le personnage principal, le centre de ce cosmos: il n'y a pas d'autre monde que celui-là, c'est une donnée permanente ... Je ne pense pas que ma mort physique, qui ferait des ravages sans doute, détruirait ce monde, mais l'absence spirituelle l'abolirait certainement.³⁰

However, the families that Ionesco portrays in his plays are more often bourgeois families, characterized precisely by this 'absence spirituelle', devoid of the true feeling and empathy which should be the distinguishing feature of any human relationship. Under these circumstances the closeness of the family situation only serves to emphasize the isolation of the individual and the constant encroachment of one individual on another, as Richard Coe puts it:

²⁸Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.50.

²⁹Beckett, En attendant Godot, p.112.

³⁰Journal, p.153.

Ionesco's people - unlike Beckett's or Genet's - are lonely where, according to any materialist philosophy, they have no right to be: in a social situation. In their families, their sitting-rooms, their offices, surrounded by relatives, 'concierges', policemen and visitors, they discover willy-nilly an additional dimension to be lonely in.³¹

This 'additional dimension' is precisely that of the individual identity.

The first relationships which the child explores are those with his mother and father. Ionesco's memories of his father appear in 'couleurs sombres'.³² He hated his father's cruelty and love of authority. The father-image became synonymous in his mind with all symbols of authority, and this hatred, he believes, has had a determining and lasting influence on his attitudes to life and to authority:

Si je suis comme je suis et pas autrement, je dois tout à ce fait initial, ou beaucoup. Je ne sais pourquoi, cela a déterminé l'attitude que j'ai prise vis-à-vis de mes parents, cela a dû même déterminer mes haines sociales. J'ai l'impression que c'est à cause de cela que je haïs l'autorité, là est la source de mon antimilitarisme, c'est-à-dire de tout ce qui est, de tout ce que représente le monde martial, de tout ce qui est société fondée sur la primauté de l'homme par rapport à la femme Tout ce que j'ai fait, c'est en quelque sorte contre lui que je l'ai fait.³³

The memory of his father haunts his plays as a cruel, repressive figure. He may well be the model for the Professor in La Leçon,³⁴ the menacing Frère Supérieur of La Soif and the 'médecin-chirurgien-bourreau-bactériologue et astrologue' and also torturer of Le Roi, the cold-blooded 'architecte-commissaire' of Tueur, the guards in La Soif, and the 'inquisiteur' and John Bull in Le Piéton. The parallel between authority and the father-image is the clearest in Victimes, where the representative of authority, the Policeman, metamorphoses into Choubert's father and the voice of the young Ionesco echoes that of the child, 'Père, nous ne nous sommes jamais compris ... Tu étais dur ... Je haïssais ta violence, ton égoïsme ... Tu me frappais ... Je devais venger ma mère'.³⁵

The female-figure is more ambiguous. Again, Ionesco's attitude was permanently coloured by his early memories of seeing his mother being mistreated by his father, and her attempt to commit suicide. His feeling

³¹ Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.164.

³² Présent passé, p.7.

³³ Ibid., pp.22-23.

³⁴ See for example Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco, p.17. 'Undoubtedly the main source for the figure of the Professor was Ionesco's father.'

³⁵ Théâtre, I, 203.

of guilt towards women was increased when his father abandoned his mother. Joséphine in Le Piéton, Marie-Madeleine in La Soif, and Madeleine in Victimes rehearse this terror of being abandoned by their husbands. Ionesco assumed his father's guilt and carries it with him throughout life:

Depuis, j'ai eu pitié, à tort ou à raison, de toutes les femmes. Je me suis senti coupable. J'ai pris sur moi la culpabilité de mon père. Ayant peur de faire souffrir les femmes, de les persécuter, je me suis laissé persécuter par elles. Ce sont elles qui m'ont fait souffrir.³⁶

The female-figure appears in a multiplicity of different forms throughout the plays: as mother, wife, mistress, fiancée, sister, queen, goddess, mother earth, lover, and witch. Commenting on the three faces of Roberte II, in Jacques, Ionesco says, 'C'est la femme qui n'a pas seulement trois visages, mais une infinité de visages puisqu'elle est toute femme'.³⁷ Women, Ionesco believes, differ from men in their sense of love and duty which he contrasts to men's greater metaphysical awareness and desire for the infinite. Thus, despite his sympathy for women and his deep love of his mother, wife, and daughter, many of Ionesco's plays portray women in an unfavourable light. It is these very qualities of love and duty that Ionesco resents, for he feels that women represent an attachment to the status quo and domesticity that stultifies man's search for his individual identity. He explained to the author in an interview that man is different from women in that:

Il y a chez lui une insatisfaction. Il veut chercher ailleurs, il veut aller plus loin, plus haut et puis, finalement, il ne peut pas. Il est retenu par le sens du devoir qu'il a vis-à-vis de sa femme et de sa famille. Il y a une contradiction en lui. Il s'apprête à n'importe quoi, mais ne peut pas parce qu'il y a des impératifs moraux qui sont plus forts.³⁸

Many critics have laid undue emphasis on the negative role of women in Ionesco's plays. Claude Abastado describes women as 'séduction et piège de l'enfer ... la fidélité au passé ... les sentiments fanés, les habitudes, les convenances ... l'amour clos comportent le monde immobile de la femme'.³⁹ Philippe Senart is even more critical:

La Femme, dans le théâtre de M. Ionesco, est l'amie de l'Ombre. Elle s'y plaît. Elle joue à y représenter le Mal. Sans doute

³⁶Présent passé, p.28.

³⁷Entre la vie et le rêve, p.146.

³⁸Interview with author.

³⁹Claude Abastado, Preface in Eugène Ionesco, Rhinocéros (Paris: Bordas, 1970), p.17.

est-ce elle qui a attiré l'homme aux enfers. Tentatrice et corruptrice, elle est l'initiatrice de sa chute Symbole de la mort, de la matière, de la pesanteur, la Femme aux bracelets fermés est l'Adversaire du Rêve qui allège et libère. Elle refuse l'espoir ... Elle a peur de l'opinion, des journaux, des voisins. Elle a, petite bourgeoise timorée, le sens des convenances A la Foi, elle oppose la Loi. A l'Esprit elle oppose la Lettre. La Femme, dans le théâtre de M. Ionesco, c'est l'Ordre établi.⁴⁰

Finally, Richard Coe emphasizes the egotistical indifference of the female to higher aspirations, their materialism and their deliberate opposition to man's search for individual identity:

Adam is betrayed by Eve. Choubert is betrayed by Madeleine ... Béranger (Rhinocéros) is betrayed by Daisy, just as the earlier Béranger (Tueur) is betrayed by a glossy and indifferent Dany. But it is in Amédée that the fear, the egotism, the stupidity and the emotional barrenness of woman is brought out in all its sordid splendour [-] [They] symbolize all that is opaque, earth-bound and futile in human existence; they nag, they betray, they enslave, they reduce every aspiration to the level of their own despairing domesticity.⁴¹

This is the role which Roberte II plays in Jacques, tempting Jacques away from his ideals to the base level of sexual gratification.

Similarly, in Victimes, Madeleine seduces Choubert downwards, 'Descends ... descends ... si tu me veux!'.⁴² She represents the love of order and authority, stating, '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'.⁴³ When Choubert, penetrated by a profound sense of being and joy, is about to fly from the top of the mountain which he has climbed in his imagination, Madeleine shows her selfishness and lack of comprehension of Choubert's spiritual aspirations. She tries to prevent his mystical exaltation, pleading, 'Pense à nous. La solitude n'est pas bonne. Tu ne peux pas nous laisser ... Aie pitié, pitié!', and insists, 'Tombe, voyons! Eteins-toi'.⁴⁴ Her namesake in Amédée is equally unable to understand her husband. The flashback scene sums up, by juxtaposition, the earthly, mundane side of the female unable to share her husband's vision:

⁴⁰Sénart, Ionesco, pp.107-108.

⁴¹Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.75, p.130.

⁴²Théâtre, I, 195.

⁴³Ibid., p.184.

⁴⁴Ibid., p.216, p.219.

Amédée II: Univers aérien ... Liberté ... Puissance trans-
parente ... Equilibre ... Légère plénitude ... Le monde n'a
pas de poids

Madeleine II: La pierre, c'est le vide. Les murs, le vide.
Il n'y a rien ... il n'y a rien.⁴⁵

As Amédée leaves in a mystical flight into the night sky, Madeleine's only concern is for herself and her fear of being alone. Her worry that Choubert might catch cold, as he has forgotten his mackintosh, is ridiculously inappropriate in face of the magnitude of Amédée's experience, emphasizing that her mind is functioning in a register totally different from his, unable to comprehend her husband's vision.

In the later plays, women are presented more sympathetically, with less egocentricity and materialism and more emphasis on the creative half of the female psyche, their capacity for love. Ionesco believes that love has great power: 'L'amour arrange tout, il change la vie'.⁴⁶ However, despite their great love for their husbands, Joséphine in Le Piéton and Marie-Madeleine in La Soif still have the same fear of solitude and the inability to share their husbands' visions that characterize the women of the earlier plays. In Le Piéton, which has been called 'one of the most convincing analyses of the marriage relationship in the modern theatre',⁴⁷ Joséphine cannot understand Bérenger's desire to leave habit, order, and home to seek his essential identity in the 'antimonde' and, in true bourgeois fashion, is concerned only with what the neighbours will think, warning him that he will be mocked for his eccentricity: 'Bérenger, voyons, tu donnes un très mauvais exemple [-] On t'attaquera dans les journaux. Tu n'auras plus de visa anglais'.⁴⁸ Not only can she not understand his vision, but she resents it because it inevitably takes him on a journey of discovery that leaves her and the home far behind. Solitude terrifies her, because alone, without the support of her husband, she feels a loss of her integrity as an individual, which, for her, is firmly rooted in the family group. She cries; 'Je suis abandonnée, j'ai peur, tellement peur. Je suis égarée. Errante ... On ne me connaît pas, on ne m'aime pas, je ne suis rien pour les autres. Je ne compte pas pour eux.'⁴⁹ She does not understand that

⁴⁵Théâtre, I, 288-289.

⁴⁶Ibid., p.291.

⁴⁷Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.130.

⁴⁸Théâtre, III, 162, 164.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.181.

her husband's search for individual identity necessarily involves trying to relate himself to the universal and absolute, finding the lost paradise, even if only to discover eventually that paradise and the individual identity are to be found, not in the absolute, but where she finds them, in the intimate, in the love and comfort of the family. She, therefore, resents his dream, and he resents her resentment. In a nightmare sequence, Joséphine is tried and found guilty for a crime which is her very virtue, her faithful sense of duty which prevents her from understanding her husband's aspirations. 'On n'a rien à me reprocher', she pleads, 'J'ai toujours été fidèle ... J'ai été vertueuse ... j'ai fait tout mon devoir, toujours. Je n'ai pas quitté mon poste. Je suis restée là, sage, triste, résignée et malheureuse ... Vous voulez condamner la vertu?'.⁵⁰ Ionesco, however, tends to sympathize with, rather than condemn, the female sense of duty. He believes that women have little time for metaphysical concerns because they are forced into a supportive role as 'mère-épouse-consolatrice', whilst men, assured of their protection and freed from their responsibilities and practical concerns, can remain children, close to their spiritual roots. Ionesco explains:

L'homme est comme un enfant et c'est par là qu'on peut lui trouver une valeur. Il a une valeur spirituelle parce qu'il est, malgré tout, un enfant qui a besoin de la mère, de la mère-épouse-consolatrice, et parce qu'il a une vision émerveillée du monde Et c'est cet étonnement devant l'univers qui est je crois l'attitude philosophique fondamentale La femme l'a aussi quelquefois cette faculté, mais sans doute beaucoup moins parce qu'elle a trop de soucis; elle doit soutenir son vieil enfant d'homme.⁵¹

Supporting so much alone, her fear of solitude is not merely selfish either, as Ionesco tells Claude Abastado:

Dans Le Piéton de l'air la femme défend l'homme, l'assiste, a peur pour lui. C'est elle qui doit faire que son fou de mari reste plus tranquille. Dans la deuxième partie de la pièce dans la scène des cauchemars, j'ai voulu montrer la solitude absolue de la femme, car l'homme peut s'appuyer sur la femme, il peut être aimé de la femme; mais la femme n'a rien derrière; c'est elle qui tient tout en mains.⁵²

The contrast between the fundamental aspirations of man and woman is clearly emphasized in La Soif. Although Marie-Madeleine understands

⁵⁰Théâtre, III, 185.

⁵¹Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, pp.276-277.

⁵²Ibid., p.276.

that her husband suffers from a 'nostalgie ardente',⁵³ she cannot share his vision. The actress Claude Winter, who played this role, summed up Marie-Madeleine's dilemma, saying, 'Mon personnage a un excédant de douceur, d'optimisme, de joie intérieure. Mais malgré tout son amour, elle ne comprend pas son mari, elle ne pénètre pas son univers'.⁵⁴ She preaches resignation in an attempt to persuade him not to leave her. 'Pour l'éternité, je suis liée à lui. Pourquoi nomme-t-il cela des chaînes?', she wonders, 'Pourtant que je l'appelle et qu'il me réponde, je ne désire rien d'autre. Il est là, cela me suffit'.⁵⁵ However, if he can be everything for her, she, although important to him, is only part of the larger framework of the cosmos which he is compelled to explore to satisfy his inner hunger and thirst. He tries to explain to her, 'Ce n'est pas la paix que je veux, ce n'est pas le simple bonheur, il me faut une joie débordante, l'extase Vous tenez une grande place. L'univers est encore plus grand, ce qui me manque, plus grand encore'.⁵⁶ Jean's search inevitably ends in failure, as he attributes his feeling of emptiness to the lack of some external object rather than to an inner lack. He believes that to be fully himself he must reject his past and all that he has been: 'Je rejette la mémoire. J'en garde juste ce qu'il faut pour savoir qui je suis, j'oublie tout, sauf ceci: je ne suis rien d'autre que moi, je ne dois être que moi-même'.⁵⁷ He does not find this completeness, for he needs what he had so proudly rejected. He had not realized what Marie-Madeleine had tried to tell him, that the joy of the integrated self had been accessible all along by simply changing his attitude towards himself. 'S'il se voyait tel qu'il est, il s'apercevrait qu'il est beau', Marie-Madeleine says, 'il ne se détesterait plus'.⁵⁸ The ending is ambiguous. It is not clear whether Jean's voyage through the world was a necessary stage in leading him to re-discover the paradise within himself or whether the awareness came too late, when he was separated from this paradise by bars. In either case, Ionesco seems to indicate in this play that it is within the bounds of the contentment and security of home and family, where

⁵³Théâtre, IV, 102.

⁵⁴Claude Winter, in 'Cinq personnages en quête d'eux-mêmes', p.17.

⁵⁵Théâtre, IV, 95.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp.82-83.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p.98.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p.95.

women endeavour to persuade their husbands to remain, that the goal which men seek will ultimately be found.

Like Marie-Madeleine, the Old Woman in Jeux tries to teach her husband the importance of giving totally of oneself in love to find contentment and resignation, even in the face of death. 'Je n'ai besoin que de toi', she tells him, 'Et d'un peu de ciel, un peu de lumière, un coin d'ombre, tout juste un peu de chaleur'. Her husband is restless, always searching for something to make life more meaningful, always trying to understand his life, and so cannot live without pain and anguish. She tells him:

Toute question perce l'être, le blesse. Toute question remet tout en question. Se demander c'est refuser, même si on ne sait pas qu'on refuse. Se demander, c'est ne pas avoir confiance ou avoir en soi le vide. Mais oui, c'est une affaire de tempérament, depuis la naissance, on a choisi le refus ou l'acceptation.⁵⁹

They both die from the plague, as there is no escape from death, but because of the Old Woman's love and resignation, she retains her hope and optimism and death loses its terror. Moreover, her life has been full of joy and beauty, whereas her husband has wasted his life in ennui and fear. That he should realize his mistake on the brink of death, when it is too late, ironically underlines the absurdity of his life and death.

In Le Roi the two different aspects of the female psyche are separated and incarnated in the two queens, Marguerite representing duty and Marie love. This device allows Ionesco to contrast and juxtapose the two traits. Jacques Mauclair, the first producer of the play, explains, 'Marie et Marguerite, ce sont les deux moitiés de la même personne, l'une c'est la reine des plaisirs, des joies etc. et l'autre c'est celle des devoirs, des réalités, de la lucidité'.⁶⁰ Ionesco confirms this, adding, that if love gives the individual happiness during his life, duty is important too, for it helps the individual to gain access to his true identity through death:

Marguerite représente le destin, la loi - et la loi est imperturbable La femme est le devoir mais elle est aussi l'amour. La reine Marie, c'est l'autre aspect de la reine Marguerite. Il y a là deux aspects de la femme, un dédoublement. Marie a voulu donner au roi un bonheur terrestre peut-être qu'il est impossible d'avoir; alors Marguerite est obligée de le mener

⁵⁹Théâtre, V, 91.

⁶⁰Mauclair, Interview with J.K. Newberry, p.210.

jusqu'à l'accomplissement de soi-même dans la mort.⁶¹

Marie believes that total love can fill the inner emptiness which the individual feels and can even cure death:

L'amour est fou. Si tu as l'amour fou, si tu aimes insensément, si tu aimes absolument la mort s'éloigne. Si tu m'aimes moi, si tu aimes tout, la peur se résorbe. L'amour te porte, tu t'abandonnes et la peur t'abandonne. L'univers est, tout ressuscite, le vide se fait plein.⁶²

Although it is not Marie but the austere Marguerite who is eventually able to reconcile the King to his death, Ionesco believes that love can ease the pain of death, and those that truly love, such as Marie-Madeleine in La Soif and the Old Woman in Jeux, do not fear death, so long as they are with the ones that they love. 'Pourvu que je suis avec toi, je n'ai pas peur de mourir', Marie-Madeleine says.⁶³ Love means giving oneself totally to another and so is a preparation for the total relinquishing of self in death, and women, Ionesco believes, possess this ability to a greater degree than men. It is for this reason that Ionesco was concerned by J.-H. Donnard's hostile criticism of Joséphine in Le Piéton, and he wrote to him:

Ce qui m'afflige, c'est que vous avez mal jugé le personnage central féminin, dont vous dites qu'elle est une petite-bourgeoise conformiste. Je ne le pense pas. Elle est tout à son amour, surmontant ses propres terreurs, elle s'est donnée toute à Bérenger, son époux un peu trop volant, et elle n'a que le souci de celui-ci: amour et peur pour lui; c'est la capacité d'amour de Joséphine que j'ai essayé d'exprimer ainsi que, à travers elle, la solitude féminine dans un monde féroce. L'amour n'est pas petit-bourgeois. Contrairement à ce qu'on pense, je crois que dans mes pièces, c'est la femme qui, malgré ses défauts, est mise en bonne lumière, en meilleure lumière que l'homme.⁶⁴

Ionesco does not condemn women for their attachment to habit, home, and duty, but shows that this aspect of the female has a very important role in guiding and supporting men. Women's supportive role, combined with their kindness and capacity for love, makes many of his later heroines very commendable. In an interview for Elle, he says of women:

Mais je les place très haut Je pense que la femme, c'est la fidélité, l'obligation, la loi, l'ange gardien, la mère, le soutien [-] Les femmes c'est la bonté, l'amour. Du moins c'est

⁶¹Cited by Abastado, in Eugène Ionesco, p.275.

⁶²Théâtre, IV, 53-54.

⁶³Ibid., p.82.

⁶⁴Letter from Ionesco to J.-H. Donnard, 18 October 1965, cited by Donnard, in Ionesco dramaturge, p.191.

ce que nous, les hommes, nous attendons d'elles. Elles ont un devoir à remplir. Ce sont elles les plus puissants. L'homme n'est rien. Elles font tout. Elles font le monde.⁶⁵

However, he recognizes that her love of duty and order is in conflict with man's thirst for the absolute and search for individual identity, and this can cause resentment and misunderstanding between the two. As Ionesco points out, 'ce n'est pas ma faute si pour elles l'équilibre se manifeste par le raccommodage des chaussettes!'.⁶⁶

The inevitable lack of comprehension which Ionesco perceives between the sexes is accentuated by the bourgeois idea of marriage that he observes around him. Marriage and family relationships should, Ionesco believes, be based on emotional responses springing from the inner life, but, because of the bourgeois fear of spontaneity and true feeling, these responses are rigidly systemized by social conventions until they become artificial, meaningless stereotypes of behaviour, divorced from love or individuality. In Le Jeune homme à marier Ionesco treats the question in a burlesque vein, but in Jacques and its sequel, L'Avenir, his criticism of the institutionalized concept of marriage is more cutting, despite the superficial comedy. All the arsenal of traditional beliefs, such as respect for one's ancestors and parents, are invoked to force Jacques's conformity to social conventions in marrying Roberte II. Having created this marriage as a social convenience, the bourgeois system contrives to turn it into a marriage without love, a mere social function for the purpose of reproduction and the preservation of the race. The play opens with the couple, now married for three years, deeply, if rather ridiculously, in love, still clasping one another in a tight embrace, much to the annoyance of the relatives for whom 'une seule chose importe: le rendement'.⁶⁷ The couple are reprimanded for their love and reminded of the importance of tradition and their 'devoir principal',⁶⁸ then separated forever and sent to opposite ends of the stage. There is no place for love in the bourgeois concept of marriage, and their future relationship must be strictly utilitarian, geared to the necessities of production.

The mentality of bourgeois society degrades the concept of love and

⁶⁵ Ionesco, 'êtes-vous notre Molière', Interview with Marlyse Schaeffer, p. 221.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Théâtre, II, 206.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.209.

sex to make it a tool of the social machine or mere aggression. The exchanges between the Fireman and Mary, in La Cantatrice, already border on the erotic, but in a fairly harmless way. However, in Robert II's 'Ma bouche dégoule ...',⁶⁹ speech in Jacques and in Le Salon de l'automobile, the sexual overtones become more open and shocking. In the 'guignolade érotique', Le Tableau, the erotic element is deliberately blatant and unpleasant so that the audience is made to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. The stage directions indicate that 'Le comédien jouant ce rôle doit être aussi érotique que le permet la censure ou que les spectateurs le supportent'.⁷⁰ Ionesco considers that this kind of eroticism, divorced from love and feeling, is a dangerous force that alienates the individual identity and the spiritual dimension of man and reduces him to the level of the animal world, where aggression and oppression are the rule. As Ionesco tells Claude Bonnefoy, 'Il est biologie pure. C'est une sorte de démission de la conscience'.⁷¹ An example of this is Scène à quatre, where four men, in their eagerness to kiss a lady, dismember her or La Leçon, where the Professor's lust ends in rape and murder that Ionesco compares to vampirism. Thus marriage is not a means of closeness and unity with another, but a combat, the attempt of each partner to encroach on the other or to possess them. Robert Abirached, in his article, 'Le Duel et la mort chez Ionesco', sees in Ionesco's plays a very pessimistic view of the relationship between men and women. He describes it as:

L'affrontement des sexes dans une guerre sans merci, l'union du couple pour collaborer à sa commune mort, le désir qui fait mine d'être aveugle parce que cela l'arrange, puis se révèle selon sa véritable nature comme un instinct carnassier cherchant qui dévorer.⁷²

Amédée and Madeleine are a perfect example of the total incompatibility that Ionesco perceives in many marriages. The contrapuntal exclamations of the flashback sequences underline the irreconcilable breach between their visions of the world. Jean-Hervé Donnard explains this disharmony in terms of Jungian psychoanalysis by reference to the 'animus' and 'anima' which, he states, no longer complement one another. 'Disons que si "l'anima" d'Amédée se révèle trop molle, en revanche

⁶⁹Théâtre, I, 124-125.

⁷⁰Théâtre, III, 263, note 1.

⁷¹Entre la vie et le rêve, p. 145.

⁷²Robert Abirached, 'Le Duel et la mort chez Ionesco', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 53 (February 1966), 21.

"l'animus" de Madeleine apparaît trop ferme", he suggests, 'Ce mariage n'est pas harmonieux; la femme ne complète pas l'homme, elle le "compense", d'où un désaccord sans remède'.⁷³ Whatever the cause, the phrase 'un désaccord sans remède' aptly sums up the plight of many of Ionesco's couples. In the famous recognition scene of La Cantatrice a married couple find out by a series of lengthy deductions that they must be man and wife, even though they do not recognize one another. Ionesco is again saying that man and woman remain isolated by their incompatibility, even when living in the most intimate conditions. They only know their illusions of one another. Unmarried couples fare no better, and even young love is vitiated by an inability to share deep feelings. The failure of the love of Daisy and Bérenger, in Rhinocéros, is but one symptom of the victory of the rhinoceroses. Bérenger hopes to regenerate mankind, like a second Adam and Eve, but, like Eve, Daisy betrays him, just as Dany is deaf to Bérenger's appeals in Tueur. The nameless hero of Le Solitaire lives together with, but totally isolated from, the 'Serveuse' until, tired of his total introspection and lack of communication with her, she leaves him with the words, 'Tu vois, nous ne sommes pas faits de la même façon. Nous ne voyons pas les choses pareils'.⁷⁴ Most of Ionesco's couples could say the same thing.

Like Beckett's tramps in En attendant Godot or Hamm and Clov in Fin de parti, 'Nec tecum, nec sine te' could be the device of many of Ionesco's couples. They cannot coexist without constant tension and disharmony, yet they need one another, even if only as a vent for their hatred and reproaches; their relationships fit well George Wellwarth's description of Adamov's plays as 'a sort of mystic, ritual dance between two magnets with the like poles constantly turned towards each other'.⁷⁵ The lady with the dog who, unsolicited and unheeded, pours out her life-story to the taciturn hero of Ce Formidable bordel sums up this constant movement of attraction and repulsion of one person towards another. 'C'est très bien le mariage', she states, but in the next breath she admits, 'Mais moi j'en souffre' and adds that 'le mariage quelquefois c'est un enfer'. Unable to coexist compatibly with her husband, she leaves him, but then she cannot bear to be without him so returns to him only to leave again and the pattern is repeated endlessly:

⁷³ Donnard, Ionesco dramaturge, p.93.

⁷⁴ Le Solitaire, p.130.

⁷⁵ Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox, p.29.

Et puis, j'en peux plus. Ça m'étouffe, monsieur, ça m'étouffe.
 Et je repars. Et je reviens. Et je repars. Et je reviens.
 Et je repars. Et je reviens. Et c'est tout le temps comme ça.
 Où aller, monsieur, et où se mettre?⁷⁶

This peculiar love-hate relationship that characterizes interpersonal relations in Ionesco's plays is best explored by Ionesco in his description of the plays of Robert Dubillard:

Des personnages sont là, ensemble, qui s'aiment un peu et se détestent beaucoup, qui veulent se séparer et ne peuvent se passer les uns des autres; ils se détestent quand ils sont ensemble, ils souffrent de l'absence de celui et de celle qui, finalement, s'échappent vers un nouveau désert d'ennui peut-être. Et ceux qui s'échappent semblent, à ceux qui restent, avoir été les seuls à pouvoir les sauver.

Mais cette façon qu'ils ont de s'accrocher les uns aux autres, de vouloir se décrocher les uns aux autres, de haïr celui qui est là, de rêver, dans le désespoir, à ceux qui ne sont plus là, tout cela donne une acuité à leur besoin d'amour en détresse qui éclaire le spectateur sur lui-même et sur les conditions de pauvreté dans lesquelles nous vivons.⁷⁷

The inability to coexist amicably within the confines of the family is mirrored in a world rent by racial hatred, wars, and violence. Ionesco specifically explores the correspondance between macrocosm and microcosm in the two plays Délire à deux and La Colère. In Délire, the petty argument of the couple about the definitions of the words 'snail' and 'tortoise' is orchestrated by the sounds of a war raging outside their room which increases in violence, as do their arguments and reproaches. At the end, outer and inner worlds come together as a headless corpse falls through the roof, while the couple hit each other, vainly trying to barricade themselves from the outside world. Similarly, in La Colère, the inability of two human beings to live together without aggression is symbolized by the trivial quarrel over a fly in the soup which shatters the peace of an idyllic Sunday morning. This quarrel occurs simultaneously all over the block of flats, in fact, all over the world, until it escalates to a degree where all individuals are at enmity with one another. The couple represents in a nutshell the division of man from man and mutual hatred that is the human condition.

However, despite the problems of two individuals relating to one another, Ionesco believes that the extension of self towards another is vital and sees hope even in a relationship that fails. As Claude Abastado says, 'Ionesco fait au couple une place à part Ils

⁷⁶ Théâtre, VI, 132-133.

⁷⁷ Notes, p.341.

expriment l'usure des sentiments, l'impossibilité de se connaître, la solitude à deux, le piège de la sensualité, le piège de l'ordre, le piège de l'enfant; mais aussi l'élan profond qui entraîne l'un vers l'autre ceux qui s'aiment et les incite à recommencer l'aurore du monde'.⁷⁸ In the later plays, where true love exists between the couples, the home and family, even the bourgeois family, can be a place of serenity and happiness, as the Old Man in Jeux realizes too late, and as Jean perhaps realizes in time in La Soif, where Ionesco specifically underlines this conclusion, saying, 'La solution, c'est le paradis de l'amour conjugal bourgeois ou de la tendresse. C'est une tentative presque désespérée et naïve et ridicule de rétablir dans sa vérité, dans ses droits, la puissance de l'amour'.⁷⁹ Love is a vital part of life and without it the individual will unconsciously suffer:

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; où l'on ne sait plus ce que c'est que l'amour, ou alors où l'on souffre encore de quelque chose qui vous manque essentiellement, mais dont on ne sait plus ce que c'est, que l'on ne peut plus nommer.⁸⁰

With love one has great power for 'L'amour fait surgir des montagnes, l'amour brise le fer, brise les entraves, rien ne lui résiste'.⁸¹ Moreover, human love is important, for Ionesco believes that it is part of an all-embracing, creative, love which Ionesco calls paternal love, a universal love that includes all the various facets of love: love of oneself, love for others, sex, love of life, and love of the world. It is a positive force, an absolute ideal, in R.N. Coe's words, 'at once spiritual, sexual, sentimental, universal and divine'.⁸² This universal love should be the foundation of a new type of relationship, a 'science of love': 'La science de l'amour. Ni détruire les ennemis, car au fond il n'y a pas d'ennemi, il n'y a des ennemis que par erreur, ni fuir la terre, mais la purifier, c'est-à-dire rendre aux hommes une conscience éveillée'.⁸³ Marthe echoes his words in Le Piéton, saying, 'Aime les gens. Si tu les aimes, ils ne seront plus des étrangers. Si tu n'en as pas peur, ils ne sont plus des monstres Aime-les. Il n'y aura

⁷⁸ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, pp.231-232.

⁷⁹ Ionesco, in Cinq personnages en quête d'eux-mêmes, p.17.

⁸⁰ Antidotes, p.277.

⁸¹ Le Solitaire, p.13.

⁸² Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, pp.128-129.

plus d'enfer'.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, Ionesco believes that this ideal of absolute love can never be achieved in this world, for it is vitiated by the individual's attachment to himself. Ionesco reflects wistfully, 'Pour pouvoir parcourir le trajet de l'existence, il faut le faire la main dans la main L'amour est notre atmosphère vitale, notre pain quotidien. Hélas! l'atmosphère est viciée, le pain empoisonné'.⁸⁵ To love absolutely, one must give totally of one's self, but this is impossible if the individual has not first discovered his individual identity, for he has no integrated sense of self to give, 'aimer cela veut dire se laisser aimer, accepter d'être la propriété de quelqu'un, c'est renoncer plus au moins à soi-même, accepter que quelqu'un dispose plus ou moins de vous'.⁸⁶ The paradox of any relationship with another, which is most clearly seen in the closest relationships within the family, is that, whilst the individual needs contact with others and sees the need to give of himself to establish a meaningful bond with the other, yet he is unable to do so completely, as he is too deeply involved in his own search for self. As the individual finds himself in a dialectical relation with the world, so too in his relationships with others he remains divided, oscillating between his need for others and his fear of them, his desire to lose himself in a relationship and the need to withdraw into solitude to search for his identity inside himself. 'Je suis partagé entre l'amour de moi-même et l'amour de l'autre', he explains, 'C'est cela mon drame, c'est cela mon enfer. Incapable de renoncer à moi en faveur des autres, incapable de renoncer à l'autre en ma faveur'.⁸⁷ This dialectical pattern of opposition and attraction remains true not only in family relationships, but in all social and political relationships. The individual divided from himself remains divided from the others, even the person he lives closest to, and this forms the model, the image of the divisions of mankind throughout history:

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, malgré tout, ne peuvent pas ne pas s'aimer, qui ne peuvent

⁸⁴ Théâtre, III, 181.

⁸⁵ Journal, p.117.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.207.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.79.

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.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.83.

All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded to the individual.

Albert Einstein, Public Statement
in English, 15 September 1933.

CHAPTER VII

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

'Il y a tout de même derrière moi, individu, quelque chose qui semble nous aliéner; et c'est l'organisation sociale', Ionesco warns.¹ If the individual's relationships with others are perceived as a threat to his identity, the abstract, impersonal forces of society pose an even greater threat of alienation, for man is no longer dealing with individuals like himself, but with an impersonal abstraction, a powerful mindless machine. There is an intensely felt tension between the individual and the refractoriness of social reality. Each individual has an inner world which is, and must remain, extra-social and so risks being alienated in a society of mechanical senselessness, with its emphasis on conformity and uniformity at the expense of the individual and the unique. Ionesco writes:

L'enfant a bien du mal à se socialiser, il lutte contre la société, il s'y adapte difficilement ... Et s'il s'y adapte difficilement c'est que, dans la nature humaine quelque chose doit échapper au social ou être aliéné par le social. Et une fois que l'homme est socialisé, il ne s'en tire pas toujours très bien C'est en enfer, le social, un enfer, les autres.²

Society forces man to assume a role or function, and an individual with a weak sense of individual identity comes to feel that this mask is more real than the self beneath it, and he loses contact with his individual identity, becoming no more than the façade, an empty social puppet indistinguishable from others and, therefore, interchangeable. However, if the forces of society thus create a certain similarity between all men, they also carry the seeds of their own destruction, for, as Ionesco constantly reminds us, 'c'est l'individu qui est porteur de valeurs'.³ Ionesco believes that a worthwhile fraternity of men can only be made up of unique individuals, for it is when the individual is at the most intimate and personal level of himself that he is able to see beyond all the differences of class and race and to perceive the fundamental

¹Présent passé, p.81.

²Notes, p.162.

³Un Homme en question, p.53.

metaphysical unity of all mankind. Ionesco is not totally opposed to society, which he sees as inevitable and as a useful safeguard against man's anarchic tendencies, but he believes that the individual should be aware of the threat which it poses to his unique identity. Therefore, as in his relationships with the others, he believes that the individual must live in a state of constant tension with society, a part of it, yet in opposition to it, as Ionesco concludes, 'L'homme est un être asocial qui ne peut vivre qu'en société, mais qui, dans la société, ne peut vivre qu'asocialement'.⁴

Léon Trotsky had warned that with the increasing development of society the modern world would be in a state of continual conflict. 'We live in a period of social passions', he wrote, 'the tragedy of our period lies in the conflict between the individual and the collectivity'.⁵ Man had rejected religion on the grounds that it alienated his freedom, yet God was an individual and as such could coexist, even if with a certain amount of friction, with other individuals. With society such coexistence is not possible, for society is an impersonal abstraction, and, if the individual identifies himself totally with it, he will be reduced to its level and become a mindless robot or a machine. 'L'homme nouveau peut vivre dans l'impersonnel', Ionesco observes, 'Il a renoncé à sa personne. Dieu peut être conçu seulement comme une personne. Les hommes sont des personnes. Si on se donne à la Nation, si la Nation, la Société est Dieu, il n'y a plus personne'.⁶ During the nineteenth century, the growth in the importance of the social sciences, giving generalized, collective answers to individual problems, gradually increased the pressures of conformity on the individual, lessening his freedom of choice and self-definition in favour of the deterministic implications of Darwinism and Freudianism. Ionesco perceives these social sciences as a great threat, for he believes they tend to emphasize the importance of social forces by lessening the importance of the metaphysical and unique element in man, the dimension that makes him a man not a machine or an animal:

La sociologie est impérialiste. Elle repousse aussi bien la biologie que la métaphysique. Elle tend surtout à se substituer à celle-ci. Serons-nous comme les fourmis qui sont soldats, ouvrières, reproductrices, qui ne sont tout entières que

⁴Antidotes, pp.80-81.

⁵Léon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, translated by Rose Strunsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), p.243.

⁶Présent passé, p.118.

fonctions de la collectivité, ou comme les abeilles? Les collectivismes menacent de socialiser, dans la totalité de son être, l'individu, l'homme, qui ne serait plus qu'un animal uniquement social, dont les profondeurs métaphysiques pourraient être neutralisées, détruites réduit au social, l'homme ne serait plus qu'une particule de la société ne vivant que pour la société, n'imaginant même pas de ne pouvoir vivre autrement qu'en tant que fonctionnaire social. Il serait socialisé jusque dans ses rêves, jusque dans son inconscient, perdant sa troisième ou quatrième dimension: l'esprit, ce qui lui est essentiel et ce qui n'est pas mesurable. Nous sommes socialisés déjà, c'est évident, à 80%. Le peu qui n'est pas socialisé, c'est ce qui fait que nous sommes des hommes, de l'esprit.⁷

'The alienation of the individual identity by the maelstrom of social forces is, Ionesco considers, a major problem of modern life. 'Plus ou moins inconsciemment, j'ai mis la main sur un problème terrible: la dépersonnalization', he states.⁸ He portrays individuals who are completely integrated in their societies, totally identified with their social persona, but reveals to the audience the lack of essential being, the nullity that lies beneath the façade. They are 'des visages sans rien derrière',⁹ 'des personnages vidés de toute substance, de toute réalité psychologique'.¹⁰ Ionesco contrasts the life of the village where he was brought up to the dehumanizing nature of larger societies. In the village, everything was personified and had a human face, 'la fonction devenait visible concrète, cependant l'on dissociait très bien la fonction de la personne'.¹¹ However, in the modern, impersonal societies, which are rapidly replacing the village communities, man is assigned a social function appropriate to his role in society, and he identifies so completely with this mask that he becomes his function, losing touch with the individual identity that should suffuse it:

Maintenant, ce qui est ennuyeux dans la société, c'est que le personnage se confond avec la fonction, ou plutôt, la personne est tentée de s'identifier totalement à la fonction; ce n'est pas la fonction qui prend un visage, c'est un homme qui se déshumanise, qui perd son visage Je me suis souvent dit que ce qui est embêtant, déshumanisant, c'est le fait qu'un adjutant dorme avec son uniforme. Il est adjutant totalement, métaphysiquement La fonction sociale ne doit pas absorber l'homme totalement, totalitairement il est aboli par sa

⁷ Antidotes, pp.79-80.

⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.128.

⁹ Ibid., p.93.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.80.

¹¹ Ibid., p.17.

fonction, il n'est plus que sa fonction aliénante, il n'est plus.¹²

The Architect in Tueur has been reduced to his role of 'fonctionnaire' so completely that he is no longer capable of any individual initiative or human feelings. When Béranger compliments him on his work, he replies tersely, 'Je suis appointé pour faire ce travail, c'est dans mes attributions normales, c'est ma spécialité. [-] J'en ai fait les plans sur ordre de la Municipalité. Je ne me permets pas d'avoir des initiatives personnelles'.¹³ As a dehumanized cog in the social machine, he cannot comprehend Béranger's elation at finding the radiant city nor his horror at discovering the Killer. The two policemen are so mechanically occupied with their specific role of directing traffic that they are oblivious to more important considerations, saying, 'Le salut public? On s'en occupe. Quand on a le temps. La circulation d'abord!'.¹⁴ In the same way, the two policemen in Le Solitaire are unable to make a personal value judgement and to deviate from their narrowly prescribed roles, even in the midst of an embryonic revolution. Seeing a group of armed men pass by, the Solitaire is surprised by the apathy of the police. He comments, 'Deux agents de police étaient là. Ils ne bougèrent pas. Ils avaient l'air de ne pas les voir. Ce n'était pas à eux de les arrêter d'ailleurs. Ces agents n'étaient préposés qu'à la circulation'.¹⁵ The Policeman in Victimes gives a perfect description of himself and all his colleagues when he says, 'Je ne suis qu'un instrument, Monsieur, un soldat lié par l'obéissance, le travail, je suis un homme correct'.¹⁶ Man believes that he can give himself stability and identity by sheltering beneath his social function, but this function displaces his identity, leaving the individual empty and vulnerable as this shallow social façade can be destroyed in a moment by the withdrawal of the assent of society, and the individual is left with nothing as in this exchange in the hospital scene of L'Homme aux valises:

L'infirmière: Il ne connaît pas son identité.

Le Consul: Connaissons-nous la notre? Nous la connaissons, en gros, grâce à nos fonctions.

¹²Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.17-18.

¹³Théâtre, II, 64-65.

¹⁴Ibid., p.157.

¹⁵Le Solitaire, pp.142-143.

¹⁶Théâtre, I, p.232.

Le Policier: Au nom de mon gouvernement, je vous annonce, monsieur, madame, que vous n'avez plus de fonctions. Donc, plus d'identité, le gouvernement ne vous connaît plus.¹⁷

The characters of the one-act plays and most of the secondary characters in the longer plays conform to Ionesco's description of these dehumanized puppets who have been totally absorbed by society; they are 'des personnages creux, le pur social: car l'âme sociale n'est pas'.¹⁸ Ionesco was angered by the attempts of some later producers to endow these empty shells of characters with a psychological content; his concept was best expressed by the ghost-like presences of the first Nicolas Bataille production of La Cantatrice. In Les Chaises, the invisible characters are only designated by their social status, and Ionesco does not even grace them with a physical presence on stage, for, when the social mask is stripped away, there is no residue of being. In Jeux, certain characters are replaced by 'des marionnettes ou de grandes poupées',¹⁹ and Ionesco stipulates that certain parts should be acted 'comme un personnage de guignol',²⁰ or 'comme des pantins'.²¹ John Bull, in Le Piéton, is compared to 'une énorme marionnette',²² and, in Jacques, the characters are masked. Many of the figures, such as that of the 'concierge' or the 'Capitaine des Pompiers', recall the stock-figures of the Commedia dell'arte tradition. Their only identity is that of their function, so they become nothing at all, as Morris Freedman writes of the latter: 'The Fire Chief ... turns out himself to be looking for a fire, for that thing to do which defines him. He gradually loses his dimensionality in that flat drawing room'.²³ According to Bergson's theory of comedy, a comic person 'est généralement comique dans l'exacte mesure où il s'ignore lui-même',²⁴ and he adds, 'L'automatisme parfait sera, par exemple, celui du fonctionnaire fonctionnant comme une simple machine'.²⁵ These characters, alienated from themselves,

¹⁷Théâtre, VI, 67.

¹⁸Notes, p.255.

¹⁹Théâtre, V, 11.

²⁰Ibid., p.29.

²¹Ibid., p.68.

²²Théâtre, III, 132.

²³Morris Freedman, The Moral Impulse (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p.121.

²⁴Bergson, Le Rire, p.23.

