

THE MIRACLE OF BEING: AN ANALYSIS OF FOUR MAJOR THEMES
AS THEY APPEAR IN THE WORKS OF EUGENE IONESCO

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by

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His eyes are quickened so with grief
That he can watch a grass or leaf,
Every second grow.

Robert Graves

Although he suffers great anxieties, Eugen Ionesco has never stopped being astonished with life. He was born in Slatina, Rumania in 1912. He received his early education in France, but later he returned to Rumania where he attended the University of Bucharest. After completion of his studies, Ionesco became a teacher of French and a literary critic. He was in Marseilles at the outbreak of the war, and he refers to it constantly in his journals. Although Ionesco dwells often on the atrocity of Nazism, he also describes the joy of living. He refers to rare moments of euphoria that he experienced in his childhood. During these times he was transformed by an incomprehensible awareness of the "miracle of being." He has struggled throughout his life to find again that

interior mechanism that could set the
world a blaze, that could transfigure
it...all one need to do is press a but-
ton; we fumble about for it in the
shadows on one of the walls of an enor-
mous strange house...¹

Ionesco spends most of his life in the shadows. His plays seem to present for us the enormous walls of this strange house in which we grope for the light. Yet the plays seem constantly to remind us that the light is there, although his characters never find it. They are blinded by the social patterns of their lives, by automatic language, by bourgeois conformity, by totalitarian ideologies, and ultimately, by death itself. This paper will concern itself with a discussion of

these themes as they appear in the plays. Mention will be made of those people and happenings that influenced Ionesco as they become relevant to the themes discussed.

The philosophy of Croce greatly influenced Ionesco. Particularly affecting was Croce's idea that "there are two kinds of thought: discursive thought and intuitive thought. Or to put it differently, logical thought and aesthetic thought. For this reason, (continues Ionesco) I think that dreams are the pure expression of intuitive thought."² Croce is mentioned here to point up the fact that to Ionesco existence included the unconscious. To him dreams were as real as anything else that happens. Therefore he created a drama that often germinated from dreams, and that relied heavily on dream-like elements in its presentation. This came in opposition to the "boulevard theater" which contained only a "puppet show" miming of external reality. Ionesco found naturalistic theater an obvious sham that was embarrassing and false. He wished for a theater that would revive intuitive thought that springs naturally from our inner being.

In his drama Ionesco attacks those shams which keep us from discovering inner truths. The artificiality of the language is one of Ionesco's primary targets. And particularly, he attacks that language upon which man depends for logical communication and thought. It is true that the use of the same word patterns by millions of people tends to force conformity and the dulling of creative thought. Language becomes a great leveler. The more it is used, the less it comes to represent the mystery of each single life experience. Ionesco points up this fact. The language of his plays is never conventional. He tears words from their ordinary context. He strips them of their ordinary meaning. By so doing, he alienates us. Suddenly, we are not comfortably listening, but

looking at our language objectively. Seeing it in this detached light, we become aware of its inadequacy.

Ionesco distorts language by magnifying the use of platitudes, truisms, and cliches. By so doing Ionesco points up the banality of ordinary conversation. This can especially be seen in "The Bald Soprano," as Ionesco explains:

I started with cliches, reflex phrases, ready-made truths. There comes a point when these truths go berserk. It comes from the fact that the characters are puppets, members of a universal petty-bourgeoise. They live on slogans. Basically, all I had to do was to listen to the people around me talking.³

This comment by Ionesco remind me of a recent television documentary that appeared on a children's show. It illustrated the laziness of people as they carelessly misused the language. The documentary cited a particularly good example. It was a one minute clip of conversation in which the words "you know" were used twenty-one times. Ionesco is also calling our attention to the trite trivia with which we fill our speech.

Many times Ionesco juxtaposes a cliché with a horrifying situation thus emphasizing its inadequacy. An apt example of such a contrast is in "Amedee." Madeline is overwrought with anxiety due to the constant growth of a corpse in their bedroom. The situation is ludicrous, and Amedee, her husband, comforts her with the words: "Everyone has problems."⁴ Banalities also take the form of repetitions. Amedee constantly tells his wife that he "will get down to it." Semiramis in "The Chairs" constantly consoles her husband with: "You could have been head-president if you had wanted to--if only you'd had a little ambition." Such repetition between husband and wife becomes meaningless, and yet it

fills our lives.