²⁵Ibid., p.39.

are certainly comical, but beneath the comedy there lies a threat. It is a world where, in the words of Henri Gouhier, 'Des poupées mécaniques dansent au bord du vide'.²⁶

Once the individual identity has been alienated, as we have seen, people become objects and are indistinguishable one from another, as the first Englishman puts it in Le Piéton, 'Les visages sont tous les mêmes. Comme pour les oies'.²⁷ If this creates a similarity between all men, it is not true unity, but the identity of bland, impersonal, mass-produced objects. As the characters are indistinguishable, they are totally interchangeable. Two characters change roles within a play without it causing the least interruption in the continuity of the action, for, like identical cogs in a machine, they can fit in anywhere. Other characters change personality and metamorphose into another role in one physical body, for with no firmly-rooted sense of being, no mask is more real than any other. Doubrovsky explains this well in terms of Heidegger's concept of the impersonal 'on':

La conscience est un néant, la personnalité, le caractère disparaissent pour de bon. Dans l'impersonnalité radicale de la conscience, rien désormais n'empêche que 'Je soit un autre' Il y a donc un vide d'être et une chute dans le on qui constituent le péché originel de l'homme. Une pièce comme La Cantatrice chauve ne peut se comprendre que comme la mise en oeuvre de l'existence humaine au niveau du on heideggerien. Les répliques deviennent interchangeables, tout comme les êtres, minés par l'absence l'identité du moi et de l'autre est celle du vide.²⁸

At the end of La Cantatrice, the Martins change places with the Smiths, and Ionesco indicates that the play is repeated with them in opposite roles. Similarly, identical scenes are repeated with the same lines being recited in Rhinocéros and L'Impromptu. In Macbett, which is an ironic parody of the great character sketches of Shakespeare, the modern counterparts of Macbeth and Banquo have become empty nullities, indistinguishable from the other puppets around them. The characters of Glamiss and Candor are interchangeable, as is indicated by the fact that they both repeat the same lines, for example, in the opening scene. The same is true of Macbett and Banco, as is shown by the exact parallelism of their two speeches beginning 'La lame de mon épée est toute rougie

²⁶ Henri Gouhier, 'Le Théâtre a horreur du vide', La Table Ronde, 182 (March 1963), 123.

²⁷ Théâtre, III, 143.

²⁸ Doubrovsky, 'Le Rire de Ionesco', pp.316-317.

par le sang',²⁹ or their respective speeches upon encountering the witches: 'Je frémis. Est-ce la froid? Est-ce la pluie qui me pénètre?'.³⁰ Even to those closest to them they have no distinguishing features by which to identify them, and Lady Duncan mistakes Banco for Macbett. As a final destruction of any semblance of differentiation or delineation, Macbett and Banco recite a speech parallel to that of Glamiss and Candor at the beginning agreeing, as they did, to kill Duncan and divide the kingdom.³¹ Thus, in the words of Alain Bosquet, 'le personnage est aussi tous les autres personnages'.³² Personality disintegrates and faceless puppets merge and mutate arbitrarily into one another. We are left with a vision of humanity like that of Aldous Huxley's eighty identical delta twins,³³ a 'Brave New World' summed up in the mouth of the Solitaire, 'Partout, partout, les mêmes gens qui se ressemblaient tous. C'était comme une ou deux personnes indéfiniment multipliées'.³⁴

If people are indistinguishable, it is inappropriate to give them names to particularize them. Kierkegaard had already pointed out the link between individual identity and one's name in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, where he wrote that, if a man forgets his name, it 'does not so much mean forgetting a designation, as it means forgetting the distinctive essence of one's being'.³⁵ Ionesco plays on this idea throughout his plays with satirical intent to show how individuals have degenerated into stereotyped objects. The Bobby Watsons in La Cantatrice, the Jacquelines of the Premier conte, the Jacques family that are produced like faceless androids in L'Avenir, the infinite mirror-images of the couples in La Colère, the endless stream of undifferentiated English men and women in La Soif, the series of identical monks in Le Piéton, or the endless series of interchangeable fiancées in Le Jeune homme à marier have all become mass-produced objects. Even though Ionesco accords the semblance of a surname to the Dupont, Martin, and Durand of Scène à quatre, he deliberately chooses the most common

²⁹Théâtre, V, 126-128, 128-130.

³⁰Ibid., p.148, 151.

³¹Ibid., p.118, 173.

³²Bosquet, 'Comment se débarrasser du personnage', p.242.

³³Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955).

³⁴Le Solitaire, pp.37-38.

³⁵Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, translated by David F. Swenson (Princeton University Press, 1941), p.109.

of French surnames to suggest that they cannot be distinguished from millions of others, and the confusion between them is no less as they all say and do the same things. In Les Chaises, the invisible characters are only designated by their social status, and, as this is no indication of a unique inner presence to set them off from one another, they merge into a mass as indistinguishable as the chairs, as Gilbert Tarrab says, 'L'identité de ces chaises-objets révèle l'identité objectale des personnages-objets qui sont censés les occuper'.³⁶ In a dream sequence of L'Homme aux valises, the hero struggles with the authorities over the confusion between the name on his visitor's card, his identity card, and his passport. He is not sure whether his name is Filard, Marty, Morty, Vardy, Mofty, Koriakides, or whether it is some completely different name which he has forgotten. His desperation to find a name that would differentiate him from the rest of the faceless mass is synonymous with his attempt to find his identity, but both attempts end in a nightmarish confusion. It is more appropriate to designate these characters by numbers rather than by names as they are not individuals, but repetitions in an endless series; there are Roberte I and II in Jacques, Bartholomeus I, II, and III in L'Impromptu, and the vast multiplication of members of the Banco dynasty at the end of Macbett. Thus, Ionesco emphasizes the alienation of these characters by using names, not with their original purpose of individualizing, but to increasingly blur the distinctions between characters. As Simone Benmussa concludes, 'plus qu'un théâtre d'individus, c'est un théâtre d'espèce'.³⁷

As only the individual identity can give a psychic continuity and a measure of sameness from the past, through the present, to the future, these characters merge imperceptibly from one role or character to another in the space of a few minutes. They are merely a disconnected series of façades, and their personality or actions bear no relation to their previous traits and behaviour or what will follow. Faust Bradesco talks of 'l'indétermination du personnage',³⁸ and Simone Benmussa of 'polyvalent'³⁹ personalities. Frédéric Towarnicki describes characters with 'une totale discontinuité psychologique ... Les personnages sans

³⁶Tarrab, in Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.22.

³⁷Benmussa, Ionesco, p.75.

³⁸Bradesco, Le Monde étrange de Ionesco, pp.79-80.

³⁹Benmussa, Ionesco, p.43.

identité discernable ... des champs de force où se manifestent, se croisent, s'annulent de violents antagonismes'.⁴⁰ Mary, in La Cantatrice, changes from being a maid to a blue stocking, then, as a final insult to the logic of character, tells us that she is, in fact, Sherlock Holmes. In La Leçon, the two characters exchange personalities; the pupil, gay, extrovert, and confident at the beginning, gradually becomes more and more submissive until she is like an inanimate object, manipulated by the whim of the Professor who, by an inverse progression, changes from being humble and timid and becomes domineering and aggressive. Whereas in traditional comedies there was always a character with common-sense to give the audience a sense of perspective from which to judge the follies of the other characters, in Ionesco's plays there is rarely any such stable character with which the audience can identify. In Victimes, for example, no role is fixed and stable. Niccolas d'Eu and the Policeman mutate from meek, polite characters to assertive tyrants, who torture the submissive Choubert. The Policeman metamorphoses into Madeleine's lover, and, in a scene reminiscent of Ionesco's childhood, Madeleine tries to poison herself, as Choubert becomes an adolescent. The Policeman then changes into his father, and they play out a dramatization of the Oedipus complex.⁴¹ The scene is interrupted, and they all change personality once again, the Policeman and Madeleine becoming spectators in theatre seats, and Madeleine metamorphoses through a myriad of different roles corresponding to the different women whom Choubert encounters in his memory. Nicholas d'Eu aptly describes this play when he outlines his new theories of the theatre where 'les caractères perdent leur forme dans l'informe du devenir. Chaque personnage est moins lui-même que l'autre'.⁴² It is above all Le Tableau which is, if in a fairy-tale vein, the play of metamorphosis. At every moment the actions and gestures of the characters contradict themselves, and their feelings and words undergo abrupt reversals and constant changes of opinions, betraying a psychological incoherence which Ionesco deliberately underlines 'le changement d'attitude des deux personnages est instantané, très visible, absurde; inattendu', he states, 'tout doit

⁴⁰Frédéric Towarnicki, 'Des "Chaises" vides ... à Broadway', Spectacles, 2 (1958), 8.

⁴¹See for example Wallace Fowlie, Dionysus in Paris (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p.234, or Hugh Dickinson's chapter on 'Ionesco - The Existential Oedipus', in Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1969).

⁴²Théâtre, I, 227.

être grossièrement souligné'.⁴³ Alice is transformed by a shot of the Gros Monsieur's gun from an ugly, one-armed old woman into a beautiful young girl, the image of the queen in the portrait on the wall, and, when he fires it again, he transforms the neighbour and the young painter turns into a Prince Charming. Each character is thus composed of an arbitrary series of states of existence, juxtaposed by total coincidence. The actress Annie Ducaux, commenting on the role of Tante Adélaïde, which she was playing in La Soif, could have been describing many of Ionesco's puppet-like characters when she said, 'Le propre de ce rôle, c'est la contradiction, l'incohérence, l'accumulation des émotions diverses, la rupture constante d'un sentiment, puis d'une idée'.⁴⁴

Without the stability of individual identity to give characters coherence and continuity, it is not surprising that they not only metamorphose through a number of different personalities, but cross the line between the human and the animal worlds. The frequent transformation of man into an animal in Ionesco's plays has been interpreted by Léon Chancerel as an illustration of 'le complexe Jupitérien', following a rather fanciful and unfounded notion that Ionesco patterned himself after that God who turned himself into an eagle or a swan or a bull to seduce beautiful mortals.⁴⁵ Alexandre Rainof, on the other hand, sees it as a dramatization of the Circe myth.⁴⁶ It seems much more likely, however, that this transformation is simply the final stage in the dehumanization of the individual by the pressure of social forces, an idea which had already been given a vivid literary illustration in Kafka's Metamorphosis. Ionesco admits his debt to Kafka and confirms his belief that each man has a monstrous aspect which, usually lying far below the surface, can be revealed when he loses himself in powerful social forces. He tells Claude Bonnefoy:

Chacun peut devenir un monstre ... C'est-à-dire, ce qui est monstrueux en nous peut prendre le dessus; les foules, les peuples se déshumanisent d'ailleurs périodiquement: guerres, jacqueries, pogroms, fureurs et crimes collectifs, tyrannies et oppressions Notre monstruosité a d'innombrables visages.⁴⁷

⁴³ Théâtre, III, 257.

⁴⁴ Annie Ducaux, in 'Cinq personnages en quête d'eux-mêmes', p.17.

⁴⁵ Léon Chancerel, 'Le Complexe Jupitérien', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 29 (February 1960), 50-61.

⁴⁶ Rainof, Mythologies de l'être chez Ionesco, p.56.

⁴⁷ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.40.

The individual, moreover, finds a certain amount of pleasure and relief in abdicating the responsibilities of individual identity and self-definition by losing himself completely in a group and returning to the instinctual level of a pack animal. Ionesco explains:

C'est parce qu'ils ont voulu être comme les autres qu'ils se sont déshumanisés, ou plutôt dépersonnalisés, ce qui revient au même. Il y a peut-être autre chose. Ces gens ont renoncé à leur humanité, c'est-à-dire qu'ils ont renoncé à leur vie propre, à leur personnalité, il est possible qu'ils trouvent une certaine joie, un certain bonheur animal dans cette abdication.⁴⁸

In La Leçon, the Professor turns into an animal or even a monster. Ionesco describes the rape of the student as 'plus qu'un viol, c'était du vampirisme'.⁴⁹ In Jacques, we see Roberte 'et ses neuf doigts s'agiter comme des reptiles', and the dehumanization of Jacques as he reverts to her base level of animal desire is symbolized by his transformation into a stallion. The bestiality of the family group is left in no doubt by the use of such verbs as 'accroupissent' and 'grouiller' indicating their animal-like posture and by the sounds which they make: 'Les acteurs poussent de vagues miaulements en tournant, des gémissements bizarres, des croassements On entend leurs gémissements de bêtes'.⁵⁰ In L'Avenir, Jacques and Roberte become a cockerel and a hen, laying a constant stream of eggs, and, at the end of L'Oeuf dur, this parallel between dehumanized individuals and mindless battery hens is underlined by the final image, an 'image alternée du groupe chantant et des derrières de poules pondant'.⁵¹ In Le Salon de l'automobile, the thin borderline between the animal and human worlds is emphasized by the background of 'bruits de basse-cour', the 'grenouilles, hennissements, beuglements';⁵² whilst, in Le Jeune Homme à marier, the successive fiancées turn into a bird, a dog, and a donkey, and the young man himself 'a soudain la tête d'un étalon',⁵³ and gallops away into the desert. In Le Piéton, Bérenger returns from the antimonde with a vision of a hell which is really only a mirror of the hell which the ordinary world is in the process of becoming, and, as if to emphasize this, the

⁴⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.128.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.104.

⁵⁰Théâtre, I, 127.

⁵¹Théâtre, IV, 248.

⁵²Ibid., p.218, 219.

⁵³Ibid., p.261.

'hommes qui avaient des têtes d'oies',⁵⁴ which he sees reappear in this world as the mindless followers of Mère Pipe in Tueur. In Rhinocéros, Ionesco studies more closely the process of the metamorphosis of man into an animal. If the physical transformation often appears comic on stage, Ionesco emphasizes that the mental transformation that it symbolizes is tragic.⁵⁵ The play illustrates Ionesco's convictions that man loses his identity when he is absorbed in a mass, and this faceless, dehumanized mass can be shaped at will by a dictator or leader into a monstrous form. 'Les gens n'ont pas de visage quand ils forment des groupes trop nombreux', he asserts, 'ou alors s'ils prennent un visage, ce visage collectif est monstrueux. C'est celui de la colère, de la destruction, ce visage est infernal'.⁵⁶ In Présent passé, Ionesco describes his own experiences in Roumania, memories which he draws on in Rhinocéros. As the men around him abdicate their freedom of thought and individuality, becoming totally absorbed by the group, they seem to lose their human form and human attributes:

Je lui parlais. C'était encore un homme. Tout d'un coup sous mes yeux, je vois sa peau qui durcit et s'épaissait d'une façon effroyable. Ses gants, ses chaussures deviennent des sabots; ses mains deviennent des pattes, une corne lui pousse sur le front, il devient féroce, il fonce avec fureur. Il ne sait plus, il ne peut plus parler. Il est devenu Rhinocéros.⁵⁷

The process of dehumanization needs only one more stage to be complete, as man loses even the blind, instinctual feeling of the animal and becomes an inanimate, insensible machine. In Le Salon de l'automobile, the human being becomes an animal and finally a machine, as the characters become indistinguishable from the cars. In other plays, it is the automatic, unthinking nature of the individual's actions, the stereotyped responses of social usage, that brings him into the realm of the machine, for example, the production line of standardized humans in L'Avenir produced by Jacques who 'souffle bruyamment comme une machine à vapeur'.⁵⁸ Everyday actions become machine-like when repeated in absurd proportions. As the characters cease to inform their actions with thought and purpose, they become objects like the things which they manipulate. Suddenly, Ionesco notices that 'les gens me semblent se

⁵⁴Théâtre, III, 195.

⁵⁵Entre la vie et le rêve, p.103.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp.127-128.

⁵⁷Présent passé, p.120.

⁵⁸Théâtre, II, 225.

mouvoir automatiquement, sans raison'.⁵⁹ Madeleine making endless cups of coffee in Victimes, the mechanical ballet of the removal men in Le Nouveau locataire, the actions of Jean distributing bowls of soup at an ever-increasing speed, or the old couple of Les Chaises cramming the room with chairs are all examples of repetitive actions causing men to become automatons. Ionesco describes the action of Les Chaises like that of an infernal machine:

Allées et venues des vieux, sans un mot, d'une porte à l'autre; 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 près sur place; leurs mains. leur buste, leur tête, leurs yeux s'agiteront, en dessinant peut-être des petits cercles.⁶⁰

The mechanisms of such a society can work without any human input; thought, feeling, and individuality become anachronisms, as Philippe Senart warns:

La Génie de la Machine peut-il remplacer l'Ame Humaine, ainsi l'Intelligence peut-elle, désincarnée et déspiritualisée, s'installer, tyrannique, dans l'Abstraction. Mais quand la Société est réduite à un Système, quand les bielles et les cylindres et les pistons qui la meuvent n'entraînent plus les hommes que dans le mouvement perpétuel et fatal d'un 'ballet mécanique', à quoi sert l'Intelligence? ...⁶¹ Gigantesque automate, Le Monde peut marcher tout seul'.

Kenneth Tynan, in the Observer, reproaches Ionesco for creating 'un monde de robots solitaires'.⁶² Ionesco certainly does not try to deny this, but he explains that, if men become machines and robots, it is because they have conformed totally to a society that crushes their individual identity. 'Les caractères "robots" que M. Tynan réproche me semblent être précisément ceux qui appartiennent uniquement à ce milieu ou à cette réalité "Sociale", qui en sont prisonniers et qui - n'étant que "sociaux" - se sont appauvris, aliénés, vidés.'⁶³

Ionesco believes that all forms of society inevitably lead to the oppression of the individual, for, in an attempt to give security to the majority and the mediocre, it cannot tolerate the individual or the unique. For him the concentration camp is the quintessential

⁵⁹Notes, p.224.

⁶⁰Théâtre, I, 160.

⁶¹Sénart, Ionesco, p.69.

⁶²Kenneth Tynan, 'Ionesco: Homme du destin?', Observer (22 June 1958), quoted in Notes, p.139.

⁶³Notes, p.143.

example of all societies.⁶⁴ However, living in the twentieth century, Ionesco is inevitably particularly concerned with the forms of social organization that he observes around him. One modern myth to which he does not subscribe is that of social progress and the perfectibility of mankind through technological advances. The idea of the inevitable progress of mankind, which had spread with the industrial revolution, had already been questioned by works such as Spengler's Decline of the West,⁶⁵ and nearly fifty years later the atrocities of World War II had probably confirmed in Ionesco's mind the fact that technological progress was not coextensive with the moral and cultural progress of man or with his happiness. Ionesco believes that modern society, with its emphasis on materialism and productivity, has turned man into an object, for the wonders of modern technology, although ostensibly for the benefit of man, relieving him of everyday tasks and inconveniences, end up by organizing and regulating every minute of his life so that no spontaneity or feeling can remain. Marx had already expressed a fear that man would be alienated by the forces of modern society, with their emphasis on production at the expense of the person. He wrote in an article entitled 'Estranged Labour' that:

With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity ... the more the worker spends of himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself - his inner world - becomes, the less belongs to him as his own.⁶⁶

As a result of this over-regulation of modern society, man is progressively turned into a standardized object by the 'graduation process' outlined by Lucien Goldman in Pour une sociologie du roman: 'dépolitisation, désacrilisation, déshumanisation, réification'.⁶⁷ It is, therefore, paradoxically in an age of technology triumphant that man has become the most afflicted with a sense of his own irreality and worthlessness, becoming the perfect type of T.S. Eliot's 'Hollow Men' in the spiritless uniformity of a living death. In a television interview Ionesco questions whether the industrial society is not in fact a serious

⁶⁴ Journal, p.132.

⁶⁵ Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1934).

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, 'Estranged Labour', Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844, pp.107-108.

⁶⁷ Lucien Goldman, Pour une sociologie du roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp.203-204.

mistake, leading to the squandering of natural resources and the ultimate destruction of the human race:

Je crois que nous sommes au bord d'une catastrophe imminente et que nous approchons en un sens qui n'est pas celui de Marx, de la fin de l'Histoire ... Nous allons à cette apocalypse à pas précipités: catastrophe nucléaire, catastrophe démographique, catastrophe écologique. Il est possible qu'il n'y ait plus d'énergie, c'est un fait prévisible. Alors l'aventure industrielle n'aura duré que deux siècles. Ce qui est très peu pour l'Histoire de l'humanité S'il n'y avait pas eu le monde industriel l'humanité aurait pu continuer à vivre. La révolution industrielle et le progrès ont provoqué des dégâts considérables et absolument irréversibles.⁶⁸

Ionesco is only too aware of the anguish that belies the superficial perfection of the model communities created by technological advances. The producer Nicolas Bataille describes the characters of Ionesco's plays as 'des gens qui ne parlent plus et qui vivent absolument seuls à la merci de n'importe quel tueur'. Ionesco, he continues, 'a senti le drame de ces cités soi-disant "radieuses", l'angoisse et tout ce que cela comportait'.⁶⁹ The concept of a technologically perfect world is explored in Tueur, which, Ionesco tells us, is based on Le Corbusier's 'ville radieuse' at Marseilles. In this play the whole concept of improving the happiness of mankind through planned communities, garden cities, and advanced technology is put in question. Despite its obvious benefits, this perfect city is dominated by logic and rules; happiness is mandatory, as is beauty. The Architect, the sinister representative of the anonymous 'Administration', explains that roses are grown, not to please man with their beauty, but because 'c'est la règle dans ce coin ... c'est calculé, c'est fait exprès. Rien ne devait être laissé au hasard dans ce quartier'.⁷⁰ There are greenhouses where inclement weather is artificially created for flowers that prefer cold weather, but elsewhere the weather is artificially and inevitably fine. This 'monde mis en formule' is asphyxiated by its own mechanisms and regulations. As Dostoevsky warns, 'twice two is four is not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death'.⁷¹

Anyone trying to fight against these forces of conformity will be

⁶⁸ 'Un somnambule sur la crête d'histoire', Interview with Jean Montalbeith, p.10.

⁶⁹ Nicolas Bataille, Interview with J.K. Newberry, in J.K. Newberry, 'An evaluation of the plays of Eugène Ionesco', p.207.

⁷⁰ Théâtre, II, 66.

⁷¹ Féodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, translated by Jessie Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.40

treated as a pariah or a madman. Writers like Artaud and Genet revolted against the superficiality and mediocrity of modern society in the name of individual integrity and freedom, accepting the opprobrium of society as an indication of their truth to their ideal. Society reacts to any display of individual spirit that cannot be contained by expelling the individual. Artaud declared in a 1925 edition of Le Révolution

Surréaliste:

Tous les actes individuels sont antisociaux. Les fous sont les victimes individuelles par excellence de la dictature sociale, au nom de cet individualité qui est le propre de l'homme, nous réclamons qu'on libère ces forçats de la sensibilité, puisqu'aussi bien il n'est pas au pouvoir des lois d'enfermer tous les hommes qui pensent et agissent.⁷²

Later, in a mental home at Rodez, he exclaimed, 'Et qu'est-ce qu'un aliéné authentique? C'est un homme qui a préféré devenir fou, dans le sens où socialement on l'entend, que de forfaire à une certaine idée supérieure de l'honneur humain'.⁷³ Thus, in order to be socially acceptable and to live comfortably in society, the individual must renounce his uniqueness and identity and become a faceless wheel in the social machine. 'Ce n'est plus l'archétype, c'est le stéréotype, la série', Ionesco laments.⁷⁴

'La société a fait étrangler dans ses asiles tous ceux dont elle a voulu se débarrasser ou se défendre comme ayant refusé de se rendre avec elle complices de certaines hautes saletés', Artaud had warned.⁷⁵

This is the message of the Tripp-Brechtoll episode of La Soif, which, Ionesco explains, is based on the trial of Siniavsky and Daniel in Russia, and, he adds, the setting of Act III could represent the prison which the socialist utopia has become in Soviet Russia.⁷⁶ It is the moral of Victimes, that all men are victims of duty, of roles and limitations imposed by society, and by their own stereotyped patterns of thought, and of Tueur, where the files and organization of the bureaucracy have been perfected to a point where human response is neither desirable nor possible. This world condemns any higher aspirations as

⁷²Antonin Artaud, 'Lettre aux médecins-chefs des asiles de fous', in Maurice Nadeau, Histoire du Surréalisme (Paris: Seuil, 1948), p.35.

⁷³Antonin Artaud, 'Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société, Oeuvres complètes, 13 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 17.

⁷⁴Notes, p.304.

⁷⁵Antonin Artaud, cited by Daniel Joski, in Antonin Artaud (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1970), p.80.

⁷⁶'Ma cage, c'est l'enfer: on ne l'a pas compris', Arts, 24 (9-15 March 1966), 19.

dangerous heresy. Edouard, as a good conventionalist, warns Béranger, in Tueur, that society will not tolerate a display of independent thought: 'Penser contre son temps, c'est de l'héroïsme. Mais le dire, c'est de la folie'.⁷⁷ The piéton de l'air is scorned for his flight from earth, and Amédée apologizes profusely for his elation, as it is not directly related to the improvement of society:

Je suis confus, je m'excuse, Messieurs, Mesdames ... Je voudrais bien rester ... Rester les pieds sur terre ... C'est contre ma volonté. Je ne veux pas qu'on m'emporte ... Je suis pour le progrès, je désire être utile à mes semblables ... Je suis pour le réalisme social ... Je suis pour l'immanence, contre la transcendance.⁷⁸

Jacques is forced to forget his youthful idealism and to submit to the routines of society, their ridiculous irrelevance symbolized by the eating of fried potatoes, just as the little boy in Le Piéton, who aspires too high, saying, 'Je voulais me promener dans la lumière. Je voulais beaucoup de ciel', is soon reduced by society to its own level of dead, mechanical logic. He is slapped and led back to prison by the Gros Personnage, who warns him significantly, 'Petit imbécile, tu apprendras que la lumière est bien plus belle quand on la regarde du fond d'un trou noir et que le ciel est bien plus pur quand on le voit à travers la grille de la lucarne'.⁷⁹ Ionesco sighs, 'Hélas! l'humanisme s'en va en morceaux'.⁸⁰ The world of the material utopia turns out to be an empty mechanical world where there is no place for the individual, and any dissenters are punished. 'La tendance de toute société est d'uniformiser', Ionesco says, 'La morale et la pensée établie "uniformisent" tout le monde son but est de combattre ceux qui pensent autrement, ceux qui sont différents, c'est-à-dire ceux qui s'insurgent contre les lois'.⁸¹

This society of lifeless automatons, of slogans and empty traditionalism, is typified, for Ionesco, by the 'petit bourgeoisie', Mounier's 'fade gelée des lecteurs de Paris-Soir'.⁸² Many modern writers have attacked bourgeois morals and standards; Cocteau's Mariés de la Tour

⁷⁷Théâtre, II, 145.

⁷⁸Théâtre, I, 317.

⁷⁹Théâtre, III, 181-182.

⁸⁰Antidotes, p.18.

⁸¹Présent passé, p.149.

⁸²Emmanuel Mounier, cited by Richard N. Coe, 'Les Anarchistes de droite', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 67 (September 1968), 107.

Eiffel is a satire on bourgeois life, and the whole Dada movement was in opposition to its values. Genet rebels against bourgeois society, by creating a deliberately scandalous theatre, and in Ping Pong Adamov uses the pinball machine to symbolize the meaningless bourgeois ethos, based on money and false prestige. However, unlike these writers, Ionesco's satire of the bourgeoisie is not aimed at a particular class or group, but a type or rather a state of mind that exists in all societies in all ages, the man of fixed ideas and clichés. In fact, he states that one of the most detestable kind of bourgeoisie is the 'bourgeois anti-bourgeois'.⁸³ The bourgeois is 'l'homme des slogans, ne pensant plus par lui-même, mais répétant les vérités toutes faites, et par cela mortes, que d'autres lui ont imposées. Bref, le petit bourgeois, c'est l'homme dirigé'.⁸⁴ The 'esprit bourgeois' represents 'le conformisme d'en haut, d'en bas, de gauche, de droit, l'irréalisme bourgeois aussi bien que l'irréalisme socialiste, les systèmes de convention figés'.⁸⁵ The bourgeois is a creature totally identified with, and therefore alienated by, society, 'absence de vie intérieure, la mécanique du quotidien, l'homme baignant dans son milieu social, ne s'en distinguant plus'.⁸⁶ Above all, he is a type that by his very mediocrity transcends any political or social demarcations and is universal. 'Le petit bourgeois, c'est pour moi l'homme de ces idées reçues que l'on retrouve dans toutes les sociétés, dans tous les temps: le conformiste, celui qui adopte le système de pensée de la société quelle qu'elle soit (ou de l'idéologie dominante) et ne critique plus. Cet homme moyen est partout.'⁸⁷ Ionesco does not dislike these bourgeois types as individuals, for indeed they are not individuals but an insipid, mediocre mass. It is the system of values, which is the mainspring of this society, that he denounces, and this wider critique that pervades his later plays goes far beyond the more specific social satire of his earlier works. Richard Coe writes:

To a greater or less degree, all Ionesco's drama is a satire upon the bourgeoisie, its speech, its manners and its morals, from the Bouvard-et-Pécuchet-style parody of La Cantatrice, by way of the more specific social ironies of Jacques, L'Avenir

⁸³Notes, p.128.

⁸⁴Ibid., p.109.

⁸⁵Ibid., p.128.

⁸⁶Ibid., p.253.

⁸⁷Ibid., p.190.

et Le Tableau, to the devastating yet ever-compassionate condemnations of Amédée and Le Tueur.⁸⁸

The couple of La Cantatrice are not just English bourgeoisie, as some critics have suggested, but a universal bourgeoisie. Under the veneer of superficial politeness, their society is riddled with hypocrisy and hidden aggressions. The true terror of this society is revealed by having the characters act according to social conventions whilst speaking according to their true feelings. The effusive welcome of Mrs. Smith is belied by her husband venting aloud his anger at being kept waiting by the guests. Similarly, Mrs. Smith, with an exaggerated show of social niceties, sobs on her knees, begging the Fireman to remain a little longer, but, when he accepts, reveals her true nature saying, 'Pas de chance. J'ai été trop polie'.⁸⁹ The society is governed by strange rules and taboos, for example, the Fireman is not allowed to extinguish the fires of priests, as this is the affair of the Archbishop, or of naturalized Englishmen, for 'les naturalisés ont le droit d'avoir des maisons mais pas celui de les faire éteindre si elles brûlent'.⁹⁰ When the Fireman innocently asks, 'A propos, et la Cantatrice chauve?', he is met with an embarrassed silence, for he has inadvertently touched on a forbidden subject in polite society and is met with the cold, abrupt answer of Mrs. Smith, 'Elle se coiffe toujours de la même façon!'.⁹¹ The tragedy of bourgeois life, Ionesco believes, is that there is an absence of living contact between individuals because life is over-regulated. In this society the individual is forced to forget his true aim of the search for his identity and spend his time acting out ridiculous social rituals which are symbolized, for example, by the scene of the dance in L'Homme aux valises. The hero in search of his identity does not want to be sidetracked by taking part in this trivial farce and complains, 'Je ne peux pas entrer dans la danse. Ce n'est pas pour danser que je suis venu dans ce pays',⁹² but to no avail, social conventions predominate. Ionesco is not primarily concerned with social injustices, but with the metaphysical deficiencies that these social forms engender. André Frank recounts how he met Antonin Artaud

⁸⁸Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.87.

⁸⁹Théâtre, I, 46.

⁹⁰Ibid., p.42.

⁹¹Ibid., p.51.

⁹²Théâtre, VI, 93.

at a cocktail party before Artaud left for Ireland. Artaud suddenly left, and, as Frank followed him out into the street, he declared, 'Dites-leur, André Frank, qu'ils sont déjà des cadavres et qu'ils ne se réveilleront plus jamais d'entre les morts'.⁹³ This is exactly the warning that Ionesco is giving in his plays.

A natural corollary of the alienation of the individual by social forces is the fundamental hatred of man for man, a hatred encouraged and sanctioned by society, for, Ionesco observes, 'il n'est pas permis ... de notre temps, de ne pas haïr'.⁹⁴ In a world that has abandoned the notion of a superior force administering justice for mankind, Ionesco believes that man has become his own torturer. Camus talks, in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, of human beings secreting inhumanity,⁹⁵ and Sartre states categorically in his famous line that 'l'Enfer, c'est les autres'.⁹⁶ Men, he suggests, in L'Etre et le Néant, can only establish relationships of force, never of true friendship, and Franz von Gerlach sums up the problem, in Les Séquestrés d'Altona: 'Le siècle eût été si bon si l'homme n'eût-été guetté par son ennemi cruel, immémorial, par l'espèce carnassière qui avait juré sa perte, par la bête sans poil et maligne, par l'homme'.⁹⁷ Adamov and Genet and the other socially committed writers tend to blame the mutual enmity of mankind on an adverse form of society. 'Si l'homme est dur pour l'homme ... c'est souvent à travers une névrose née de la condition qui lui est faite par la société', Adamov writes.⁹⁸ Ionesco, however, does not believe that this hatred of others is imposed on man from outside. He suggests rather that it is a result of his alienation from the world and the self which makes the individual hate himself and, therefore, hate the reflection of himself that he sees in others. It is his metaphysical, not his material, condition that is to blame for this hatred. Ionesco suggests, 'Ce n'est peut-être pas sa condition sociale que l'homme déteste, ce n'est peut-être pas la faim, c'est peut-être sa propre condition d'homme'.⁹⁹ Man must respect himself and his individual

⁹³ Cited by Joski, Antonin Artaud, p.80.

⁹⁴ Notes, p.228.

⁹⁵ Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, p.29.

⁹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, Théâtre (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p.167.

⁹⁷ Sartre, Les Séquestrés d'Altona, p.222.

⁹⁸ Adamov, 'De quelque faits', Ici et maintenant, p.163.

⁹⁹ Antidotes, p.290.

identity, Ionesco believes, in order to be able to give of himself in a relationship and to treat others with consideration. 'Il faut bien sûr s'aimer', Ionesco writes, 'si on ne s'aime pas on déteste aussi les autres Il faut garder un peu d'amour pour soi en réserve, donner le surplus aux autres. On ne peut tout donner, on périrait d'inanition'.¹⁰⁰ In modern society, unfortunately, hatred has become the general rule of conduct, and those who try to rebel against it are punished. 'Nous l'avons bien vu', Ionesco admits, 'celui qui ose ne pas haïr est mis au ban de la société: il devient un traître, un paria'.¹⁰¹ This hatred vitiates all relationships in society:

L'homme est méchant de nature. Nous ne nous aimons pas. C'est bien cela. Autrement, les choses s'arrangerait facilement, personne n'exploiterait personne, nous nous ferions toutes les concessions, tout le monde aimerait servir tout le monde, il n'y aurait ni maître, ni serviteur, il y aurait coopération.¹⁰²

His picture of the future of mankind, Ionesco claims, is similar to that of Hieronymus Bosch, where man has created and become his own hell on earth. 'Le mal ne vient pas de l'extérieur', he writes, 'Il est en nous l'enfer n'est pas ailleurs, l'enfer est ici, il est en nous, nous sommes l'enfer'.¹⁰³ In encouraging this hatred, society seems to be working towards its own destruction: 'Que ça aille mal, c'est ce qu'il faut. Pourvu que l'humanité soit détruite plus vite: c'est ce que les hommes désirent'.¹⁰⁴

Society not only fosters the hatred of man for man, but provides a mask and moral justification for the individual so that he can continue to hate with a good conscience. 'Les hommes s'entretiennent sous le couvert de croyances souvent nobles et qui masquent une sorte d'instinct homicide, une haine fondamentale de l'homme pour l'homme', Ionesco notes.¹⁰⁵ Each society has its own system of moral justifications so that the individual can disguise his individual hatred and aggression. 'Toutes les sociétés ont des slogans qui leur permettent de se mettre à l'abri dans les conformismes et les morales irréelles, toutes les

¹⁰⁰Journal, p.125.

¹⁰¹Notes, p.229.

¹⁰²Présent passé, p.115.

¹⁰³Antidotes, p.58.

¹⁰⁴Présent passé, p.112.

¹⁰⁵Ionesco, in Les Entretiens d'Helsinki ou les tendances du théâtre d'avant-garde dans le monde, edited by Paul-Louis Mignon (Paris: M. Brient, 1961), p.49.

sociétés et toutes les morales justifient les crimes...'¹⁰⁶ These moral justifications are arbitrary, even contradictory; men have killed under the banner of order or against it, for God or against him; they have massacred in the name of love and charity, but all under the shelter of the approval of a social group and 'chaque catégorie sociale a bonne conscience puisqu'elle est une collectivité'.¹⁰⁷ In a group, man abdicates any feeling of moral responsibility or guilt for an action as guilt is an individual reaction, and society is an anonymous, unthinking abstraction that has no conscience. 'La collectivité ne se sent pas coupable. La foule qui se déchaîne, qui lynche ne se sent pas coupable. L'individu seul réfléchit, peut ou non se sentir coupable.'¹⁰⁸

Ionesco's theatre is, in the words of Henri Gouhier, 'un théâtre humain de la cruauté',¹⁰⁹ where there is ample evidence of man's inhumanity to man. In La Cantatrice, we saw the fundamental aggressiveness that divides even people of the same race and milieu, and, in La Leçon, we see the hatred and desire for dominance latent in the pupil-teacher relationship. The same 'libido dominandi' leads to murders, mass executions, and tyranny in Macbett. Choubert, in Victimes, is tortured mentally and physically by the representatives of social order. In La Colère, the hatred of man for man is absorbed under the aegis of society, and individual aggression escalates into universal destruction. Man is again tortured by his fellows in the last scene of La Soif, which Ionesco specifically states is an image of our society which can become a prison for the individual. The words of Frère Tarrabas ominously reveal, behind their superficial sweetness, man using society as a justification for his hatred: 'Nous sommes des humains. Nous avons des obligations les uns vis-à-vis des autres, à moins de préférer la cage de la solitude'.¹¹⁰ It is a world no worse than the apocalyptic vision of the anti-monde of torture, death, and total destruction that Béranger sees in his journey in Le Piéton:

Simplement ce qui se passe dans la moitié de l'univers et que l'autre moitié, par aveuglement, indifférence, parti pris, ne veut pas voir: des dizaines de millions de gens bafoués; la

¹⁰⁶ Antidotes, p.289.

¹⁰⁷ Journal, p.131.

¹⁰⁸ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.76.

¹⁰⁹ Henri Gouhier, 'Un Théâtre humain de la cruauté', Table Ronde, 147 (March 1960), 178-181.

¹¹⁰ Théâtre, IV, 184.

terreur installée, la tyrannie, les pouvoirs devenus fous, enfin, la petite apocalypse quotidienne, quoi, habituelle.¹¹¹

Under the threat of disaster, man can rationalize and justify bestial behaviour of pillaging and fighting and even the most extreme form of lack of respect for the humanity of the other, cannibalism. In scene XVII of Jeux there is the following exchange:

Deuxième personnage: Oui, en effet, que voulez-vous, il faut bien que l'on se mange les uns les autres.

Premier personnage: Tout est humain, voyez-vous, tout est humain. C'est à cause de la maladie que nous en sommes là. Nécessité objective. Autrement, normalement, nous nous aimerions ou nous nous détesterions sans nous manger'.¹¹²

Ionesco suggests that our society is little better and is characterized by the same lack of respect of one person for another and the desire to treat others as objects not as fellow human beings. 'Nous vivons en économie fermée', he warns, 'nous sommes bien obligés de nous manger entre nous. Mangez-vous les uns les autres'.¹¹³ This hatred is not peculiar to any society or situation, but is universal and fundamental; wherever the hero of L'Homme aux valises travels, he is met with the same incomprehension and enmity, 'le haine de l'homme pour l'homme, le sadisme, les hommes qui se persécutent, se torturent les uns les autres'.¹¹⁴

In Tueur, the wonderful technological world that man has created turns out to be rotten at the core, its superficial harmony and beauty belied by the ugliness of man's hatred for man. The play represents, in the words of Pierre-Aimé Touchard, 'la vie de l'homme qui pourrait être si belle, si harmonieuse, si miraculeusement facilitée par les dernières découvertes scientifiques', and he asks, like Ionesco himself, 'Pourquoi faut-il qu'elle soit rongée par ce mal mystérieux qui est l'ambition, la peur, le goût de la violence ...?'.¹¹⁵ This evil is embodied in the figure of the Killer. Bérenger questions the Killer, trying desperately to understand the reason for his vindictiveness, but finds that it is impossible to combat hatred as it is totally irrational, an innate part of his human nature, to quote Ionesco: 'Evil, fundamental

¹¹¹ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.63-64.

¹¹² Théâtre, V, 103.

¹¹³ Antidotes, p.319.

¹¹⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.169.

¹¹⁵ Pierre-Aimé Touchard, 'L'Itinéraire d'Eugène Ionesco', Revue de Paris (July 1960), p.91.

aggressiveness without reason, almost without hatred. A kind of divine principle of destruction'.¹¹⁶ Moreover, everyone is implicated in this crime towards the other by his general indifference to human suffering. Even Béranger contributes unwittingly to human suffering because he is prevented from helping the weaker members of humanity, represented by the old man searching for the Danube, by the tentacles of society, the policeman and the political demagogue, and by his own preoccupation with his quest. Even if the individual tries to stand apart from society, like Ionesco himself or the Solitaire, he is inevitably marked by the crimes of his fellows and shares their guilt. Ionesco writes, *Le Solitaire* est marqué par les événements qui nous entourent: les meurtres, les génocides, les guerres, le Vietnam, le Liban ... le bouleversement des sociétés. Il reflète l'angoisse d'aujourd'hui'.¹¹⁷ Thus, Ionesco's plays underline a fundamental irrational hatred in man, une tendance profonde à la destruction et à l'auto-destruction'.¹¹⁸ In his desire to harm others, he destroys himself, for he forces retaliation from the other, and the constant movement of aggression and defence makes a harmonious society impossible. The world of these plays leaves us with the impression of a society in which 'tout le monde veut tuer tout le monde'.¹¹⁹

However, Ionesco is not a total anarchist or a revolutionary and accepts the inevitability and necessity of society. Man cannot live without taking some account of others, for, as he told Richard Schechner, 'a person alone also bathes in his epoch'.¹²⁰ Even if he becomes a recluse and lives apart from society, the individual is still marked by society and judged by his relation to social norms. Ionesco explains, 'Tout est social, même l'asocial, car rien d'humain n'est hors de la société comme rien n'est hors du cosmos'.¹²¹ Moreover, although society, by its devaluation of the metaphysical side of man, does contribute to mutual misunderstanding and hatred and the alienation of man from himself and from others, yet society, at least a liberal one, does limit man's fundamental aggressivity within certain bounds by its laws

¹¹⁶ 'The Outrageous Ionesco', Interview with Rosette C. Lamont, *Horizon*, (May 1961), 91.

¹¹⁷ *Entre la vie et le rêve*, p.167.

¹¹⁸ *Antidotes*, p.215.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.186.

¹²⁰ Interview with Richard Schechner, p.166.

¹²¹ *Notes*, p.171.

and conventions. Without the restraint of society Ionesco believes that relationships would revert to total chaos and the law of the jungle:

Lorsque les révoltés d'aujourd'hui s'insurgent contre la violence institutionnelle, c'est une violence plus grande encore qu'ils semblent désirer. Détruire la société qu'ils appellent bourgeoise, en somme la société tout court, c'est vouloir rétablir la jungle puisque toute vie est agressivité. Ils seraient bien ennuyés. La contrainte exercée par les polices est, en somme, une violence dirigée contre les instincts primaires qui, si on les laissait surgir, rendraient la vie invivable, puisque l'homme a besoin d'une société et d'une contrainte que de toute façon il ferait renaître.¹²²

The danger of society is that, when it becomes too powerful, it tends to submerge the individual thereby obscuring his metaphysical dimension. In order to achieve 'la réalisation de la personnalité pluri-dimensionnelle de l'être humain',¹²³ social and individual must coexist, even if it is in a state of constant tension. Ionesco would agree with Herman Hesse's observation that 'anyone who has attended a high degree of individuality must recognize that life is a struggle between sacrifice and defiance, between the recognition of collective values and the rescue of the personality'.¹²⁴ Ionesco's later heroes are, significantly, individuals who refuse to submit totally to the pressures of society. They are, in the words of Henri Gouhier, the symbol of 's'il n'en reste qu'un',¹²⁵ or, in the words of J.-P. Sartre, those that 'dans une société d'oppression, dans sa forme politique, la dictature où tout le monde paraît consentant, témoignent de l'avis de ceux qui ne sont pas consentants'.¹²⁶ As Rosette Lamont has pointed out in her article 'The Hero in Spite of Himself',¹²⁷ the modern hero cannot be a Roland, the supreme representative of his society, for such a leader now savours too much of political oppression. He is a rebel, an outsider, yet an ordinary man with human qualities of love and compassion. He realizes that his duty to humanity is the same as his duty to himself and that,

¹²²'Au-delà des institutions, le véritable adversaire des révoltés, c'est l'homme', Figaro Littéraire (4-10 August 1969), p.5.

¹²³Notes, p.345.

¹²⁴Herman Hesse, Reflections, translated by Ralph Manheim, edited by Volker Michels (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), p.30.

¹²⁵Henri Gouhier, 'Un Humanisme tragique', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 82.

¹²⁶J.-P. Sartre, cited by Ionesco, in Notes, p.173.

¹²⁷Lamont, 'The Hero in Spite of Himself', p.73.

in searching for his individual identity and seeking to emphasize that which is unique in himself, he will recognize and respect the individuality of the other and the standardizing tendencies of society will be resisted. 'Ce qui peut nous sauver, c'est l'individualisme', says Ionesco, 'je veux dire que la chose la plus importante, c'est de voir les différences entre les gens et non pas leurs ressemblances. Personne ne ressemble à personne. La réalisation de soi passe par la reconnaissance de l'existence de l'autre en tant que personne'.¹²⁸ It is this desire to be true to his own human nature that prevents Béranger from becoming a rhinoceros, for to betray himself is to betray the others, just as to betray the others would be to betray himself. Even this simple principle, however, makes Ionesco's hero seem antisocial in a world that, as we have seen, is founded on hatred and aggression. As Rosette Lamont points out, 'True heroism for Ionesco is a quality of the heart rather than the mind. It is the inevitable and natural behaviour of a modest man who wants to be true to himself. In our mechanized world, this innocent wish is, in itself, an act of passive defiance'.¹²⁹ However, the antisocial hero is essential to society, for it is only in a state of dynamic opposition, the delicate equilibrium that rules all spheres of life, that society can exist. If all individuals were antisocial, society could not exist, yet, without the constant questioning and critical re-evaluation of the antisocial element, society would reach a stalemate with no further progression or development possible. Ionesco confirms that:

Rien n'a été fait, rien n'a été changé dans le monde que par les asociaux. L'asocial, c'est le révolutionnaire, c'est l'expression de la critique. Il y a toujours eu cette contradiction; l'Histoire ne peut se faire que par les asociaux sans lesquels il n'y aurait pas de changements; en même temps, il n'y a pas de société possible, par définition, avec les asociaux. Il faut qu'il y ait toujours un équilibre entre sociabilité et asociabilité pour qu'il y ait Histoire.¹³⁰

Society is only valuable in so far as it is made up of unique individuals. As an inanimate abstraction, society itself is worth less than the least of the individuals that make up that society. Therefore, a society that is totally unified, composed only of anonymous masses of dehumanized individuals would be dead. The unity of society, Ionesco believes, does not have to rest on total conformity and the standardization

¹²⁸ Antidotes, p.107.

¹²⁹ Lamont, 'The Hero in Spite of Himself', p.80.

¹³⁰ Présent passé, pp.149-150.

and subjection of the individual personality to the dictates of an abstract mass. It should be based on a vast network of personal relationships between free and unique individuals. He writes:

Or, nous n'avons pas besoin de foule. C'est l'Etat monopolisateur qui les crée: bientôt les foules, nous l'espérons ardemment, redeviendront de multiples associations d'hommes libres, de plus en plus diverses, de plus en plus originales, de plus en plus personnelles dans l'unité de leur société, de la société.¹³¹

The individual identity, moreover, is extra-social. Society is only the temporal stage where man works out his finite destiny, and it is unable to comprehend or ameliorate the most fundamental problems of the human condition which belong to the metaphysical dimension of man. As Ionesco points out, 'Aucune société n'a pu abolir la tristesse humaine, aucun système politique ne peut nous libérer de la douleur de vivre, de la peur de mourir, de notre soif de l'absolu. C'est la condition humaine qui gouverne la condition sociale, non le contraire'.¹³²

Ionesco is not trying to deny the importance of the social side of man, but to emphasize that one must consider simultaneously his metaphysical and social dimensions, and he criticizes socially committed writers, like Brecht, for mutilating characters by denying them 'la dimension en profondeur, la dimension métaphysique',¹³³ for it is, he believes, only in this transcendental extra-social sphere that the individual can find his true, essential being.

This additional dimension of the individual is the reason that social relationships are unsatisfactory. In society, relationships are established only on a superficial, ephemeral level. Real human friendship transcends the social camaraderie and establishes contact between individuals on a profound universal level. 'Je dirai que la société véritable, l'authentique communauté humaine est extra-sociale', Ionesco explains, 'c'est une société plus vaste et plus profonde, celle qui se révèle par des angoisses communes, des désirs, des nostalgies secrètes qui sont le fait de tous'.¹³⁴ The true community of mankind is found paradoxically in solitude, yet Ionesco believes that, in the modern world, solitude is becoming increasingly rare, for, fearing isolation,

¹³¹Un Homme en question, p.58.

¹³²Notes, p.143.

¹³³Antidotes, p.193.

¹³⁴Notes, pp.142-143.

men rush into superficial social relationships. 'On a perdu, dans le monde moderne, l'habitude d'être seul', Ionesco laments.¹³⁵ Ionesco himself acknowledges that from time to time he feels a need for this superficial companionship to assuage his fear of separation and rejection by others. In an 'Entretien Secret' with Pierre Bourgeade, he admitted that he liked to frequent bistrots where 'on n'est pas seul. Il y a une présence et une présence qui ne vous demande rien'.¹³⁶ However, the individual has an even greater need for solitude. Solitude is a time of 'recueillement',¹³⁷ an opportunity for contemplation and inner searching and should not be confused with isolation, which is a sterile and terrifying state. 'Of course there is the problem of isolation', Ionesco said in an interview, 'It is a death within life. But isolation is different from solitude. In my solitude ... I leave behind the social being, the inessential, to find the universal being'.¹³⁸ When the individual is denied this essential solitude, he becomes estranged from himself and from others, as Ionesco explains:

La solitude est un besoin et chacun fuit l'autre Tout le monde déteste se trouver au régiment, dans un dortoir ou travailler en équipe. C'est dans ces situations-là que les gens ne communiquent plus parce que la camaraderie n'est pas l'amitié. Elle est même tout le contraire: une contrainte, une aliénation La vie doit vraiment être imprégnée de solitude pour être vivable. Chacun a besoin d'un espace vital personnel.¹³⁹

Society, in trying to force men closer together, in trying to create a similarity between them, therefore only alienates man from himself and others, creating misunderstanding and schisms and widening the gap between one individual and another. As Herman Hesse once put it, 'the closer together people sit, the harder it is for them to get acquainted'.¹⁴⁰ Modern society, with its emphasis on the communal at the expense of the individual, the transitory to the detriment of the universal, is, Ionesco believes, the cause of the friction of social relationships. 'L'incommunicabilité, l'isolement sont, paradoxalement,

¹³⁵ 'Ionesco en quête d'espérance', Libre Belgique, 89, 27 (27 January 1972), 19.

¹³⁶ 'Qui est-ce? Entretien secret', Interview with Pierre Bourgeade, Quinzaine Littéraire, 70 (1-5 April 1969), 8-9.

¹³⁷ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.126.

¹³⁸ 'Ionesco on his First Film', Interview with Melinda Camber, The Times (12 February 1974), p.13.

¹³⁹ Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.126-127.

¹⁴⁰ Herman Hesse, Reflections, p.29.

les thèmes tragiques du monde moderne où tout se fait en commun, où l'on nationalise ou socialise sans arrêt, où l'homme ne peut plus être seul'.¹⁴¹

Solitude is also an essential part of the creative experience. The artist speaks from his most personal and intimate experiences, attempting to create a new, original form of expression, yet he finds a reflection and recognition of his experience in the unique experiences of millions of other individuals. Ionesco explains: 'Voir le monde à travers, dans son étrangeté originelle; c'est ce que fera le poète qui détruit les mots ou les crée. Pour créer de la parole, il faut être seul. Les autres le reprennent. Mais le poète est asocial - le social le couvre et l'empêche de se découvrir'.¹⁴² In the same way, each individual, when he drops his social mask and seeks his inner being through contemplation and introspection, comes closer to understanding himself and to understanding others, and he becomes aware of a deeper fraternity of mankind, a 'communauté oubliée' or a 'communauté extra-historique',¹⁴³ that reaches beyond society and beyond the limits of time. This metaphysical fraternity is based on the fundamental archetypes of the human condition: man facing the universe, the astonishment of being, and the difficulty of being. It is here that 'les solitudes s'identifient'.¹⁴⁴ Through reaching out in his writing, through expressing his own deepest fears and obsessions, Ionesco hopes to rediscover this true community of mankind. He explains:

Nous avons perdu le sens d'une communauté humaine profonde. Elle existe pourtant cette identité et je désespère de retrouver au-delà des catégories, castes, classes, nations et justement je la trouve, cette communauté universelle, dans ma propre solitude qui théoriquement est niée mais qui est celle de trop de gens partout dans le monde et c'est de cette solitude que je parle.¹⁴⁵

The search for individual identity is, therefore, the same as the search to find the right relationship with others, for the innermost life is the same in all men, and men are the closest to one another when they emphasize their uniqueness and individuality. Without the individual identity, there can be no true foundation for any society or

¹⁴¹Notes, p.216.

¹⁴²Découvertes, p.36.

¹⁴³Notes, p.167.

¹⁴⁴Ionesco, Preface to Les Possédés de Dostoïevsky, stage version by Akakia Viala and Nicolas Bataille (Paris: Emile-Paul, 1959), p.11.

¹⁴⁵Ionesco, in Les Entretiens d'Helsinki, p.48.

relationship. This individual element prevents society from running smoothly, like a machine, but it is precisely a social utopia that functions with total harmony and efficiency that is dangerous, for it has isolated the individual elements that alone give it meaning and soul. 'Si toutes les sociétés sont mauvaises, c'est parce que le quotient individuel empêche qu'elles soient parfaites et s'oppose à l'utopie', Ionesco explains, 'Ceci est à la fois bon et mauvais. C'est plutôt bon, encourageant'.¹⁴⁶

The key to social problems lies, therefore, in the search for individual identity. The individual who is unaware of his inner self tries to hide his alienation by identifying himself with an abstraction or a function that further decreases his individuality, and no true social relationships are possible, except for those based on mass fear or hatred. The search for his essential identity, however, leads to a recognition of the uniqueness of others and a respect and consideration of their individuality. It is paradoxically through the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual that man discovers the universal archetypes of the human condition and perceives the fundamental identity of all human beings. This awareness, Ionesco believes, will form the basis of a metaphysical fraternity of mankind, which, if it cannot achieve total harmony, will certainly go a long way towards it, and he writes to remind man of this fact:

Pour que nous ayons conscience de notre destin, pour savoir comment nous situer vis-à-vis des autres et de nous-mêmes. Notre conscience sociale découle de notre conscience métaphysique, de notre conscience existentielle. N'oubliant pas ce que nous sommes, où nous en sommes, nous nous comprendrons mieux. Une fraternité fondée sur la métaphysique est plus sûre qu'une fraternité ou une camaraderie fondées sur la politique C'est le sentiment de l'étonnement et de l'émerveillement face au monde que nous contempions, lié au sentiment que tout est, en même temps, souffrance, c'est cela qui peut constituer la base fondamentale d'une fraternité et d'un humanisme métaphysique. L'enfer c'est les autres, est la formule célèbre d'un écrivain et philosophe contemporain. Les autres c'est nous-mêmes, peut-on répondre. Si nous ne pouvons faire un paradis de notre vie commune, nous pouvons en faire un passage moins désagréable, moins épineux.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Antidotes, p.81.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp.325-326.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming.

Croire? D'accord. Mais à quoi?

Ionesco speaking to Guy Verdot.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INDIVIDUAL AND POLITICS

'Tout tient radicalement à la politique',¹ Rousseau said, and two centuries later Ionesco can only confirm this opinion: 'Rien n'est politique, et tout est politique. Etre contre la politique, c'est encore faire de la politique'.² Political organization is like social organization, but even more dangerous, backed up by a whole network of propaganda and methods of force, both mental and physical, contributing to the alienation of the individual from his identity and from others. Ionesco believes that politics, originally conceived as the science of man's relationships, has been perverted into an irrational force which contributes to the deception and ultimate destruction of mankind. Any prevailing political ideology, whether of the left or right wing, is equally to be feared, for, despite their superficial differences, all creeds mask and justify the same individual ambitions and hatreds, the desire to subject the individual by making him abdicate his liberty and individual identity into the hands of a dictator or a party. Politics, which should be used to assist the development of culture, has become in the modern world an enemy of art and culture and, therefore, the greatest enemy of the individual. As an artist, Ionesco refuses any political engagement, for politics is incompatible with true art, which has a broadness of interpretation and a richness of significance that would be limited by an attachment to any political belief or party. Ionesco's only engagement is a deep concern for the individual, and his plays are frequently ambiguous, and deliberately so, leaving the spectator to draw his own conclusions and resolve the problems spotlighted by the play in his own way. Ionesco sees the greatest danger of politics, however, in the fact that it has become the modern opium of the people, and, while

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cited by Robert Derathé, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps (Paris: P.U.F., 1950), p.377.

² 'Tuons-nous les uns les autres', Interview with Claude Cézan, p.13.

man is pursuing the chimera of a world transformed by politics, he is distracted from the fundamental metaphysical problems of the difficulty of being and the search for the individual identity. 'La politique est une dérivation, une fuite qui fait oublier l'essentiel, la question métaphysique', Ionesco points out, 'On se jette dans la politique comme on boit de l'alcool, comme on se noie'.³ As a result of its over-emphasis on the political and the ephemeral at the expense of the metaphysical and the universal, history has been 'une suite ininterrompue d'aberrations'.⁴ The only salvation, Ionesco believes, lies in the individual, who, emphasizing the inviolability of the individual identity, will maintain his uniqueness and liberty of thought. It is through 'les quelques consciences individuelles' who 'tentent de rectifier les aberrations de l'histoire, que le grand nombre considère être justice et vérité'⁵ that the worst excesses of politics might be avoided.

Ionesco compares the modern world to the story of the Tower of Babel as recounted by Kafka. This tower was conceived in an attempt to aspire towards God, but, by the time the workers got to the third storey, the original intention had already been forgotten, and the workers had been sidetracked into political considerations of creating unions, housing the workers, and establishing salaries and pensions. 'Tout le monde avait oublié le but. La politique, la technique ont oublié le but. Elles ont substitué au but principal des buts secondaires.'⁶ In the same way, modern man has become so embroiled in minor political diversions that he has no time left for the fundamental problems of mankind. 'Le passionné de politique est un passionné de l'éphémère', Ionesco points out, 'il tourne le dos aux problèmes fondamentaux'.⁷ 'Seul est capital mon conflit avec l'univers', he reminds us.⁸ Ionesco suggests that it is because man is afflicted by a deep metaphysical longing for completeness and harmony that he becomes so passionately involved in politics. Failing to understand that his dissatisfaction is a result, not of his circumstances, but of his lack of individual identity, he tries to remedy the situation or to distract himself from it by irrelevant

³'Nous avons la manie des révolutions', Interview with Sandra Stolojan, p.2.

⁴Notes, p.316.

⁵Ibid., p.317.

⁶Antidotes, p.223.

⁷Ibid., p.231.

⁸Notes, p.189.

political agitation. The Solitaire, standing back and looking with detachment at his compatriots, realizes that 'les gens qui s'agitent qui agissent, qui déterminent les autres à agir, trouvent là-dedans une évasion, un oubli [-] Ça bricolait parce qu'ils ne pouvaient pas expliquer l'inexplicable'.⁹ Without the distraction of politics, men would be forced to face their helplessness and confront their inner emptiness. 'Heureusement que la société était mauvaise. Que feront-ils s'il y a un jour une société bonne?', the Solitaire asks, 'Ils ne pourront plus se révolter contre elle, alors l'objet de l'angoisse apparaîtra dans toute sa nudité, dans toute son horreur'.¹⁰ Rather than creating hypotheses and systems, it seems to Ionesco more logical that, in the knowledge of his helplessness and ignorance in the face of his metaphysical destiny, the individual would feel paralyzed, unable to act or to espouse any definite opinion. How, asks the hero of Le Solitaire, can man presume to judge and to qualify things as good or bad, let alone to act on these assumptions, when he does not yet understand the fundamental bases of the individual identity or of man's relationship with the world: 'Que pouvons-nous savoir de la justice, de l'ordre physique, de l'histoire, des lois de la nature, du monde, si les bases fondamentales de notre entendement possible nous sont inconnues à nous-mêmes?'¹¹ Political action can change nothing fundamental; it is merely a superficial diversion, not the all-powerful means of changing the world and creating a utopia on earth that men believe it to be. Ionesco states categorically:

Aucune révolution, que je sache, n'a réussi à abolir ni ne réussira à résoudre le problème de l'existence humaine, de l'être humain [-] Elle constitue une activité secondaire, limitée, dépourvue des implications ultimes La politique ne donne pas de réponse à la question essentielle qui est: que sommes-nous, d'où venons-nous, où allons-nous?¹²

While men have been chasing a mirage of a world transformed by politics, they have lost sight of their aims, and, as a result, the whole world has lost its direction. As The First International Congress for the Defence of Culture concluded at Turin in 1973, 'le monde a perdu sa direction. Ce n'est pas faute d'idéologies, mais bien plutôt que

⁹Le Solitaire, p.141, 156.

¹⁰Ibid., p.144.

¹¹Ibid., pp.23-24.

¹²Antidotes, p.189, 327.

celles-ci conduisent nulle part'.¹³

In their pursuit of political utopias Ionesco believes that politicians and their followers have overlooked a true revolution which is taking place in modern science. Science, Ionesco suggests, is a much more immediate and realistic way to help mankind, by broadening the horizons of knowledge. 'La science ne vaut-elle pas mieux que la révolution?', Ionesco asks, 'La science n'est-elle pas la révolution même? Et n'aurons-nous pas, de surcroît, une meilleure société, qui sera la société scientifique, scientisée?'.¹⁴ Although Ionesco does not approve of all the developments of science or believe in the perfectibility of mankind through scientific advance, he believes that certain discoveries, such as that of space travel, are immensely important because they afford man insight into dimensions of existence as yet unimaginable, permitting him 'à imaginer l'inimaginable, à concevoir l'inconcevable, à penser ce qui, aujourd'hui, est impensable',¹⁵ thereby enabling him to better understand himself and his world. He is dismayed to see that the question of space travel is becoming complicated by political considerations: 'Maintenant, on a peur de voir dans les exploits cosmiques américaines le triomphe du capitalisme. En somme, il s'agit d'une victoire de l'intelligence humaine, comme l'on sait. La politique, encore, cette petite chose, prend le pas sur le reste'.¹⁶ Ionesco believes that, rather than worshipping political leaders who represent the baser instincts of the race, we should pay homage to scientists who represent the achievements of the human brain. 'Les savants, les ingénieurs sont les véritables grands hommes, les véritables héros et les véritables révolutionnaires d'aujourd'hui. Les passions politiques sont la déchéance et souvent la honte de l'humanité, sa médiocrité et sa bêtise', he states.¹⁷ Although every individual cannot be a great scientist, each individual has the power to improve the world on a small scale. In fact, it is only on the individual level that any real improvements can be made. Ionesco considers an act of human kindness and compassion to be a much more positive action than any amount of communal agitation. 'Quand on a conscience de l'horreur, il n'y a que

¹³ Nouvelles tendances du theatre (Lausanne: Laffont, 1975), pp.37-38.

¹⁴ Antidotes, p.81.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 'Au-delà des institutions, le véritable adversaire des révoltes, c'est l'homme', p.5.

¹⁷ Antidotes, p.118.

deux attitudes possibles', Ionesco states, 'celle du désespoir, c'est-à-dire, du suicide et celle qui consiste à essayer de remédier au mal. Partir au Biafra soigner les lépreux, voilà des expressions de la révolte'.¹⁸

'La politique est aliénation ... qui font de nous les pantins', Ionesco warns.¹⁹ Like society, it demands total conformity to an impersonal abstraction, such as the Nation or a creed, leaving the individual no freedom of self-definition. The political puppets which he portrays in Rhinocéros, Tueur, Le Solitaire, and Le Maître are anonymous machines, ready to be programmed by whatever political propaganda is in vogue at the time. 'Ils n'ont plus de cervelles', Ionesco observes, 'à la place, il y a la boue de la propagande; une autre propagande emplira leur tête d'une autre boue'.²⁰ All political ideologies and organizations are equally guilty in their oppression of the individual identity, even those that claim to act in the name of humanity. Although Ionesco hates the oppression of Fascism that is all too real to him after the traumas of the last world war, he believes that the concept of a 'Socialisme à visage humain',²¹ is a ludicrous contradiction because socialism, with its emphasis on the good of the masses, has no respect for the individual, yet, as he points out, humanity is an empty abstraction except in that it is made up of unique individuals: 'L'humanité n'existe pas. Il y a des hommes. La société n'existe pas, il y a des amis'.²² Thus, Ionesco concludes, 'dans cette tentative actuelle de dépersonnalisation, dans ce goût de la collectivité où on veut noyer l'homme dans la nation, dans la société, dans la race, je vois les conséquences, les fruits aussi bien du totalitarisme communiste que du totalitarisme des quelques nazismes'.²³

The theme of the individual's alienation by politics runs throughout Ionesco's theatre and forms the basis of Rhinocéros and Le Piéton, where Ionesco dramatizes the continual conflict between the private world of the individual and the impersonal, abstract, often monstrous, world of the political collectivity. He explains:

¹⁸ 'Découvertes de Ionesco', Interview with Ritta Mariancic, p.12.

¹⁹ Antidotes, p.328.

²⁰ Présent passé, p.180.

²¹ Antidotes, p.69.

²² Présent passé, p.118.

²³ Ibid., pp.170-171.

La foule est monstrueuse. C'est ce que j'ai essayé de dire dans Rhinocéros. Béranger refuse d'être comme les autres, il refuse d'entrer dans la mode, dans l'idéologie dominante, dans la foule, dans le monde du 'on' Dans Le Piéton de l'air on a dit que je parlais de ma propre peur, mais c'est une pièce politique ... Ce que voit Béranger quand il s'envole, c'est l'aspect monstrueux du monde, du monde totalitaire.²⁴

The *Mère Pipe* episode in Tueur is an obvious satire of the dehumanizing nature of political demagogues. She promises to replace the old myths with slogans, to mystify the mystifiers, to disalienate mankind by alienating the individual; thus, she concludes, 'Il n'y aura que des malentendus. Nous perfectionnerons le mensonge'.²⁵ In the background the voices of the crowd happily cheer their oppression and dehumanization by the establishment of the police state. In Ce Formidable bordel, which, according to Emmanuel Jacquart, is based on France's abortive revolution of 1968,²⁶ there is the same blatant disregard for the individual. Despite the reiterated ideal of brotherhood, the true tenor of the revolution is revealed by their treatment of the waitress and their shouts of 'Du sang! des ventres crevés! Je veux voir les boyaux sortir de leur ventre'.²⁷ The crowds at the end of Macbett who shout first for one side and then the other are the perfect type of these political puppets who, lacking the stability of individual identity, blow with the wind of any prevailing ideology, as Ionesco notes: 'Les foules changent avec une promptitude incroyable. Elles ne font même que cela'.²⁸

Ionesco, recalling his own experience in Roumania of the 1930s, which was being swept by Nazi fanaticism, felt the pressure of alienation exerted by the mass against the one when there is 'toute une ambiance, des doctrines, tout un mouvement contre vous'.²⁹ Although the physical threat was great, he felt that the threat to his individual identity was even greater. 'Il était très difficile de résister', he recalls, 'non pas sur le plan de l'action politique ... mais aussi sur le simple plan d'une résistance morale et intellectuelle, même silencieuse'.³⁰ As even

²⁴ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.277.

²⁵ Théâtre, II, 138.

²⁶ Emmanuel Jacquart, 'Ionesco's Political Itinerary', Interplay I, p.73.

²⁷ Théâtre, VI, 157.

²⁸ Antidotes, p.13.

²⁹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.24.

³⁰ Ibid.

his closest friends changed their political opinions, it seemed that they underwent a personality change too, a total transformation so that they became unrecognizable, like men of a different race or species. 'J'ai assisté à des mutations', Ionesco recalls, 'J'ai vu des gens se transformer, à peu près sous mes yeux Ils perdaient leur personnalité, remplacée par une autre. Ils devenaient autres'.³¹ Ionesco recounts how a similar mutation took place at the beginning of the French Revolution, so that an English traveller who had left France in April 1789 returned in October to find he could no longer recognize the place or the people: 'C'était un autre planète. Il y avait eu mutation'.³² An individual who resists being drawn in to the 'pâte informe des multitudes',³³ and affirms the value of his subjectivity finds himself terrifyingly alone, unable to communicate with the others who seem, like animals, to have an incomprehensible language of their own. In the middle of a vast camaraderie, from which he is totally excluded, he wonders if he might not be the monster, and they the humans:

Affreux exil. Seul, seul je suis, entouré de ces gens qui sont pour moi durs comme pierre, aussi dangereux que les serpents, aussi implacables que les tigres. Comment peut-on communiquer avec un tigre, avec un cobra, comment convaincre un loup ou un rhinocéros de vous comprendre, de vous épargner, quelle langue leur parler? En fait, étant comme le dernier homme dans cette île monstrueuse, je ne représente plus rien, sauf une anomalie, un monstre.³⁴

In Rhinocéros, this mutation is portrayed as a contagion of epidemic proportions.³⁵ The disease attacks the individual at his weakest point and begins to incubate as soon as he makes the first concession to the rhinoceroses: 'Ce n'était que le premier symptôme d'une incubation qui allait progresser jusqu'à la déclaration de la maladie ... La plus légère concession et tout était perdu. On était irréversiblement pris dans l'engrenage de la machine infernale'.³⁶ In the office scene of Act I, scene 2, we are shown in microcosm the way in which the contagion of political ideas strikes each individual in a different manner according to his idiosyncracies of character. Jean, whose aggressive dogmatism had always inclined him to the precepts of the Rhinoceroses,

³¹Présent passé, p.173.

³²Ibid., p.166.

³³Ibid., p.181.

³⁴Ibid., p.169.

³⁵Notes, p.285.

³⁶Présent passé, pp.174-175.

submits absolutely and blindly, whereas the more ethereal Papillon adheres to their doctrines in a mysterious way. Botard, the fashionable follower of the latest trends, metamorphoses with the words, 'Il faut suivre son temps!'.³⁷ Daisy falls in love with the 'singing' of the Rhinoceroses, and Dudard, man betrayed by his own intellect, is doomed by his desire to understand, wondering, 'Je me demande si ce n'est pas une expérience à tenter'.³⁸

Although Rhinocéros originated in a precise experience, it transcends its historical situation and becomes a 'tentative de "démystification"'³⁹ on a universal level:

Rhinocéros est sans doute une pièce anti-nazie, mais elle est aussi, surtout une pièce contre les hystéries collectives et les épidémies qui se cachent sous le couvert de la raison et des idées mais qui n'en sont pas moins de graves maladies collectives dont les idéologies ne sont que les alibis.⁴⁰

The political implications are deliberately left ambiguous. When the Russians asked him to revise the text, before staging the play in Moscow, in such a way that it could only refer to Fascism, Ionesco refused, for 'rhinocerotitis' is a disease of the extreme left wing as much as the right wing. In fact, he says, 'La rhinocérinite actuelle ressemble à l'autre, seulement les bannières sont différentes. Nous assistons aujourd'hui à l'épanouissement des rhinocérinites d'extrême gauche'.⁴¹ The dehumanization of the individual through political conformism is an ever present danger, and, if Hitler is dead, there are many contemporary political myths to take his place. When asked what was his most frightening image of the future, Ionesco replied, 'Ce serait un univers de moutons, de moutons enragés. Et je crois que nous en prenons le chemin le mythe de la révolution, l'anti-américanisme, l'anticommunisme, le mythe de la jeunesse, de l'élan vital, la haine du bourgeois, de l'individualisme'.⁴² The phenomenon of mass hysteria can be observed under many different façades. For example, in an article for Paris-Pressé entitled 'Hier j'ai vu un rhinocéros', Ionesco describes the Beatles craze as a manifestation of the same

³⁷Théâtre, III, 98.

³⁸Ibid., p.101.

³⁹Notes, p.279.

⁴⁰Ionesco, cited by Abastado, in Preface to Rhinocéros (Paris: Bordas, 1970), p.186.

⁴¹Antidotes, p.94.

⁴²Ibid., pp.99-100.

alienation in the crowd that he describes in Rhinocéros and, if apparently harmless, nonetheless a symbol of the abdication of individual thought and self-determination that leads to the ultimate destruction of mankind.⁴³ Thus, beyond all the different possible political interpretations of Rhinocéros that Ionesco cites, he points out that it is also, and above all, a play concerned with the fundamental metaphysical experiences of an individual in search of his self, confronting the horror and evils of the world that oppose his uniqueness:

Quant à Rhinocéros, c'est une pièce ... peut-on dire politique? C'est toujours l'homme en proie au dévergondage du monde, à l'irrationalité brutale. On l'a prise pour une pièce anti-nazie, en Argentine pour une pièce anti-péroniste, en Espagne pour une pièce anti-stalinienne comme en Tchécoslovaquie et en Pologne. En U.R.S.S. et en Allemagne de l'Est aussi, c'est d'ailleurs pour cette raison qu'elle n'y a pas été jouée. Elle a été prise pour une pièce anti-américaine en Amérique, où on y a vu 'le monde des clichés'. C'est l'histoire d'un homme en proie à la violence, une violence sans raison réelle, malgré les explications que donne Dudard, l'intellectuel de la bande. Il s'agit donc d'un homme pour lequel le monde apparaît dans son insolite, un insolite brutal, qu'il n'arrive pas à comprendre.⁴⁴

The threat that Ionesco felt on a personal level in Rhinocéros is repeated on a world-wide scale by the attempt of dictators to destroy whole cultures: their religions, values, literature, and traditions, thereby depriving each individual of his metaphysical and historical roots and leaving him defenceless. 'Toutes les révolutions détruisent les bibliothèques d'Alexandrie', he states.⁴⁵ Even if a country is physically dominated, as was France under Hitler or the Jews under the Arabs, they are not truly beaten whilst they are able to hold out a moral resistance to the opposing ideology. 'C'est quand le vaincu accepte la philosophie du vainqueur qu'il est vraiment vaincu', Ionesco points out.⁴⁶ Ionesco had hoped that the confrontation of Eastern and Western traditions in the modern world would be fruitful, enabling the West to rediscover their lost spiritual traditions. However, he observes, the opposite has happened. The East has been Westernized, abandoning its own rich historical roots and cultures and forcing its satellite states to conform to the same spiritless uniformity, and has turned against the

⁴³ 'Hier j'ai vu un rhinocéros', Paris-Presse, 6343 (28 April 1963), 9D.

⁴⁴ Antidotes, pp.220-221.

⁴⁵ Présent passé, p.65.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.34-35.

West. 'En Russie soviétique, toute une culture a été détruite, tout la spiritualité judaïque, talmudique, hassidique', Ionesco writes.⁴⁷ He witnesses the same process in communist China where Mao, the 'plus épouvantable "massificateur"',⁴⁸ with his little red book, has 'arraché la Chine à sa culture et à son identité'.⁴⁹ The greatest threat to the individual in the modern world is not so much the destruction of his society, as the destruction of his individual identity through the destruction of his culture, in which his sense of continuity with the past and the future is rooted. Culture is being replaced as the foundation of society by a society of technology and machinery where the individual identity is superfluous:

Ce qui est le plus à craindre, ce n'est pas la mort de l'Occident en tant que sociétés, régime libéral, indépendance nationale. Le danger est plus grave, dis-je. L'Occident humaniste peut mourir sans postérité, sans héritier. Nos religions, notre humanisme, notre culture, notre littérature, tout cela peut disparaître à jamais dans l'oubli historique. Des siècles de culture et de civilisation pour rien. Ce qui m'ennuie le plus, c'est la fin de Racine, de Shakespeare, de Dante, de Goethe, de Calderon. A la poubelle tout cela. A la place, l'organisation, une société durement hiérarchisée, la technique. Le monde des sous-ingénieurs. Rien d'autre.⁵⁰

Against this abdication of identity on an individual or national level, Ionesco can only oppose the value of personal resistance to any overwhelming current of thought: Personnellement, je me vante de ne pas être comme les autres. Je suis né désobéissant Contre la mode. Contre l'Histoire'.⁵¹ Although Ionesco has since rationalized his own resistance to this 'phénomène monstrueux de la massification',⁵² telling Frederic Towarnicki, 'Si, autrefois, je ne savais guère pourquoi je résistais à la rhinocérisme, aujourd'hui, je le sais mieux',⁵³ it is nonetheless true that his initial motive for his reaction was spontaneous, 'celle muette et profonde du coeur',⁵⁴ not one of conceptual reasoning, but a deep-rooted desire to remain true to himself and to

⁴⁷Présent passé, p.51.

⁴⁸Ibid., p.116.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Antidotes, p.119.

⁵¹Ibid., p.76.

⁵²Notes, p.292.

⁵³Antidotes, p.98.

⁵⁴Journal, p.151.

humanity. 'Je ne suis pas un homme nouveau. Je suis un homme', he claims.⁵⁵ The same motive makes him immune to any contemporary mass hysterias, for it is only in this way that 'une certaine vérité pouvait être sauvegardée, gardée intacte dans une conscience individuelle'.⁵⁶

Politics, by depriving man of his uniqueness and individual identity, also destroys the possibility of establishing a deep and lasting relationship with others. 'La politique professionnelle détruit les rapports normaux entre les gens, elle aliène, l'engagement ampute l'homme', Ionesco states.⁵⁷ Men, as we have seen, fear to be alone, confronted with their own metaphysical emptiness, and, by uniting in a powerful group, they believe that they can find both companionship and substantiality. However, as the only true relationships can be established on a fundamental metaphysical level, political associations are not true friendships, but a superficial camaraderie, which, Ionesco suggests, is no more than 'solitude in common'.⁵⁸ Moreover, by fostering deception and confusion, politics further divides individuals. 'Je crois que ce qui nous sépare les uns des autres c'est cette "politique", qui élève des barrières entre les hommes et est une somme constante de malentendus', Ionesco writes.⁵⁹ Under the banners of 'community', 'mutual aid', 'communism', and the 'brotherhood of mankind', politics only serves to split humanity into factions and parties which cannot coexist:

Les idéologies, devenues idolâtries, les systèmes automatiques de pensée s'élèvent, comme un écran entre l'esprit et la réalité, faussent l'entendement, aveuglent. Elles sont aussi des barricades entre l'homme et l'homme qu'elles déshumanisent, et rendent impossible l'amitié malgré tout des hommes entre eux; elles empêchent ce qu'on appelle la coexistence, car un rhinocéros ne peut s'accorder avec celui qui ne l'est pas, un sectaire avec celui qui n'est pas de sa secte.⁶⁰

It is only when the individual is free from political bias and prejudice that he can establish a true relationship with another, transcending their superficial differences by the awareness of man's metaphysical identity. 'Je suis bien l'homme dépouillé de tout ce qui en lui est

⁵⁵Présent passé, p.99.

⁵⁶Antidotes, p.276.

⁵⁷Notes, p.314.

⁵⁸Entre la vie et le rêve, p.126.

⁵⁹Notes, p.142.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp.287-288.

mentalité partisane, séparation, déshumanisation, homme aliéné par le choix ou le parti, et je ne hais plus les autres', Ionesco claims, and he adds, 'C'est là le lieu de l'identification profonde, c'est là le moyen d'y parvenir'.⁶¹

Despite its systematical, logical façade, Ionesco considers modern politics to be extremely irrational. Political ideologies that are erected into a rigid system of belief or action for a group or nation are really only masks to hide individual hatreds and passions, he suggests. 'Les idéologies ne sont que les masques permettant l'explosion de l'irrationalité ou de l'extra-rationalité du crime inscrit dans notre nature', Ionesco warns.⁶² As in Russia, these ideologies become a rigid, monolithic 'mythologie abstraite', a 'système de mensonges sacrées',⁶³ totally divorced from reality, yet so sanctioned by common assent that it is impossible to question or oppose it. Ideologies are, therefore, alibis creating deceit and confusion. The real motivating force of politics is not a belief or creed, but the fundamental hatred of the self and the other, characteristic of the individual who has lost touch with his individual identity, that Ionesco perceives vitiating man's relationships at every level. As man is often unaware of these subconscious passions, he contributes unwittingly to his own destruction:

Tout plonge dans l'irrationalité et la magie. Les hommes font autre chose que ce qu'ils pensent vouloir faire. Ils disent qu'ils veulent la liberté et le bonheur, ils font tout pour aboutir à la tyrannie, au malheur, à la catastrophe. Je pense qu'ils veulent secrètement punir les autres et se punir eux-mêmes.⁶⁴

As a result of this self-deception and deliberate deception of others, political action often results in the direct opposite of the avowed aim. 'Il faut comprendre l'histoire à l'envers', Ionesco states, 'Tout ce qui a voulu être progrès n'a été que régression. Toutes les révolutions n'auront été que des réactions'.⁶⁵ Revolutions inevitably lead to the restoration of an even more tyrannical order. The Soviet utopia promised equality for all, yet turned out to be a system of political oppression and imperialistic expansion more repressive than that of the Czars. Through political actions man deceives himself into believing that he is

⁶¹ Journal, p.25.

⁶² Antidotes, p.322.

⁶³ Manès Sperber, cited by Ionesco, in Antidotes, p.171.

⁶⁴ Antidotes, pp.74-75.

⁶⁵ Découvertes, pp.113-114.

able to establish some measure of control over the course of history and his destiny, but, Ionesco suggests, history follows its own cycle of revolution or reaction which politics is powerless to alter, and politics, by creating a network of deceit and self-delusion, can only contribute to man's ultimate perdition. 'Que l'Histoire nous échappe, que nous faisons autre chose que ce que nous voulons faire, cela est évident', he concludes.⁶⁶

In his volume Antidotes, Ionesco describes some of the atrocities committed in the name of politics; the wall of Berlin, the destruction of the civilization of Tibet, the Vietnam war, Biafra, the subjection of Finland, the Arab-Israeli question, the crushing of Czechoslovakia, and the assassination of Gandhi are but a few of the political crimes of recent years. 'C'est l'enfer dans le monde. Certainement ce n'est que le début de l'enfer', Ionesco concludes.⁶⁷ Ominous statements concerning the dangers to which politics is leading abound in his books and articles: 'De Prague à Londres la honte des hommes', 'C'en est fini peut-être de la race blanche', 'Seul un fou peut encore espérer', 'J'ai le sentiment de ce trop tard', 'Je me demande comment on va pouvoir échapper. Dans notre ciel, la menace'.⁶⁸ 'En réalité, il est tout à fait évident que "ça" va de plus en plus mal', Ionesco concludes, 'les dangers sont de plus en plus graves et que jamais, comme aujourd'hui, la vie universelle n'a été si menacée'.⁶⁹ If this is the result of a fundamental instinct of aggression and destruction in all men, it is nonetheless true that politics has only aggravated the progression of the evil:

Au lieu de désarticuler, de désarmer les désirs, ces révolutions par plaisir et ces fêtes que l'on espère, ne font qu'exacerber les défoulements des instincts jusqu'à l'explosion finale qui sera l'explosion spirituelle et atomique de la planète tout entière.⁷⁰

Blinded by political myth and indoctrination, man is unable to see the cataclysm germinating in the world. Even those who are not actively concerned with politics are incriminated in political crimes by their apathy and passivity. Ionesco criticizes the 'torpeur' of the Western

⁶⁶Présent passé, P.138.

⁶⁷Ibid., p.196.

⁶⁸Antidotes, pp.33-39; Présent passé, p.78; Présent passé, p.198; 'Un Somnambule sur la crête de l'histoire', Interview with Jean Montalbeith, p.10; Présent passé, p.60.

⁶⁹Notes, pp.319-320.

⁷⁰'La Chasse à l'homme. (Journal de mon désarroi)', Figaro Littéraire, (6-7 May 1972), p.18.

world which has ignored the suffering of intellectuals and artists in Russia and turned a blind eye to Russia's aggression against Czechoslovakia:

L'Occident est responsable, en grande partie, de l'asservissement de Prague. Car, s'il y avait eu, au lieu du cafouillage idéologique, au lieu de la confusion passionnelle des hommes et femmes répandue dans les cervelles de ce côté-ci, s'il y avait eu, au lieu de cet aveuglement, une conscience mondiale nette, déterminée, le mal aurait pu être évité.⁷¹

This lack of concern for human suffering has been a constant throughout history. 'Toute l'histoire est pleine de nuits de la Saint-Barthélemy', Ionesco reminds us, but 'les bonnes âmes s'enfichent'.⁷² In *Tueur*, all the characters are actively or passively implicated in the murders of the Killer by their moral insensibility and indifference. Pierre-Aimé Touchard says the play shows 'l'impassibilité avec laquelle on envisage l'éventualité d'une guerre totalement destructrice',⁷³ and compares it to Jean Giraudoux's play, *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*. Both plays illustrate the implacable progression of war and its absurdity, but a new hopelessness, he suggests, divides the play written after the 1914-18 war and that written after Hiroshima. Both heroes try to warn their fellow citizens about the futility of war and of the way it destroys their chances of happiness, but, whereas Giraudoux's hero is able to convince the others of this basic truth, Ionesco's meets only with derision and indifference; as Touchard puts it, 'il se rend compte que cette petite face ricanante et muette de la guerre est plus forte que l'Humanité tout entière. Et ce grand vertige qui le prend, qui l'accule à un quasi-suicide c'est comme l'écroulement de toute foi'.⁷⁴

However, if all humanity is implicated in the crimes of history, those most to blame, Ionesco believes, are those in positions of power. Ionesco would certainly have agreed with the famous saying of Lord Acton that 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men ... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it'.⁷⁵ When asked, in an interview, who were his heroes in real life, Ionesco replied

⁷¹Antidotes, pp.38-39.