Another device Ionesco uses with words is to take them out of their grammatical context.⁵ For example in "The Chairs" Semiramis mentions the guests who will come. In the list of guest come "penholders and chromosomes." Or Ionesco may keep the words in their proper context, but make them totally illogical as in "The Bald Soprano": "You may sit down in the chair, when the chair hasn't any," or "I'd rather see a bird in a field, than a marrow in a wheelbarrow." Sometimes Ionesco invents new words, as in "Jacques, The Submission." He coins such words as "boyle" for boy; "aristrocant" for aristocrat; "ploor" for poor; and so the list could continue. Ionesco uses any method he can to make us aware of the superficiality of language. Perhaps his most effective method comes at the end of the "Bald Soprano." Here the characters start by shouting platitudes at each other until these disintegrate into a barrage of (in the words of Coe) "quasi-meaningless" sounds:⁶

Mrs. Martin: You cacklegobblers! You gobble-cacklers!
 Mr. Martin: Cat's lick and pot's luck!
 Mrs. Smith: Krishnawallop, Krishnawallop, Krishnawallop!
 Mr. Smith: The Pope's eloped! The Pope's no soap! Soap is dope!
 Mrs. Martin: Bazaar, Baseball, Bassoon!
 Mr. Martin: Business! Bosnia! Buster!
 Mr. Smith: Aeiou, aeiou, aeiou!
 Mrs. Martin: Bcdfg, lmnop, rstvwxyz!
 Mr. Martin: Do re mi fa sol la si do!
 Mrs. Martin: Said the barley to the cabbage, said the cabbage to the oats!
 Mrs. Smith: (imitating a train) Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff Puff!

As Coe explains: "In this type of passage language is used to provoke the spectator, to force him by the sheer violence of sound to react...no less forcibly than a man who has been jabbed with a red hot poker."⁸

Ionesco was once asked by Bonnefoy if he attached any special meaning to each particular distortion. Ionesco answered, "None. Which is why I use them."⁹ Exactly right, he need attach no meaning. He need only shock us into a realization of the careless abandon with which we use our language.

Before concluding this discussion of the types of distortion, mention should be made of the technique of overlapping dialogue.¹⁰ A most effective use of this occurs in "Rhinoceros." The scene is a sidewalk cafe. Jean is trying to convince Berenger to give up his dissipated way of life. The two are seated at a table downstage, while a Logician and Old Gentleman are seated at a table upstage. They are discussing the logic of the syllogism:

Logician: Here is an example of a syllogism.
 The cat has four paws. Isidore and Fricot
 both have four paws. Therefore Isidore and
 Fricot are cats.
 Old Gentleman: My dog has got four paws.
 Logician: Then its a cat.
 Berenger: I've barely got the strength to
 go on living. Maybe I don't even want
 to.
 Old Gentleman: So then logically speaking,
 my dog must be a cat?
 Logician: Logically, yes. But the contrary
 is also true.
 Berenger: Solitude seems to oppress me. And
 so does the company of people.
 Jean: You contradict yourself. What oppresses
 you--solitude, or the company of others?
 You consider yourself a thinker, yet, you're
 devoid of logic.
 Old Gentleman: Logic is a very beautiful thing.¹¹

This intermingling of conversations is an excellent statement of Ionesco's anti-logic. The reality of the world can be grotesquely twisted by the rational use of logic through language. People can be persuaded to do anything through words. Nazism started in words. As Ionesco suggests, anything can be justified with words. Perhaps this explains his vicious

attack on language.

Ionesco forces us to see that language is nothing more than a string of sounds. He does this not only through various distortions, but also through actual references to language by characters in the plays. "The Lesson" contains a direct discussion of language:

The Professor: If you utter several sounds at an accelerated speed, they will automatically cling to each other, constituting syllables, words, even sentences... denuded of all sense, but for that very reason the more capable of maintaining themselves at high altitude without danger in the air. Words charged with significance will fall, weighted down by their meaning--and in the end they always collapse, fall...¹²

Coe explains that Ionesco's "words fall like stones, like corpses."