⁷²'La Chasse à l'homme', p.18.

⁷³Pierre-Aimé Touchard, 'Deux bêtes de théâtre: Anouilh et Ionesco', *Nef*, 27 (April 1959), 80.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p.82.

⁷⁵John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, First Baron Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1907), Appendix, p.504.

bluntly, 'Aucune. Je n'aime aucune personne qui prend trop d'importance'.⁷⁶ Ever since his childhood hatred of his father, who dominated his wife and children and who was a political Vicar of Bray, a believer in all forms of orthodoxy and power, Ionesco's experience has only confirmed the dangers of authoritarianism. Power, he believes, is a dangerous paranoia, leading to a desire to alienate the individual identities of others, to subject them to his will, and use them as objects. Distrusting all political doctrines as pseudo-rational justifications for personal obsessions, 'les armatures des subjectivités'.⁷⁷ Ionesco warns against these false saviours, advising, 'N'améliorez pas le sort de l'homme, si vous lui voulez vraiment du bien'.⁷⁸ Those who declare, like the threatening Frère Tarrabas, in La Soif, 'nous voulons votre salut',⁷⁹ must of necessity be hypocrites, for the only true solutions are to be found on the individual, not the collective, level, and, as soon as a private opinion becomes a collective doctrine, it loses whatever truth and sincerity it originally had. 'Je me suis toujours méfié des vérités collectives', Ionesco warns, 'Je crois qu'une idée est vraie lorsqu'elle n'est pas encore affirmée et qu'au moment où elle est affirmée, elle devient excessive. A ce moment-là il y a un abus, une exagération dans l'affirmation de cette idée qui la rendent fausse'.⁸⁰ As Ionesco believes that there is no objective standard of truth and that reality is merely a projection of individual identity, there is no basis for authority, for to impose one's subjective view of the world on others is to suggest that one has a monopoly of truth which is valid for all: 'Il faut être bien sûr de soi pour prétendre pouvoir mener les gens par le bout du nez sur le chemin du bien et de la vérité, et encore plus sûr de soi pour prétendre savoir quel est ce chemin, ce bien, cette vérité, fût-elle relative et historique'.⁸¹ Moreover, to impose one's personal solution to a problem on others inevitably becomes an attempt to crush the other's uniqueness and individual identity, and this desire for dominance, Ionesco believes, has poisoned political relations throughout history:

⁷⁶ 'Ionesco répond au questionnaire Marcel Proust', p.14.

⁷⁷ Notes, p.103.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.161.

⁷⁹ Théâtre, IV, 162.

⁸⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.25.

⁸¹ Notes, p.103.

Toutes les sociétés, révolutionnaires ou non, sont ratées. On dirait que l'Histoire s'est jouée de l'homme. Elle a fait le contraire de ce que les hommes ont voulu faire ou prétendu vouloir faire. Ou peut-être que l'Histoire, les intentions secrètes, les fondateurs de sociétés ont révélé leurs intentions profondes, inconscientes et réelles. Derrière les plus nobles idéaux et derrière les intentions les plus généreuses, il y a une volonté de puissance, une volonté mauvaise ou une soif de destruction ... C'est la libido dominandi qui a tout gâché.⁸²

There is a constant movement of aggression and resistance with each individual trying to impose his self on the other, trying to possess and control him. 'Tout le monde veut diriger tout le monde. Tout le monde s'oppose à être dirigé par tout le monde', Ionesco observes.⁸³ Liberal ages are, therefore, very rare in the history of mankind, and, despite the brave device of the French nation, 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité', he believes that 'c'est de tyrannie et d'autorité que les Français ont besoin. Ou d'anarchie. Mais pas de démocratie'.⁸⁴ On the death of Mao-tse-tung, whom Ionesco considers to have been one of the worst tyrants of the modern world, he was horrified to find Europeans 'agenouillés devant Mao'.⁸⁵ The political persuasion of a leader does not make the slightest difference, Ionesco believes. For him, the modern archetypal figures of authority are Che Guevara and Codreanu, leader of the Iron Guard.⁸⁶ The representatives of the extreme right and left wings meet in their common inhumanity, their desire to dehumanize others.

All figures of authority in Ionesco's plays are represented in an unfavourable light. Even the early play La Leçon explored the spirit of domination present in the teacher-pupil relationship, which, according to Pierre-Aimé Touchard, is a symbol of all forms of dictatorship.⁸⁷ This interpretation is confirmed by the Professor donning a swastika armband at the end of the play, although this was never implemented in production, for Ionesco considered its political implication was too precise. Those in authority are alienated, mutilated people, having lost any dimensionality. The Emperor in Les Chaises appears in a light that is significantly 'froide, vide'⁸⁸ and is as invisible as the other

⁸²Antidotes, pp.103-104.

⁸³Présent passé, p.85.

⁸⁴Antidotes, p.86.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp.113-118.

⁸⁶Ibid., p.107.

⁸⁷Pierre-Aimé Touchard, 'La loi du théâtre', Cahiers des Saisons, 15 (Winter 1959), 225.

⁸⁸Théâtre, I, 167.

alienated characters. Le Maître is a satire on the mass hysteria that dictators inspire. The leader is loudly acclaimed by the crowds off stage, but, when he finally appears, he has no head and, to the puzzled comment of an admirer, 'Mais, mais ... il n'a pas de tête, le maître!',⁸⁹ the Announcer replies, without a qualm, 'Il n'en a pas besoin, puisqu'il a du génie'.⁹⁰ In a revival of the sketch by the Jean Rougerie Company, in Inédits,⁹¹ the leader is represented by a hat suspended on a wire with nothing at all underneath it, emphasizing even more strongly Ionesco's point. As they are alienated from their inner selves, those in authority are cruel and impervious to human suffering, like the Policeman in Victimes or the false monks in La Soif. The Frère Supérieur is 'la parodie du tyran'.⁹² He is 'anormalement grand',⁹³ and silently, 'inébranlable, domine tout le monde de sa taille'.⁹⁴ The brainwashing of Tripp and Brechtoll underlines the cruelty of dictatorial regimes; it is, in the words of Simone Benmussa, 'l'archétype de la Gestapo, de la NKVD, de toutes les polices'.⁹⁵ Mère Pipe, in Tueur, is a typical satirical portrait of those in authority. Her speeches are an absurd collection of slogans and clichés from Brechtians, fascists, and communists alike, and her geese, although considered by one critic as a reference to the goose step,⁹⁶ are probably simply a symbol of the dehumanization of individuals when they abdicate their liberty into the hands of a dictator. It is no coincidence that the photograph that leads to mass destruction in Tueur is one of a Colonel with all its overtones of militarism, authority, and subjection of the individual to a cause.

Ionesco was very much obsessed with the question of how men can govern others with equity and justice without alienating themselves or others and has devoted one of his plays, Macbett, to the question of the corruption of power. Before writing the play, he outlined the subject to Claude Abastado:

⁸⁹Théâtre, II, 241.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹See Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco, p.40.

⁹²Benmussa, Ionesco, p.34.

⁹³Théâtre, IV, 143.

⁹⁴Ibid., p.158.

⁹⁵Benmussa, Ionesco, p.34.

⁹⁶Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.90.

Comment se fait-il qu'un soldat vertueux et fidèle soit devenu un monstre? ... C'est à cause de son ambition politique ... Je voudrais essayer de montrer que le pouvoir est dangereux et néfaste. Ceux qui veulent le pouvoir politique, qu'ils l'obtiennent ou qu'ils ne l'obtiennent pas, sont plus ou moins paranoïaques.⁹⁷

In keeping with Ionesco's vision of politics, Macbett is overthrown, but not to be succeeded by liberty or democracy, but by an even greater tyrant who promises yet greater suffering. He voices quite frankly the opinions that Ionesco believes lurk in the subconscious of every dictator:

J'abonde en penchants diversement criminels que je satisferai par tous les moyens Oui maintenant que j'ai le pouvoir, je vais verser dans l'enfer le doux lait de la concorde. Je vais bouleverser la paix universelle, je détruirai toute unité sur la terre. De cet archiduché commençons d'abord par faire un royaume-et je suis roi. Un empire, je suis empereur. Supra-altesse, supra-sire, supra-majesté, empereur de tous les empereurs.⁹⁸

In an interview for Le Soir, Ionesco suggests that one solution to the problem of the corruption and alienation of those in authority would be to make those who do not want to govern heads of state,⁹⁹ or elsewhere he proposes that machines should be used to rule mankind, 'car, en somme, tous les dirigeants, tous ceux qui veulent et obtiennent le pouvoir sont plus ou moins paranoïaques. Les machines sont neutres, il faut qu'on les charge de l'administration des hommes'.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the individual not only has to try to avoid the crushing of the one by the many, the dehumanization of the individual by forcing him to conform to a faceless crowd, but also the crushing of the many by the one, the dehumanization of a mass of individual identities by the paranoia of a political demagogue. Ionesco observes:

Il n'y a jamais eu non plus autant de dictateurs et de tyrans qui n'ont fait qu'imposer leur 'moi' à tous les autres et qui ont fait des autres les instruments de leur 'moi'.

On a l'impression que ce n'est pas le 'nous' qui submerge les 'moi', mais que ce sont les 'moi' ou certains 'moi' qui noyautent, détruisent les autres, le nous.¹⁰¹

The knowledge of his own subjectivity in all he does and sees makes

⁹⁷ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.284.

⁹⁸ Théâtre, V, 204.

⁹⁹ 'Dialogue avec Eugène Ionesco, Salle Jean XXIII', Soir, 22 (27 January 1972), 9.

¹⁰⁰ 'L'Express va plus loin avec Ionesco', Interview with Frédéric Towarnicki, p.204.

¹⁰¹ Présent passé, p.210.

it impossible for Ionesco to identify with any political belief:

Dans mes controverses, dans mes conflits, je suis toujours handicapé, dès le départ un peu désarmé, car le fait de savoir que je n'ai ni tort ni raison me donne mauvaise conscience je constate à la fois la réalité de ma subjectivité et aussi la profonde subjectivité des autres. Cette subjectivité défigure, rend impossible la connaissance de la réalité.¹⁰²

He concludes, 'Me rendant compte que tout jugement est relatif, vrai et faux, impossible etc., je ne puis que refuser de juger'.¹⁰³ Any party or individual who claims to have a monopoly of objective truth is, therefore, necessarily trying to deceive or justify his personal desires:

Tous les systèmes sont faux; c'est-à-dire: tous les systèmes ne sont ou ne peuvent être que des images, des façons différentes de s'imaginer, de se représenter le monde qui n'est que le point de départ des représentations. Tous les systèmes partent de la réalité qui est amorphe et s'en éloignent. Plus un système est parfait, rond, admissible, vraisemblable, logique, cohérent, plus il est irréel, artificiel. Tous les systèmes sont donc fondamentalement artificiels, éloignés de la réalité.¹⁰⁴

This being the case, all ideologies are equivalent and therefore invalidated. 'Tous les gouvernants sont à mettre dans le même sac', Ionesco declares.¹⁰⁵ He points out that, under completely different banners and ideologies, the communists are establishing dictatorships indistinguishable from the traditional fascist dictatorships, such as that of Franco, except in that they are perhaps even more repressive; 'la dictature franquiste était de l'eau de rose comparée à la dictature soviétique'.¹⁰⁶ The Russians are now the greatest imperialists, whereas the British are anti-imperialist, and in an article written in 1969, 'Mao merci, fascisme pas mort',¹⁰⁷ he says it is virtually impossible to see any fundamental differences between the practices of the right and left wings. He even wonders whether there is an 'entente secrète et profonde qui existe entre les bourgeois capitalistes et les bourgeois communistes, l'entente profonde qui règne entre les conformistes de l'Est

¹⁰² Antidotes, p.291.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.272.

¹⁰⁴ Présent passé, p.67.

¹⁰⁵ Antidotes, p.139.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.308.

¹⁰⁷ 'Mao merci, fascisme pas mort', Figaro Littéraire (2 June 1969), reprinted in Antidotes as 'Le Fascisme n'est pas mort', pp.21-27.

et ceux de l'Ouest'.¹⁰⁸ Revolution, both etymologically and in practice, means the restoration of an archetypal social order of tyranny and oppression; history follows its own cycle of eternal return which, Ionesco believes, will inevitably be for the worst. 'Je ne crois pas au progrès', he declared, in an interview, 'L'humanité tourne toujours dans le même cercle. On s'aperçoit bien maintenant que le nazisme est une sorte d'impulsion permanente ... Il y aura peut-être un jour un changement, mais pour le moment les actes humains sont mauvais, ils tournent toujours mal'.¹⁰⁹ To try to remedy this situation by any mass action will only aggravate matters. 'Il est à se demander', Ionesco says, 'si toute action, toute "politique" n'est pas nuisible: on dirait qu'elle ne sert qu'à perpétuer le crime, à donner une nouvelle force, une nouvelle forme à la tyrannie'.¹¹⁰

In this situation Ionesco can only classify himself politically as an anarchist. 'Je suis un anarchiste de droite', he affirms.¹¹¹ As a political anarchist, his standpoint has tended to shift according to the context. In the early plays, the greatest threat appeared to be the conservative or 'bourgeois' establishment of the West, but since 1960 the threat has been seen more and more as being the left wing, and in 1976 he wrote an article for Le Figaro entitled 'Le Communisme est le plus grand échec de l'histoire de l'humanité'.¹¹² In all his plays that deal with political topics, he, therefore, maintains what George Wellwarth terms a 'purposeful vagueness',¹¹³ not condemning any particular group, but the futility of politics in general. We have seen how the swastika was suppressed at the end of La Leçon as being too precise for a play that indicts all forms of dominance and aggression, including that of sex. The quarrel about the fly in the soup in La Colère, the quibbling over the definitions of words in Délire à Deux, and the argument in La Cantatrice, beginning with the ridiculous assertion 'A bas le cirage' show the futility of all conflicts and how major disasters can be provoked by insignificant disagreements when they become absorbed by politics. The 'éducation-reéducation' scene of La Soif,

¹⁰⁸ Antidotes, p.167.

¹⁰⁹ 'Académicien ou non, Ionesco reste Ionesco', Interview with Claudine Chonez, p.5.

¹¹⁰ Antidotes, p.104.

¹¹¹ Ionesco, cited by Coe, in 'Les Anarchistes de droite', p.101.

¹¹² Antidotes, pp.128-131.

¹¹³ Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox, p.57.

where Tripp and Brechtoll are made to renounce their belief and affirm the opposite one, is a perfect image of the equivalence of ideologies. Brechtoll, Ionesco tells us, represents left wing totalitarianism and Tripp fascism, but the cruelest, most totalitarian oppression is manifested by the monks, for at least Tripp and Brechtoll are still able to think. Ionesco concludes, 'The dogmas of one neutralize the dogmas of the other, and it all ends up by drowning itself in an impersonal totalitarianism which spies on us'.¹¹⁴ Ionesco recounts how the Catholics were particularly insulted by this scene, but wrongfully so, he stated, because it was not, as they believed, a satire of the Catholic Inquisition, but of all the inquisitions in history and today: 'On voit très bien que dans cette pièce nous nous malmenons les bien-pensants de droite, les bien pensants de gauche, les deux armées de Salut'.¹¹⁵ Beyond the satire of this brainwashing episode, Ionesco's intention is to undermine all 'systèmes, doctrines, dogmes, mythes, tics, automatismes mentaux qui vous accablent'.¹¹⁶ It is, ironically, the sinister Frère Tarabas that most aptly sums up the moral of the scene. 'La vraie prison, c'est l'aliénation de l'esprit', he says, 'Si vous êtes enrhumé, c'est parce que c'est vous qui avez une croyance, un critère, un dogme ou ... une morale. Bref, des préjugés C'est votre pensée qui vous enferme'.¹¹⁷

If Ionesco acknowledges the futility of politics, this does not mean that he is apathetic about political matters, for, as we have seen, to ignore the situation is to be indirectly implicated in its continuance. Besides, it would be impossible for a sensitive, concerned individual not to feel directly involved in the problems of his time. 'On me fusille à bout portant tous les matins',¹¹⁸ Ionesco states or again, 'Il y a des événements historiques qui me bouleversent comme s'il s'agissait de ma propre histoire'.¹¹⁹ 'Il m'est devenu de plus en plus difficile d'être indifférent',¹²⁰ he admits, and, elsewhere, he asks, 'Comment faire pour être un égoïste simple? Comment faire pour être,

¹¹⁴ Interview with Ionesco, in Hayman, Eugène Ionesco, p.8.

¹¹⁵ Ionesco, in 'Cinq personnages en quête d'eux-mêmes', p.17.

¹¹⁶ Théâtre, IV, 160.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.159, 170.

¹¹⁸ Antidotes, p.39.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.33.

¹²⁰ Présent passé, p.87.

non pas seulement intellectuellement, mais psychologiquement indifférent?'.¹²¹ Despite his relentless criticism of avowedly committed writers, such as Brecht or Sartre, Ionesco's passionate concern for politics has led critics to debate over the question of whether or not Ionesco can be considered to be an 'écrivain engagé'. Ionesco himself has contributed to the confusion by statements such as that in an interview with the Cahiers libres de la jeunesse, where he admitted to having contradicted himself by having attempted, with Rhinocéros, to write 'engagé' théâtre.¹²² However, for the Marxist critics, such as Kenneth Tynan, Ionesco has not espoused the 'vocation politique'¹²³ recommended by Bernard Dort and that these critics thought essential if the avant-garde were to have an enduring impact. To Tynan's observation that Ionesco's theatre was an irrelevant diversion, not on the 'main road' of artistic creation,¹²⁴ Ionesco replied that this sort of commitment leads directly to the concentration camp.¹²⁵ However, Ionesco has written a large number of articles on political matters, many of which he compiled in the volumes Antidotes and Un Homme en question, and he is not afraid to speak out on current issues. In an article, 'La Tchécoslovaquie? Le seul pays d'Europe qui mérite son indépendance',¹²⁶ he strongly condemns the Soviet intervention of 1968 in that country, and, in his discussions of the Arab-Israeli war, he states categorically, 'Je suis évidemment partisan d'Israël'.¹²⁷ Yet this does not mean that he commits his theatre or other writings to the support of any political viewpoint, for to make his literary creation a demonstration of his personal beliefs would be contrary to the spirit of art, as Robbe-Grillet points out:

Il n'est pas raisonnable ... de prétendre dans nos romans servir une cause politique, même une cause qui nous paraît juste, même si dans notre vie politique nous militons pour son triomphe. La vie politique nous oblige sans cesse à supposer des significations connues: significations sociales, significations historiques, significations morales. L'art est plus

¹²¹Présent passé, p.271.

¹²²Notes, p.172.

¹²³Bernard Dort, 'La Vocation politique', in Théâtre public (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), p.362 et seq.

¹²⁴Notes, p.140.

¹²⁵Ibid., p.205.

¹²⁶Antidotes, pp.27-33.

¹²⁷Présent passé, p.88.

modeste - ou plus ambitieux -: pour lui, rien n'est jamais connu d'avance.¹²⁸

However, Ionesco's theatre is 'engaged' in the sense that he is very much concerned with the situation and problems of man. Eric Bentley has said that modern drama is more concerned with ideas than that of any previous age.¹²⁹ Ionesco's lack of any political commitment does not preclude this concern for ideas; in fact, he can be more concerned as he does not have to limit himself to the ideas of one particular ideology. 'Plus nous sommes désentravés, libérés des partis pris, ou d'autres aliénations', he points out, 'plus la création porte des significations multiples'.¹³⁰ Ionesco is part of the movement of repudiation, reevaluation, and enquiry that Robert Brustein sees as the hallmark of modern drama in his book, The Theatre of Revolt,¹³¹ and his freedom from political affiliations allows him to conduct a savage satire on all the facets of modern society that he believes to be corrupt or harmful for the individual. Jacques Guicharnaud writes:

Le désengagement de Ionesco n'exclut pas chez lui une très grande force de dénonciation de la littérature doctrinaire ou orientée, il nous offre pourtant un certain jugement sur le monde au nom de certains valeurs en marge de l'esthétique et de l'éthique.¹³²

Despite Renée Saurel's statement that 'on chercherait en vain dans ces drames un signe de notre temps',¹³³ Ionesco's theatre is unquestionably firmly situated in and concerned with contemporary events. When asked in an interview, 'Avez-vous le sentiment de porter un témoignage sur notre temps?', Ionesco replied without hesitation, 'Bien sûr. Mais sans rien de message automatique. Pas de pensée engagée; donc, pas de parti pris'.¹³⁴

Thus, Ionesco's theatre is engaged in the broader sense of Maxwell Adereth's definition of a committed man as 'a man who feels a sense of responsibility to his fellow men and who takes practical steps to help

¹²⁸ Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, p.120.

¹²⁹ Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946), pp.3-19.

¹³⁰ Notes, p.185.

¹³¹ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (London: Methuen & Co., 1965).

¹³² Guicharnaud, 'Un Monde hors de contrôle', p.16.

¹³³ Renée Saurel, cited by Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.263.

¹³⁴ 'Ionesco et les subventions', Nouvelles Littéraires, 2008 (2 February 1966), 13.

them'.¹³⁵ In a sense, all life lived with a lucid awareness is in itself commitment, as John Mander points out in his study, The Writer and Commitment. 'Commitment is universal', he writes, 'The poet of subjectivity chooses to explore its inner rather than its outer face'.¹³⁶ Ionesco himself makes this distinction, and, in inveighing against the engaged writers, he is careful to specify that it is not engagement as such, but '"l'engagement" tel qu'il est conçu' by these writers and critics that is the catastrophe.¹³⁷ Ionesco's plays are as socially relevant and as committed to humanity as those of the avowedly political-ly engaged writers, yet they are more wide-reaching and more enduring as he considers not only the political and social man but the universal man in his metaphysical totality. In his passionate concern for others and his deep implication in his historical context, Ionesco's theatre is unquestionably committed in this wider, universal sense, as Claude Abastado writes:

L'oeuvre de Ionesco est historiquement 'engagé'. Jamais elle n'exprime en clair une éthique, un système de valeurs car Ionesco ne veut pas opposer une idéologie à d'autres idéologies. Mais ses refus et la prise de conscience des problèmes marquent son engagement Il y a 'engagement' et il y a 'théâtre' toutes les fois que sont en jeu l'homme et sa destinée, à l'intersection du temps et de l'éternité.¹³⁸

Although he may espouse certain political opinions as a private individual, Ionesco is rigidly opposed to any attempt to use these private opinions to direct or control the free expansion of art. 'Rien n'empêche le citoyen de s'engager politiquement comme il veut', he states, 'Mais en tant qu'artiste qui remet tout en question, il doit être libre'.¹³⁹ Theatre or art that is tied to any ideology is not truly popular, for it does not address the problems of the human condition in its totality, problems with which all men, at all times, can identify on the level of their extra-social, fundamental obsessions. He claims, in a neat paradox, 'Seul le théâtre impopulaire a des chances de devenir populaire. Le "populaire" n'est pas le peuple'.¹⁴⁰ With

¹³⁵ Maxwell Adereth, Commitment in Modern French Literature (London: Gallancz, 1967), p.47.

¹³⁶ John Mander, The Writer and Commitment (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), pp.180-181.

¹³⁷ Notes, p.185.

¹³⁸ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, pp.249-250.

¹³⁹ Antidotes, p.178.

¹⁴⁰ Notes, p.74.

their concern for the superficial and the transient, these engaged writers 'court derrière l'Histoire'.¹⁴¹ They are schizophrenics,¹⁴² imprisoned in a world of politics, ignoring the depths of human existence. The characters in their plays reflect this; they are mutilated, alienated creatures without the depth of individuality to define them:

L'homme brechtien est plat, il n'a que deux dimensions, celles de la surface, il n'est que social: ce qui lui manque c'est la dimension en profondeur, la dimension métaphysique l'homme brechtien est infirme, car son auteur lui refuse sa réalité la plus intérieure; il est faux, car il lui aliène ce qui le définit.¹⁴³

Even worse, these committed writers are 'terroristes',¹⁴⁴ whose aim is to alienate their audiences by turning them into blind followers of their creed. 'Tous les auteurs engagés veulent vous violer, c'est-à-dire vous convaincre, vous recruter'.¹⁴⁵ The vogue for committed theatre has led to an impasse in the modern theatre, Ionesco believes, an idea which he explores in the article, 'Le Théâtre ne peut évoluer sans être dépolitisé'.¹⁴⁶ Political engagement in the theatre is a distortion both of the role of the playwright and of the nature of reality. Ideologies and propaganda are dead, inanimate thoughts and feelings and are, therefore, in direct opposition to the living, creative reality of art. In the two articles, 'Le Dogmatisme tue le théâtre',¹⁴⁷ and 'Pas de soupe pour les dogmatiques', he outlines his view, consistent since his earliest writings, that literature is only of value if it provokes original thought and feelings, liberating the individual and expanding his horizons rather than constraining him. 'Si ce que je dis n'est pas neuf, originel, pourquoi le dire, pourquoi le répéter?', he asks, 'Ce travail est inutile. Il est propagande, il est vulgarisation'.¹⁴⁸ Propaganda is the business of politicians, not of artists: 'L'auteur n'enseigne pas: il invente'.¹⁴⁹ Theatre is a living organism, a process of surprise and discovery and so cannot be subject to an ideology that

¹⁴¹ Antidotes, p.227.

¹⁴² Notes, p.299.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.194.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p.302.

¹⁴⁵ Journal, p.23.

¹⁴⁶ Antidotes, pp.189-192.

¹⁴⁷ 'Le Dogmatisme tue le théâtre', Tribune de Genève, 105 (5 May, 1964).

¹⁴⁸ Découvertes, p.100.

¹⁴⁹ Notes, p.74.

is fixed and already familiar, degraded into dead clichés:

Il y a un théâtre qui vulgarise les idées, c'est le théâtre dit 'idéologique'. Un autre théâtre les rend vivantes, les incarne, fait que les idées deviennent les éléments, les membres d'un organisme vivant des personnes existant dans un monde réalisé, non pas réaliste. Je crois bien que c'est cela un oeuvre: un être nouveau, attendu et inattendu. Le théâtre non-idéologique n'est pas dépourvu d'idées. Le théâtre idéologique a une seule idée, connue à l'avance à illustrer, donc superflue, puisque connue, donc pas vrai, puisque illustrative. Le théâtre idéologique est monodéiste.¹⁵⁰

Propaganda and art are thus mutually exclusive entities to Ionesco, each with its own laws and each serving a different purpose. The 'hérésie de l'enseignement',¹⁵¹ denounced by Baudelaire, by ignoring a vital part of the human condition, cannot attain the universality and transcendence that is a sine qua non of true artistic creation. 'L'artiste authentique est celui qui, même s'il veut faire de la propagande, ne réussit pas à faire de la propagande: surgi de son temps, il dépasse son temps', Ionesco concludes.¹⁵²

Ionesco dealt with the problem of commitment in art in a satirical vein in L'Impromptu de l'Alma. The three Bartholoméuses represent respectively the critics Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes, and Jean-Jacques Gauthier: one essentialist, one existentialist, and the other a partisan of the 'théâtre de boulevard'. Ionesco mocks the rigidity of their ideologies and their ludicrous pseudo-scientific technical terms. Their empty truisms end up in a cacophony of alliteration and assonance, devoid of any semantic content, but behind this farce Ionesco defines his situation as a writer. He affirms the value of the subconscious and its universality, the necessity of artistic freedom, and his hostility to all critics, especially those that demand political commitment:

Je reproche à ces docteurs d'avoir découvert des vérités premières et de les avoir revêtues d'un langage abusif, qui fait que ces vérités premières semblent être devenues folles. Seulement, ces vérités, comme toutes les vérités, même premières, sont contestables. Elles deviennent dangereuses lorsqu'elles prennent l'allure des dogmes infailibles et lorsque, en leur nom, les docteurs et critiques prétendent exclure d'autres vérités et diriger, voire tyranniser, la création artistique.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ 'Je ne fais que solliciter le dialogue', Interview with Pierre Hahn, p.32.

¹⁵¹ Charles Baudelaire, in Edgar Poe (Prose traduction de Baudelaire, Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe), (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956), p.1071.

¹⁵² Ionesco, Preface to Situation et perspectives, p.17.

¹⁵³ Théâtre, II, 56-57.

How, Ionesco asks, can a writer presume to give answers when he is not yet even aware of the question,¹⁵⁴ and, even more, how can a writer presume to teach others when he knows so little about that which is closest to himself, his individual identity? He tells Marlyse Schaeffer, 'Je déteste les écrivains qui veulent donner des leçons. Des "leçons"? De quel droit? Quand nous ne savons pas nous-mêmes ce qu'il en est de notre propre vie'.¹⁵⁵ When accused of having no message, Ionesco quoted Nabokov's words, 'No, I am a writer, I am not a postman',¹⁵⁶ for 'la leçon du théâtre est au-delà des leçons'.¹⁵⁷

Considering Ionesco's views of politics interwoven in his plays and writings, his belief that politics distracts man from his true goals in life and isolates him from his individual identity and his conviction that ideologies are riddled with corruption and deceit and that any action in the political arena to ameliorate man's situation is futile, it is not surprising that his plays have been called 'pièces du désespoir',¹⁵⁸ or even 'des représentations qui auraient lieu à la veille de la fin du monde. Et encore mieux le lendemain'.¹⁵⁹ However, if it is true that his plays and writings abound in apocalyptic statements, indicating man's impending doom, yet these are more than counteracted by passages where he affirms the individual identity as the supreme value in life, able to rise above human cruelty and resist political dehumanisation:

Ils tuent, ils internent, ils torturent tous ceux qui incarnent ce qu'il y a de spirituel et de valable dans humanité. Mais ils n'ont pas finalement réussi et ne réussiront jamais à tuer l'homme définitivement, au profit de la brute. L'homme renaît incessamment. Les hommes renaissent. Ils ont beau faire semblant de considérer que l'homme 'en général' est une entité abstraite, les faits prouvent qu'il est la seule réalité concrète évidente.¹⁶⁰

For Ionesco personally, the way out of the impasse is the affirmation of the individual identity through artistic creation, which, he believes,

¹⁵⁴Notes, p.22.

¹⁵⁵'Ionesco, êtes-vous notre Molière?', Interview with Marlyse Schaeffer, p.123.

¹⁵⁶Interview with author.

¹⁵⁷Notes, p.185.

¹⁵⁸Jim Victor, 'The Theatre of the Absurd', Political Affairs (January 1964), p.52.

¹⁵⁹Arthur Miller, cited by Agnès Nicolaïevna Mikheieva, in Les Critiques de notre temps et Ionesco, p.130.

¹⁶⁰Antidotes, p.137.

is a means of changing the world more surely and fundamentally than any political action or revolution, through the shaping synthesis of the creative vision. He sees art, not as a means of escape to an ivory tower, but as a positive affirmation, construction, and creation of something new, whereas politics is inevitably destruction: 'Imagination n'est pas évasion. Imaginer, c'est construire, c'est faire, créer un monde ... A force de créer des mondes on peut "re-crée" le monde à l'image des mondes inventés, imaginaires. On ne redresse pas le monde, on en "dresse" un '.¹⁶¹ However, if Ionesco has found a solution valid for himself, he has no intention of trying to impose it on others, for they, as unique individuals, will have to find their own answers. Yet his art is not esoteric and irrelevant but constructive and universal, for it highlights the fundamental problems and questions that each individual faces in political concerns and thus gives them a vantage point in their search for their own solution:

Le théâtre nouveau était un théâtre métaphysique, plus métaphysique que nihiliste. Les auteurs de ce théâtre nouveau demandaient aux lecteurs et aux spectateurs d'essayer de répondre, d'essayer de trouver en eux-mêmes des explications ou au moins quelques éclaircissements aux problèmes. Le poète n'est ni un prophète, ni un omniscient. Le poète est celui qui sait voir le problème là où les autres ne le voient pas; le poète, tout simplement, met les problèmes en évidence.¹⁶²

The individual, however, must find his own solution inside himself. To the accusation that he leaves his readers in a void without suggesting any positive course of action, Ionesco replied, 'C'est bien ce que j'ai voulu faire. C'est de ce vide qu'un homme libre doit se tirer tout seul par ses propres forces et non par la force des autres'.¹⁶³ When the individual starts to search inwards for his identity and stability instead of trying to establish a false sense of existence by dominating and possessing others, or by hiding his problems by alienating the self in a mindless crowd, he will rediscover the fundamental unity of mankind. Politics will be superceded at this point as there will no longer be rivalry and hatred among men. Ionesco hopes that one day he will be able to say, 'le moment est venu où tous les hommes doivent se mettre d'accord, renoncer les uns à leur haine, les autres à leurs privilèges

¹⁶¹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.91.

¹⁶² Ionesco, Preface to L'Avant-garde théâtrale, edited by Tom Bishop, p.x.

¹⁶³ Notes, p.292.

et dépasser le problème politique'.¹⁶⁴ Only then, 'on retrouverait le véritable sens de la "politique", c'est-à-dire la science ... des rapports humains'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Antidotes, p.310.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.284.

Si le signe de l'époque est la confusion,
je vois à la base de cette confusion une
rupture entre les choses, et les paroles,
les idées, les signes qui en sont la
représentation.

Antonin Artaud, Le Théâtre et son double.

O paroles, que de crimes on commet en
votre nom!

Ionesco, Jacques ou la soumission.

CHAPTER IX

THE INDIVIDUAL AND LANGUAGE

Language plays an important role in the individual's search for identity. From the first cry of the infant expressing his astonishment at the world, to his use of language to formulate thoughts with which to classify and distinguish the objects of the external universe, and his use of his national language to communicate with others, language is a vital tool of interrogation about the three-way relationship between man and his individual identity, man and the others, and man and the world. It is:

Communication, évidemment, mais surtout manifestation de l'interrogation; il est discussion avec moi-même sur l'objet, il est une discussion sur l'objet avec les autres, on se parle à soi-même autant que l'on parle aux autres, mais il est bien essentiellement la formulation d'un 'qu'est-ce que cela veut dire' adressé à la création, à toute humanité et au cosmos tout entier, aussi bien qu'à ce qui peut être derrière ... Il est l'expression de la tentative de cerner l'objet: oui c'est cela 'l'expression', à la fois marque de l'effort de connaître l'objet, l'effort de le saisir, au moins de le cerner, et de le dire, c'est-à-dire de le restituer.¹

Being, language, and thought should go hand in hand, but, when the individual loses contact with his individual identity, the whole structure breaks down. The first and most major breakdown in communication is that of the individual with himself. 'Il n'y a pas d'incommunicabilité sauf une seule', Ionesco claims, 'l'incommunicabilité entre moi et moi-même'.² From the divorce between being and thought springs the divorce between thought and words. The 'tragédie du langage'³ that Ionesco perceives and that is reflected in the automation of speech, congealed into meaningless clichés and truisms. As a result of the perversion of language and the estrangement from the self, communication with others

¹Découvertes, p.40.

²Journal, p.105.

³Notes, p.252.

also breaks down, and this is sometimes aggravated by the deliberate distortion of language to conceal, rather than to convey, the truth. Words, as we have seen, can be used as objects, tools of aggression or symbols of the anti-spiritual presence that proliferates and crushes man. By portraying the breakdown of language in his theatre, Ionesco deliberately contributes to its total destruction. However, if Ionesco destroys language, it is in an attempt to recreate it and to restore it to its original function of interrogation and discovery, to make it once again a useful tool in the search for the individual identity, rather than a means of further dehumanizing it:

Un poète ou un écrivain voulant désarticuler le langage, le réarticulent en fait et enrichissent le langage. Ils nous rendent eux-mêmes plus libres dans la prison de notre condition terrestre.⁴

Ionesco's account in Découvertes of the discovery of language by the infant raises some important questions for the search for individual identity: the relationship between thought and word, the attempt to express the inexpressible, language as creation of significances, and the relationship of the language of the individual and the collectivity. Even before the invention of a childish language, an infant can recognize and distinguish objects and feel emotions, and language is merely a convenient way to formulate and express these pre-existing thoughts and feelings, 'la pensée semble précéder le langage. Le langage ne faisant que la manifester, qu'à aider à mieux penser ce que je pense, puis à la préciser'.⁵ This conclusion was confirmed later in life when, on reading an account of involuntary memory in Proust's Du côté de chez Swann, Ionesco found one of his own most profound experiences, which he had believed to be inexpressible, had already been clearly formulated by someone else. This proved to him that 'quelque chose peut être senti, éprouvé, (donc, "pensé") sans pouvoir être dit ou sans avoir encore été dit'.⁶ However, if thought can survive without language, we shall see that language without thought collapses. Ionesco believes that the language of the infant is creative, an attempt to establish new relationships with the world and to express them in an original way; whereas adult language, based on a series of pre-arranged formulae, is a mere convenience and not creative of new significances:

⁴Un Homme en question, p.53.

⁵Découvertes, p.32.

⁶Ibid., p.41.

Le langage inventif ou créateur, et mon langage de bébé l'était essentiellement, est donc la tentative et aussi la réussite de cerner, de saisir, de dire, d'intégrer, de communiquer un incommunicable ou ce qui est encore un incommuniqué, tandis que le langage donné par les autres est le langage non inventif, bien sûr, puisqu'il est donné: c'est le tout fait. Cela facilite la vie, évidemment, mais il n'est pas création.⁷

The infant's use of language is, therefore, analogous to that of Ionesco, the artist, who sets out to destroy dead language and to break down the old significances of words, thereby creating a new vision of the reality which they denote.

Language not only serves the purpose of interior dialogue and expression of the self, but is the most important tool in communicating these personal feelings to others. 'Le langage, c'est-à-dire l'expression de la pensée, tantôt allait vers les autres, tantôt revenait vers moi', Ionesco explains.⁸ In order to reach others the child has to learn his national language with its agreed set of conventions. Ionesco finds this discovery of a common language by so many different individuals surprising. 'Ce qui est étonnant c'est que tous les autres découvraient le même vocabulaire que moi, pour dénommer les mêmes objets', he writes.⁹ This collective language, however, cannot comprehend the uniqueness of the individual identity, and the individual finds a contradiction between his desire to communicate his inner self and the inappropriate pre-formulated expressions of others that are his only tool of expression. 'Hélas, toute la sincérité, toute l'authenticité, toute la vérité, tout ce que j'ai vécu tout seul et senti disparaît déjà dans les clichés, les expressions qui appartient au patrimoine public et à la généralité', Ionesco laments.¹⁰ There is a dislocation that occurs between the vital living experience or feeling and its spiritless formulation in conceptual language, so that its expression inevitably betrays the original sensation. This was the 'crise', the 'Terreur', that Jean Paulhan saw in modern literature when he wrote Les Fleurs de Tarbes,¹¹ and it is the meaning of Artaud's statement that 'tout vrai langage est incompréhensible'.¹² 'Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un mot?',

⁷ Découvertes, p.35.

⁸ Ibid., p.37.

⁹ Ibid., p.46.

¹⁰ Présent passé, pp.280-281.

¹¹ Jean Paulhan, Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres (Paris: Gallimard, 1941).

¹² Antonin Artaud, 'Ci-gît', Oeuvres complètes, XII (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 95

Ionesco asks and answers tersely, 'Tout ce qui n'est pas vécu avec une intensité ardente'.¹³ Words can only express superficial information and can never truly describe the living dialectic of the individual's search for identity and his unique intuition of being. 'L'expérience profonde n'a pas de mots', Ionesco concludes, 'Plus je m'explique, moins je me comprends. Tout n'est pas incommunicable par les mots, bien sûr, mais la vérité vivante'.¹⁴ However, if the words which the individual uses must be those of others and are a very imperfect medium, Ionesco believes that there is still a place for personal expression within these boundaries, and it is in this Saussurien distinction between 'parole' and 'langage' that the possibilities of individual expression and of artistic creation survive. Ionesco explains:

Si 'je' est illusoire c'est, bien entendu, parce que son être est l'être du langage collectif. Il y a longtemps déjà que moi-même je me sentais perdu dans le langage. Cependant, il est certain aussi qu'il y a le langage, d'une part, la parole, d'autre part. Je ne suis pas dans le langage, je suis dans la parole. Ma parole m'appartient, ma parole, c'est moi.¹⁵

On another occasion, he confirms this, writing, 'Mais l'expression personnelle, à l'intérieur de l'expression collective, ne s'est pas éteinte car c'est à ma façon que je crie et que je parle, ce que fait que chacun a son intonation, son accent personnel que la collectivité s'efforce d'adopter tout comme l'être individuel adopte le langage collectif'.¹⁶ It is when the individual loses contact with his individual identity and, therefore, ceases to infuse the collective language with this personal element that language becomes dead, functioning according to its own mechanisms.

The first problems arise when the individual believes that language can create being, whereas, in fact, language is only a reflection of being. To the individual who has lost his sense of identity and feels an inner emptiness, language seems to offer a proof of existence and coherence, as the Old Woman, in Les Chaises, says, 'C'est en parlant qu'on trouve les idées, les mots, et puis nous dans nos propres mots, la ville aussi, le jardin, on retrouve peut-être tout, on n'est plus orphelin'.¹⁷ Many of Ionesco's characters try to fill their inner void

¹³ Journal, p.103.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Présent passé, p.207.

¹⁶ Découvertes, p.33.

¹⁷ Théâtre, I, 139.

by incessant talking like this Old Woman who, Serge Doubrovsky tells us, 'croit que le langage opère le mariage de l'être et de l'homme, qu'il constitue un salut, un moyen de repeupler le vide, de combler la solitude, bref qu'il reflète un Logos divin', but words are not the solution, for there is no divine Platonic concept behind them, and, without the human reality, they reflect only emptiness. Doubrovsky goes on to implicate everyone in her self-deceit. 'Par elle', he writes, nous essayons de couvrir notre vide intérieur et l'absurdité du monde sous un voile de rationalité Il va s'agir de montrer la duplicité et l'échec de la parole à tous les niveaux'.¹⁸ By talking incessantly, the characters try to deaden the pain of thought and 'the terror of the silence of Outer Space' of which Richard Coe talks.¹⁹ The compulsive talking that is the theme of plays like Beckett's Oh les beaux jours, Tous ceux qui tombent, Cascando, and Embers, as well as the novels of the trilogy, is a reflection of the same anguish that prompts the Smiths and the Martins to tell pointless anecdotes in La Cantatrice, or the stream of different people to soliloquize in front of the impassive Personnage in Ce Formidable bordel, or the Old Woman's desire, in Les Chaises, to hear the same story repeated night after night. Language is thus a 'divertissement' in the Pascalian sense; silence is unbearable, for it leaves the individual face to face with his lack of identity and his metaphysical condition, as the tramps in Beckett's En attendant Godot realize:

Estragon: En attendant, essayons de converser sans nous exalter, puisque nous sommes incapables de nous taire.

Vladimir: C'est vrai, nous sommes intarissables.

Estragon: C'est pour ne pas penser.

Vladimir: Nous avons des excuses.

Estragon: C'est pour ne pas entendre.

Vladimir: Nous avons nos raisons.²⁰

Ionesco's characters go on chattering in a language that has become, in Molloy's words, no more than the 'buzzing of an insect',²¹ in order to try to resist the void within, but it is in vain, for the hollow meaninglessness of their words only emphasizes their own emptiness.

¹⁸Doubrovsky, 'Le Rire de Ionesco', pp.318-319.

¹⁹Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.68.

²⁰Beckett, En attendant Godot, p.87.

²¹Beckett, Molloy, p.67.

As language is a reflection of being, a breakdown of language accompanies the breakdown of the self. When Ionesco shows language disintegrating, it is, therefore, the reality of the self without individual identity that is indicted; as J.-H. Donnard puts it, 'Le langage se décompose parce que l'homme se décompose. La crise de la parole est le symptôme de la crise de l'intelligence, c'est-à-dire de la crise de la société qui ne sait plus désigner les choses par leur vrai nom ni leur donner leur vraie valeur'.²² The great variety of registers of language within one play betrays the lack of a solid immutable individual identity to give speech consistency and continuity. Ionesco recommended to his actors to 'jouer contre le texte',²³ and actions and language are often put in a contrapuntal relationship, what a person says blatantly contradicting what he does. Characters contradict themselves with equal conviction in the space of a few moments, like the Gros Monsieur in Le Tableau or the Lady in La Jeune fille à marier who agrees with anything the man says, even if it is the opposite of what she has just said. Words no longer reflect any interiority or personal opinion, so whole conversations or speeches become interchangeable, as in La Cantatrice or Macbett. At first, the effect of this nonsense language is comical, then the awareness of the emptiness of the characters that is revealed through the emptiness of their words begins to cause a sense of unease in the audience. In the words of Henri Miller, 'Ce qui est inquiétant, ce n'est pas que ce soit un non-sens, le non-sens peut être délicieux, mais que nos mots ne soient faits que du courant du vide habituel de nos coeurs, de nos esprits et de nos âmes'.²⁴ In Beckett's Fin de partie, Hamm asks anxiously, 'On n'est pas en train de ... de ... signifier quelque chose?'. Clov merely laughs, 'Signifier? Nous signifier! ... Ah elle est bonne!'.²⁵ Ionesco's puppet-like characters indeed mean nothing either in themselves or in what they say. Cut off from their individual identity, any attempt at self-expression breaks down as the vital inner dialogue has been lost: 'Ils sont vidés de toute psychologie. Ils sont tout simplement des mécaniques. Étant des mécaniques, s'ils ne peuvent pas communiquer, c'est avec eux-mêmes qu'ils

²² Donnard, Ionesco dramaturge, p.46.

²³ Notes, p.60.

²⁴ Henri Miller, 'De Dié à Carmel', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 13.

²⁵ Beckett, Fin de partie, p.49.

ne le peuvent. Ils ne pensent pas. Ils sont séparés d'eux-mêmes'.²⁶

Ionesco tells us that 'un langage c'est une pensée. C'est aussi la manifestation de la pensée. C'est à la fois une pensée et une manifestation de la pensée'.²⁷ However, when the individual loses contact with his individual identity, there is, in the words of R.N. Coe, an 'ineradicable alienation of thought and language',²⁸ and, without the anchor of thought and meaning, language loses all significance and connection with reality. Despite the writings of Plato, Cassirer, and Wittgenstein, Ionesco believes that there is no perfect, empirical concept of language, and, without intellectual control, no word can retain any meaning. In an interview, Ionesco described how, in his plays, 'le langage se détruisait dans la mesure qu'elle se parlait sans le secours d'aucune situation'.²⁹ Freed from the restraints of thought and meaning, Ionesco's characters talk endlessly, despite the fact that they have nothing to say or maybe for this very reason. However, it is no longer truly language, but rather 'cette parlerie où chacun parle pour ne rien dire ... C'est l'inanité absolue, l'absurdité totale, l'éloquence de l'aphasie'.³⁰ For this there is a convenient tool at hand, the stereotyped, mechanical language of the cliché and the platitude. Automatic language is both a way to speak whilst renouncing the ability to think for oneself and also a way to restrain the individual who might wish to think for himself, the 'robotisation des consciences par la parole' of which Maurice Lecuyer speaks.³¹ In plays, such as La Cantatrice, stock phrases and commonplaces are exchanged, giving the outward semblance of a conversation, but without its intention. The petrification of language implies a social satire; it is 'the cadaveric language of an alienated society',³² as R.N. Coe puts it, a society where, in the words of Hans Mayer, 'les conversations tournent à vide leur langage n'est qu'une articulation, une répétition de mots, imposée par les habitudes sociales, et derrière laquelle il n'y a ni

²⁶ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.123.

²⁷ Journal, p.41.

²⁸ Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.59.

²⁹ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, p.24.

³⁰ Jean Delay, Discours de réception d'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française, p.60.

³¹ Maurice Lecuyer, 'Ionesco ou la précedence du verbe', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 53 (February, 1966), 18.

³² Coe, Ionesco: a study of his plays, p.63.

sentiment, ni pensée'.³³ However, more important than the critique of a society is the fact that the world of the individual identity and this world of jargon are two opposed and conflicting realms. As Dominique Nores puts it, 'Entre la vie des hommes et les hommes, il y a le mot des hommes'.³⁴ The mechanical repetition of empty sounds is, therefore, the outward sign of the dislocation between language and living ideas or feelings that accompanies the alienation of the individual. In the words of Jean Paulhan, 'Le cliché nous est signe que le langage soudain a pris le pas sur un esprit dont il vient contraindre la liberté, et le jeu naturel'.³⁵

As words lose their shape and significance, so too do the objects which they are supposed to name, classify, and differentiate. Objects become indistinguishable and contraries become equivalent, as the characters in La Cantatrice agree: 'On le dit. - On dit aussi le contraire. - La vérité est entre les deux. - C'est juste'.³⁶ Reality is devalued along with the words that should designate it. As Jacques père concludes, 'La vérité n'a que deux faces mais son troisième côté vaut mieux!'.³⁷ We are thus presented with:

Des vérités simultanées. Toutes les solutions possibles pour une même phrase sont envisagées dans le même temps: une conjugaison (au sens grammatical) de vérités La simultanéité des significations pour une même phrase souligne l'équivalence de toutes choses. De là vient l'impression de dérision et d'insignifiance ... de la réalité.³⁸

This is the message of the father's speech on 'le sens juste des mots' in the 'Quatrième conte pour enfants de moins de trois ans', where he teaches his daughter, Josette, that 'la chaise, c'est une fenêtre. La fenêtre, c'est un porte-plume. L'oreiller, c'est du pain. Le pain, c'est la descente de lit. Les pieds sont des oreilles. Les bras sont des pieds. La tête, c'est le derrière. Le derrière, c'est la tête'.³⁹ A young girl, in La Cantatrice, dies because she leaves the gas tap of her oven open, mistaking it for her comb. As Mrs. Smith observes,

³³Hans Mayer, 'Ionesco et les idéologies', Théâtre populaire, 50 (Summer 1963), 41.

³⁴Dominique Nores, 'La Condition humaine selon Beckett', Théâtre d'aujourd'hui (1957), p.10.

³⁵Paulhan, Les Fleurs de Tarbes, p.46.

³⁶Théâtre, I, 34.

³⁷Ibid., p.112.

³⁸Benmussa, 'Les Ensevelis dans le théâtre d'Ionesco', p.198.

³⁹Présent passé, p.202.

'Ces confusions sont toujours dangereuses!'.⁴⁰ The Professor's course in comparative linguistics, in La Leçon, points to the same conclusion. According to the Professor, all languages are identical 'car une même notion s'exprime par un seul et même mot, et ses synonymes, dans tous les pays'.⁴¹ Paul Vernois links Ionesco's frequent use of parataxis to the theme of non-differentiation. For example, in La Soif, Jean relates his disparate memories of his journey to the pseudo-monks, juxtaposing them without the least semblance of grammatical or logical order, indicating that all elements of the exterior world have become indifferent to him and therefore identical. The same is true of Ionesco's use of repetition, which, as Henri Gouhier points out, results in 'une espèce d'aplatissement'.⁴² where, like the words that are used so indiscriminately, all aspects of reality merge into a featureless mass. As Jacques notes, in the hallucinatory world of Robert II, where everything is called 'chat', 'C'est facile de parler ... ce n'est même plus la peine'.⁴³ When he was asked by Claude Bonnefoy if his intention in these scenes was to create a universal language, Ionesco replied that, far from this, he had intended to indicate an abdication of man's control over exterior objects by refusing to differentiate them. 'C'est plutôt une absence de langage', he explained, 'c'est plutôt l'indifférentiation, tout est au même niveau, c'est l'abdication de la lucidité, de la liberté devant l'organique'.⁴⁴

The theatre of Ionesco is, in the words of Serge Doubrovsky, 'un traité complet de pathologie linguistique'.⁴⁵ In accordance with his own avowed aim 'de mettre, l'une à la suite de l'autre, les phrases les plus banales, faites des mots les plus vides de sens, des clichés les plus éculés que j'ai pu retrouver',⁴⁶ some of his sketches, such as Chez le docteur, Mise en train, and Leçons de français pour Américains, as well as long passages of his early plays, are comprised entirely of banal clichés strung together without logical association. Association of words by sense is no longer possible, and Ionesco replaces it by

⁴⁰ Théâtre, I, 42.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.81.

⁴² Gouhier, Un Humanisme tragique, p.123.

⁴³ Théâtre, I, 127.

⁴⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.146.

⁴⁵ Doubrovsky, 'Le Rire de Ionesco', p.319.

⁴⁶ Notes, p.131.

word sequences based on audible affinities, alliteration and assonance, and metonymic and homophonic associations. The mechanical nature of this dead language is emphasized by his introduction of bizarre grammatical declensions and conjugations and paradigms. Words and phrases are no longer used for their sense, but for their connotative power. He uses aphorisms, both French and English, such as the 'Charity begins at home' that Mr. Martin suddenly proffers in La Cantatrice⁴⁷ and literal translations of Roumanian words and idiomatic phrases. Sometimes he underlines the ridiculous nature of clichés and stock phrases by restoring them to their original semantic content. 'Vous rêvez debout!', says Jean, in Rhinocéros, to which Béranger replies in surprise, 'Je suis assis'.⁴⁸ There are many phrases, such as 'L'automobile va très vite, mais la cuisinière prépare mieux les plats' and 'Prenez un cercle, caressez-le, il deviendra vicieux!',⁴⁹ which have the grammatical necessities of a sentence yet lack the meaning it should encapsulate. He uses neologisms, such as the 'obnubilation', 'consombrition', and 'fils de porc et de porche' of Jacques⁵⁰, and the pseudo-scientific terms, such as 'costumologie', 'décorologie', and 'spectatologie' that he invents in L'Impromptu.⁵¹ On other occasions he just distorts words, as in Les Salutations where he creates bizarre adverbial forms. This meaningless pabulum, undoubtedly a reflection of Ionesco's own attempt to learn English by the Assimil method, is deliberately absurd. As Jean Vannier observes, 'Tout son oeuvre témoigne d'une même volonté: celle de réduire le langage à l'absurde, en le considérant comme une pure matière sonore et en vidant systématiquement cette matière des significations qu'elle est chargée de véhiculer'.⁵²

Freed from the constraint of meaning, language becomes extremely powerful. 'Le langage doit presque exploser ... dans son impossibilité de contenir les significations', Ionesco notes,⁵³ and he compares it to a 'coup de matraque'.⁵⁴ Speech is used per se as sound and intonation for emotional effect. Artaud had already envisaged this extra dimension

⁴⁷Théâtre, I, 53.

⁴⁸Théâtre, III, 19.

⁴⁹Théâtre, I, 53, 52.

⁵⁰Ibid., p.101.

⁵¹Théâtre, II, 36-38.

⁵²Vannier, 'Langages de l'avant-garde', p.32.

⁵³Notes, p.63.

⁵⁴Ibid., p.60.

of language, writing, 'à côté de ce sens logique, les mots seront pris dans un sens incantatoire, vraiment magique - pour leur forme, leurs émanations sensibles, et non plus seulement pour leur sens'.⁵⁵ Ionesco, however, goes one step further and cuts all links with sense; language becomes no more than the 'assemblages purement irrationnels de sons, dénués de tout sens' that the Professor, in La Leçon, describes.⁵⁶

In Ionesco's words:

Le mot lui-même est démantelé, c'est-à-dire qu'on ne fait plus confiance au mot comme porteur de signes, puisqu'on s'acharne à vouloir détruire la signification du mot. Au point de vue sémantique le monème devient phonème, c'est-à-dire le SENS redevient SON.⁵⁷

Thus, when asked by Donald Watson, what was the sense of certain passages of Amédée, Ionesco replied, 'None at all, that is the point. Put anything you like'.⁵⁸

If language no longer serves as an instrument of self-expression, it follows that it is even more deficient as an instrument of communication. Much of the theatre of the absurd, following in the steps of Chekhov and Pirandello, shows the individual sinking into solipsism, as language is no longer a valid means of breaking down the barriers between individuals. However, if Ionesco's theatre seems to fit neatly into the trend of modern theatre, in which, according to Paul Surer, 'le langage ne nous permet pas de communiquer, à plus fort raison de communier avec autrui',⁵⁹ he assures us that 'je prétends seulement qu'il est difficile de se faire comprendre, non point absolument impossible'.⁶⁰ In an article entitled 'Nous sommes des casseurs d'assiettes', he elaborates, 'Pour ce qui est de l'incommunicabilité je n'y crois pas. C'est une invention des petits-bourgeois constipés ou confinés et qui se croient progressistes'.⁶¹ Sometimes Ionesco finds it surprising that, despite all the deficiencies and imprecision of language, a degree of communication is possible. Talking of La Cantatrice he says, 'Il y a un degré de communication entre les gens. Ils se parlent. Ils se

⁵⁵ Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 149.

⁵⁶ Théâtre, I, 77.

⁵⁷ 'Ionesco à coeur ouvert', p.74.

⁵⁸ Cited by Donald Watson, in 'Retrospect', introduction to Volume II of translation of Ionesco's plays (London: John Calder, 1958), p.x.

⁵⁹ Surer, Cinquante ans de théâtre, p.327.

⁶⁰ Notes, p.141.

⁶¹ 'Nous sommes des casseurs d'assiettes', p.34.

comprennent. C'est cela qui est stupéfiant. Comment se fait-il que nous nous comprenions?'.⁶² If there is no communication between people, it is because there has been a 'déviation voulue du langage'.⁶³ The individual, separated from his individual identity, distorts language to try to disguise his inner emptiness from himself and from others. Ionesco explains:

Je crois que la communication est possible, sauf si on la refuse pour toutes sortes de raisons: mauvaise foi, manque d'attention, passion politique, incompréhension temporaire Il y a aussi ceci, c'est que les systèmes d'expression ne servent pas toujours à communiquer, ils servent souvent à cacher une pensée.⁶⁴

Ionesco's plays are, therefore, not so much about non-communication as about people who have nothing valid to communicate and so destroy language by their refusal to invest it with any vital, living meaning.

Communication should be an outward movement, a dialectical exchange, and a means of establishing a link with others. However, when language no longer reflects any authentic existence, it functions as an empty mechanism that is unable to establish any form of relationship. Jean Vannier sees in Ionesco's theatre 'l'incapacité radicale du langage à fonder de véritables rapports humains ... [les mots] ne s'adressent à personne ... C'est que le langage, par nature, est pour autrui: parler c'est sortir de soi, esquisser un rapport social, passer de la subjectivité à un début d'univers humain'.⁶⁵ Yet Ionesco's characters talk endlessly to one another as though pathetically believing that their conversations are bringing them closer together; whereas they merely serve to emphasize their total isolation, as Touchard points out:

Les mots que nous employons nous trompent, nous nous imaginons qu'ils nous lient alors qu'ils accusent notre isolement par leurs mensonges [-] Ils croyaient se parler, alors qu'un horrible vide les séparait, et seule une inconscience prodigieuse, insolente, absurde, les empêchait de constater l'absurdité et le désespoir de leur situation.⁶⁶

Ionesco's plays illustrate how the destruction of communication inevitably leads to the destruction of the relationships that should be based on it. In La Leçon, the pupil's toothache prevents her from listening to the Professor, and the frustration at his inability to

⁶² Entre la vie et le rêve, p.59.

⁶³ Ibid., p.123.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.124.

⁶⁵ Vannier, 'Langages de l'avant-garde', pp.34-35.

⁶⁶ Touchard, 'L'itinéraire d'Eugène Ionesco', pp.93-94.

communicate is undoubtedly one of the causes of the Professor's murder of the girl. The communication gap, acutely and poignantly illustrated in the flashback scenes of Amédée, prevents the rapprochement of husband and wife, just as it prevents Choubert's longed-for reconciliation with his father in Victimes. Les Chaises, Ionesco tells us, is specifically 'une plaidoirie pathétique, peut-être, en faveur de la compréhension mutuelle'.⁶⁷ Its theme is the impossibility of communicating a lifetime's experience and of incommunicability in general, for the play puts in question everyone's ability to communicate his fundamental experiences to another. The Orator, the professional manipulator of words, turns out to be dumb, and he cannot even write, so all channels of communication are closed. His incoherent mumblings, however, are no more meaningless than the polite platitudes of the old couple. The mechanical nature of this social intercourse is underlined by the fact that, even though only half of the conversation is audible, the spectator can, without any difficulty, reconstruct the stereotyped pattern of the dialogue between the old couple and their invisible guests. In Tueur, the difficulties of communication are again a central theme. The Architect, absorbed in his own affairs, is blind to the effusions of Bérenger, and Edouard, even though he is Bérenger's friend, is so self-absorbed that he never bothered to tell him about the Killer, although he knew of his presence all along. Without individual identity, the individual loses his ability to think and feel for himself and functions like a machine, oblivious to others, as Faust Bradesco points out, 'Les phrases décousues des dialogues ionescuiens soulignent le décalage perpétuel de notre existence par rapport aux autres ... la suite obstinée de nos idées fixes, de nos absurdes contre-sens'.⁶⁸ This reaches its logical conclusion in the contrapuntal conversations of Tueur and Act I of Rhinocéros where one person speaks and the other answers, but as though oblivious to what his interlocutor had just said. Thus, several conversations are carried on in parallel, each character absorbed by his own obsessions. By chance the conversations sometimes cross each other and make sense, then deviate off again on their own course.

A feeling of unbearable isolation results from this inability to share and to communicate with others. This is the loneliness and

⁶⁷Notes, p.142.

⁶⁸Bradesco, Le Monde étrange de Ionesco, p.104.

frustration which Béranger feels in Tueur. Attempting to find some common ground for communication with the Killer, he uses all the clichés of commonplace morality, destroying them himself as he talks, until, as a recognition of his impotence and inability to force any more reciprocation than a sneer from the Killer, he submits to his knife. It is not the words themselves that are at fault, Ionesco suggests; they fail because, in becoming clichés, they have been separated from any living feeling or emotion. 'Ce n'est pas tellement la vérité des paroles qui était mise en question', he says, 'mais le fait qu'on ne les vivait plus'.⁶⁹ Béranger experiences the same feeling of isolation in Rhino-céros when he suddenly becomes aware of his inability to use language to reach out to his fellows:

D'abord, pour les convaincre, il faut leur parler. Pout leur parler, il faut que j'apprenne leur langue. Ou qu'ils apprennent la mienne? Mais quelle langue est-ce que je parle? ... Est-ce du français, ça? ... On peut appeler ça du français si on veut, personne ne peut le contester, je suis seul à le parler. Qu'est-ce que je dis? Est-ce que je me comprends?⁷⁰

In the same way, the hero of L'Homme aux valises feels a stranger everywhere he travels because none of the people he meets can understand his language or, if they do, like the Policeman of scene X, they wilfully misunderstand him. The heroes of Le Solitaire and Ce Formidable bordel are totally isolated in a prison of non-communication. In Ce Formidable bordel, for an hour and a half of the production the principal character does not even speak. Other characters approach him and voice their ideas and obsessions. Each is also in his way solitary and unhappy, yet they elicit no dialectical exchange; they voice their monologues and pass on their way without even leaving a ripple of recognition. Every man, Ionesco suggests, will be isolated and experience anguish until he renews language by investing it with the vital meaning and sincerity that reflects the individual identity. As Faust Bradesco says:

L'homme incapable de communiquer n'est pas un homme complet. c'est une partie d'être pensant, dénué de son meilleur lot spirituel: l'entente harmonieuse avec les autres individus ... L'homme devait briser la solitude, retrouver sa place au milieu des autres et, par là, écarter de lui l'angoisse et toutes ses conséquences.⁷¹

In Chapter IV we saw how the dead, meaningless forms of language can

⁶⁹ Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.37.

⁷⁰ Théâtre, III, 115-116.

⁷¹ Bradesco, Le Monde étrange de Ionesco, pp.123-124.

take on a life of their own and, turning against those that presume to use them, can contribute to the alienation of the individual. This danger is aggravated by people deliberately using language as a weapon to oppress others. Language, Ionesco tells us, is 'une méthode de guerre moderne'.⁷² The tools of this aggression are inevitably the dead parts of language, 'une forme d'expression établie est aussi une forme d'oppression', Ionesco warns.⁷³ The same aggression underlies all conversational exchanges when the living input of the individual identity is absent, for, as in relationships, each person is trying to force the other to confirm his identity. Robert Abirached writes, 'Si nous parlons, c'est pour nous agresser mutuellement et pour tuer à chaque instant quelque chose autour de nous et en nous-mêmes. Dialogue c'est duel'.⁷⁴ We have already seen the use of language as a weapon, for example, in the passages at the end of La Cantatrice and L'Avenir, and, in La Leçon, the Professor uses language to destroy. Rape and despotic language go hand in hand, Ionesco suggests; one is aggression against the body and the other against the mind. Claude Abastado comments:

Le drame de la Leçon figure évidemment la séduction et l'emprise intellectuelle.

Toute transmission d'un savoir implique un rapport de domination, une puissance affirmée, une soumission consentie Cette dégradation, l'agression sadique qui ne garde plus rien de l'amour tient à ce que, pour Ionesco, les mots et le discours ne sont pas la forme du savoir mais le véhicule des idéologies, l'instrument des tyrannies, la chaîne de toutes les servitudes.⁷⁵

From the over-inflation of technical terms, such as those of the structuralist critics and existentialists in L'Impromptu and those of psychoanalysts in Jacques, Victimes, and Rhinocéros, to the bureaucratic language of Tueur or the deceptive double-talk of modern journalism and publicity campaigns, Ionesco shows us over and over again in his theatre the power of words and how they can be used to corrupt and destroy. The 'Logicien', in Rhinocéros, is a professional misuser of words; he twists and distorts them to prove syllogistically that a dog and Socrates are both cats.⁷⁶ His logic is the 'logique abracadabrante

⁷²Notes, p.9.

⁷³Ibid., p.77.

⁷⁴Abirached, 'Le Duel et le mort chez Ionesco', p.22.

⁷⁵Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, pp.70-71.

⁷⁶Théâtre, III, 24, 25.

des tyrannies',⁷⁷ that subjects and alienates man and turns him into a rhinoceros. As Claude Abastado puts it, 'Comme les rats propagent la peste, le langage transmet le virus de la rhinocérisme'.⁷⁸ The logic of language can prove anything: that Socrates had four paws or that the rhinoceroses represent movement and progress. It can create a new moral code and put a different significance on events; for example, when a man changes into a rhinoceros, Ionesco tells us he 'emploie les mêmes mots que vous et cependant ce n'est pas la même langue. Les mots ont pour lui un autre sens'.⁷⁹ Béranger is accused of not being logical in his language. 'Vous vous contredisez', Jean tells him, 'Est-ce la solitude qui pèse, ou est-ce la multitude? Vous vous prenez pour un penseur et vous n'avez aucune logique'.⁸⁰ However, it is precisely this refusal to submit to 'la mystification ricanante',⁸¹ of the artificial, mechanical logic of language that saves him. As Claude Abastado points out, 'Béranger raisonne mal; mais, précisément, il sent juste'.⁸² Political ideologies represent the most radical distortion of truth and reality under the cover of words. They compose 'a sort of deadly lullaby that perverts the function of language'.⁸³ Ideologies are always false because they necessarily consist of the dead parts of language. They are, in Ionesco's words, 'un système fermé, donnant des explications "clichéisées"',⁸⁴ and they purposely aim to hide the truth instead of to convey it. 'Dans la propagande politique, à tous les niveaux, le langage est fait pour cacher la vérité, tricher, duper. On ment donc fondamentalement si l'on est "politisé"', he states.⁸⁵ Language is used as an instrument of mass indoctrination in Jeux, by the announcer in Le Maître, in the bewitching scene of Macbett, and in the Mère Pipe scene of Tueur. Words are an alibi, for they can change the significance of events. Mère Pipe explains:

Je vous promets de tout changer. Pour tout changer il ne faut

⁷⁷ Antidotes, p.203.

⁷⁸ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.148.

⁷⁹ Présent passé, p.99.

⁸⁰ Théâtre, III, 24.

⁸¹ Antidotes, p.70.

⁸² Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.149.

⁸³ George E. Wellwarth, 'Beyond Realism: Ionesco's Theory of the Drama', Interplay I, p.34.

⁸⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.135.

⁸⁵ Antidotes, pp.59-60.

rien changer. On change les noms, on ne change pas les choses. Les anciennes mystifications n'ont pas résisté à l'analyse psychologique, à l'analyse sociologique. La nouvelle sera invulnérable. Il n'y aura que des malentendus. Nous perfectionnerons le mensonge.⁸⁶

Under a smokescreen of words tremendous atrocities are committed with impunity, for example, in Ghana where, Ionesco tells us, 'puisque le chef de l'Etat du Ghana avait adopté une idéologie convenable, il pouvait faire n'importe quoi à l'abri de cette idéologie Ne comptent que les mots'.⁸⁷ Semantic anarchy corresponds to moral anarchy. Words are a deadly weapon because they attack the mind and the conscience by creating moral justifications for evil impulses or, on the contrary, by giving a bad conscience to the individual who commits fundamentally good actions. Thus, Albert Schulze-Vellinghausen, in an article 'La Bombe H: banalité', compares the destructiveness of Nazi rhetoric to that of the atomic bomb, saying, 'Le langage d'Hitler, monnaie de billon archi-usée (je me souviens d'une phrase de Mein Kampf ...) était immédiatement meurtrier. Autant, et dans le même sens que la bombe d'Hiroshima'.⁸⁸

To devote so much of his writing to the problems of communication and an illustration of the devaluation of language would seem to be a paradox for an author who spends his life trying to communicate with his fellows through the imperfect medium of words. Reality, Ionesco believes, lies behind the words. 'Ces mots étaient comme des masques', he writes, 'ou bien ils sont comme des feuilles mortes qui seraient tombées à terre. L'arbre de vie et de mort est là, nu et noir'.⁸⁹ Yet to try to express his unique perception of this reality to others, his only tools are words. To the accusation of creating a contradiction between his writing and his conviction that language is no longer an adequate vehicle of thought and meaning, Ionesco would have replied, as did Beckett when Gessner questioned him about this same inconsistency, 'Que voulez-vous, Monsieur? C'est les mots; on n'a rien d'autre'.⁹⁰ Moreover, Ionesco, as we have seen, does not believe that communication

⁸⁶ Théâtre, II, 138.

⁸⁷ Antidotes, pp.285-286.

⁸⁸ Albert Schulze-Vellinghausen, 'La Bombe H: banalité', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 42 (February 1963), 58.

⁸⁹ Journal, p.88.

⁹⁰ Beckett, cited by Esslin, in The Theatre of the Absurd, p.84.

is impossible, but only that it is difficult, especially when the individual does not really want to communicate and so distorts words in a deliberate attempt to deceive or abdicates control over language by repeating meaningless clichés. 'Si je croyais vraiment à l'incommunicabilité absolue je n'écrirais pas', Ionesco points out, 'Un auteur, par définition, est quelqu'un qui croit à l'expression'.⁹¹ For Ionesco, writing is a means to try to break through the barrier of communication that he perceives and to reach out to others. 'J'ai toujours eu l'impression d'une impossibilité de communiquer, d'un isolement, d'un encerclement', he admits, 'j'écris pour lutter contre cet encerclement'.⁹² If his plays reveal a certain devaluation of language characteristics of our age and a questioning of the ability of language to convey ultimate truths, yet he has shown himself to be a master of language as an artistic medium by the literary mastery of works such as Le Roi, and his plays are eloquent witness to his attempt to communicate the inexpressible by destroying language and recreating it afresh beyond the clichés. He writes:

Je constate parfois la destruction ou la déformation volontaires du langage et je dénonce cela; je constate aussi son usure naturelle; je constate encore son automatiser qui fait que le langage se sépare de la vie; je conçois donc qu'il ne faut tellement le réinventer que le rétablir.⁹³

Art alone is able to 'donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu',⁹⁴ and this is its fundamental aim and raison d'être. Ionesco's destruction of language does not spring from a desire to devalue communication, but from an attempt to make it possible by virtue of a renewed language which would be 'un moyen de connaissance et une création à la fois',⁹⁵ bringing man back to the fundamental truths that the dead language of clichés, ideologies, and social formulae has obscured:

La réside donc le but, peut-être principal, de l'art: rendre au langage sa virginité. Le cliché c'est ce qui avilit, à travers le langage, certaines réalités essentielles qui ont perdu leur fraîcheur, que l'on doit redécouvrir comme l'on déterre des villes ensevelies sous le sable.⁹⁶

If language is aggression and can be used as a dangerous weapon by

⁹¹Entre la vie et le rêve, p.124.

⁹²Notes, p.309.

⁹³Ibid., p.9.

⁹⁴Stéphane Mallarmé, cited by Ionesco, in Présent passé, p.250.

⁹⁵Discours de réception d'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française, p.34.

⁹⁶Notes, p.188.

hiding thought and meaning, art is also powerful and can be used as a counter-weapon, creating new significances and giving a fresh, sincere view of reality. For Artaud, the function of art was to 'briser le langage pour toucher la vie',⁹⁷ and Ionesco too believes that 'tout art est agressif'.⁹⁸ 'On ne peut démystifier que par les mots', he states, 'on est mystifié par les mots et on démystifie par les mots'.⁹⁹ By exposing dead, meaningless languages on stage, Ionesco hopes to achieve a therapeutic effect, whereby the audience will be made aware of the subversion of sense by political ideologies and the mass media and of the mechanical irrelevance of everyday social politeness and, as a consequence, will re-evaluate their own use of language. It is not so much language itself that Ionesco condemns as the state of mind of the individual who perverts the function of language by failing to invest it with any living meaning. By abdicating his control over language, man is abdicating his lucidity and humanity in favour of the abstract and inanimate, and this is coextensive with an abdication of the search for individual identity, as Maurice Lecuyer points out:

Ionesco ne fait nullement le procès de celle-ci, [la langue française], il met en accusation l'homme qui se laisse dominer par elle, par sa forme sans sa substance, par la lettre sans l'esprit et au-delà donc par toutes les langues. On peut expliquer ainsi le succès mondial de ce théâtre, où l'homme, conditionné par les slogans publicitaires et la propagande politique, s'est reconnu et a réagi.¹⁰⁰

To this abdication of identity and self-definition on an individual or national level, Ionesco opposes the value of the individual identity. The language of the individual who can communicate with his inner self is sincere as it springs from a living core of being and, however limited, is, therefore, preferable to the most eloquent discourse of a politically or socially alienated person who, unable to think for himself, can only repeat the words of others:

Je crois qu'il est préférable de penser maladroitement, courtement, comme on peut, que de répéter les slogans inférieurs, moyens ou supérieurs qui courent les rues. Un homme fût-il sot, vaut quand même mieux qu'un âne intelligent et savant; mes petites découvertes et mes platitudes ont davantage de valeur, contiennent plus de vérités pour moi que n'ont de signification pour un perroquet les brillants ou subtils

⁹⁷ Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 18.

⁹⁸ Notes, p.331.

⁹⁹ Ionesco à cœur ouvert, p.64.

¹⁰⁰ Lecuyer, 'Ionesco ou la précédence du verbe', p.17.

aphorismes qu'il ne fait que répéter.¹⁰¹

In deriding a certain form of language, Ionesco derides a whole way of life, for, as he tells Rosette Lamont, 'l'Histoire c'est la linguistique et la linguistique c'est la histoire'.¹⁰² Just as in Russia Ionesco observes that the language of realism represents the reactionary ideas of the country,¹⁰³ the acceptance of the platitude is symbolic of conformism to the bourgeois culture of stereotyped thoughts and actions, a culture which, Jean Vannier tells us, is defined exclusively by its own slogans. He elaborates:

En même temps que son essence, c'est sa fonction sociale qu'il nous montre: ce qui fait du lieu commun ... le produit d'une classe enfermée dans sa singularité... Le langage, tout en clichés et en formules reçues, qui est celui d'une société aliénée, et qui est le nôtre aussi, dans la mesure où nous appartenons à cette société et où la bêtise qu'elle secrète ... contamine malgré nous tout notre comportement quotidien.¹⁰⁴

Following Croce, Ionesco believes that each time there is something new in the form of expression, each time there is originality, there is merit. Art is not dissociated from life, but is the very heart of life itself, and the attack on fossilized forms of language is a more positive and constructive act, to improve man's position in society by liberating him from habitual modes of life and thought, than any amount of political action. Art, together with science, is the only true revolution, an opinion Ionesco ironically voices through the mouth of a drunkard in Tueur:

La science et l'art ont fait beaucoup plus pour changer la mentalité que la politique. La révolution véritable se fait dans les laboratoires des savants, dans les ateliers des artistes. Einstein, Oppenheimer, Breton, Kandinsky, Picasso, Pavlov, voilà les authentiques rénovateurs. Ils étendent le champ de nos connaissances, renouvellent notre vision du monde, nous transforment.¹⁰⁵

Therefore, language as a vehicle of thought, of self-interrogation, and of communication with others is a vital link in the search for the individual identity. Unfortunately, both the attempt at self-expression and at communication break down for various reasons. When an individual loses touch with his individual identity, he can no longer communicate

¹⁰¹ Notes, pp.104-105.

¹⁰² 'Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco', interview with Rosette Lamont, p.27.

¹⁰³ Antidotes, pp.186-187.

¹⁰⁴ Vannier, 'Langages de l'avant-garde', pp.32-33.

¹⁰⁵ Théâtre, II, 145.

with himself so his language no longer serves as a vehicle of thought and meaning, but deteriorates into the mechanical repetition of clichés and empty platitudes. In the form of ideologies and slogans, this automatic language can be used as an alibi or as a tool of aggression to coerce or subjugate others. The task which Ionesco, as an artist, undertakes in renewing expression through destroying the dead parts of language, therefore, represents far more than a desire to rid society of its jargon and clichés; it represents an attempt to change the whole ethos of this society that is based on automatic thinking and habit, inspiring the individual to look at himself and at reality anew, to seek his own truth, and to express that vision in a way that is genuine and sincere:

Renouveler le langage c'est renouveler la conception, la vision du monde. La révolution c'est changer la mentalité. Toute expression artistique nouvelle est un enrichissement correspondant à une exigence de l'esprit, un élargissement des frontières du réel connu: elle est aventure, elle est risque, elle ne peut donc pas être la répétition d'une idéologie cataloguée, elle ne peut être servante d'une autre vérité ... que la sienne.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Notes, p.157.

Prenez un mot prenez-en deux
faites les cuir' comme des oeufs
prenez un petit bout de sens
puis un grand morceau d'innocence
faites chauffer à petit feu
au petit feu de la technique
versez la sauce énigmatique
saupoudrez de quelques étoiles
poivrez et puis mettez les voiles
où voulez-vous en venir?
A écrire.

Vraiment? à écrire??

Raymond Queneau, Pour un art poétique.

CHAPTER X

THE ACT OF ARTISTIC CREATION

It is no coincidence that Ionesco's life, devoted, as we have seen, to the search for individual identity, is simultaneously a search for the sources of artistic creation. Nor is it a coincidence that so many of Ionesco's heroes are writers or at least share the heightened consciousness that is the prerogative of the creative disposition. A poet lives what he writes, so there is no rupture between the themes and form of Ionesco's work and the life of the man, but also, on a universal level, Ionesco believes that all men are to some extent creators, and the act of creation is indissolubly bound up with a search for individual identity. Although Ionesco has written a large corpus of autobiographical and critical works, these are important more as a source and commentary for his theatre, reflecting on the act of writing itself and justifying his choice of theatre as a medium. The theatrical form, however, is not just a random chance as Ionesco would sometimes have us believe, but a decisive and significant meeting of form and content, of an artist and his innate mode of expression. Theatre is the crucible where all the discordant elements of Ionesco's perception of the world and his search for identity can play out their conflicts without resolving into any definite solution. In his theatre, 'mal d'être' alternates with the state of wonder; the fear of solitude coexists with the praise of it, and the world oscillates between a beautiful evanescence and an oppressive heaviness. Thus, literature affords a means of reconciliation between the individual and the surrounding cosmos, recreating the harmony that was broken as the child lost the faculty of 'émerveillement', for it recreates a new complete world, rejoining childhood sensations through its exploration of dreams, myths, and fundamental obsessions, recapturing the startling freshness of the childhood vision, resolving

the problem of communication that haunts him by giving expression to the inexpressible and providing a means to even overcome the finality of death. The paradox of art is that, through seeking that which is most personal and unique, the author arrives at that which is universal. Thus, in writing, Ionesco feels that he is no longer in conflict with others, but that he rejoins humanity on a more profound level. Ionesco's theatre is a collective, ritual experience, and, through the multiple levels of identification possible in the theatre, it creates a chain of significances, transcending the original text and provoking each member of the audience to seek his own identity and his own vision of reality and thus to comprehend himself, others, and the universe more fully:

Le théâtre, éternel exorciseur de démons, pacificateur des passions, rassembleur des solitudes; le théâtre qui, parce qu'il rend l'irréel plus vrai que le réel, fait de nos rêves les plus vagues, de nos aspirations les plus diffuses, de nos besoins les plus inconscients, non plus des témoignages d'impuissance ou de fuites stériles, mais un tremplin vers une humanité plus lucide et plus violemment avide de son propre accomplissement.¹

In discussing the relevance of Ionesco's theatre to his search for individual identity, we must, therefore, consider both his choice of literary creation as a career to which he has devoted his life and his choice of the theatre in particular. In someone as complex and sincere as Ionesco, it would be surprising if he showed only a single face of any concept, even artistic creation. Therefore, the deficiencies that he recognizes in art as a means of apprehending reality and resolving the enigmas of identity, have to be considered. The process of creation itself is also important. The inner balance that Ionesco senses and the dissatisfaction with the reality which he perceives around him create a desire to go beyond superficial reality to attain a more profound truth and to reconstruct a universe that corresponds to his inner necessities. Finally, we will analyse what Ionesco does gain from his theatre: whether or not it achieves the integrated self, the immortality and the cathartic, therapeutic function that he claims for art, and what the spectator or reader gains from his creations. The only conclusion can be, not a resolution but a constant questioning, the questioning and re-examining of reality that is at the basis of the creative process as it is of the individual identity. If, at the end, there are no easy solutions to be found, at least, as the Logician, in Rhinocéros, points out, the

¹ Pierre-Aimé Touchard, Le Théâtre et l'angoisse de l'homme (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p.219.

questions are now properly posed,² and author and audience can say, as Beckett has done, 'that's all I can manage, more than I could'.³

Ionesco himself feels that he was born a writer and that he was a writer even before he had written anything. Writing seems innate in him so that he cannot conceive of doing anything else. 'Je ne suis bon qu'à faire de la littérature. Je suis né pour la littérature', he claims.⁴ Moreover, he believes that creation is a fundamental force in all men, an 'exercice spirituel'⁵ as natural to him as breathing, and, if he is unable to give vent to his creativity in some form, he will suffer frustration and anguish:

La poésie, le besoin d'imaginer, de créer, est aussi fondamental que celui de respirer. Respirer c'est vivre et non pas s'évader de la vie La création artistique répond à une exigence très nécessaire, impérative, de l'esprit.

Les gens qui en sont privés ... souffrent profondément. Même s'ils ne s'en aperçoivent pas clairement tout de suite.⁶

The creative impulse is so fundamental in man that it is coextensive with life itself. Colette Audry, in her analysis of Le Roi, suggests that the underlying theme of the play is that of 'la littérature, identifiée à l'activité même de vivre, la mort de l'individu étant la fin de son langage, la mort de l'humanité ... étant la fin de toute survie littéraire, c'est-à-dire la mort dans la mort'.⁷ Just as Beckett's characters are unable to die until they finally silence the voice inside them that goes on imagining, telling stories, inventing characters, the King tries to ward off death with words, for, as the Doctor observes, 'tant qu'on est vivant, tout est prétexte à littérature'.⁸ Art, as creation, as expression of emotion and thought, is a part of being. As Saint-John Perse wrote, 'Mais plus que mode de connaissance, la poésie est d'abord mode de vie ... et de vie intégrale. Le poète existait dans l'homme des cavernes, il existera dans l'homme

²Théâtre, III, 42.

³Samuel Beckett, Letter to Alan Schneider (12 August 1957), cited by Alec Reid, in All I Can Manage, More Than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett, p.33.

⁴Découvertes, p.65.

⁵'Ionesco c'est l'auteur le plus joué à Paris', Interview with Monique Pantel, Paris-Presse (13 December 1966), p.7F.

⁶Notes, p.174.

⁷Colette Audry, 'Livret complémentaire à l'usage des professeurs', in Le Roi se meurt (Paris: Larousse, 1970), p.26.

⁸Théâtre, IV, 43.

des âges atomiques; parce qu'il est part irréductible de l'homme'.⁹

Given the importance that Ionesco accords to creation and art, it is not surprising that he puts a heavy emphasis on culture as the basis of any civilization or society. He repeatedly states that, without the beauty and constant re-questioning of reality that are fundamental to good art, men will become alienated and unhappy, as in the Eastern block countries where cultural freedom is denied. 'Ils ne savent pas, mais ils sentent que l'art leur manque', he states.¹⁰ In the article 'La Culture n'est pas l'affaire de l'Etat',¹¹ he stresses the major role that culture should play in society and opposes Unesco's attempts to control and regiment culture and artistic creation. Genuine culture, he believes, can only function with total liberty to contest, revolutionize, and change reality, if necessary. In the article 'Culture et politique', he contrasts politics, a means of oppressing and alienating the individual, to culture, which is the very essence of a fuller, more meaningful life. 'L'humanité ne vit que par la culture. Il s'agit du problème de l'existence de l'être dans le monde', Ionesco states, 'C'est l'art et la pensée qui sont constitutifs de l'homme et le définissent royalement, au plus haut degré'.¹² The culture of a society gives it identity and continuity, linking past and present and ensuring its survival into the future. To deny the importance of art and culture is, therefore, to deny life and individual identity, for 'tout ce qui appauvrit la littérature, en réalité appauvrit l'homme'.¹³

In the modern world science has taken over much of the kudos of art as a method of investigation and knowledge. Ionesco emphasizes, however, that art and science should not be considered as rival but as complementary modes of knowledge; science perceiving the world in a logical, pragmatic way, and art perceiving it in a lyrical, intuitive way. To survive in the modern world, Ionesco believes that art should not try to imitate science, but should rely on its own unique insights and ability to touch the emotions. 'Tant que nous serons des êtres affectifs, la nécessité de l'art se fera sentir', Ionesco told

⁹ Saint-John Perse, Poésie (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p.184.