Even in moments of utter seriousness, Ionesco's language maintains some gap between thought and word. And "across this gap the living energy of meaning cannot pass."¹³

Since he was a teacher of French, it is only natural that Ionesco should be concerned with the co-existence of so many various languages. He spoke French, Rumanian, and studied English. Several of the plays refer directly to problems posed by language barriers. Berenger gropes blindly with the problem in "Rhinoceros":

Berenger: I can't bear the sound (referring to the trumpeting language of the rhinoceroses) of them any longer, I'm going to put cotton in my ears...the only solution is to convince them--but what to convince them..of what?...In any case, to convince them you'd have to talk to them. I'd have to learn their language. Or they'd have to learn mine. But what language do I speak? What is my language? Am I talking French? Yes it must be French. But what is French? I can call it French if I want to, and nobody can say it isn't--I'm

the only one who speaks it. What am I
saying? Do I understand what I'm saying?
Do I?¹⁴

This is the predicament of man as he is forced to look squarely at the sounds he utters. And to complicate matters more he must realize that the same object will have a dozen different sounds attributed to it. This idea is brought out in "The Lesson" when the professor asks the pupil to translate "the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who was Asiatic." When he translates it correctly he says it exactly the same in Spanish, Latin, French, Rumanian, and Oriental. We have a double absurdity. The phrase was senseless to start with and its translation was merely a repetition of the same words. Ultimately, Ionesco seems to be saying that all languages are equally absurd and that all words are equally incapable of carrying meanings. In "Jacques the Submission" Roberta explains that in her country house everything is carried by one word, puss:

Roberta: Everything is puss.
Jacques: Everything is puss.
Roberta: One name for every single thing; puss.
The cats are called puss; food, puss; insects, puss; number one, puss; number two, puss; number three, puss; twenty, puss; thirty, puss; all the adverbs, puss, all the prepositions, puss. It makes talking so easy...
Jacques: To say let's go to sleep, darling..
Roberta: Puss, puss, puss, puss
Jacques: To say: bring me some cold spaghetti, warm lemonade, and no coffee...
Roberta: Puss, puss, puss, puss, puss, puss, puss, puss
Jacques: And Jacques, and Roberta?
Roberta: Puss, puss.¹⁵

The last two lines are especially significant. "And Jacques and Roberta?" The lines seem to ask, what about us? Each of us? What about our identity? The answer comes heavily: "Puss, puss." Their identities are merged with

everything else. They are lost. Thus Ionesco shows that man is forced into conformity by the automatic nature of his language. One must marvel at the ability of Ionesco to create such an iconoclastic language without destroying the lucidity of its meaning--and this he has done, most effectively.

Ironically, Ionesco uses one aspect of language without any distortion. Highly poetic passages can be found in all his plays. Of course Ionesco was a literary critic and especially interested in poetry. At one time he planned to write a thesis on the themes of death in French poetry, but this was never completed. So he came by his interest naturally. He uses imagery, rhythm, rhyme, all poetic techniques as freely as he uses distortions. For a man who hates words, he certainly knows how to use them to communicate sensual experience. The sexual imagery used by Roberta as she entices Jacques is a perfect example of this:

I'm all moist...I'm a necklace of ooze, my
breasts are melting, my pelvis is soft, I've
water in my crevices..beneath dripping blan-
kets we make love...swelling with bliss!
You plunge deep and dissolve..in the rain my
streaming hair. My mouth is streaming,
streaming, my shoulders bare, everything
flows and streams, the sky's a stream, the
stars flow and stream...¹⁶

Here language is purposeful. Poetic. Provacative. It is not the banal language of ideas, but the language that springs from the emotions of our inner being.

Much more could be said about Ionesco and language. The more I say, the more I seem to leave unsaid. I've tried to select those things which seem most important. Mention should be made here of the possible influence of Antonin Artaud. Artaud has become since his death in 1948 one of

the most fashionable theorists of the avant-garde theater. Artaud's Theater and Its Double has nourished many absurdist writers. Although Ionesco refuses any indebtedness to Artaud, certainly much of what he does with drama was suggested by Artaud in Theater and Its Double. He must accept Artaud's basic notion of "shattering language in order to reconstitute it anew and to touch life."¹⁷ Artaud also proposed a much freer use of the mise en scene. Ionesco did just this. He utilized dance in "The Chairs," slides in "The Killer" and "Rhinoceros," absurd props in "Amedee," and so the list could grow. Ionesco used lighting and often interspersed song in his plays. So he was realizing in part at least Artaud's idea of "poetry in space." Artaud proposed that the theater should shock its audience into a realization of their primordial consciousness. This is not unlike Ionesco's insistence that there is a reality beyond our conscious and rational faculties. At any rate Ionesco, in the words of Coe

accuses Artaud of ignorance, of incompetence in the realm of practical drama, and of a kind of insensitive dogmatism which, in the end was destined to do more harm than good in the crusade against the boulevard theater.¹⁸

Ionesco used many of the ideas proposed by Artaud, but his theater remains lucid. Artaud's did not. Ionesco's connection to the Surrealists is much the same as it is to Artaud. The surrealists proposed total spontaneity in writing and they relied heavily on dream sequences. Ionesco also believed in the importance of dreams, but he did not consider himself a surrealist:

I believe that a writer must expose a mixture of spontaneity, of subconscious impulses and of lucidity; a lucidity which is unafraid of whatever the spontaneous imagination may give birth to. If one were to insist upon lucidity, it is as

though one were to dam up the sluice gates. The waters must be allowed to come flooding out, but afterwards comes the sorting, the controlling, the understanding, the selecting.¹⁹

If is the "afterwards," the "sorting and controlling" that the surrealists missed. Artaud, the surrealists, and Ionesco all share a passionate belief in the metaphysical side of existence.

This paper has already examined the ways in which Ionesco uses language to show the stifling of man's metaphysical or inner being. Man's individuality is also destroyed by the duties inflicted upon him first by the authoritarian nature of the family in which he lives, and then by the society as a whole. I would like to preface this discussion with a biographical note on Ionesco's life that seems relevant here. Ionesco's father was a wealthy lawyer who became in turn an Iron Guard, a Freemason democrat, and a Stalinist. "He respected the state and believed in the powers that be," said Ionesco. "As far as he was concerned all opposition was wrong. As far as I was concerned all opposition was right."²⁰ However docilely Ionesco's father supported the state, he was a despot in his own home. He domineered his wife, subjecting her to great anguish. This seemed to deeply affect Ionesco. He vividly describes one incident that occurred between the two of them. "If any of the images I have of my father are, so to speak, silent; in the scene that follows there are not only images but also the sound of his voice and my ears still hear my mother's sobs."²¹ Ionesco goes on to describe his mother's attempted suicide, which was echoed, no doubt, in Madeline's attempt on her life in "Victims of Duty:"

She takes the cup and pours a whole bottle of iodine into it, like tears, like blood, staining the silver. My father had already gotten

up, very quickly, a few seconds before, and I can see him in his long underwear, hurrying over with long strides and holding back my mother's hand. My mother continues to weep as he takes the cup out of her hand.²²

Ionesco refers to his mother as a "puppet in my father's hands and the object of persecution."²³

Evidently the father attempted the same control over Ionesco, but failed. This is perhaps echoed in "Jacques, The Submission." At any rate, Ionesco explains:

He wanted me to become a bourgeois, a magistrate, a soldier. I was horrified by prosecuting attorneys; I couldn't lay eyes on a judge without wanting to kill him. I couldn't set eyes on an officer, a captain shod in boots without giving way to fits of anger and despair. Everything that represented authority seemed to me and is unjust.²⁴

This hatred of authority is it seems the thread that runs through all of Ionesco's works. And it is connected rather directly with the sense of duty inflicted upon individuals by family and society.