¹⁰ Un Homme en question, p.58.

¹¹ Antidotes, pp.146-157.

¹² Un Homme en question, p.51, 52.

¹³ Ionesco, interview in Mouvements littéraires d'avant-garde (Lausanne: Laffont, 1975), pp.68-69.

Claude Bonnefoy.¹⁴ Moreover, unlike science and alone among all material phenomena, art is a revelation of something beyond itself, as it is not only a mode of knowledge but creation, the intimation of new significances: 'connaissance, découverte et création, tout à la fois'.¹⁵

Whereas the knowledge afforded by science or philosophy is superceded by new discoveries, the knowledge that springs from art is cumulative, each new insight contributing to, rather than replacing, previous ones.¹⁶

Art is, therefore, more important to mankind than science, for it is not just the product of a particular age but part of the universal, eternal history of mankind: 'C'est l'artiste et c'est la création qui portent le monde en eux, de la préhistoire au présent et ils anticipent l'avenir'.¹⁷

However, Ionesco believes that art does not need to justify itself. Its existence alone is sufficient justification, for, as creation, it denies the purposelessness and emptiness of life:

Au-delà de toute explication raisonnable, au-delà de nos doutes, de nos interrogations, l'activité artistique se justifie par son existence même, sa volonté d'être, sa négation de la stérilité, tout comme la seule justification du monde est d'être monde, de vouloir être monde. spectacle, manifestation.¹⁸

If creation in some form is an essential outlet for all mankind, it is in the theatre that Ionesco found his most natural mode of self-expression. The comparison of the world with the theatre is as old as the theatre itself. Man seeking his individual identity through all the changing roles he must play is as much the picture of the actor as of the man in society. Of all art forms the theatre is probably the most appropriate for the portrayal of a search, as it is not the demonstration of something formulated but is itself the means of exploration in which actors, dialogue, movement, and visual images are all instruments of discovery. In writing for the theatre, Ionesco thus seeks within the dramatic forms which he adopts for an enhanced understanding of reality and of the self, for 'le dialogue et le mouvement du théâtre sont sa façon même d'explorer le réel, de s'explorer soi-même. de comprendre et de se comprendre'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.196.

¹⁵ Un Homme en question, pp.59-60.

¹⁶ Notes, p.72.

¹⁷ Un Homme en question, p.60.

¹⁸ Ionesco, Préface to Miro: Quelques fleurs pour des amis: Avec un coup d'oeil sur le jardin par Eugène Ionesco (Paris: Société Internationale d'Art XX^e siècle, 1964), p.11.

¹⁹ Journal, p.184.

Ironically, Ionesco, who was to devote the majority of his life to the theatre, had initially conceived a strong dislike for theatre. He reproached the dramatists of the Forties for using a simplistic, out of date psychology. He condemned the traditional intrigues as stereotyped, restricted by logic and realism, unable to comprehend the deep, irrational forces that rule existence. Above all, he detested the use of the theatre to dictate a message. However, beyond a particular form of theatre, he disliked the concept of the theatre itself, which he found crude and vulgar, totally lacking in subtlety or nuances. He criticized the authors for 'leurs ficelles ... leurs procédés trop évidents'.²⁰ Moreover, the physical presence of actors on stage made him feel uncomfortable and destroyed the illusion. It seemed to him dishonest and indecent that these men of flesh and blood should accept to become another person, and the mixture of planes of reality made Ionesco consider the theatre to be impure as a literary form. His first play, La Cantatrice, was written, he tells us, to 'tordre le cou à la théâtralité',²¹ to mock the theatre and to revenge his dislike of it. However, it ended up by captivating him, much to his surprise, and revealed to him without a doubt where his true vocation as an artist lay:

Ainsi ce n'est que lorsque j'ai écrit pour le théâtre, tout à fait par hasard et dans l'intention de le tourner en dérision; que je me suis mis à l'aimer, à le redécouvrir en moi, à le comprendre, à en être fasciné; et j'ai compris ce que, moi, j'avais à faire.²²

It was precisely the falseness and crudity of the theatre that now seemed attractive to him and that seemed to constitute the very essence of theatricality as he perceived it, and, far from trying to eliminate the heterogeneous elements, he decided that they should be pushed to their extreme:

Si donc la valeur du théâtre était dans le grossissement des effets, il fallait les grossir davantage encore, les souligner, les accentuer au maximum. Pousser le théâtre au-delà de cette zone intermédiaire qui n'est ni théâtre, ni littérature, c'est le restituer à son cadre propre, à ses limites naturelles.²³

Thus, almost despite himself, Ionesco's 'anti-pièce', intended only as a 'fausse pièce de théâtre, une pièce négative',²⁴ became the beginning of

²⁰Notes, p.57.

²¹Un Homme en question, p.171.

²²Notes, p.59.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ionesco, cited in 'Eugène Ionesco', Express Magazine, International Edition, 1383 (9-15 January 1978), 15.

a new line of dramaturgy.

Although from time to time Ionesco still wryly decries the theatre and proclaims his intention of branching out into other fields claiming, for example, 'le théâtre n'est pas ma vocation véritable',²⁵ he recognizes that his creative gifts are those of a dramatist. 'Je suis fait pour écrire des pièces comme une poule pour pondre des oeufs', he concludes.²⁶ One has only to look at Ionesco's writing before his discovery of the theatre²⁷ or the difference between his plays and the prose works on which some of them are based to see the superiority of his theatrical work. He himself sees the theatre as the core of all his writing, his other works performing a supporting role, voicing the same obsessions and themes. 'Il existe, dans mon oeuvre, une unité complète et totale dont le coeur est le théâtre', he states, 'un coeur obsessionnel, avec toujours la même angoisse existentielle'.²⁸ This is how it should be, for Ionesco believes a true dramatist carries the theatre inside himself as his natural and most authentic mode of expression.²⁹ Thus Ionesco found his spontaneous means of artistic expression in the theatre, and, when asked by Nelly Murstein what he would write if he could begin afresh, he admitted, 'Je crois que je ferai la même chose, que j'écirai des pièces de théâtre'.³⁰

Having instinctively found the mode of expression that fitted his perception of the world, Ionesco's work is an exploration of theatrical form and its aptness as a channel for the expression of the search for individual identity. He was attracted by the richness and multivalency of the theatre which make it one of the most comprehensive and therefore the most potent of the art forms. 'Le théâtre réunit les possibilités de moyens d'expression qui sont plus pauvres', Ionesco stated in an interview, 'le théâtre comprend le journal, les contes, les essais;

²⁵ Journal, p.33.

²⁶ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, p.24.

²⁷ Gelu Ionesco, for example, writes, 'Les écrits d'Eugène Ionesco de la période 1930-1940 constituent en fait le journal ample et varié d'un échec pathétique, l'aveu d'un manque de capacité à s'exprimer dans une forme esthétique existante, manque qui subsistera jusqu'à ce qu'il découvre le théâtre'; cited by Van der Linden, 'Ionesco. De l'Auteur roumain à l'écrivain français', p.365.

²⁸ 'Rencontre avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with France Béquette, p.27.

²⁹ Notes, p.264.

³⁰ 'Entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly Murstein, p.620.

il est confession, récit et même critique'.³¹ Theatre is a composite art using elements and structures from all its sister arts. Its links with music in the rhythms and timbres of the spoken voice are obvious as are its affinities with dance in the expressiveness of human movement on the stage. Painting, sculpture, and architecture are important aspects of the visual appeal of theatre in costume, lighting, and scene design and, in combination with the other elements of the production, become a meaningful part of the performance. Thus, in theatre all these diverse elements are fused and transformed into a whole, the impact of which surpasses each of its constituent parts, making theatre, in the words of Arrabal, 'le miroir le plus riche d'images que puisse nous tendre l'art d'aujourd'hui ... la prolongation et la sublimation de tous les arts'.³²

Theatre is not only comprehensive; the theatrical illusion is also very complex incorporating many different levels of reality and illusion. Life is theatre; to live is to act, so the theatre only adds one more level of illusion to the fabric of illusion that we call everyday life. It is thus a perfect image of our situation as human beings. Echoing Shakespeare's 'All the world's a stage', the Solitaire says, 'Le spectacle que les hommes donnent, leur théâtre, n'est qu'un pauvre succédané du grand théâtre',³³ an impression that Ionesco himself experiences. 'J'ai vraiment, quotidiennement, l'impression que le monde est un théâtre', he writes, 'La plupart du temps j'y suis acteur comme les autres, mais parfois je m'en détache pour en examiner le mystère'.³⁴ The theatre constitutes what Alfred Simon termed the 'métaphore primordiale',³⁵ a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm, a double of life. 'J'ai voulu parodier le théâtre, c'est-à-dire le monde', Ionesco states, 'et ce que j'ai écrit a été, évidemment, en partie, une parodie, peut-être même la parodie de la parodie'.³⁶ The ambivalence of the relationship between the flow of life and the static form of art was dramatized by Pirandello in Six Characters in Search of an Author. Juxtaposing stage truth and reality, he shows them both to be illusions, but the fiction appears

³¹ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.282, 283.

³² Fernando Arrabal, cited by Surer, in Cinquante ans de théâtre, p.404.

³³ Le Solitaire, p.75.

³⁴ 'Académicien ou non, Ionesco reste Ionesco', Interview with Claudine Chonez, p.5.

³⁵ Alfred Simon, 'La Métaphore primordiale', Esprit, 33, 338 (May 1965), p.838.

³⁶ Antidotes, p.94.

more real than its enactment by flesh and blood actors. The characters, Pirandello states in the stage directions, 'should not in fact appear as phantasms, but as created realities, unchangeable creations of the imagination and therefore more real and more consistent than the ever-changing naturalness of the actors'.³⁷ For Ionesco too the reality of the imagination is more true and sincere than the pretence and façades of everyday life. His intention is like that which Tennessee Williams announces in the opening lines of the Glass Menagerie:

Yes I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve.
But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion
that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the
pleasant disguise of illusion.³⁸

Ionesco plays on the tenuous boundaries between theatre and life. By emphasizing the disruption of the proscenium barrier, Ionesco aims to show the audience that they are no less actors than those on stage. He shows up the illusion that is reality and the reality of illusion, thus emphasizing the relevance of his theatre to life and leading the spectator to question the falseness and illusion on which his life and concept of self are based. As Alfred Simon puts it 'le théâtre met en question par son existence la réalité du monde et l'identité de l'homme. Pris dans la dialectique de l'être et du non-être, l'homme a choisi de se mirer dans le miroir du théâtre avec l'espoir de passer de l'autre côté'.³⁹ Another technique that Ionesco uses is that of a play within a play. This technique usually enhances the reality of the play that frames the other, as in Hamlet for example, but in Ionesco's theatre it further blurs the division between reality and the illusion, and the play often acts as an image of itself, ironically commenting on itself as a play, for example, in Victimes or Le Piéton. On other occasions Ionesco deliberately destroys the theatrical illusion by referring specifically to the stage machinery, as in Le Piéton, or by making one of the characters comment on the fact that they are only taking part in a play, as in Le Roi. This again serves to emphasize the affinities between theatre and life. It is for this reason that Ionesco wished to end La Cantatrice with the author coming on stage and insulting the audience, just as over a hundred years ago, in the Epilogue to

³⁷ Luigi Pirandello, Six Characters in Search of an Author, translated by Frederick May (London: Heinemann, 1954), p.6.

³⁸ Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (New York: Vail Ballou Press, Inc., 1949), p.4.

³⁹ Simon, 'La Métaphore primordiale', p.844.

The Inspector General, Gogol had hurled at the audience, 'What are you laughing at? Laugh at yourselves!'.⁴⁰

The theatre is plastic and concrete like life itself, and this physical construction allows it to stand on its own as an independent structure, a 'construction dynamique'⁴¹ of words, movements, and gestures, with its own reality, coherence, and laws of construction, even without an audience and after the ideas that it contained have become outdated, just as a temple or monument survive long after the event or religion which they symbolize has been forgotten. Moreover, the physical quality of drama enables it to directly re-create the pure state of existence by alone being able to fuse mental and physical realities through the manipulation of material objects, décor, movement, and the body and voice of the actors, accessories denied to the novel or to the poem. Mental attitudes are materialized, embodied in an object or person, as Ionesco explains:

Tout est permis au 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.⁴²

Words are devalued as an instrument of analysis and demonstration, and the meaning and impact of the play reside more in the complex pattern of theatrical images presented by the play than in the words spoken by the characters. The theatre represents a privileged meeting place of the inner and outer realities by giving them equal existence on the theatrical plane, as Artaud wrote to Paulhan: 'C'est sur la scène que se reconstitue l'union de la pensée, du geste et de l'acte'.⁴³ Thus theatre acts as a direct demonstration of existence, both mental and physical, 'the semblance of events lived and felt ... so that they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of virtual life'.⁴⁴

Another reason that Ionesco chose the theatre in preference to any other literary form is that he found in the directness of the dialogue and the multiple foci of emphasis that the theatre presents the natural

⁴⁰ Nikolay Gogol, 'Denouement of the Government Inspector', in The Theater of Nikolay Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings, translated by Milton Ehre and Fruma Gottschalk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.189.

⁴¹ Notes, p.212.

⁴² Ibid., p.63.

⁴³ Antonin Artaud, Letter to Jean Paulhan (25 January 1936), Oeuvres complètes, V (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 313.

⁴⁴ Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p.212.

form of expression for his inner conflict and his image of a world torn by the opposing states of being. In the theatre, he can pose questions without suggesting an answer and let these contradictions play themselves out without proposing a synthesis. 'Si j'ai fait surtout du théâtre plutôt que du roman, plutôt que de l'essai', he explained to Claude Bonnefoy, 'c'est parce que l'essai et même le roman supposent une pensée cohérente, alors que l'incohérence ou les contradictions peuvent se donner libre cours dans une pièce de théâtre'.⁴⁵ Whereas narration on the printed page is necessarily linear, moving in a single direction, focusing on one event at a time, in the theatre several things can happen at once or the actions of a character may be in contradiction with his words. To preserve this multivalency and contradiction, Ionesco opposes any attempt by producers, audiences, or critics to put one interpretation on a play or to explain it in conceptual terms. The play is an 'évidence vivante',⁴⁶ a complicated poetical metaphor that has a number of possible, even contradictory interpretations, often containing meanings of which the author is unaware at the time. 'Une pièce n'est pas ceci ou cela', Ionesco states, 'Elle est plusieurs choses à la fois, elle est et ceci et cela'.⁴⁷ These contradictions must be allowed to coexist in the theatre as in the world that it mirrors:

Je ne crois pas qu'il faille surmonter, résoudre les contradictions. Ce serait s'appauvrir. Il faut laisser les contradictions s'épanouir en toute liberté; les antagonismes se réuniront d'eux-mêmes, peut-être, tout en s'opposant en un équilibre dynamique. On verra ce que cela va donner.⁴⁸

Finally, Ionesco chose the theatre for the expression of his search for individual identity for, alone among the literary arts, it is a ritual, collective experience. Although a play can exist as a structure without an audience, a play is only completely a play in production, as Claudel said to Jean-Louis Barrault, 'Ce n'est qu'au feu de la rampe qu'une oeuvre dramatique commence vraiment à vivre'.⁴⁹ Theatre, unlike the cinema or television, has a carefully prepared environment and demands concentration and attention from a body of cooperating people.

⁴⁵ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.61.

⁴⁶ Notes, p.273.

⁴⁷ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.74.

⁴⁸ Notes, p.173.

⁴⁹ Paul Claudel, cited by John Fletcher, in Forces in Modern French Drama, edited by John W. Fletcher (London: University of London Press, 1972), p.8.

Commitment and involvement are the hallmarks of the human transaction of living theatre at every level. Not only do the actors influence the spectators who are made to feel their identity with the situation of the characters and therefore with the experiences and emotions that the author proposes, but reciprocally the adhesion, or lack of it, on the part of the audience influences the actors' performances. The theatrical illusion can only exist by the complicity of the spectators who consent to the fiction of the metamorphosis of actor and situation. Moreover, theatre is an immediate experience, created anew each performance, bringing together author, actors, and spectators in a compelling communal experience, as Touchard writes, 'La communauté du public n'existe pas en soi, n'existe en tant que communauté que par rapport à la pièce qui la crée'.⁵⁰

Thus, in the theatre, Ionesco instinctively found his personal means to express his search for identity and to convey his experiences to others. The comprehensiveness, multivalency, and tangibility of the theatrical performance enabled him to portray his inner contradictions in a universally valid way. Unlike any other art form, theatre can, as Hamlet said, hold a mirror up to Nature, showing both audience and author their spiritual dramas, the patterns of hopes and fears, of inner and outer conflicts, that constitute human life, materialized and acted out before their eyes, so that they may come to better understand themselves and their surroundings. The theatre, as Ionesco has said, 'c'est l'homme qui se donne en spectacle à lui-même'.⁵¹

However, as the material and psychological worlds are ruled by a bipolar system, it is not surprising that Ionesco's attitude to creation, which he considers to be coextensive with life itself, is also contradictory and changeable. If the joy of creation corresponds to the state of wonder, a feeling of the futility of literature and of the immense difficulty of writing corresponds to the opposing state of being. Much of Ionesco's early writing was aimed at a radical devaluation of literature. The work of art, he suggested, could not contain any immutable truth or inherent criteria of excellence, as it could be proved to be a masterpiece or worthless according to the approach used by the critic:

J'avais la rage de la destruction. J'ai voulu prouver que ni la littérature, ni la critique n'avait d'existence réelle puisque je pouvais, par exemple, d'abord démontrer que toute

⁵⁰ Touchard, Le Théâtre et l'angoisse des hommes, p.211.

⁵¹ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.141.

une oeuvre d'un grand poète ne valait rien puis, ensuite, démontrer qu'elle avait une grande valeur et tout cela sans changer de critères.⁵²

His early plays were written in the same spirit of the denigration of theatre as a worthless game. 'Pourquoi ai-je écrit ma première pièce?', he told Claude Bonnefoy, 'Peut-être pour prouver que rien n'avait de valeur profonde, que rien n'était vivable, ni la littérature, ni le théâtre, ni la vie, ni les valeurs'.⁵³

Resulting from this conviction that literature is futile, there is a lack of inspiration, a sterility, that Ionesco embodies in Amédée, a playwright who cannot even get past the first phrase of the play which he is writing, or Béranger, in Le Piéton, who, after years as a successful writer, realizes that there is really no reason to write. He explains:

Pendant des années cela me consolait un peu de dire qu'il n'y avait rien à dire. Maintenant, j'en suis trop convaincu et cette conviction n'est plus intellectuelle, ni psychologique; elle est devenue une conviction profonde, physiologique, qui a pénétré dans ma chair, dans mon sang, dans mes os. Cela me paralyse. L'activité littéraire n'est plus un jeu, ne peut plus être un jeu pour moi. Elle devrait être un passage vers autre chose. Elle ne l'est pas.⁵⁴

Ionesco is here speaking from the personal experience of the four-year period of sterility which he himself had undergone prior to writing this play. The conviction that writing is futile leads Ionesco to belittle what he has written, and his work is full of ironic remarks about his own creation, both in the plays themselves and in his autobiographical writings. He readily quotes his daughter, Marie-France, who once told him, 'Just between the two of us, Papa, I won't repeat it naturally, but just between the two of us won't you admit that your plays are rather silly and a little childish?'.⁵⁵ In questioning the value of artistic creation, Ionesco questions the value of his whole life, as he lives for and by artistic creation. To Claude Sarraute's question, 'Avez-vous donc l'impression d'avoir raté votre vie?', he replied without hesitation, 'Absolument, oui. L'art n'est-il pas inférieur à la science, et le plus petit chercheur du laboratoire

⁵² Découvertes, p.120.

⁵³ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.53.

⁵⁴ Théâtre, III, 126.

⁵⁵ Cited by Muriel Reed, in 'Ionesco', p.50.

supérieur au plus grand des poètes?'.⁵⁶ The feeling of his own worthlessness explains Ionesco's recurrent dream of his father returning from the dead and asking him to justify his fame as a writer. All he can find are shreds of yellow paper and illegible scribbings, 'une tentative d'oeuvre inutile'.⁵⁷ Nor is the acclaim of others sufficient to convince him of the value of his writing. If they like his plays, Ionesco believes that it must be because they do not really understand them. 'Je n'ai toujours pas l'impression d'être un "auteur reconnu"', he laments, 'Ceux qui aiment ce que je fais l'aiment souvent par malentendu de même que ceux qui me détestent'.⁵⁸ His only reason to continue to write is practical, he states, for he is obliged to earn money to live. 'Cela m'ennuie d'écrire', he says, 'je n'ai rien à dire'.⁵⁹ But, as he admits elsewhere, 'Hélas, je ne suis qu'un écrivain. Incapable de faire quoi que ce soit d'autre'.⁶⁰

However, if he questions the value of his art, it is not because he believes that he is a bad craftsman, but because, in his moods of depression, he feels that art has become divorced from the modern world and from the individual identity, and that it has, therefore, become an irrelevant distraction. Literature, he claims, is unable to contain the complexity of the contemporary world, neither its beauty nor its horror. It is, therefore, unable to comprehend the fundamental and essential problems of man, yet without penetrating these depths, it is worthless. The constant introspection of the writer in search of his identity, Ionesco suggests, may, by separating him from the world and from others, result in a self that is even more rigid and lifeless, cut off from the context which nourishes it. 'Entre la vie et la littérature il y a un divorce', Ionesco stated in an interview, 'La littérature, ça contribue à l'hypertrophie du moi. On pense trop à soi ... Ah! trouver un accord entre soi et le monde! C'est cela que j'appelle le salut de l'âme'.⁶¹ He feels guilty that he has spent his life engaged in something that is no more than a frivolous game, whilst men are starving and atrocities are

⁵⁶ Du tournage de La Vase à la création de Jeux de massacre', Interview with Claude Sarraute, Le Monde (15 September 1970), p.17.

⁵⁷ Un Homme en question, p.110.

⁵⁸ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, p.24.

⁵⁹ 'Pour moi le réel est insolite', Interview with Jean Kaminsky, p.9.

⁶⁰ 'Je suis un peu frivole', Interview with Daniel Lasagne, Figaro Littéraire (1-2 September 1973), p.12.

⁶¹ 'Ionesco, êtes-vous notre Molière?', Interview with Marlyse Schaeffer, p.221.

being committed, for example, in Vietnam, in Russia, and in Palestine.

The artist's role has become irrelevant:

J'ai l'impression que faire de la littérature en ce temps ou en ce monde n'est pas une chose, comment dirais-je? ... à la hauteur. Pendant que les volcans se réveillent et crachent, ensevelissent: pendant que la terre tremble jusque dans ses fondements; pendant que l'humanité crie dans sa souffrance, comme dévorée par le feu, ou pendant que l'on souffre de maux intolérables et qu'on en meurt; ou, au contraire, pendant que le cosmos s'ouvre à nos regards exaltés ... moi, nous, littérateurs, nous pouvons avoir l'impression que nous vivons notre temps à collectionner des timbres-poste et à les coller après les avoir humectés de la langue ... c'est trop 'tranquille', c'est 'hors de la vie', cela n'égale pas la force, l'horreur, la démence, l'atrocité, la vérité de tout ce qui n'est pas de la littérature.⁶²

Moreover, art has been made obsolete by the advances in scientific techniques of analysis and investigation, as Ionesco told Peter Lennon:

It is no longer an epoch for the artist. Scientific technique has bypassed him. The writer's thinking is so elementary compared with scientific capabilities In the past psychological truths were revealed thanks to the intuition of the writer. But after the revelations of psychology, the writer's intuitive discoveries became thoroughly mediocre from the point of view of knowledge of the human heart. Literature can no longer reveal anything of significance.⁶³

Even if the author has something valuable to communicate, literature betrays his vision. In his work, Ionesco repeats over and over the same themes in an attempt to pin down the essence of the experience and to communicate it to others, but with only limited success, as he himself admits:

Il y a la vision. Il y a l'écriture. De la vision, à l'écriture, on ne sait ce qu'il peut arriver. Par exemple, ceci: l'écriture peut trahir la vision. Elle peut la défigurer, elle peut l'exprimer insuffisamment ou maladroitement. L'expérience authentique, c'est la vision elle-même. Le reste est littérature.⁶⁴

In these moods, it seems to Ionesco that, far from being a means to search for the individual identity, artistic creation is a diversion that hinders knowledge of the self. He puts these two activities clearly in opposition to one another, when he asks: 'Est-ce que je veux vraiment m'accomplir, me connaître vraiment? Etre vraiment maître de ma vie et

⁶² 'Petit Soliloque sur les insuffisances de la littérature, Nouvelles Littéraires (15 May 1969), p.10.

⁶³ 'Destiny Muddling Along', Interview with Peter Lennon, Guardian 29 June 1965), p.9.

⁶⁴ Ionesco, 'Lettre-Préface' to Ionesco, by Frickx, p.6.

de ma mort, ou bien est-ce que je veux tout simplement faire, continuer à faire de la littérature?'.⁶⁵ Or again he states that literature has distracted him from the true goal, the knowledge of his individual identity. 'Cet acharnement à me connaître et à connaître, j'aurais dû l'avoir plus tôt Au lieu de faire de la littérature', Ionesco writes, 'Quel temps perdu, quel gaspillage ... c'est même à cause de la littérature que je n'arrive plus à comprendre quoi que ce soit'.⁶⁶ In the same way, on a wider level, he sees culture as a superficial escape from the fundamental metaphysical problems. It is:

Un paravent, quelque chose qui nous cachait à nous-mêmes nos propres terreurs face à la misère, au dégoût, aux tristesses, aux anxiétés, face à la mort surtout Mettant notre misère, nos maux dans des livres, nous avons espéré les éloigner de nous-mêmes, nous avons cru les avoir éloignés. L'art contemporain est dans une grande partie la réserve, la musée de nos désespoirs.

But man's problems cannot be buried or ignored, and, when the temporary shelter collapses, man is left even more unprepared to face his inner chaos:

Les murs de l'édifice de la culture s'écroulent, le paravent que nous avons mis entre nous et nous-mêmes est soufflé par le vent. Les démons que l'on croyait exorcisés se lèvent de l'intérieur de nous-mêmes et nous lacèrent. Nos blessures sont à vif, nous sommes des écorchés vivants.⁶⁷

Thus, literature is a useless game, a distraction from the realities of life and self rather than a revelation of them, and an excuse for lethargy and self-indulgence rather than a positive action to help others. 'La littérature, c'est pour les vacances', Ionesco concludes,⁶⁸ and he resolves, 'La littérature me soulage, elle est un alibi, elle m'excuse de ne pas agir. Je n'écrirai plus'.⁶⁹

With such a conviction of the futility of literature, Ionesco might ask, like Beckett's 'L'Innommable', 'Comment dans ces conditions fais-je pour écrire?'. Beckett himself has become increasingly convinced that literature is irrelevant, and his attempts to fight against this conviction have failed completely. He says:

At the end of my work there's nothing but dust - the nameable. In the last book L'Innommable - there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on. The very last thing I

⁶⁵ Journal, p.159.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp.87-88.

⁶⁷ Un Homme en question, pp.66-67.

⁶⁸ Présent passé, p.91.

⁶⁹ Journal, p.141.

wrote - 'Textes pour rien' - was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed.⁷⁰

Moreover, the awareness that artistic creation is pointless and the individual identity perhaps ultimately unattainable coincides with a need to create. So Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait for Godot, even though they know that he will never come, and the mouth in Not I will continue to search for the right words, even though there is nothing to say, and Beckett, like the hero of L'Innommable, will continue to write or speak, for 'il faut dire des mots, tant qu'il y en a, il faut les dire, jusqu'à ce qu'ils me trouvent, jusqu'à ce qu'ils me disent ... il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer'.⁷¹ Ionesco finds the same inherent contradiction in his own nature. Even when he believes writing to be futile, he cannot prevent himself from writing. 'Mais à quoi bon? Un livre de plus ... c'est l'à quoi bon qui m'empêche de vivre et c'est l'à quoi bon qui me plonge dans la tristesse', he declares. He continues to write, nevertheless, because of an inner necessity. 'Je ne peux pas faire autrement', he admits, 'c'est une contradiction inhérente à ma nature',⁷² It is indeed to this sense of 'à quoi bon' that we owe some of Ionesco's best plays. Moreover, even if art is not the complete revelation of reality and truth that Ionesco would wish it to be, it does embody the fundamental questions about the relationship of the individual with himself, with others, and with the cosmos, which, he tells us, 'ne peuvent pas ne pas exister dans la conscience humaine',⁷³ and the light it sheds, however limited, is preferable to the total darkness of unquestioning existence. 'L'art apporte une petite, toute petite lueur', he states, 'une petite lueur grisâtre, un tout petit début d'illumination, noyé dans le bavardage'.⁷⁴ To write therefore, despite a conviction that art is irrelevant and futile, is not necessarily a contradiction. Artistic creation, even if ultimately meaningless, is less meaningless than anything else because it is creation, the construction of a living form from the disparate mass of ideas, dreams, and obsessions that constitute the individual, and it is a constant questioning of the self and of the

⁷⁰Samuel Beckett, cited by Israel Shenker, in 'Moody Man of Letters: A Portrait of Samuel Beckett', New York Times (6 May 1956), Section 2, p.3.

⁷¹Beckett, L'Innommable, pp.261-262.

⁷²Antidotes, p.221.

⁷³Présent passé, p.135.

⁷⁴Journal, p.103.

world and an attempt to communicate this inexplicable personal vision to others. Ionesco writes:

Les oeuvres littéraires sont quand même des objets et c'est bien. Tout ce que l'on ressasse, tous nos malheurs, toutes nos idées politiques, tous nos dégoûts, nos amours et surtout toute la haine que nous avons les uns des autres, tout cela n'est plus que du mortier, des briques. Et puis il y a une construction, et je crois que c'est ça qui nous sauve. Il y a un salut par la littérature, tout de même. Tout à l'heure, je disais que la littérature, c'est la médiocrité, que ce n'est rien; ça ne fait rien si je me contredis. Il n'y a jamais pour une chose, une seule explication, il y a des angles de vue différents. Je crois qu'il faut faire quelque chose et la littérature c'est moins rien que le reste Et c'est cela, le cri de l'humanité. Ce que l'homme a fait de plus valable c'est quand même d'essayer de s'expliquer, et d'essayer de s'expliquer dans l'inexplicable.⁷⁵

With such diverse and often contradictory statements about the value of literature as a source of the self, it is difficult to resolve from Ionesco's direct statements about art whether or not literature has helped him in the search for individual identity. It is equally misleading to try to draw conclusions about his search for individual identity by making too close an identification between Ionesco and the characters that he puts on stage. There is no denying the fact that, as Donnard says, 'Ionesco soit la source principale de Ionesco',⁷⁶ or that Ionesco is 'le plus ionescien des personnages de Ionesco',⁷⁷ as Jean Kott put it when describing Ionesco and his family at the Spolète festival in 1959. Not only do the characters that he puts on stage share many of the fears and obsessions that he reveals in his autobiographical works, but also many of the particular events which he recounts in his plays have their roots in his dreams, memories, or experiences. This is intensified by Ionesco's evident taste for confession and his constant desire to justify and explain himself. He told Jean Kaminsky:

Toute oeuvre est un 'journal' romancé. Dans toute oeuvre, il y a du faux, du vrai, du sincère et du mensonger. Pourquoi le mensonge? Pour se cacher En fait, tout roman, toute oeuvre est une confession. Tout écrivain peut dire, comme Flaubert: 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'. Car d'où pourrais-je tirer ces choses, sinon de mes entrailles?⁷⁸

However, there is no point in picking out various historical incidents

⁷⁵ Antidotes, pp.221-222.

⁷⁶ Donnard, Ionesco dramaturge, p.9.

⁷⁷ Jan Kott, cited by Abastado, in Preface to Rhinocéros, p.15.

⁷⁸ 'Pour moi le réel est insolite', Interview with Jean Kaminsky, p.9.

or aspects of Ionesco's character in his plays; the only worthwhile identification must be a global one between the whole of the work and the whole of the author. Moreover, although Ionesco is undoubtedly present behind all of his characters, these are never simply autobiographical selves, but also reflect possible aspects of himself, virtualities that he perceives or fears or hopes for inside himself, or that he sees in dreams and that are sometimes the very opposite of his actual self. 'Mes personnages sont peut-être l'image d'une sorte de moi-même', he states, 'Ils ne peuvent être moi-même ils sont très souvent ce que je ne voudrais pas être, ce qu'un écrivain ne voudrait pas être, ce qu'il a rêvé qu'il est'.⁷⁹ For example, the character whom many critics agree is the most clearly autobiographical, the hero of Le Solitaire,⁸⁰ is not merely a reflection of Ionesco, as he himself strenuously asserts. He is 'a part of myself that I had freed myself from',⁸¹ something that, he tells us, 'existait en moi en tant qu'angoisse',⁸² or 'ce que j'ai toujours eu peur d'être. Mais il est vrai qu'il est ce que j'aurais pu être si les choses avaient mal tourné'.⁸³ Ionesco deliberately adopts a certain distance from his characters by the controlling agent of irony; he compares the writer to the father of many children, who are born through him and ressemble him, yet are free and independent, and, once he has established them in the dramatic world that he creates, he is no longer responsible for them.⁸⁴ 'L'auteur n'a qu'un devoir', he asserts, 'ne pas intervenir, vivre et laisser vivre, libérer ses obsessions, ses phantasmes, ses personnages, son univers, les laisser naître, prendre forme, exister'.⁸⁵ This independence of his characters explains his statement in an interview that 'je n'ai pas dit, moi, que "la réalité contrairement au rêve tournait au cauchemar": c'est un de mes personnages qui a prononcé cette phrase C'est à mes personnages que l'on doit poser ces

⁷⁹ Interview with Ionesco, in Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.276.

⁸⁰ See for example, Georges Sion, 'Pourquoi un roman après vingt pièces', Le Soir (18 July 1973), p.20; or Christine Arnothy, 'Ionesco "Le Solitaire"', Parisien Libéré (6 August 1973), p.6.

⁸¹ 'Ionesco on his First Film', Interview with Melinda Camber, The Times (12 February 1974), p.13.

⁸² 'Nous avons la manie des révolutions', Interview with Sandra Stolojan, p.1.

⁸³ 'Je suis un peu frivole', Interview with Daniel Lasagne, p.12.

⁸⁴ 'Absurd Person Singular', Interview with Janet Watts, p.10.

⁸⁵ Notes, pp.274-275.

questions, pas à moi'.⁸⁶ Without this carefully preserved distance, the characters will be lifeless and unnatural:

Il faut une certaine cruauté, un certain sarcasme vis-à-vis de soi-même. Ce qui est le plus difficile, c'est de ne pas s'attendrir sur soi ni sur les personnages-tout en les aimant. Il faut les voir avec une lucidité non pas méchante mais ironique. Quand l'auteur est pris par son personnage, le personnage est mauvais.⁸⁷

Therefore, although Ionesco's plays are inevitably an expression of himself, a witness to his vision of the world, these elements are only the materials from which he constructs a work of art that has a universal impact far surpassing its origins. 'Literature is shameless', Ionesco stated, 'In a play a writer exposes his entrails, passions, blood abscesses, despair, melancholy, disgust, anxiety, joy. But they are only the materials out of which one creates something. The construction not the materials is what is important - what remains or doesn't remain'.⁸⁸ Thus, as Ionesco admitted to Rosette Lamont, Béranger is both an aspect of himself and Everyman,⁸⁹ for, without achieving this wider level of identification, his characters would have no lasting value. 'Tous les personnages sont autobiographiques', Ionesco concludes, 'Ils expriment une partie de l'auteur et en partie ils s'en éloignent. Si ce n'était que l'expression d'un cas particulier les personnages n'auraient aucun intérêt'.⁹⁰

If neither Ionesco's statements about art, nor the search for identity that he portrays in his fictional characters, is an adequate source of information about his own search for identity, his descriptions of the processes of artistic creation are very revealing in this respect. Springing from an inner dissatisfaction and a sense of unbalance and harmony in the world around him, the act of creation proceeds by a process of surprise and discovery, incorporating all the disparate elements of dreams, wonder, childhood memories, and personal obsessions, to the establishment of the coherent universe of the work of art, in the image of the reality that was its inspiration, but embodying the perfection of artistic creation. As Nietzsche said, art is 'not merely

⁸⁶Notes, p.165.

⁸⁷'Le Rire? L'aboutissement d'un drame', Interview with Edith Mora, p.7.

⁸⁸'Absurd Person Singular', Interview with Janet Watts, p.10.

⁸⁹'The Outrageous Ionesco', Interview with Rosette Lamont, p.91.

⁹⁰'Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Laure Rièse, Modern Drama, 15, 4 (March 1973), 349.

an imitation of the reality of nature but a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed alongside thereof for its conquest'.⁹¹ As such, the work of art is always challenging and original, forcing the spectator to reconsider reality and himself. Camus writes:

L'art n'est ni le refus total, ni le consentement total à ce qui est. Il est en même temps refus et consentement, et c'est pourquoi il ne peut être qu'un déchirement perpétuellement renouvelé. L'artiste se trouve toujours dans cette ambiguïté, incapable de nier le réel et cependant éternellement voué à le contester dans ce qu'il a d'éternellement inachevé.⁹²

Like the first creation of the world, which was reputed to be a creation of harmony from chaos, the starting point of Ionesco's creation, he tells us, is an inner chaos rent by the constant oscillation between joy and suffering that is at the basis of his perception of the world and of the self and that he hopes to reconcile through art.⁹³

'Qu'on le veuille ou non', Adamov stated in his Strindberg, 'il y a entre la névrose obsessionnelle et l'art un rapport indiscutable',⁹⁴ and Beckett opposes the boredom of habit, the lack of a dynamic duality of being, to suffering 'that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience'.⁹⁵ Ionesco confirms this in his work Non, where he describes a masterpiece as germinating only in the presence of inner struggle and division:

La joie et la souffrance ne sont pas des états d'équilibre; ce ne sont même pas des états - dans le sens étymologique du mot - mais tension et démarche. Elles témoignent d'un déséquilibre et sont par conséquent, de par leur nature, bouleversement des acceptations, de ce qui est équilibre, principe d'identité, distinctions et autres scrupules. Elles sont le symptôme d'un désordre, elles sont désordre, en ce sens qu'elles ne sont pas fausses, justement parce que leur contenu notionnel est incertain et paradoxal, car n'est faux et arbitraire que ce qui est ordre.⁹⁶

Hélène Vianu links this praise of a fertile disharmony with the idea of liberty, as opposed to the abuse of the idea of order in the Fascist uprising in Roumania.⁹⁷ Whether or not this was the genesis of the idea,

⁹¹Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, I, edited by Dr. Oscar Levy, translated by W.A. Haussman (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 182.

⁹²Albert Camus, Discours de Suède (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), pp.54-55.

⁹³Entre la vie et le rêve, pp.66-67.

⁹⁴Arthur Adamov, August Strindberg, dramaturge (Paris: L'Arche, 1955), p.59.

⁹⁵Beckett, Proust, p.16.

⁹⁶Cited by Vianu, in Préludes ionesciens, p.107.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp.107-108.

art, for Ionesco, is indissolubly linked with total liberty of invention. The universe, he believes, is inevitably in a state of disharmony, and true art, if it is sincere, cannot help but reflect this:

Il y aura toujours division et antagonismes. C'est-à-dire il y aura division tant qu'il y aura vie. L'univers est en crise perpétuelle. Sans la crise, sans la menace de mort, il n'y a que la mort. Donc: il y a crise au théâtre lorsque le théâtre n'exprime pas la crise.⁹⁸

Germinating in this chaos, the work of art takes its shape by a process of constant questioning and challenging of the reality on which it is based. 'Une oeuvre d'art, littéraire, dramatique, doit tout remettre en question: c'est son but et c'est sa fonction', Ionesco writes.⁹⁹ If art is to mirror life, it can no more be fixed and static than life itself is, and if it is to keep abreast of life, it must undergo a process of constant renewal, both of 'fond' and 'forme', as in art a constant renewal of expression and language inevitably accompanies a change of ideas. Robbe-Grillet writes:

L'art est vie. Rien n'y est jamais gagné de façon définitive. Il ne peut exister sans cette remise en question permanente. Mais le mouvement de ces évolutions et révolutions font sa perpétuelle renaissance.¹⁰⁰

Thus, Ionesco's theatre, like all avant-garde theatre, is aggressive, not only embodying his own revolt against accepted reality, but challenging and acting upon the audience, aiming to create 'un bouleversement dans nos habitudes mentales'.¹⁰¹ Ionesco regrets that the dictatorship of money in the modern theatre is an inducement to artists to write works of poor quality to reassure and appease the audience; whereas a true work of art should be deliberately provocative and scandalous, challenging accepted notions by its originality. 'Une création artistique est, par sa nouveauté même, agressive, spontanément agressive', he writes, 'elle va contre le public, contre la grande partie du public, elle indigné par son insolite, qui est lui-même une indignation'.¹⁰² Unless there is this element of questioning and challenge, however painful, both on the part of the author and the audience, the work of art will be worthless. Ionesco writes:

⁹⁸ Notes, p.313.

⁹⁹ Un Homme en question, p.31.

¹⁰⁰ Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, p.136.

¹⁰¹ Notes, p.88.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.82.

Elles sont terribles et grandioses les révélations de l'art L'art n'est rien si on ne s'engage pas à fond dans sa contemplation. Si un chef-d'oeuvre ne vous met pas hors de vous-même, c'est que vous n'avez pas regardé, vous ne l'avez pas compris, vous ne l'avez pas laissé vous parler. Chaque appréhension de l'oeuvre d'art est un combat, une souffrance. Vous devez, avec elle, tout remettre en question.¹⁰³

The work of art is, therefore, a process of discovery, both for the artist and the audience, and in this it bears obvious affinities to the process of discovery that the child experiences and to the state of wonder and astonishment that accompanies it. Ionesco often compares artistic creation to a voyage into a world that is unknown both to himself and others, but which he himself discovers, like a medium, at the same time as he reveals it to others. 'Quand je démarre une pièce', Ionesco writes, 'je pars dans le vide'.¹⁰⁴ Before writing, he has no fixed ideas of what he will write, only a chaotic mass of semi-conscious, semi-subconscious aims which take form and become clarified only in the process of writing itself. 'Je n'ai pas d'idées avant d'écrire une pièce', Ionesco explains, 'J'en ai une fois que j'ai écrit la pièce ... Je crois que la création artistique est spontanée. Elle l'est pour moi Ce n'est que cette spontanéité qui peut garantir une connaissance directe de la réalité'.¹⁰⁵ It is only in retrospect that the artist can attempt to fully understand his work and analyze the inner impulses that have been given expression in the work of art. The imagination can never be controlled or limited by a preconceived idea or intention, it must develop in total liberty, capturing ideas alive at the moment of their formulation. 'Pour moi', Ionesco confesses, 'l'oeuvre ne doit pas être le produit d'une réflexion, elle doit être la réflexion même, une pensée qui se découvre, une pensée en marche, en action'.¹⁰⁶ However, if the discoveries which the work of art affords are surprising and original, they are not created 'ex nihilo', but are a re-discovery of something that existed already as a virtuality inside the author, waiting to be given concrete realization and expression in the work of art. Writing is thus, for the author, 'une sorte de défoulement',¹⁰⁷ or

¹⁰³ Un Homme en question, p.63.