Ionesco refers to these social duties as "functions" in his conversations with Bonnefoy:

The unpleasant thing about society nowadays is that there's a confusion between people and their functions; or rather people are tempted to identify completely with the function they perform. Instead of the function taking a human face, you get a man dehumanizing himself-- losing his face. Today a 'man of letters' is a man of letters even in his dreams; he has a 'man of letters' wife, a 'man of letters' tie, a 'man of letters' friends. He's abolished by his function. He's swallowed up by the social machinery.²⁵

Ionesco is saying that man forced to "do his duty" to family and to country loses his identity. "Jacques, The Submission" and its sequel "The Future is in Eggs" turn a cruel, yet amusing light on the family

as it sets about the task of molding its off-spring. The father is a strong authoritarian figure, but so are the other family members. The comment in "Victims of Duty" is much more serious and involves the individual as he is swallowed up by authoritarian governments.

In "Jacques the Submission" we see a young man struggling to keep his identity against the onslaught of mother, father, sister, and grandparents. Each member pleads with Jacques to uphold the family honor and to conform to their family creed. Jacques pleads: "There's nothing I can do about, I was born like this...I am what I am." Father Robert commands: "Chin up and do your duty."²⁶ Finally, Jacques submits to his duty. He pronounces the family creed--"I love hash brown potatoes." Like the Bobby Watsons in "The Bald Soprano" Jacques' identity is merging with that of the family. His second duty is, of course, to marry. This he also fights until the three-nosed Roberta II seduced him. Just before the sexual encounter Roberta II describes the hideous drowning of a child in a pond (an image that is used also in "The Killer"), the drowning of a dog "engulfed in the marsh, buried alive, and then she describes herself: "In my belly, there are pools, swamps...you plunge down and you dissolve..."²⁷ The connection here is obvious, Jacques by submitting will drown himself. However the fires of desire, pictured in the metaphorical image of a flaming horse, are too much and Jacques does his duty.

"The Future is in Eggs" begins where "Jacques" ended. The central problem of the play is that Jacques and Roberta II have been married for three years and not performed their duty:

Jacqueline: You're neglecting production!
 Why don't you get on with it? After
 all it's your main duty.
 Father-Jacques:
 Mother-Jacques:

Grandmother-Jacques: It's your duty!
 Father-Roberta II:
 Mother-Roberta II:
 Jacques: (to Roberta II) That's true my dear.
 Roberta: (to Jacques) That's true my dear.
 Jacques & Roberta: It's our duty.²⁸

Still Jacques evades the problem. The Father of Jacques decides he must take control: "We must each impose our authority when it is called for...I see that I've got to bring all my authority to bear on this."²⁹ Jacques is then reminded of his grandfather's death. He reacts belatedly, but eventually he dutifully cries. Production will continue the family. He gets down to business. Roberta II gives birth off stage--cackling all the while. Jacques remains on stage to hatch the eggs. And so it come that Roberta II and Jacques submit. They produce eggs and more eggs that are carried onto the stage in baskets. Then the family asks: "What are we going to make of the off-spring?" Each member chimes in as they list all the possibilities. The grandmother completes the list with "and omelettes. And above all, lots of omelettes."³⁰ That seems to be the point of the play. The family pressures destroy the individual until he is only a soggy mixture of them all.

Martin Esslin calls "Victims of Duty" a playwright's play, "an argument for and against the problem drama."³¹ However, my discussion of this play will center on a secondary theme: the oppression of the individual by the state. Early in the play Madeline and Choubert are talking about government. Choubert mentions the fact that government suggestions soon become laws. Madeline's answer seems to reflect what Ionesco's father might have said:

Well, my dear, you know, the law is necessary, what's necessary and indispensable is good, and everything that's good is nice. And it really is very nice indeed to be a good, law abiding

citizen and do one's duty and have a clear
conscience!³²

Madeline is indoctrinated. She offers no resistance, she has no doubt but that the state is right. Then a detective arrives. Of course, he symbolizes the naturalist's approach to literature, but he also seems to represent the autocratic power of the state. He forces Choubert to delve into his subconscious to remember something about the former tenant, Mallot. Like the Professor in "The Lesson" he begins politely and ends brutally victimizing Choubert. The orders given Choubert by the detective are discomfoting in their familiarity. Choubert disintegrates into mental anguish, but still the detective prods him on: "You must realize Mallot's got to be found again. It's a question of life and death. It's your duty. The fate of mankind depends on you."³³ Choubert is a helpless victim in the hands of the detective. His suffering is emphasized by the indifferent urgings of the detective: "You must be a man to the bitter end."³⁴ When talk fails, the detective assisted by the dutiful Madeline begins stuffing Choubert's mouth with bread to plug the gap in his memory. It is then that Nicolas, a sensitive poet, arrives. After some philosophical discussion about the new writing, he becomes appalled at the suffering of Choubert and he brutally knives the detective, who dies saying: "I am...a...victim... of...duty."³⁵ Madeline realizes that Mallot may never be found and that the detective has died in vain. She urges Nicolas to continue stuffing bread down the helpless Choubert. This Nicolas does. He is like so many revolutionaries who become as evil as that which they overthrew. The play ends with Nicolas performing the detective's function as Madeline shouts: "We are all victims of duty. Chew. Swallow. Chew.

Chew. Swallow!"³⁶ This play is obviously darker than "The Future is in Eggs" and "Jacques." It would seem logical that this play does reflect in part the indifference of the Nazi regime to human suffering.

This brings us quite naturally to the third theme of this discussion, the oppression of the individual by totalitarian governments. Ionesco saw the fascist movement as it swept through Rumania. He witnessed the tyranny of Hitler. His journals are saturated with his hatred of collective ideologies and especially Nazism. The idea for "Rhinoceros" certainly germinated from this hatred:

Around 1940: The police are rhinoceroses. The judges are rhinoceroses. You are the only man among the rhinoceroses...Here is a rhinoceros slogan, a slogan of the "New Man" that a man can't understand: everything for the state, everything for the nation, everything for the race. This seems monstrous. What I will admit is this: everything for God, if one is a believer; or, if not, everything for man, for men, for the joy of man. How can anyone be for the state which is only a administrative machine?³⁷

The abundance of such comments in Ionesco's journals force my agreement with Richard Coe who said that "Rhinoceros" is an "implacable diatribe against the oppression and poison of the Nazi state; the nightmare that absorbs all other nightmares is that of Adolf Hitler."³⁸ Esslin suggests that the main meaning of the play lies in the inability of the sensitive man to ever fit into a society of bourgeois conformity. He bases this on the fact that the play was inspired by Kafka's Metamorphosis which deals more generally with the mutation of collective thought.³⁹ Coe replies, however, "all too many critics have turned the play into an abstraction--a 'universal parable' on the subject of 'conformism.' Universal it may be, but when 'universality' is used as an excuse for

making oneself deaf to a call for action, then it's time to restate the particular." Coe goes on to say, "the fell disease of 'rhinoceritis' is the condemnation, not of any ideology to which man may feel the urge to conform, but specifically of the Nazi ideology."⁴⁰

I think this can also be supported by glancing at the many references to Nazism in other plays. In "The Lesson" the professor subjugates and kills the pupil. When he is afraid for what he has done the maid gives him an armband with the insignia of the Nazi swastika. "Wait if you're afraid, wear this--then you won't have anything more to be afraid of... That's good politics."⁴¹ Cries of "Long live the white race!" echo in several plays. In "The Killer" we have another direct reference to Nazism as Mother Peep addresses a street crowd. She moves the mob with such absurdities as:

We won't prosecute, but we'll punish and
deal out justice. We won't colonize,
we'll occupy the countries we liberate.
We won't exploit men, we'll make them
productive."⁴²

The crowd answers with: "Long live Mother Peep." They even fall into the goose step at the end of the scene. So examples could continue, and if one were to analyze all the "would-be Nazis" who appear in Ionesco's plays--the personages of administrators, policemen, concierges, one would begin to see even more fully the contempt and fear that Ionesco held for the Nazi state.⁴³

So in summary we see that Ionesco is above all struggling to rediscover the "miracle of being" against insurmountable odds; conformity forced by language, conformity forced by man's duties to family and society, and above all against the dehumanization of the police state. But there is one more presence more ominous than all the rest. For it

there is no answer. Ultimately the "miracle of being" will be canceled out by death.