¹⁰⁴ 'Ionesco, êtes-vous notre Molière?', Interview with Marlyse Schaeffer, p.123.

¹⁰⁵ Notes, p.70.

¹⁰⁶ 'Je ne fais que solliciter le dialogue', Interview with Pierre Hahn, p.28.

¹⁰⁷ 'Une entrevue avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Nelly Murstein, p.611.

'le surgissement de l'édifice intérieur se laissant ainsi découvrir'.¹⁰⁸ Ionesco concludes that 'l'oeuvre d'art que nous mettons au monde était déjà, virtuellement en nous. Elle n'a fait que guetter l'occasion de surgir'.¹⁰⁹ Beckett sums up the view of the creative process, which he shares with Ionesco, when he describes the work of art as 'neither created nor chosen, but discovered, uncovered, excavated, pre-existing within the artist, a law of his nature. The only reality is provided by the hieroglyphics traced by inspired perception'.¹¹⁰ Writing is, therefore, a privileged means of gaining access to unknown aspects of the individual identity and of reality, and it is for this reason that the author is often surprised by his own work and what it reveals to him. 'Je pense que l'on découvre en même temps qu'on invente, et que l'invention est découverte ou redécouverte', Ionesco states.¹¹¹ Moreover, by capturing this spontaneous discovery in a living form, Ionesco immortalizes the experience and makes it accessible to others. 'Toute pièce est une improvisation écrite. Toute pièce est une sorte de "happening" beaucoup plus "pensé"', Ionesco writes, 'Le "happening" est une découverte de la réalité, une découverte de soi Mes pièces sont des improvisations qui durent'.¹¹² As the creation of meaning and form from inner chaos and confusion, art must, therefore, be a mixture of spontaneity and of lucidity. Without the first, it will be a piece of propaganda, not art, and, without the second, the insights gained in the creative experience will not be realized and assimilated or communicated to others. The playwright Arthur Miller explains this, writing:

A writer of any worth creates out of his total perception, the vaster part of which is subjective and not within his intellectual control. For myself, it has never been possible to generate the energy to write and complete a play if I know in advance everything it signifies and all it will contain. The very impulse to write, I think, springs from an inner chaos crying for order, for meaning, and that meaning must be discovered in the process of writing or the work lies dead as it is finished. To speak, therefore, of a play as though it were the objective work of a propagandist is an almost biological kind of nonsense, provided of course, that it is a play, which is to say a work of art.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸Notes, p.235.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p.311.

¹¹⁰Beckett, Proust, p.84.

¹¹¹Notes, p.70.

¹¹²Antidotes, p.263.

¹¹³Arthur Miller, Introduction to the Collected Plays (London: Cresset Press, 1958), pp.37-38.

'Créer c'est vivre deux fois', Camus stated.¹¹⁴ The act of creation, by challenging accepted notions of reality and providing new and surprising insights into the self and the world, is a means of recapturing the world of childhood, both for the author and the spectator, who are awakened to a sense of the strangeness and marvellousness of all things and who find emotions aroused in them that they normally refuse to admit. Ionesco's theatre reminds us that, just as in childhood the characteristic mode of contact with the phenomenal world was one of wonder, the basic response to art should be one of naive simplicity, 'une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit ... une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle'.¹¹⁵ To create this freshness of vision is indeed the function of all artistic creation, as Jean-Louis Barrault points out, talking of artists as diverse as Villon, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Van Gogh, Claudel, and Kafka:

Ces artistes ... découvrent malgré eux des observatoires d'où l'on peut recevoir la vie d'un oeil neuf selon des lois nouvelles en accord avec les autres lois. La vie se révèle sous un nouveau visage. L'art s'en trouve enrichi. C'est l'avant-garde des 'Génies'.¹¹⁶

Inseparable from Ionesco's desire to create a theatre of wonder and surprise is his desire to renew language and his use of humour and dreams. Edouard Morot-Sir writes:

Certains mots sont inséparables de celui de création: enfance, rêve et humour; l'humour, cet étonnement devant l'être, pour reprendre la formule de Ionesco, est captation consciente de nos rêves et éveil de l'esprit d'enfance; il est puissance surréelle, qui rend notre réel dérisoire.¹¹⁷

Humour is a mental explosive that shatters accepted ideas and forms and creates the sense of surprise and stupefaction that Ionesco wishes to recreate. Dreams achieve a similar effect. Springing from the inner depths, when they are suddenly juxtaposed with the familiar world, they afford a sudden illumination of strange light, striking reality and making it appear unreal by comparison. 'C'est cela l'art: du merveilleux vivant', Ionesco concludes, 'Et c'est cela surtout que doit être le théâtre'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, p.128.

¹¹⁵ Notes, p.60.

¹¹⁶ Jean-Louis Barrault, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est l'avant-garde en 1958?', Lettres Françaises (27 March-1 April 1958), p.1.

¹¹⁷ Morot-Sir, 'Apparition de l'humour dans la littérature française', p.48.

¹¹⁸ Notes, p.217.

However, the discovery of new truths, of a new reality, is not the end of the process; the artist must take these irrational, unformed elements of experience and give them unity and structure in the work of art, which has its own criteria of coherence and truth. In the twentieth century, authors have faced the dilemma of trying to give a form to the irrational and disordered nature of modern existence. Beckett, in an essay on the paintings of his friend, Bram van Velde, explained that he had become an abstract painter because representational painting was no longer possible in a world where there was no longer any reality to represent.¹¹⁹ However, for the writer, pure abstraction is not possible, and Beckett, like Ionesco, continues to search 'to find a form that accommodates the mess'.¹²⁰ In 1963, Ionesco was asked why he wrote and he answered, 'Parce que je désire comprendre le monde ... mettre au moins pour moi un peu d'ordre dans cet immense chaos'.¹²¹

'Il n'est rien de plus faux, ni rien de plus vrai que le théâtre', Louis Juvet has said.¹²² The theatre moves in a precarious twilight zone between the truth and reality on which it is based and the illusion of truth which it creates. There is the superficial reality that has to be consented to by the audience through a 'willing suspension of disbelief', but, to be of value, Ionesco believes the theatre must go beyond this intermediate world to capture a deeper reality, something truer than life itself, rectifying some of the deficiencies of reality, as Picasso stated in 1923:

We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that it gives us to understand Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art we express our conception of what nature is not.¹²³

Art is not a servile repetition of reality, but a transposition and interpretation of reality, 'une redistribution d'éléments puisés dans le réel',¹²⁴ filtered by the creative mind and given its own concrete

¹¹⁹Samuel Beckett, 'Bram van Velde', in Proust. Three Dialogues [by] Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit (London, Dublin: John Calder, 1965), pp.115-126.

¹²⁰Samuel Beckett, cited by Tom Driver, in 'Beckett by the Madeleine', Columbia University Forum, IV, 3 (Spring 1961), p.23.

¹²¹Notes, p.14.

¹²²Louis Juvet, Ecoute mon ami (Paris: Flammarion, 1952), p.31.

¹²³'Statement by Picasso. 1923', cited by John Cruickshank, in Aspects of the Modern European Mind, edited by Hugh F. Kearney (London: Longmans, 1969), pp.172-173.

¹²⁴Camus, L'Homme révolté, p.332.

realization. It is revelation of a deeper truth, that of the imagination which, Ionesco tells us, cannot lie. Ordinary reality is merely 'les à-côtés de la vérité essentielle qui est celle de la création',¹²⁵ whereas imagination reveals fundamental truths and the depths of the individual identity:

La vérité est dans l'imaginaire. Le théâtre d'imagination est un théâtre de la vérité authentique, le seul à être authentiquement documentaire L'imagination ne peut mentir. Elle est révélatrice de notre psychologie, de nos angoisses permanentes ou actuelles, des préoccupations de l'homme de toujours et d'aujourd'hui, des profondeurs de l'âme.¹²⁶

Thus, Ionesco hopes his works will go beyond a mere tacit consent to the fiction of the theatrical representation to a feeling of truth that equals or surpasses that of everyday reality, standing on its own as a created world rivalling, rather than imitating, the first. He tells us:

A work of art is a monument which is neither true or false but dwells on a different plane from truth or falsehood. The work of art is real, it finds reality in the imaginary world, which is not truth, logic, rationality, or dialectic but is truer than the true, it is sincerity and existence.¹²⁷

By extracting the essence of an idea or an experience, the work of art conveys a sense of fundamental truth so that the audience will be able to say, as Arrabal said of Beckett, 'Whenever I read his plays, the book gives off a vapour of which the colours form the words "HOW IT IS"'.¹²⁸

Thus, the act of artistic creation is at once a discovery of hidden truths and a rediscovery of the vision of wonder and at the same time a logical construction that groups and orders these disparate discoveries into a self-sufficient universe, expressed in a unique and original manner, operating a poetic transposition of reality whilst remaining in close contact with it. Nathalie Sarraute sums up the process of artistic creation in discussing 'La Littérature aujourd'hui':

Cet invisible que l'art rend visible, qui est à tout moment pour l'artiste ce qu'il appelle 'la réalité', de quoi est-il fait? D'éléments inconnus, épars, confus, amorphes, de virtualités, de sensations fugaces, indéfinissables, écrasées sous la gangue du visible, du déjà connu, du déjà exprimé, du conventionnel.

¹²⁵ Découvertes, p.76.

¹²⁶ Antidotes, p.176.

¹²⁷ 'The Play of the Passions', Times Literary Supplement, 71 (6 October 1972), 1188.

¹²⁸ Fernando Arrabal, 'In Connection with Samuel Beckett', in Beckett at 60: A Festschrift (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p.88.

L'acte créateur, c'est, me semble-t-il, le mouvement par lequel l'artiste brise cette gangue, fait jaillir ces éléments intacts et neufs, les groupe, leur donne une cohésion, les construit en un modèle qui est l'oeuvre d'art elle-même. La structure d'une oeuvre, le style sont l'accomplissement de cet effort.

En l'absence d'une forme qui les crée, ces éléments resteront invisibles, inexistants. Sans la forme ils ne sont rien. Mais la forme n'est rien sans eux

L'artiste crée un monde qui vient grossir la réalité connue et étend plus loin le champ du visible. Ce monde que fonde l'acte créateur ne sert et n'illustre rien. Il se suffit à lui-même.¹²⁹

As a result of the particular channels which the act of creation takes, art becomes, for Ionesco, a means of attaining to a deeper level of reality and truth which enables him to resolve the conflicts and divisions that have obsessed him since the tragic separation from the harmonious world of childhood. Through creation, Ionesco is able to reconcile the division between the self and the world and between the individual and the metaphysical dimension of life, and he is able to communicate with others and feel a oneness and harmony with them. Art alone, for Ionesco, is the guarantee of immortality, and, finally, it is a means, even if ultimately an imperfect one, of approaching a knowledge of his individual identity. However, if the beneficial effects of artistic creation were only felt by the creator himself, literature and art would remain a very limited and esoteric exercise. Art only achieves its true dimension if the communication of one man's subjective experiences is transformed into an objective universality that enriches the lives and perception of author, audience, and reader alike, becoming, in Nietzsche's words, 'the great means of making life possible, the great seducer to life, the great stimulus to life'.¹³⁰

In art and, as we have seen, particularly in the theatre, inner and outer realities can meet and coexist, effecting a fusion between the real and the imaginary and thus between the self and the world, in a way he had never known since childhood. In this use of the theatre to break down the dichotomy of the world within and the world without, Ionesco follows in the steps of Artaud, who compared the conflict between the self and the world to a mental disease, the symptom of which was a sense of separation from the individual identity. Artaud likened the

¹²⁹ Nathalie Sarraute, 'La Littérature aujourd'hui', Part II, Tel Quel, 9 (Spring 1962), 49.

¹³⁰ Frederick Nietzsche, 'The Will to Power', in The Complete Works of Frederick Nietzsche, edited by Oscar Levy, IV (Edinburgh and London: T.N. Foulis, 1910), 290.

processes of theatrical creation to those of alchemy. By externalizing inner conflicts on stage and through the discovery of a series of natural analogies, he believed that the theatre could reconcile the division between the individual and his surroundings, between reality and the ideal, and between spirit and matter, creating from chaos the gold of mental and physical harmony, 'd'en retrouver l'âme par des sortes de mathématiques analogies'.¹³¹ Ionesco emphasizes his interest in this aspect of Artaud's work in the article which he wrote on Artaud, 'Ni un Dieu, ni un Démon', where he quotes Artaud's stated intention to:

Comblent cette nostalgie de la beauté pure ... de résoudre ... tous les conflits produits par l'antagonisme de la matière et de l'esprit, de l'idée et de la forme, du concret et de l'abstrait, et fondre toutes les apparences en une expression unique qui devait être pareille à l'or spiritualisé.¹³²

The process of the fusion of the artist and the world takes place, Ionesco explains, by the creator taking the external world into himself, transforming and shaping it through the filter of his internal world, and then projecting it into the actual world again in the shape of the work of art that informs the world and vice versa. Creation is not an escape from reality, but a key to understanding and interpreting reality, and, if the writer does not utilize the outer world but retreats into the self, he will experience the creative impotence of a writer like Amédée. Writers who are 'enfermés dans leur chambre, devant leur feuille blanche', Ionesco believes, 'ne savent plus ce qui se passe au-dehors, ils ne voient plus de façon neuve ce qui se passe à l'intérieur d'eux-mêmes'.¹³³ However, unless the writer infuses objective reality with the original vision of his inner reality, his work will be lifeless repetition. There must be a meeting of the individual and the world in the work of art, and this inevitably causes a shock and a conflict between the two planes of being, a conflict that is all the greater in the theatre, which is the most direct confrontation between objective reality and the inner psychological reality of the individual, which is materialized and relived in a context of physical reality. Ionesco describes the process in these terms: 'Art: rencontre de l'homme et de l'univers. Heurt: ni l'un, ni l'autre n'en sortent intacts. Ils se sont

¹³¹ Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 157.

¹³² 'Ni un Dieu, ni un Démon', Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, 22, 23 (May 1958), 132-133.

¹³³ 'Journal d'un citoyen malgré lui', Nouvelle Revue Française, 274 (October 1975), 173.

récioproquement bousillés, ramollis, amollis; ils se sont inclinés'.¹³⁴

The result must be a compromise between the two worlds because the writer has only the material tools of words and objects to express his inner self and because the interior and exterior realities are not reducible one to another. Ionesco explains:

Toute oeuvre est approximative Elle n'est que l'à peu près de ce que le peintre a vu lui-même, un écart, une différence, dus aux conflits qu'il y a entre ce qui est à incarner et la matière contre laquelle le peintre lutte pour incarner ses formes ... son oeuvre fait la synthèse, non je n'aime pas ce mot-là, fait la réunion de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur. L'intérieur et l'extérieur se heurtent dans son travail et ils ont l'air d'en sortir, l'un et l'autre, cabossés. Ce 'cabossage', si je puis dire, est le résultat du mélange.¹³⁵

In the world of the work of art the author can be the centre and the motivating force, totally at one with his context. For Ionesco, creation is therefore like a rebirth into the integrated world of his childhood paradise, for, he asks, 'Comment naît-on si ce n'est en se projetant, en ne faisant plus qu'un avec ce dans quoi on se projette: moi, le monde, moi et le monde, moi avec le monde, moi dans le monde'.¹³⁶ Through art, the writer can, therefore, maintain a balance between the self and the world, and, although it cannot ultimately resolve the dichotomy, art draws the two poles closer together by creating a new world where they can coexist in harmony, offering, in the words of André Maurois, 'un thème de réconciliation avec lui-même et avec le monde'.¹³⁷

Not only is theatre a means of reconciling the individual with the physical world, but Ionesco believes that it should also be an attempt to reunite man with the metaphysical dimension of his existence. George Bernard Shaw once said that 'the theatre is really the week-day church',¹³⁸ and Ionesco saw his theatre as an attempt to restore theatre to its fundamental roots of ceremony and religion, an attempt to approach the mysteries of being. Like religion, the theatre should be a ritual, collective experience. Sartre refers to it as a 'great,

¹³⁴ Ionesco, 'Trois approches', in Peintures et écrits, by Pierre Alechinsky (Paris: Yves Rivière, 1977), p.9.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.12.

¹³⁶ Découvertes, p.92.

¹³⁷ André Maurois, Nouvelles directions de la littérature française: The Zaharoff Lecture for 1967 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p.21.

¹³⁸ George Bernard Shaw, cited by Nelvin Vos, in Eugène Ionesco and Edwin Albee: A Critical Essay, edited by Roderick Jellema (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), p.39.

collective, religious phenomenon',¹³⁹ and Arrabal as 'une cérémonie, une fête qui tient du sacrilège et du sacré'.¹⁴⁰ For Ionesco, 'il est à l'esprit une religion ou, si l'on veut, il est une voie religieuse, parallèle à la religion'.¹⁴¹ In the same way as religion, the theatre aims to fuse all the disparate elements of the audience by awakening them to fundamental, universal questions. Moreover, Ionesco's theatre, like that of his contemporary dramatists of the avant-garde, is religious in the sense that it is a quest for the ultimate values and meaning in life, an appeal to something beyond the material world of everyday reality. It is, in the words of Martin Esslin, 'a symptom of what probably comes nearest to being a genuine religious quest in our age'. It is a search for 'a dimension of the Ineffable; an effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition'.¹⁴² As such, the theatre, together with science, philosophy, and religion, is a manifestation of a fundamental spirit of questioning and searching for ultimate meaning that is at the basis of all civilizations. Discussing the works of Mircea Eliade, Le Clézio states:

Il ne peut y avoir de civilisation qui ne soit aussi création, poésie; il ne peut y avoir d'autre vérité humaine que dans cet élan, dans cette foi presque magique qui a pour origine les forces naturelles et qui exprime pareillement la création et la procréation, la lumière et la sémence. C'est qu'il n'y a pas l'art, la philosophie, ni la science, mais une simple et même recherche, que Mircea Eliade appelle 'religion'. Pour le poète, écrire et communiquer avec les hommes, c'est révéler cette lumière commune qui est dans le mémoire et dans l'imaginaire, et que seul l'ordinaire de la vie empêchait de percevoir.¹⁴³

Ionesco believes that his theatre has this serious, universal intent. It is a celebration of a fuller life and an attempt to awaken the earth-bound man to his metaphysical dimension. 'Je crois que la littérature devrait aider à placer l'homme entre ce monde-ci et l'autre',¹⁴⁴ he states, and ultimately he hopes it might even be a means of uniting the two spheres:

L'art relie donc l'archaïque et le moderne. Mais l'art, à la frontière du réel et de l'irréalité, c'est-à-dire d'une réalité

¹³⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Forgers of Myths: The Young Playwrights of France', *Theatre Arts*, XXX, 6 (June 1946), 330.

¹⁴⁰ Fernando Arrabal, *Théâtre*, I (Paris: Juilliard, 1958), 7.

¹⁴¹ *Un Homme en question*, p.61.

¹⁴² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.390.

¹⁴³ J.M.G. Le Clézio, 'Mircea Eliade: l'initiateur', *Quinzaine Littéraire*, 297 (1-15 March 1979), 16.

¹⁴⁴ *Un Homme en question*, p.10.

qui est l'autre réalité, relie également notre monde dans ses structures essentielles à l'au-delà du monde.¹⁴⁵

Ionesco's theatre is also religious in nature because of Ionesco's faith that, through art alone, the individual can attain some measure of immortality. Art is a means of heightening reality and capturing the essence of an experience or idea, but it uses these insubstantial materials to build a concrete form that preserves the moment permanently, imprisoned in matter. 'En vérité', Ionesco states, 'l'oeuvre littéraire est une forme, une structure, destinée à l'humanité'.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, although he realizes that his physical presence cannot be eternal, he hopes that his witness to life, which is encapsulated in his work, and, therefore, his individual identity, which is inseparable from this vision of the world, will remain as a trace that death cannot destroy:

On écrit pour perpétuer tout cela et pour se perpétuer soi-même, pour vaincre la mort. Nous sommes là avec nos tableaux, nos musiques, nos poèmes, nos livres, en quête d'un semblant d'immortalité. On écrit pour ne pas mourir entièrement, pour ne pas mourir tout de suite ... faire savoir que nous avons existé.¹⁴⁷

If art is indeed a privileged means for the author to resolve his inner contradictions and to gain a heightened insight into himself and reality, this is only the starting point. 'Le but de l'action d'écrire n'est pas en soi', Ionesco states, 'L'écriture est un moyen. On écrit aux autres, pour les autres'.¹⁴⁸ Art is an attempt to reach out to the rest of mankind and to thereby resolve the conflict between the self and the other. It is also a method of communicating the unique insights of the author, a means of overcoming the limitations of language, of expressing the inexpressible. By its universality, art is able to establish a link with others on a fundamental level that overrides the superficial differences of class, creed, and society that divide individuals and groups in everyday life. This, Ionesco suggests, is perhaps the most valuable contribution he can make as an individual:

Je dirais que la forme la plus haute de la préoccupation de l'homme est l'art, qui part du social vers un point de rencontre extra-social et supra-social qui réunit tous les hommes: de la diversité indispensable à l'unité de notre esprit, à la

¹⁴⁵ Un Homme en question, pp.60-61.

¹⁴⁶ 'Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco', in Mouvements littéraires d'Avant-garde, p.71.

¹⁴⁷ Antidotes, pp.333-334.

¹⁴⁸ Notes, p.209.

solidarité par-delà le temps et l'espace.¹⁴⁹

Ionesco is faced with the dilemma of trying in his theatre to communicate feelings and states of being that are inaccessible to rational, conceptual thought. His theatre expresses, as Kierkegaard once put it, 'the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think'.¹⁵⁰ As Esslin has pointed out,¹⁵¹ the theatre has been used for this purpose before, but only in conjunction with other functions, such as that of telling a story or discussing ideas, whereas, for the first time, Ionesco uses this element in complete isolation. His plays are non-conceptual, struggling to say what cannot be said, and if it were said, the meaning would change or become untrue, for Ionesco considers that once an idea is formulated, it is already dead. 'Plus on parle ... moins c'est clair', he concludes.¹⁵² Ionesco feels that his work belongs more to the realm of intuition and feelings than of thought. 'Je ressens plutôt que je ne pense', he states, 'ou bien le ressentir est ma forme de pensée'.¹⁵³ It is, therefore, impossible to express his sense of being through the medium of language based on a logical relationship between thought and words and words and meaning, yet this is the paradoxical challenge of all true art, as Beckett told Gabriel d'Aubarède in an interview: 'Si le sujet de mes romans pouvait s'exprimer en termes philosophiques, je n'aurai pas eu de raison de les écrire [-] Je ne suis pas un intellectuel. Je ne suis que sensibilité'.¹⁵⁴ Ionesco sees the words that he uses as a trap that distorts the experience that the artist is trying to convey by imposing on it an artificial grill of syntax and rules. Claude Mauriac points out that, in speaking or writing, the individual:

Is carried along by the logic of language and its articulations. Thus the writer who pits himself against the unsayable must use all his cunning so as not to say what the words make him say against his will, but to express instead what by their very nature they are designed to cover up. the uncertain, the contradictory, the unthinkable.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ Un Homme en question, pp.52-53.

¹⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, translated by David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p.46.

¹⁵¹ Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, pp.188-190.

¹⁵² Un Homme en question, p.24.

¹⁵³ 'Un Somnambule sur la crête d'histoire', Interview with Jean Montalbeith, p.10.

¹⁵⁴ Samuel Beckett, 'En attendant Beckett', Interview with Gabriel d'Aubarède, Nouvelles Littéraires, 1746 (16 February 1961), 7.

¹⁵⁵ Claude Mauriac, L'Allittérature contemporaine (Paris: Albin Michel, 1958), p.83.

Creation must be a constant struggle for expression. If the words flow easily, Ionesco suggests, it is because there is no deep thought behind them, or because the artist is not succeeding in conveying the totality of the vision. 'Rien ne se dit que ce qui est impossible à dire', Ionesco states, 'Ce qui se dit clairement se conçoit malaisément et les mots pour le dire arrivent très difficilement'.¹⁵⁶ The value of art, therefore, and of the theatre in particular, which has at its disposal the use of visceral, concrete images and symbols as well as words, is that it is able to formulate lyrical intuitions that are inexpressible in normal terms. 'Une oeuvre d'art est l'expression d'une réalité incommunicable que l'on essaie de communiquer - et qui, parfois, peut être communiquée. C'est là son paradoxe, - et sa vérité', Ionesco concludes.¹⁵⁷ It is only at this level that a true language of human understanding can be established; 'c'est dans la mesure où les gens se trouvent face à l'incompréhensible, qu'ils sont plus près d'une compréhension possible',¹⁵⁸ and that the barriers of communication can be broken down, for, Ionesco states:

Real conversation does not take place in social gatherings or even between two people. It exists via the medium of a work. It is difficult to communicate, but it is not impossible. I believe that the language of a writer can break through the incommunicability implicit in language.¹⁵⁹

A desire for human exchange, for universality, is a sine qua non of art. No author can write without hoping to be understood and to have his feelings recognized in sympathetic minds. 'La création littéraire suppose des échanges humaines', Paul Nizan wrote, 'l'écrivain ne peut point vouloir que sa pensée ne soit pas attendue, ne soit pas importante pour les hommes parmi lesquels il vit'.¹⁶⁰ Reciprocally, the principal source of dramatic interest lies in the identification established between the audience and the characters and thereby with the author, for, as Beaumarchais wrote, it is 'un principe certain de l'Art qu'il n'y a moralité ni intérêt au théâtre sans un secret rapport du sujet dramatique à nous'.¹⁶¹ This is particularly true of the theatre, which is the most

¹⁵⁶ Découvertes, p.111.

¹⁵⁷ Notes, p.145.

¹⁵⁸ Un Homme en question, p.21.

¹⁵⁹ 'Ionesco on his First Film', Interview with Melinda Camber, p.13.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Nizan, cited in Littérature et langages, edited by François Mitterand et al, V (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1977), 59.

¹⁶¹ Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, 'Essaie sur le genre dramatique sérieux', Théâtre complet (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1934), p.18.

public of the arts and an experience that demands a greater degree of participation and more complex series of psychological relationships than any other form of art. The response which Ionesco has found for his theatre proves to him that he indeed achieves this identification with his audiences, for, as he said in an interview for The Times, 'the very fact that people take an interest in my work means that they have the same problems as me - if not, I would be talking to myself like a schizophrenic. The response they give me means I am not alone'.¹⁶² However, Ionesco hopes to go beyond this immediate recognition to write theatre that is classical and universally valid for all men at all times, not just for an audience of a particular time or historical juncture, thus achieving 'cet idéal de communication universelle' which, Camus tells us, 'est en effet celui de tout grand artiste'.¹⁶³

An artist is inevitably situated in his own time and expresses the tendencies of an epoch. Indeed, to reflect the obsessions of mankind, the author must live among them, sharing with them and observing them. 'La littérature a le devoir d'exprimer l'humain, la vie humaine', Ionesco wrote in an article 'Huliganii', for the review Facila, 'L'écrivain regarde tout à côté, il coudoie, il épaulé: il est parmi les hommes. Le plus rapproché d'eux, le plus attaché aux autres'.¹⁶⁴ Forty years later, giving the address at the fifteenth 'Journée mondiale du théâtre', he stated that the reuniting of the artist and the ordinary people was the theatre's only means of renewal and survival. Every artist's aim, he stated, should be to 'rendre à notre art une fonction qu'il a perdue, vivre avec le peuple, au plus près, et lui redonner une dimension qu'il n'a plus que d'une façon dérisoire: être le miroir de notre temps'.¹⁶⁵

Theatre is the most public of arts. It is, in Armand Gatti's words, 'l'art de la cité' and exists only 'dans la mesure où il provoque un rassemblement des hommes'.¹⁶⁶ Theatre is, therefore, a meeting place of all men and the play a means of creating a language of understanding based on a common acceptance of the drama, although not necessarily a

¹⁶² 'Ionesco on his First Film', Interview with Melinda Camber, p.13.

¹⁶³ Camus, Discours de Suède, p.42.

¹⁶⁴ 'Huliganii', cited by Hélène Vianu, in 'Préludes ionesciens', p.104.

¹⁶⁵ 'Ionesco messenger', Journal de Chaillot, 16 (March 1976), 10.

¹⁶⁶ Armand Gatti, 'Un Théâtre pour la Cité', Nef, 24, 29 (January-March 1967), 71.

common interpretation of it. 'Le théâtre n'est pas fait pour accentuer ce qui sépare les hommes', Jean-Louis Barrault points out, 'il est fait, au contraire pour les rassembler. Il n'est pas fait pour la division, mais pour l'union. Il n'est pas fait pour entretenir les haines mais pour faciliter les échanges et les compréhensions'.¹⁶⁷ If today, there is a crisis in the French theatre and Ionesco believes that 'les Français sont les gens qui s'intéressent le moins du monde au théâtre',¹⁶⁸ this is symptomatic of a crisis in civilization and indicates that men no longer want to admit their basic fraternity by sharing and communicating through the medium of theatre. Art, therefore, and particularly theatre, must remain 'collectif mais non pas collectiviste',¹⁶⁹ avoiding any social or political commitment in order to maintain its vital position as a means of communication, of revelation, and of unification:

L'art dit-on, n'a pas de frontières. Le théâtre ne doit pas en avoir. Au-delà des divergences idéologiques, castes, races, nationalismes, patries particulières, il doit être la patrie universelle, le lieu de rencontre de tous les hommes qui communient dans la même angoisse et les mêmes espérances que révèle l'imagination, non pas arbitraire, ni réaliste, mais expression de notre identité, de notre continuité, de notre unité.¹⁷⁰

Moreover, if Ionesco's plays are a reflection of his time, he hopes that they will go beyond this to attain the general and permanent truths of man's condition. 'L'oeuvre part d'un temps et échappe à son temps, elle va au-delà de son temps'.¹⁷¹ This universality is the hallmark of all true art, as Schlegel wrote: 'Only by being individual and universal does a work become the work. Only in this way does it differ from studies'.¹⁷² We have seen that Ionesco refuses to limit the field of reference of his plays to one historical event or set of circumstances; as Gabriel Vascaux writes, 'Ionesco n'est nullement homme à écrire des pièces de circonstance. C'est même pourquoi ses pièces peuvent

¹⁶⁷ Jean-Louis Barrault, 'Le Métier', Esprit, 338 (May 1965), 852.

¹⁶⁸ 'Les Français sont les gens qui s'intéressent le moins du monde au théâtre', Table Ronde, 220 (May 1966), 31.

¹⁶⁹ Un Homme en question, p.60.

¹⁷⁰ Antidotes, p.178.

¹⁷¹ 'Rencontre avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with France Béquette, p.25.

¹⁷² Friedrich Schlegel, Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms, translated, introduced and annotated by Ernst Behler and Roman Strug (University Park & London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p.92.

s'accorder à toutes les circonstances'.¹⁷³ The work of art thus surpasses its original intentions, making a commentary on the reality from which it was formed at a much more fundamental level. 'Le dramaturge est nécessairement "engagé" dans son temps pour exprimer à travers lui un "hors-temps" incommunicable. Le théâtre n'est pas de son temps qu'à condition d'être inactuel ... Le théâtre n'est ni actuel, ni a-temporel; il est transhistorique.'¹⁷⁴

The author discovers this universality not only in his observation of the reality that surrounds him, but in his exploration of his own most personal anguish and obsessions, in his search for individual identity. Although the author creates out of an inner need as 'l'expression ou l'explosion de soi-même',¹⁷⁵ the most personal creation, the work of confession and exorcism, paradoxically becomes the property of others, a myth of universal validity in which all men can recognize their most fundamental problems. 'Pour découvrir le problème fondamental commun à tous les hommes, il faut que je demande quel est mon problème fondamental, quelle est ma peur la plus indéracinable', Ionesco states, 'C'est alors que je découvrirai quels sont les peurs et les problèmes de chacun'.¹⁷⁶ The communication between author and audience takes place from the depth of one individual's being to another, for at this level, as we have seen, men are no longer divided one from another but are united in a metaphysical fraternity. Ionesco stated in an interview:

Je n'aime pas le mot public car si ce que j'écris s'adresse à quelqu'un, c'est à des personnes individualisées ... Je m'offre moi-même, pas le moi sordide, le moi profond. C'est une intériorisation en profondeur ainsi qu'une angoisse profonde qui s'adressent aux gens qui sont comme moi, alors on n'est plus isolé. Nous sommes des groupuscules et reflétons une réalité plus profonde et plus universelle que celle qui est politique et sociale.¹⁷⁷

Theatre is thus a process of simultaneous discovery for author and for each individual in the audience. 'Un créateur, tout en pouvant être seul, n'est jamais isolé', Ionesco concludes, 'C'est lui qui, consciemment ou inconsciemment, exprime les besoins, les désirs, les vérités encore obscures pour la plupart des hommes, mais que ceux-ci

¹⁷³ Gabriel Vascaux, cited by Claude Roy, in L'Homme en question (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p.359.

¹⁷⁴ Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.213.

¹⁷⁵ 'Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Laure Rièse, p.348.

¹⁷⁶ Notes, pp.143-144.

¹⁷⁷ 'Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Laure Rièse, p.348.

finiront par reconnaître'.¹⁷⁸ Both author and audience, by plunging into the depths of their selves through the medium of the work of art, can discover the invisible and eternal aspects of man's condition and the universality of their individual situations, thus gaining insight both into their selves and those of all men. Ionesco often stresses the close relation that he feels his work or that of Beckett, for example, bears to Shakespeare or to the Book of Job,¹⁷⁹ and he sees art as a vast parliament where writers from Plato and Sophocles to Freud or Dostoevsky can meet and discuss and where the work of each is, in a way, a continuation of the work of all his forerunners.¹⁸⁰ To attain this universality and to feel this continuity between past and present and future through art is the poet's reward, as Ionesco said in a speech at the Academy of Vaucluse: 'La récompense de l'écrivain est de s'apercevoir que son oeuvre peut provoquer un écho chez des amis lointains'.¹⁸¹ The language of art and especially of the theatre thus becomes a universal language, bringing mankind closer together. Ionesco's namesake sums this up in a passage of L'Impromptu:

Le créateur est lui-même le seul témoin valable de son temps, il le découvre en lui-même. c'est lui seul qui, mystérieusement, librement l'exprime Le théâtre est pour moi, la projection sur scène du monde du dedans: c'est dans mes rêves, dans mes angoisses, dans mes désirs obscurs, dans mes contradictions intérieurs que, pour ma part, je me réserve le droit de prendre cette matière théâtrale. Comme je ne suis pas seul au monde, comme chacun de nous, au plus pfofond de son être, est en même temps tous les autres, mes rêves, mes désirs, mes angoisses, mes obsessions ne m'appartiennent pas en propre; cela fait partie d'un héritage ancestral, un très ancien dépôt, constituant le domaine de toute humanité. C'est par-delà leur diversité extérieure, ce qui réunit les hommes et constitue notre profonde humanité, le langage universel.¹⁸²

In communicating the fundamental truths that he discovers inside himself to others, Ionesco hopes that his theatre will fulfil a therapeutic function. The idea of the catharsis afforded by theatre, both for audience and author, is as old as the theatre itself, and Ionesco considers it to be an important justification for his writing. By violating the accepted, complacent vision of the world and the self,

¹⁷⁸ Antidotes, p.144.

¹⁷⁹ Un Homme en question, p.55.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., pp.55-56.

¹⁸¹ Cited by Jean-Pierre Thiel, in 'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie de Vaucluse', Nouvelles Littéraires (13 January - 6 February 1972), p.6.

¹⁸² Théâtre, II, 57-58.

his plays are an attempt to aid his audience to readjust to the reality of an absurd world, 'the issueless predicament of existence',¹⁸³ and to confront the void within the self, thereby freeing themselves from it. His plays do not offer a simple solution; the catharsis functions through a heightened lucidity that enables man to face the truth that is revealed to him and to accept it with some measure of serenity, 'pouvoir être serein, non pas dans l'inconscience ... mais devenir serein après avoir pris l'inconscience de l'horreur, et malgré l'horreur'.¹⁸⁴ His unquestionable success in achieving this catharsis is shown by the fact that one critic attributed him with the surname 'le thérapeute'.¹⁸⁵

'Si [la littérature] pouvait le soulager',¹⁸⁶ exclaims Marie, in Le Roi. However, if literature cannot console the dying King any longer, it cannot be denied that it serves a therapeutic function for Ionesco himself. To admit, as Ionesco has done to Claude Bonnefoy and others,¹⁸⁷ that literature is the product of a neurosis is to tacitly admit to its therapeutic and sedative power. He compares it to an unburdening of the self, an exorcism of the anxieties and obsessions that poison his system.¹⁸⁸ When he is unable to create, he is devoured by frustration and anxiety, like Amédée or like Bérenger in Le Piéton. Ionesco describes the physical and mental torture of being unable to express himself in 'Printemps 1939'. 'Je voudrais tout dire ... tout revivre', he recalls, 'Impossible de "m'exprimer". J'en ai mal à la tête, je la sens lourde. Dépression. Peur. Si je savais dire; pouvoir me libérer'.¹⁸⁹ Art, like psychoanalysis,¹⁹⁰ is a bringing into consciousness of the unconscious, an enactment of the fantasies of the inner life, and, by thus objectifying them, the author is able to distance himself from these obsessions and free himself from them. Ionesco writes:

¹⁸³ Samuel Beckett, cited by John Fletcher, in Fin de partie, edited by John and Beryl S. Fletcher (London: Methuen, 1970), p.3.

¹⁸⁴ Antidotes, p.290.

¹⁸⁵ Bradesco, Le Monde étrange de Ionesco, p.215.

¹⁸⁶ Théâtre, IV, 43.

¹⁸⁷ See for example, Entre la vie et le rêve, p.67; or Théâtre, III, 127.

¹⁸⁸ Journal, p.110.

¹⁸⁹ 'Printemps 1939', La Photo du Colonel, p.182.

¹⁹⁰ See for example, Freud's study of Jensen's Gradiva, in his Delusion and Dream, where he stresses the affinities between artistic creation and psychoanalysis, or C.G. Jung's chapter on 'Psychology and Literature', in Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933), pp.175-199.

Bien sûr nous avons tous des choses à dire ... Mais l'intérêt de la création littéraire est que tout cela se dépersonnalise; ce n'est plus qu'un matériau; nos angoisses, nos malheurs, nos entrailles ne sont plus que des briques avec lesquelles on construit un édifice. C'est une façon de surmonter l'angoisse, le pathétique du vécu, le besoin de s'exprimer soi-même elle est bien un exercice spirituel, une ascèse, un dépassement.¹⁹¹

Victimes, which Robert Frickx refers to as a 'tentative d'exorcisation ou... une thérapeutique',¹⁹² was obviously a direct attempt by Ionesco to exorcise his feelings of guilt towards his father, and he felt that he had created in this play 'une image de moi-même qui m'apparaît riche ambitieuse et multivalente, comme elle ne l'a peut-être jamais été depuis'.¹⁹³ Le Roi and Voyages chez les morts also have overtly cathartic intentions, but all his plays and the very act of creation itself fulfil this same therapeutic function. 'La vérité, c'est que je me sens mieux quand j'écris', Ionesco admits, 'Même s'il s'agit d'une pièce douloureuse. J'ai l'impression d'être délivré et rien ne vaut les choses tristes pour rendre gai celui qui en parle'.¹⁹⁴

Like Artaud before him, who saw the theatre as an experience of cruelty, a crisis which would act as a 'thérapeutique de l'âme',¹⁹⁵ from which the individual would emerge purified and transformed, Ionesco sees the therapeutic function of the theatre for his audience in terms of shock and revelation, the stripping away of comforting illusions. 'Je m'étais rendu compte que c'était assez de mots, assez même de rugissements, et que ce qu'il fallait, c'étaient des bombes',¹⁹⁶ Artaud wrote to André Breton, and Ionesco states in similar terms, 'A chaque fois, c'est la même chose: les poètes secouent les gens qui dorment pendant que la maison brûle et les engourdis les engueulent, mal réveillés de leur sommeil'.¹⁹⁷ The 'théâtre de boulevard' which is 'sans problèmes, sans questions', Ionesco believes, 'contribue à endormir davantage la conscience des gens',¹⁹⁸ and is therefore the denial of true art.

¹⁹¹ 'Je suis un peu frivole', Interview with Daniel Lasagne, p.12.

¹⁹² Frickx, Ionesco, p.63.

¹⁹³ 'Eugène Ionesco à Zurich', Interview with Jacques Depallens, p.12.

¹⁹⁴ 'Moi et mes monstres', Interview with André Bourin, p.11.

¹⁹⁵ Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 102.

¹⁹⁶ Artaud, Letter to André Breton, cited by Joski, in Antonin Artaud, p.92.

¹⁹⁷ Notes, p.339.

¹⁹⁸ Antidotes, pp.326-327.

Ionesco's theatre, by violating all accepted visions of the world and traditionally cherished notions, leaves the spectator face to face with the harshness of reality and the absurdity of the world, as Jean Delay pointed out, welcoming Ionesco as a member to the Academy:

Il s'agit d'abord de dépayser le spectateur, de troubler ou de violenter ses habitudes, d'engourdir ou de forcer ses résistances pour l'amener à accomplir un trajet au fond de lui-même, qui lui permette de communiquer, à son insu, avec l'inconscient de l'auteur et de rejoindre son inspiration.¹⁹⁹

The basic truths of man's condition are often painful to face squarely, and Ionesco deliberately creates a theatre which will be 'la révélation d'une vérité qui la plupart du temps est insoutenable'.²⁰⁰ However, the artist, as Ionesco points out, 'n'est que celui qui dit à voix haute ce que les autres se disent ou murmurent'.²⁰¹ This anguish exists in all men, Ionesco believes, as a vague, hidden, repressed anxiety, and the only way to exorcise this fear is to bring it out into the open and confront it. 'Mais nous, nous ne voulons pas chasser l'angoisse. Nous essayons de la rendre familière pour que l'on la surmonte', Ionesco writes.²⁰² He uses humour as a means of detachment, to stand back and master the malaise of existence and his fears by becoming familiar with them. Humour is, for him, 'the manifestation of lucidity and liberty',²⁰³ and, however dark the comedy, it is therefore therapeutic, as he explains:

Prendre conscience de ce qui est atroce et en rire, c'est devenir maître de ce qui est atroce Une seule démystification reste vraie: celle qui est produite par l'humour, surtout s'il est noir ... Le comique est seul en mesure de nous donner la force de supporter la tragédie de l'existence.²⁰⁴

Thus, through comedy, Ionesco presents a world that, at first, seems so strange and laughable that the spectator can distance himself from it and laugh without reservation, until he realizes, too late, that this world is merely a wry reflection of his own world and that he himself and his vision of reality are implicated in his laughter. Robbe-Grillet comments:

¹⁹⁹ Jean Delay, in 'Discours de réception d'Eugène Ionesco à l'Académie Française', pp.68-69.

²⁰⁰ Entre la vie et le rêve, p.153.