This fact weighs heavily on Ionesco. He is never free from the burden of his mortality, although he feels within himself a lightness that wishes to be free--eternal. For Ionesco consciousness is composed of two fundamental states: lightness and heaviness.⁴⁴ Heaviness he defined as the death of the spirit by the crushing power of the material universe. Lightness he describes as a sense of wonder, a transformation, a sense of existence that is apart of all things. It is not unlike Nirvana. The presence of these two states can be found in nearly all of his plays.

The dramatic action of "The Killer" begins with Berenger discovering a forgotten sense of lightness and joy. As the play opens, he arrives on an almost empty stage. It is brilliantly lighted. He has quite by accident taken the wrong street car and arrived at "the city of light." He tells the architect who designed the city that it re-creates in him an exhilarating joy. In a speech that lasts for several pages Berenger describes a childhood experience that once brought him a similar feeling of lightness and joy. (Ionesco actually had such an experience in Chapelle-Anthenaise. This description is nearly identical to the one given in Ionesco's journal.)⁴⁴ Berenger mentions such details as "a country town," "little gardens," and "wooden fences." He explains that at this time he was transformed and "a song of triumph rose from the depths of my being: I was, I realized I had always been, that I was no longer going to die."⁴⁵ The luminous, empty stage becomes a symbol of this state. It is quickly negated, however. The architect explains to Berenger that people are afraid even here. They don't come into the

street. A killer is on the loose. As the architect speaks slide projections show the murders. All are drownings. Thus, we have the state of heaviness. Man's euphoria is always sucked down by the existence of death.

From this point on, Berenger leaves the city of light and enters the dingy world in order to capture the killer. Immediately, we are overwhelmed by the heaviness of the construction of the setting. After much confusion with a concierge, a drunk, Mother Peep, the police, and Edward, Berenger finally confronts the killer. What follows is a twenty minute monologue during which Berenger attempts to convince the dwarf not to continue murdering innocent people. Somehow Berenger's arguments all break down in contradictions. He admits that even he is not sure that life is worth it: "It's possible that the survival of the human species is of no importance, so what does it matter if it disappears."⁴⁶

But then in a final rage of resolution, Berenger threatens to chop the killer into a "thousand pieces" and to "throw his ashes into hell." He withdraws two pistols from his pockets and aims them at the dwarf. With the odds absurdly in his favor, Berenger disintegrates, dropping to his knees and stammering:

Oh God! There's nothing we can do.⁴⁷
What can we do...What can we do...

The "joy of living" that Ionesco so wanted to recapture is always shattered by the weight of death.

"Amedee" contains a rather delightful variation of this theme. A gigantic corpse suddenly turns into a balloon that floats into the air carrying with it an astonished husband. On the ground a very angry wife shouts to her husband as he floats away: "Amedee, you may have gone up

in the world, but you're not going up in my estimation."⁴⁸ "A Stroll in the Air" also deals with the idea floating in the air. In it Berenger gains the ability to fly. He explains: "I've never been so relaxed; I've never felt so happy. I've never felt so light, so weightless."⁴⁹ This play ends as darkly as did "The Killer" with Berenger's awful description of Hell. When Martha asks him to fly her away from Hell, Berenger answers:

I'm afraid I can't my darlings. After
that there's nothing...Nothing. After
that there's nothing, nothing but abys-
mal space. . .abysmal space.⁵⁰

Ionesco enhances the contrast between evanescence and opacity by using a technique called by the critics, the proliferation of objects. They, of course, come to represent the crushing power of the material universe. Proliferation occurs with every kind of object imaginable; eggs, coffee cups, noses, rhinoceroses, furniture, and even words. The objects are added to the stage until their presence is ludicrous and awesome.