²⁰¹ Journal, p.28.

²⁰² Antidotes, p.327.

²⁰³ 'Ionesco Talking', Interview with Carl Wildman, p.8.

²⁰⁴ Notes, p.206.

Or ce monde parfaitement insolite que nous présente Ionesco, nous sommes obligés de le reconnaître à chaque instant pour le nôtre nous découvrons à chaque réplique un aspect que nous n'avions pas l'habitude de voir et ces vues successives viennent s'ajouter les uns aux autres sans s'inquiéter jamais de ce qu'elles ont de contradictoire.²⁰⁵

Once the individual has been forced to recognize the absurdity of life, he can begin to readjust to the new vision of reality, confronting the limits of the human condition and thus rising above it. In discussing the achievements of the Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin gives this therapeutic element priority of place. By presenting the audience with a picture of the disintegration of reality, he believes that these dramatists set in motion a process of integrative forces in the mind of the spectator:

The challenge to make sense out of what appears as a senseless and fragmented action, the recognition that the fact that the modern world has lost its unifying principle is the source of its bewildering and soul-destroying quality, is therefore more than a mere intellectual exercise; it has a therapeutic effect Stripped of illusions and vaguely felt fears and anxieties, he can face this situation consciously, rather than feeling it vaguely below the surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions. By seeing his anxieties formulated he can liberate himself from them.²⁰⁶

The theatre is not only the revelation of external reality, but of an inner reality which touches all members of the audience. In an early article condemning theatre, Ionesco outlined the blueprint for his own theatre. Theatre, he states, should be 'une investigation qui ne se limite pas au "caractère" mais qui pénètre dans le noyau vivant essentiel, en causant un paroxysme qui fait sauter les couches extérieures, qui révèle la tension inconnue des profondeurs de l'être'.²⁰⁷ In his own theatre, this use of drama as a means of 'auto-analyse',²⁰⁸ becomes one of the most valuable and fundamental elements of his work. He believes that theatre is able to penetrate depths of being, inaccessible to rational investigation, revealing to the author aspects of himself of which he was unaware, for, in creating the play, the author subconsciously incarnates hidden aspects of his inner being and materializes them on stage. Watching these doubles of himself act out his inner

²⁰⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Eugène Ionesco', Critique, IX, 173 (June 1953), 565.

²⁰⁶ Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p.404.

²⁰⁷ Cited by van der Linden, in 'Ionesco, de l'auteur roumain à l'écrivain français', p.361.

²⁰⁸ Journal, p.83.

struggles, he can begin to assess himself with greater lucidity.

'Je me dédouble', Ionesco explains, 'et ... je parle de moi comme d'un autre, comme d'un cas étranger'.²⁰⁹ Edith Kern has gone so far as to say that the notion of 'Verfremdung', the distancing of oneself from the characters on stage that Ionesco criticizes so frequently in the theatre of Brecht, is the key to all his theatre.²¹⁰ In the same way as that envisaged by Artaud,²¹¹ Ionesco uses characters, objects, scenery, and sounds to represent physically his own obsessions, emotions, and anguish, thus making them the tools of his self-analysis. Claude Abastado writes:

L'univers imaginaire d'un écrivain traduit son 'être au monde'. Les images, les figures nées de la rêverie transposent des états affectifs Les images forment les réseaux, les constellations d'un paysage intérieur; la structure des dialogues et les constantes de la syntaxe dévoilent la dynamique d'une pensée; les décors, les accessoires avouent des phantasmes: tous les éléments dramatiques servent la quête de l'écrivain, son exploration de la psyché. Toute pièce est une 'auto-analyse'.²¹²

The theatre is thus the ideal mirror for the author, allowing him to step outside himself and to see all around himself. 'Le chef-d'oeuvre théâtral a un caractère supérieurement exemplaire: il me renvoie mon image, il est miroir, il est prise de conscience', Ionesco states.²¹³ However, it serves not only as a mirror for the author but also for the audience, for, as we have seen, the most personal reflects the universal. Ionesco states:

Je tâche de projeter sur scène un drame intérieur (incompréhensible à moi-même) me disant, toutefois, que, le microcosme étant à l'image du macrocosme, il peut arriver que ce monde intérieur, déchiqueté, désarticulé, soit, en quelque sorte, le miroir ou le symbole des contradictions universelles.²¹⁴

The mirror does not reflect the individual in a very flattering light. Ionesco's characters resemble each one of us 'sideways on', as Lemarchand puts it.²¹⁵ The first reaction is often disgust or laughter at these grotesque half-beings and a refusal to acknowledge any resemblance between them and oneself. Even Ionesco himself admits to

²⁰⁹ Journal, p.113.

²¹⁰ Edith Kern, 'Macbett in the Light of Verfremdung', The Two Faces of Ionesco, pp.215-244.

²¹¹ Artaud, 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté', Oeuvres complètes, II, p.22.

²¹² Abastado, Eugène Ionesco, p.198.

²¹³ Notes, p.67.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p.226.

²¹⁵ Jacques Lemarchand, Preface to Théâtre, I, by Eugène Ionesco, pp.11-12.

being terrified to see these amplified images of himself. 'Lorsqu'on voit se concrétiser les personnages', he confesses, 'lorsqu'on voit ses cauchemars se matérialiser, on ne les reconnaît pas, on a peur de les reconnaître, on ne veut pas les reconnaître'.²¹⁶ The initial reception of Ionesco's plays was undoubtedly in part the result of this refusal on the part of audience and critics to face the horror of self-perception, to be implicated in the play they were watching. Jean Duvignaud, describing the mixed reactions to a performance of La Cantatrice, wrote that 'ceux qui n'ont pas voulu comprendre la belle pièce de Ionesco ont montré seulement qu'elle les concernait trop',²¹⁷ and Georges Lerminier perceived the same phenomenon in the adverse criticism of Ionesco's plays. He wrote: 'L'oeuvre de Ionesco ... est l'une des plus caractéristiques de ce temps. C'est pourquoi sans doute beaucoup refusent de s'y reconnaître. L'homme n'aime pas les miroirs déformants, ni la sorte de fidélité caricaturale dont ils sont l'insolent instrument'.²¹⁸ When man is faced with this mirror-image of himself, these 'autopsies of his unacknowledged invisible manias',²¹⁹ he can either recognize what he sees or try to deny it, but either way it produces a shock and forces a reaction which is more therapeutic than the coma of habit and misconception in which he was imprisoned. Pirandello wrote:

When a man lives, he lives and does not see himself. Well, put a mirror before him and make him see himself in the act of living. Either he is astonished at his own appearance or else he turns away so as not to see himself, or else in disgust, he spits at his image, or again, clenches his fists to break it. In a word, there arises a crisis and that crisis is my theatre.²²⁰

Thus, twenty years after the shock-tactics of the Surrealists, Philippe Soupault praises Ionesco for having succeeded where they had failed 'à provoquer chez les lecteurs, spectateurs et voyeurs, cette révolte qui les oblige à admettre qu'ils ou elles sont vivants ou vivantes'.²²¹

Moreover, the therapeutic effect of Ionesco's theatre, as of all

²¹⁶ Journal, p.205.

²¹⁷ Jean Duvignaud, 'Pour Ionesco et Tardieu', Arts (15-21 May 1952), p.4.

²¹⁸ Lerminier, 'Clés pour Ionesco', p.3.

²¹⁹ Wallace Fowlie, Climate of Violence: The French Literary Tradition from Baudelaire to the Present (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), p.230.

²²⁰ Luigi Pirandello, cited by Raymond Williams, in Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), pp.161-162.

²²¹ Philippe Soupault, 'Eugène Ionesco, mon ami Eugène', Cahiers des Saisons, 15 (Winter 1959), 230.

good art, reaches beyond the immediate experience of the play to modify man's feelings and manner of looking at the world and the self. 'In our time', Ibsen wrote, 'every new creative work has the task of shifting the boundary stakes'.²²² The work of art widens the emotional experiences of the audience, giving them the capacity to feel subtler and richer emotions. John Osborne wrote of his theatre, 'I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling',²²³ and Ionesco sees in this ability to elicit emotional responses the basis of a radical revolution in man's thinking. 'C'est souvent le langage de l'artiste', he says, 'qui propulse, engendre la pensée des autres, c'est lui aussi qui crée les nouvelles façons de voir, donc la nouvelle mentalité'.²²⁴ In liberating men from false illusions, in changing their attitudes, the revolution engendered by art has repercussions in every aspect of man's life, both private and social. In his 'Thoughts on the Theatre from Jail', Julian Beck wrote, 'I guess I am recommending complete social re-structure How? No answer. But if enough people start thinking about the state of things we're in, we might find a solution, an action together ... if we could at least feel pain we might turn towards becoming men again, instead of turning more and more into callous automata'.²²⁵ Ionesco confirms that, for him, the only possible form of humanitarian revolution is through art. 'Si la révolution est possible', he writes, 'elle ne peut être que celle-là, intellectuelle, littéraire, artistique. Changer le mental. Pas changer "d'abord" les conditions extérieures'.²²⁶

The centre of gravity of Ionesco's work is, therefore, not so much in the theatre or the work as in life itself; 'il se situe en quelque sorte au point d'intersection de la scène et de la salle, voir de la salle et du monde'.²²⁷ Theatre no longer supplies a clearly formulated message, but awakens the audience to the questions and sends them out to discover their own answers in themselves, beyond the scope of the

²²² Henrik Ibsen, cited by Bentley, in The Playwright as Thinker, p.13.

²²³ John Osborne, 'They Call it Cricket', cited in Playwrights on Playwriting, edited by Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp.141-142.

²²⁴ Journal, p.184.

²²⁵ Julian Beck, 'Thoughts on Theatre from Jail', New York Times (21 February 1965), Section II, p.3.

²²⁶ Antidotes, p.226.

²²⁷ Bernard Dort, 'Une propédeutique de la réalité', Nef, 24, 29 (January-March 1967), 62.

theatre. Bernard Dort describes the theatre as a 'propédeutique' of reality and life, a theatre that acts on the totality of man's life to teach the spectator to become himself:

Celle-ci [l'activité théâtrale] a de moins en moins pour but de représenter le monde sur la scène, d'en donner une image vraie, de dire sa vérité aux spectateurs; il s'agirait plutôt de mettre ceux-ci en état de découvrir, hors du théâtre, cette vérité, et de les amener, par le théâtre, à avoir prise sur le monde. L'enseignement donné y est plutôt une propédeutique, c'est-à-dire que la scène a pour première mission d'apprendre le spectateur à devenir lui-même. Elle propose des images du monde à sa libre activité critique, elle lui soumet des manifestations idéologies ou des reflets d'une société aliénée afin qu'il prenne lui-même conscience de ses idéologies ou de ses aliénations propres et qu'il travaille à s'en délivrer Le théâtre devient propédeutique de la réalité. On y apprend à découvrir le réel, non comme une donnée immuable, mais comme une tâche à accomplir, comme une anti-physis.²²⁸

By creating an experience that is sufficiently powerful and memorable that it modifies the outlook of the audience, Ionesco hopes that the participation and identification that form the basis of the theatrical experience and of catharsis will continue after the play has ended, making man aware of the forces that control his destiny, but also aware of his complete liberty to achieve the full potential of his individual identity in the space for manoeuvre that is left. Georges Michel, considering the question of 'Quel public? Quelle participation?', concludes:

Le théâtre d'aujourd'hui ne doit pas se contenter d'une participation pendant le spectacle. Cette participation doit se continuer après. Il faut créer des images, des scènes si fortes, qu'une fois sorti du spectacle l'on ne puisse plus les oublier. Des images qui transforment la vue, le monde, les structures, les modes de pensée Il faut ... aider l'homme 'à déchiffrer son réel et le mettre en cause' L'homme a à choisir entre la liberté et le confort, mais pour que le choix lui-même soit libre, il doit avoir conscience des mécanismes qui le manoeuvrent comme un pantin.²²⁹

Every man must find for himself and by himself his own unique answers to the same questions. The therapeutic effect of Ionesco's theatre lies in re-awakening man to these fundamental questions; 'chacun de nous doit se situer par rapport à ces poignantes interrogations. L'essentiel c'est qu'elles soient posées, qu'elles inquiètent la conscience du spectateur'.²³⁰

²²⁸ Dort, 'Une propédeutique de la réalité', p.63.

²²⁹ Georges Michel, 'Quel public? Quel participation?', Nef, 24, 29 (January-March 1967), 69.

²³⁰ Desnues, 'Eugène Ionesco ou les insuffisances de la littérature', p.554.

Thus, Ionesco's plays have an immensely therapeutic effect both for author and for audience, a power that surpasses the original framework of the play, for it aims to put each individual on the path to discovering his individual identity and unique vision of the world, 'de permettre ainsi la réalisation de ce que j'appellerai les "possibles" de l'individu', as Armand Gatti puts it.²³¹ It is this surpassing of itself that gives Ionesco's work its true value and scope, prompting a critic like André Alter to describe it as 'une oeuvre qui n'a d'autre fin que la redécouverte d'une véritable présence de l'homme au monde',²³² for, as Brecht has said, 'every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living'.²³³

'Ai-je réussi à donner ma connaissance du monde et de moi à travers mes rêves? Ou ai-je raté?',²³⁴ Ionesco asks himself or, in other words, has artistic creation helped him to discover his individual identity and helped the audience to find theirs? The development of Ionesco's theatre shows an ever-increasing involvement with the problem of individual identity. Whereas his early plays had destroyed all semblance of identity, his later plays have become more inward looking, expressing his innermost fantasies and obsessions. 'J'ai détruit le personnage dans mes premières pièces', Ionesco admits, 'Je l'ai réintroduit ensuite en incarnant, en donnant des visages à mes phantasmes'.²³⁵ Nicolas Bataille considers that Ionesco is a much sadder man than twenty years ago, when he created for the pure joy of creating, for now he reflects much more on himself and the problem of his individual identity.²³⁶ Galey Mathieu observes the same increasing introspection:

En réalité on s'aperçoit de plus en plus combien la démarche de Ionesco est toute personnelle, s'attachant aux fantasmes et à l'onirisme ... et c'est beaucoup plus son inconscient et son moi qu'il poursuit alors qu'on le croyait occupé à prendre par la dérision une image de notre société.²³⁷

²³¹Gatti, 'Un théâtre pour la Cité', p.72.

²³²André Alter, 'D'un constat d'absence à la quête d'une présence', O.R.T.F. Cahiers Littéraires, 2,18 (21 June-4July 1964), 6.

²³³Bertolt Brecht, cited by Harold Clurman, in The Naked Image (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p.iii.

²³⁴'Je ne sais pas ce que c'est que vivre ... ni mourir', Interview with Claudine Jardin, Figaro (20 June 1967), p.19.

²³⁵Un Homme en question, p.178.

²³⁶Interview with J.K. Newberry, in Newberry, 'An Evaluation of the Plays of Eugène Ionesco', p.206.

²³⁷Mathieu Galey, 'Quand Vitez "entre" à la comédie Française', Nouvelles Littéraires (8-14 December 1978), p.13.

Schechner believes that Ionesco found the solution to his personal search for individual identity when he found success in the theatre,²³⁸ but the continued and increasing obsession with his identity in his theatre suggests that writing has only afforded a partial answer to the problem, and, as he told the author, material success has only been a hindrance to his search:

En effet, je suis à la recherche de cette identité et j'espère que, par-ci, par-là, dans un passage ou dans un autre, on peut trouver quelque chose qui approche de mon identité profonde mais la célébrité ne m'a pas du tout aidé à trouver mon véritable moi, au contraire cela m'empêche de voir tout clair en moi-même. C'est-à-dire, je suis confronté tout le temps avec les vus et avec les explications des autres et cela n'a fait que me brouiller davantage ... Je ne sais pas ... Je ne sais pas si la littérature aide à la découverte de soi ou, au contraire, si les mots trompent.²³⁹

Ionesco is, therefore, compelled to go on writing, questioning, searching for a deeper understanding of the individual identity, both for himself and for others, hoping that one day he might finally pin down the elusive self, as he confided to the author, 'Oui, jusqu'à mon âge je n'ai trouvé aucun remède, aucune explication, mais quand même, malgré tout, je ne désespère pas d'avoir un jour une illumination, ou une révélation'.²⁴⁰

Considering Ionesco's avowed aims and the nature of his theatre, it is, moreover, inappropriate to demand from his work a solution to the problem of individual identity. He did not become a creative artist in order to find a method of discovering the self, but found that artistic creation was his natural, innate means of expression for the search for individual identity and so became an artist almost despite himself. It is the very fact that he is not afraid to find no answers that guarantees the sincerity and authenticity of his work. A passage written in 1937 sums this up:

Reste vivant dans le domaine littéraire - non pas celui qui a voulu faire de la littérature, mais celui qui en a fait malgré lui, sans le savoir et pour qui la littérature n'est qu'un moyen d'exprimer ses tortures et ses problèmes ... Les hommes vraiment vivants ne cherchent pas à faire de l'art - ils crient, ils pleurent, ils expriment ... ils se confessent, ils se dénuident.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', p.205.

²³⁹ Interview with author.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Article for Facla (8 February 1937), cited by Vianu, in 'Préludes Ionesciens', p.111.

If Ionesco has not found his personal solution to the problem of individual identity and doubts whether there is a complete solution, as an artist, he is 'celui qui se sent le plus faible, le plus nu devant les questions essentielles qui restent sans réponse',²⁴² and the heightened lucidity and self-critical awareness that are the prerogatives of the artist, combined with the advantages of the theatrical medium as a method of investigation and demonstration, enable the author to penetrate deeper into himself and to confront unknown aspects of himself with a wholeness of vision unique to art. Moreover, by a participation in the experiences and vision of the author through the medium of art, all men can share in the author's insights. 'Ai-je fait ce travail afin de rendre saisissable aux autres cette vision, ou bien n'ai-je écrit toute ma vie que pour arriver à me comprendre moi-même?', Ionesco asks. 'Cela revient au même', he concludes, 'En effet, "je" c'est "nous"'.²⁴³ By its constant re-questioning of the self and of reality, by its struggle and search for greater awareness, for a richer, more meaningful existence, artistic creation remains a very positive achievement, a witness to the value of human life, and perhaps ultimately a way of at least approaching a greater knowledge of 'cette sorte de fragile et remuant foyer auquel ne touchent pas les formes',²⁴⁴ the individual identity:

Si l'art ne nous donne pas la clé, car aucun effort ne peut la donner ni aucune méthode, l'art nous entrouvre la porte sur la vie au-delà de la vie, par-delà le néant.

L'art nous pose la question du problème insoluble, mieux que la philosophie perdue dans l'érudition, il nous met face à notre interrogation sur nos fins dernières. L'art est essentiellement interrogatif. Cette interrogation, c'est déjà un début de réponse. Pour nous restituer à nous-mêmes, l'art nous sort de nous-mêmes, nous met face à face à nous-mêmes, à l'énigme.

A chaque contemplateur de l'oeuvre d'art, réfléchissant sur l'oeuvre d'art, la nécessité s'impose d'aller plus loin ou de plonger dans le mystère car c'est l'art qui cerne le mieux entre l'ici et l'au-delà du monde, il nous mène dans la nuit qui peut être une nuit étoilée.²⁴⁵

²⁴² 'Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Rosette Lamont, p.29.

²⁴³ Ionesco, 'Lettre-Préface', in Ionesco, by Frickx, p.6.

²⁴⁴ Artaud, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 18.

²⁴⁵ Un Homme en question, pp.61-62.

Who may tell the tale
of the old man?
weigh absence in a scale?
mete want with a span?
the sum assess
of the world's woes?
nothingness
in words enclose?
Samuel Beckett, Tailpiece.

Quelle est la morale?
C'est à vous de la trouver.
Ionesco, La Cantatrice chauve.

CONCLUSION

'Who is it', Lear asked, 'that can tell me who I am?'.¹ Nearly four hundred years later Ionesco affirms that no one can give a final answer to this question, not even oneself. 'Qui suis-je?', he wonders, '"Je" est-il et si "je" est où vais-je? Qu'est-ce que je fais, que fais-je ici, que dois-je faire? ... Depuis toujours devant la porte verrouillée'.² Yet despite the vicissitudes of the sense of self that this study has explored, Ionesco remains convinced that there is an individual identity which defines each person as unique, a '"je" profond, celui qui n'est pas un autre',³ and it is his frustration at being unable to grasp this sense of identity, coupled with his firm conviction that it exists, that motivates Ionesco's writing. There is no solution suggested or, at least, no one solution, for the individual identity is too complex and contradictory to be summed up in a neat formula. It is the depth and sincerity of the search itself that is important rather than the goal achieved, for Ionesco believes it is only by a constant striving towards greater lucidity and awareness that one gains insight into the self. For Ionesco personally, this search takes the form of artistic creation, in particular theatrical creation, where the theme finds its most complete and powerful expression. However, if this is the key for Ionesco, he stresses that it is not an absolute answer, nor is it the only way to achieve greater awareness and that each individual must seek his own personal solutions, for however limited and fragmentary they might be, they are more valuable to his

¹William Shakespeare, King Lear, act I, scene IV, line 238.

²Journal, p.169.

³'Je ne fais que solliciter le dialogue', Interview with Pierre Hahn, p.30.

knowledge of the self than any solution provided by another. His plays are not abstract ideas, but 'une aventure de l'esprit',⁴ attempts to communicate an intuition of being that must be lived through together by audience and author with their whole selves. In this way, he hopes that, rather than providing a conclusion, an ending to the search for identity, his plays will constitute a mutual beginning to a search that will take the author and every individual spectator or reader the rest of their lives to complete. Even then it will only be a personal ending, not that of Ionesco's work, for, Ionesco believes, 'l'oeuvre n'est jamais finie ... même la mort ne la finit pas',⁵ nor most certainly the end of mankind's search for absolute knowledge of the self, for, as Ionesco is only too aware, the desire to 'Know Thyself', as the exhortation inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi reminds us, is as old as life itself.

Ionesco would have been in agreement with the words of Goethe's Faust who concluded just before his death:

To this opinion I am given wholly
And this is wisdom's final say:
Freedom and life belong to that man solely
Who must reconquer them each day.⁶

While man lives, Ionesco believes, he must continue to search for his identity, for identity is not something that can be achieved as a static entity, established for all time but something that, although identical in its essence, is in a constant process of renewal and development. The truth of both man's inner world and outer reality lies in a recognition of the complexity and uncertainty that constitutes life. 'Everything is transition. We turn and turn', Ionesco said in an interview.⁷ Once the individual has lost the harmonious world of childhood, every sphere of life is ruled by conflict and contradiction, pulling the individual in different directions, dividing him against himself and against the objects and people which surround him. He discovers an existence ruled by the dialectical opposition of the two states of being: wonder and joy, lightness and beauty, alternating with anguish, darkness, heaviness, and the dullness of habit. The disorientation of

⁴Notes, p.214.

⁵Ionesco à coeur ouvert, p.68.

⁶Johann W. von Goethe, Faust, Part one and Part two, translated with an introduction and notes by Charles E. Passage (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), p.393. Part two, act V, lines 11573-11576.

⁷'An Interview with Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Richard Schechner, p.165.

the individual is aggravated by the hostile opacity of the material world to which he is indissolubly linked, yet which he can neither comprehend, except as a projection of himself, nor control and, as this world is ever-changing, so inevitably is the individual who tries to relate himself to his context. As Beckett has pointed out, 'the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness ... the pact must be continually renewed, the letter of safe-conduct brought up to date'.⁸ Terrified by his solitude, the individual reaches out to others for confirmation and support, but discovers a fundamental hatred and aggression underlying human exchanges, and the forces of anonymity and conformity inherent in social groups threaten his tenuous sense of self. Over and above all the conflicts and tensions of life, the individual is subjected to the changes wrought by time, with its 'unceasing modification of the personality',⁹ and finally by 'cet absolu de la mort',¹⁰ to which time leads with ineluctable steps.

The individual is, therefore, a battlefield of contradictions and conflicts. 'C'est peut-être cela l'âme: un lieu où toutes sortes de choses, toutes sortes de forces occupent le terrain simplement', Ionesco writes, 'Le moi ne serait donc qu'un noeud de principes antagonistes en équilibre dynamique Il n'y a peut-être que des mouvements'.¹¹ Ionesco had read and admired Stephane Lupasco's Logique et contradiction, where Lupasco outlined a theory of dynamic identity, 'l'être basé sur la contradiction'. The principle of identity, Lupasco stated, is at the basis of all human experience, and he concluded, therefore, that 'la logique ... doit être, désormais, la science première des dynamismes contradictoires de toute expérience'.¹² In L'Impromptu, Ionesco seems to be firmly in agreement with this idea. 'Je suis pour la contradiction', he asserts, 'tout n'est que contradiction',¹³ and in Victimes, he applies this theory to identity, propounding, through the mouth of Nicolas d'Eu, a concept of individual identity based on a 'psychologie

⁸Beckett, Proust, p.19.

⁹Ibid., p.15.

¹⁰Antidotes, p.196.

¹¹Journal, p.165.

¹²Lupasco, Logique et contradiction, p.231.

¹³Théâtre, II, 20.

des antagonismes'.¹⁴ Although this passage is probably a deliberate parody of Lupascian theories, it is nevertheless close to Ionesco's own conception of individual identity as evidenced in his plays, and this is attested to by Coe, Senart, and Pronko. To live in a state of tension and contradiction is painful and confusing, and Ionesco suggests that the vain attempt to find a resolution, a balance, is the source of all men's cultural, political, and scientific endeavours.¹⁵ Like Unanumo, who stated that to be an individual the self must be divided against the self, for to create a perfect harmony within the self would be to be dead,¹⁶ Ionesco believes that man should not try to overcome these contradictions, but let them play out their conflicts, for this tension constitutes the very essence of life. Early in his career, Ionesco praised this fertile disharmony within the self, writing in *Non*, 'Tant que mes tristesses ne se changent pas en ferveurs et mes joies en souffrances, je me sens médiocre et insipide, je me déconsidère'.¹⁷ As a mature writer, he proudly compares his inner turmoil to that of a volcano, for he considers his anguish to be a proof of his sincerity and awareness. 'Nous luttons en permanence contre nous-mêmes Si je ne me combats plus, je tombe en dépression, je meurs', he explains, and he advises, 'L'univers est volcanique, soyons consciemment des volcans'.¹⁸

It is these inner divisions and conflicts that form the source and inspiration of Ionesco's theatre. Tranquility, Ionesco argues, is not conducive to artistic creation, which he considers to be the direct product of imbalance and neurosis. It is in an attempt to express the contradictory extremes of his experience that Ionesco feels compelled to write, 'On écrit par amertume, par angoisse', he admits, 'mais aussi par joie. Pour exorciser ses démons mais aussi pour admirer Dieu'.¹⁹ The drama develops naturally from the tension engendered, for, as Ionesco explains, 'lorsque ... on laisse éclore ses propres fantômes ... on sait que ces contradictions s'entredéchireront, dans leur

¹⁴ *Théâtre*, I, 226.

¹⁵ 'Pour moi le réel est insolite', Interview with Jean Kaminsky, p.9.

¹⁶ See Jerome Ashmore, 'Interdisciplinary Roots of the Theatre of the Absurd', *Modern Drama*, 14, 1 (May 1971), 76.

¹⁷ Cited by Vianu, in 'Préludes ionesciens', p.108.

¹⁸ Ionesco, Introduction to *Les Volcans*, by Katia and Maurice Krafft (Montrouge: Draeger, 1975), p.8.

¹⁹ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, p.24.

véhémence, donnant naissance au drame'.²⁰ In the final work, these contraries must be juxtaposed, as in the life it mirrors, without resolving into a synthesis. The movement of the drama, Ionesco states, must be dictated by the friction and conflict between these opposing factions, like that of a football or boxing match, 'antagonismes en présence, oppositions dynamiques, heurts sans raison de volontés contraires'.²¹ Moreover, the search for identity is, as we have seen, a task that can never be relinquished, and, as this quest is, for Ionesco, embodied in his writing, he is also compelled to write by his desire to understand his existence. Writing must be a continual process of questioning, 'une mise en question de tout',²² and it cannot, therefore, be an attempt to provide a lesson, but at most 'des aperçus',²³ each complementary to the others, each shedding a certain light on a different aspect of the problem. If there were a solution to be found, the fundamental questions would cease to exist; the problem of identity would be superseded, and, Ionesco believes, man would lose his compulsion to create in order to try to comprehend his existence, for there would no longer be any purpose in literature and art:

L'homme se connaîtra mieux, un jour, peut-être. La psychanalyse sera perfectionnée. Tout sera élucidé Le monde des agitations incohérentes disparaîtra L'Art deviendra inutile La conscience humaine s'amplifiera, se dilatera à tel point qu'elle finira par se confondre avec les lois cosmiques et disparaîtra.²⁴

Until this time, the individual identity remains an enigma that must everyday be challenged afresh. Remaining constantly open to the questions is the only way to approach the truth, as any single answer is limited and restrictive, and therefore the goal is not a solution but a greater profundity in the questions asked and a greater awareness of the problems faced, and this is the motivation for Ionesco's writing. 'La littérature est une interrogation', he states, 'une demande d'explication. La réponse, c'est comme si l'interrogation en était une. Ce qui est intéressant, c'est de poser le problème, non pas d'y répondre. Toutes les réponses sont, en effet, limitées et fausses'.²⁵ It is

²⁰Notes, p.227.

²¹Ibid., p.314.

²²'Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco', Interview with Yvon Toussaint, p.5.

²³'Je ne fais que solliciter le dialogue', Interview with Pierre Hahn, p.31.

²⁴Présent passé, pp.272-273.

²⁵'Découvertes de Ionesco', Interview with Ritta Mariancic, p.12.

therefore paradoxically in the recognition of uncertainty and contradiction that the hope of illumination lies. Moste Lazar writes:

Ionesco belongs to that group of writers since Strindberg for whom the literary or dramatic artwork is not a tale of the objective or visible 'persona', or if its social, behavioral patterns or its psychological motivations, but rather a metaphoric and dreamlike representation of the psyche in its labyrinthic, non-sequential and disguised reality And because there are no definite 'cures' for these besieged souls, the journey into darkness and back into creativity is always starting over again, repeating itself with variations, circling in a centrifugal manner around the Self, spinning around that mysterious center where 'the end is in the beginning', the lost future is in the past and where the only possible paradise is a 'paradise lost'.²⁶

However, despite the contradictions and conflicts that rule the individual's inner and outer existences, hindering the knowledge of self, Ionesco firmly reasserts his faith in the existence of a unique, irreducible core of individual identity which, although it cannot be comprehended by rational analysis, can be sensed as a consciousness of the self. He refutes the Existentialist idea that man makes himself anew each day through his actions and decisions, that existence precedes essence. He acknowledges that the individual has to change and adapt to different situations, but the identity of his reactions proves to him that he does have an inner essence that remains inalterable. This essence is not created but rediscovered:

On ne change pas; la situation change. On peut être mis dans des conditions meilleures ou pires, c'est toujours moi qui suis au milieu, le même dans mon essence intime Ainsi, depuis toujours, on est; on ne devient pas; l'essence précède l'existence; les réactions diffèrent sans altérer cette essence Je n'aurais pas pu et je ne pourrais pas être un autre Il ne s'agit donc pas de changer, il s'agit de se retrouver: l'inaltérable dans les altérations toutes provisoires d'un moi mélangé au monde.²⁷

Although Ionesco admits that he can never totally know this inner essence, telling the author, 'mon identité individuelle est fait d'un carrefour de forces contraires et contradictoires et je ne peux pas me trouver vraiment. Quel est mon identité? Si Dieu est, c'est lui seul qui peut la connaître',²⁸ he believes that he can gain a greater awareness into the self through the lucidity that is the prerogative of art.

²⁶Moste Lazar, 'The Psychodramatic Stage: Ionesco and his Doubles', Interplay I, pp.135-136.

²⁷Journal, pp.149-150.

²⁸Interview with author.

He sees the individual identity in terms of a structuring consciousness, and the more open he can be to this consciousness the greater his sense of self. 'Qu'est ce que le moi?', he asks, 'C'est la conscience d'être moi'.²⁹

Ionesco's belief that the essence of the self is not only individual but universal does not contradict his conviction of the persistency of individual identity. To explain the enigma of the individual's place in the universal scheme, Ionesco frequently returns to the analogy of the eddy in a river, part of the same body of water yet unique in its structure and in the way it structures the same materials:

Chaque tourbillon est un moi individuel. Son organisation, son mouvement propre, c'est sa personnalité. Le moi est une organisation particulière. Chaque tourbillon est anarchique. Chaque tourbillon a sa réalité évidente, non illusoire, dans la manière qu'il a d'organiser les eaux du fleuve commun. Chaque moi affirme et nie le groupe. Chaque moi est social-antisocial. Donc, il existe, s'affirme. Tout signe Les eaux coulent, il y a d'autres eaux. Mais chacun constitue son même tourbillon.³⁰

Thus, Ionesco believes that only the individual consciousness can structure and integrate the chaos of irrational and contradictory forces that constitute life, giving them a unique form and meaning. There is no consciousness except at the level of the individual; a group has no consciousness, and if the individual allows himself to be totally absorbed by a group, he will lose his consciousness of existence. 'Il n'y a pas de conscience d'ensemble. Il n'y a de conscience qu'individuelle', Ionesco reminds us.³¹ Like Pascal's 'roseau pensant',³² Ionesco believes that the individual remains superior to all forces that oppose him whilst he retains this unique awareness, but once he subordinates his individual consciousness to any other priority, those forces will rapidly engulf him, reducing him to an empty, anonymous shell. Thus, Ionesco founds what he calls 'un nouveau personnalisme',³³ based on that of Emmanuel Mounier, emphasizing the inviolability of the individual identity and its importance as an integrating consciousness, giving form and meaning to its surroundings of which it forms an integral yet always distinct and unique part:

²⁹ Présent passé, p.217.

³⁰ Journal, pp.212-213.

³¹ Présent passé, p.282.

³² Pascal, Pensées, p.144.

³³ Présent passé, p.42.

Chaque vie est unique. Chaque vie, un univers. Mais, chaque vie n'est rien si elle ne reflète la vie universelle, si elle n'est à la fois elle-même et autre, elle n'est rien si elle est séparée, elle n'est rien non plus si elle est grégaire, elle n'est rien si elle est perdue dans le néant de l'impersonnel. Vivre sa vie: c'est vivre le monde à sa façon, d'une autre façon, d'une façon inattendue, comme les autres et pas comme les autres.³⁴

For Ionesco, artistic creation is the most complete manifestation of the presence of this structuring consciousness, and it is in the process of creation that he feels the most intensely aware of his self. 'J'ai la conscience d'être vrai lorsque j'invente et que j'imagine', he states.³⁵ Creation, the exercise of the imagination in the making of something new and original, is not, Ionesco reminds us, an escape, but a deepening of the consciousness, for the imagination can penetrate what the discursive, logical mind cannot comprehend, and the revelations of the imagination are always sincere and true. Moreover, Ionesco believes that creation, in whatever form it takes, is a natural function and therefore a fundamental need of all mankind. Ionesco finds his creative outlet in writing which is for him a means of searching and discovery, of recapturing the wonder and freshness of the childhood vision and of re-opening the dialogue between the artist and the world and the individual and others. The artist takes the chaotic, unformed elements of external reality and blends them with his own unique vision to create a parallel world that is at once surprising and original yet recognizable, reflecting the contradictions of the outer and inner worlds yet allowing them to coexist in the harmonious perfection of form that is the work of art:

A la fois connaissance et création; à la fois révélation, découverte; communication ou construction; contenu et contenant, telle est l'oeuvre d'art qui nous fournit des expressions, des images, des perspectives toujours renouvelées du monde.³⁶

More than any other art form, Ionesco favours the theatre, which he considers to be the most germane to the expression of his personal search for identity. The complexity and concrete immediacy of the theatrical illusion presents a direct metaphor of the author's inner state of being, allowing the author to step back from himself to laugh or to criticize, to perceive himself more clearly. However, the work of

³⁴ Journal, p.42.

³⁵ Ionesco, in Les Entretiens d'Helsinki, p.20.

³⁶ Journal, p.41.

art not only acts as a mirror for the author, but also for the audience. By reflecting a grotesque, amplified vision of the world which they inhabit and forcing them to recognize it as their own, the play acts like the 'verres grossissants' that Proust described and, by deciphering reality for the audience, enables them to become 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes'.³⁷ By learning more about themselves, both audience and author become more aware of the fundamental link between all mankind and all ages. Theatre is, therefore, the 'rassembleur des solitudes',³⁸ creating a common language and a link of mutual understanding based on common fears and experiences and on shared emotions. However, communication alone is not enough, Ionesco believes; to communicate something of value necessitates not only originality in the content of the work, but also a renewal of the means of expression, constantly transcending former limits in order to formulate states of being that have hitherto been considered inexpressible. 'La valeur d'une oeuvre réside essentiellement dans ce qu'elle a d'explicable', Ionesco states.³⁹ The recognition that he has found throughout the world proves that he has indeed achieved this, for, as he himself modestly admits, 'si l'on a tellement écrit sur moi, favorablement ou non, je puis oser penser que j'ai au moins murmuré quelque chose qui approche l'essentiel'.⁴⁰ Thus, art is a process of exploration and discovery for both author and audience, widening their horizons and affording them a privileged insight into themselves, each other, and the world, for we are reminded:

La fonction de l'art n'est-elle pas de nous révéler à nous-mêmes et en même temps aux autres? D'être une révélation de mondes inconnus, d'univers inexplorés, afin d'ajouter non seulement à notre sensibilité, à notre intelligence, à notre joie, mais surtout à notre humanité, en nous révélant ce que nous pressentions peut-être sans le savoir encore.⁴¹

'Qu'il est difficile de se révéler à soi-même; qu'il est malaisé d'écarter l'apparis par coeur -ce cholestérol des artères de l'esprit- le su qui est mal su tant qu'il n'est pas une redécouverte intime', Ionesco writes in his Notes.⁴² This is exactly the challenge that he makes in his theatre. Art, he believes, should be an instrument of shock,

³⁷ Marcel Proust, Le Temps retrouvé (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p.424.

³⁸ Touchard, Le Théâtre at l'angoisse des hommes, p.219.

³⁹ Antidotes, p.233.

⁴⁰ Ionesco, Preface to Situation et perspectives, p.19.

⁴¹ Leonard C. Pronko, 'Théâtre politique', Esprit, 338 (May 1965), 964.

⁴² Notes, p.358.

liberating the individual from the sterility of preformulated concepts and habitual patterns of thought or action by forcing him to see reality and himself in a new, startling light. In his theatre, Ionesco destroys the clichés of language and reveals the forces of conformity and anonymity with which society and material concerns threaten the individual. If the first reaction is laughter and a refusal to recognize a life that is all too disturbingly real and the second reaction is pain, as we acknowledge what we are or what we may become, the final result is to prompt a vigilant awareness that Ionesco believes is the guarantee of freedom, for, he reminds us, 'dire la dure vérité, inconsolable, c'est proposer la liberté'.⁴³ Armand Gatti wrote of the modern theatre:

Je n'arrive pas à considérer le théâtre comme un moyen d'amuser, de distraire. Je préfère le concevoir comme un perpétuel moyen de libération - non seulement de préjugés, d'injustices (ce qui va de soi), mais aussi du conformisme et de certaines façons de penser qui, arrêtées, deviennent cercueil.⁴⁴

Ionesco's challenge to all accepted notions, his obsession with not providing any answers, has mistakenly been interpreted by some critics as the nihilistic destruction of an anarchist. Ionesco's intention, however, is positive and constructive. By clearing the ground of inauthentic modes of existence, he aims to put each individual on the path to search for his own personal truth and to rebuild an authentic existence for himself, not according to any formula prescribed by the author, but according to the dictates of his own being and unique vision. 'Ce qu'il lui demande', explains Robbe-Grillet, 'ce n'est pas de recevoir tout fait un monde achevé, plein, clos sur lui-même, c'est au contraire de participer à une création, d'inventer à son tour l'oeuvre - et le monde - et d'apprendre ainsi à inventer sa propre vie'.⁴⁵ By its process of constant questioning, by its violation of comforting illusions, together with its emphasis on individual freedom and the spontaneous deployment of the imagination, Ionesco believes that the overall force of his theatre is positive and integrative, for, as Georges Anex puts it, 'tel est bien la fonction de la littérature: elle recrée la vie qu'elle met en question'.⁴⁶ The fact that Ionesco

⁴³ 'Ionesco, êtes-vous notre Molière?', Interview with Marlyse Schaeffer, p.122.

⁴⁴ Armand Gatti, 'Sur le théâtre', R.T.F. Cahiers Littéraires, 2, 18 (21 June - 4 July 1964), 8.

⁴⁵ Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, p.134.

⁴⁶ Georges Anex, 'Chronique du roman: une aventure existentielle', Journal de Genève: Samedi littéraire, 238 (14 July 1973), 15.

was awarded the Prix Jerusalem for his contribution to 'la liberté de l'individu dans la société',⁴⁷ proves that he has indeed been successful in this endeavour.

Ionesco's theatre, therefore, adds a new twist to Aristotle's theories of the therapeutic effect of theatre. For Ionesco, theatre is indeed a means of inspiring pity and terror, but not with the aim of purging the passions to 'un état modéré et conforme à la raison',⁴⁸ for reason and logic are discredited as they are unable to comprehend the complexity of the modern world or the individual. Ionesco aims on the contrary to excite man's passions to their maximum intensity thereby inspiring him to endeavour to continue to live in the state of heightened awareness of himself and his surroundings, experiencing the deeper emotions and more immediate sensations that he has known through the medium of theatre. Thus, Ionesco 'a choisi d'écrire', as Robert Kaners points out, 'non pour apaiser notre soif et notre faim, mais pour les exciter toujours davantage'.⁴⁹ Moreover, by transforming his inner attitude, Ionesco believes that the individual not only increases his consciousness of his individual identity, but he is also able to transfigure all reality, for, he asserts, 'si je change, je change le monde'.⁵⁰ The idea of a solution to the search for individual identity is thus replaced by the dual imperatives of lucidity and creation, and the measure of man's success in the search is gauged, not by the goals achieved, but by the depth and sincerity of his struggle for self-fulfilment, by his ability to constantly question himself and reality afresh, and to live every moment to the full as though it were his first, or last, on earth:

Etre conscient à chaque instant que l'on existe, c'est difficile et passionnant, terrifiant et miraculeux. Il n'y a pas d'autre merveille, d'autre conte de fées qui surpasse le simple fait de pouvoir dire: 'Ce matin je me suis levé, j'ai ouvert la fenêtre et le soleil brillait:'. Les jours de pluie, c'est pareil: il n'y a pas de moment plus exaltant que le moment présent et chaque moment est le premier de la vie.

Le pouvoir de ressentir cela, c'est l'art et la littérature qui nous le donnent. On ne se baigne jamais les mêmes eaux.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Antidotes, p.46.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, cited by Eugène Vinaver, Racine et la poésie tragique (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1967), p.37.

⁴⁹ Robert Kaners, 'L'I.O.N.E.S.C.O.', Express, 767 (28 February - 6 March 1966), 47.

⁵⁰ Journal, p.137.

⁵¹ 'Eugène Ionesco ouvre ses valises', Interview with François Varenne, p.24.

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