This technique is used most creatively in "The Chairs." The dream of joy is there, although not so defined as in "The Killer." The Old Man and Old Woman begin the play with a game of make-believe in which images of Chapelle-Anthenaise are again evoked. They tell the story of their arrival in the "city of light," Paris. Again there is described the "garden," the "village church," and a "road." However the old couple never really experience their vision. It is a dream they never grasped and never will. In fact the imagery is broken by the tears of despair from the Old Man. His wife playing his mother comforts him by explaining that when the guest arrive he will deliver his message, and then his life

will have meaning. The play proceeds with the arrival of the imaginary guests. More and more chairs are brought onto the stage for the host of people who have come. When the orator finally arrives, the Old Man and Woman know their message will be told. They wish to die with the fame of their lives intact. As the play ends, they jump from the windows on either side of the room and plunge to the water below. Of course there is no one in the room except the orator. The stage is covered with chairs with nothing on them. When the orator speaks he only utters guttural sounds, he says nothing. The lives of the old couple were meaningless. In their suicides we see again the heaviness of death, as expressed through drowning.

The themes of Ionesco's plays are most pessimistic, and he offers no answers. Yet, his plays become stimulating drama that is almost in the words of Coe "cathartic" in its effect. There are, I think, two primary reasons for this. The first is the structure of the increasing intensification and acceleration of one dramatic action; the second is the use of humor. Let us look first at the pattern of intensification. Ionesco, himself explained:

I do not write plays to tell a story. The theater cannot be epic...because it is dramatic. For me, a play is a structure that consists of a series of states of consciousness or situations, which become intensified, grow more and more dense, then get entangled, either to disintegrate or to end in unbearable inextricability.⁵¹

Ionesco's plays are controlled by a unity of action that is distorted until it grows into a wild, explosive climax. A description of his first childhood play demonstrates in simple terms the pattern of ascending rhythm:

Seven or eight children were sitting having tea together, and afterwards they smashed their cups, they smashed all the crockery, they smashed all the furniture and threw their parents out the window.⁵²

So the action of Ionesco's plays reaches a peak and is resolved. In "The Lesson" the conflict between the professor and the student terminates in what almost becomes a sexual orgasm. Note the description of the murder:

The pupil falls flopping in an immodest position onto a chair. The murderer and victim shout "Aaah!" at the same moment. After the first blow of the knife, the pupil flops into the chair, her legs spread wide and hanging over both sides of the chair. The Professor remains standing in front of her--his back to the audience. After the first blow, he strikes her dead with a second slash of the knife from bottom to top. After that blow a noticeable convulsion shakes his whole body.⁵³

One is reminded of the finish of "Jacques." The point being made here is that Ionesco's plays end in a climatic frenzy of action that can be equated to the power of orgasm. The release from this brings a cathartic effect. Esslin explains:

The pattern of Ionesco's plays is one of intensification, acceleration, proliferation to the point of paroxysm, when psychological tension reaches the unbearable--the pattern of orgasm. It must be followed by release that relieves the tension and substitutes a feeling of serenity. This liberation takes the form of laughter.⁵⁴

Thus we come to the use of humor in Ionesco's plays. Ionesco considered himself a part of the tradition including Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare. He resembled the Greeks in his unity of action. He

resembled Shakespeare in his use of comedy. However, Shakespeare did not directly mix the comic and the tragic as did Ionesco. His humor came only in moments of relief. The drunker porter in Macbeth is not a main part of the action, neither are the gravediggers in Hamlet. Ionesco does something very different with humor, he mixes it directly with the central line of action. He explains:

At the start, you have a little of something mechanical encrusted on the living. It's comic. But if the mechanical gets bigger and bigger, and the living shrinks and shrinks, things become stifling and then, tragic.⁵⁵

One can see this pattern especially clearly in "Rhinoceros." When the first pachyderm snort and runs across the stage in a cloud of dust, we laugh. When the second pachyderm tramples the housewife's cat, we laugh. When Mrs. Boef gallops on her "tenderly trumpeting" husband, we laugh. Slowly however, the infection has begun to grow. It takes all of Act One and part of Act Two for one transformation, but by the end of Act Three every character in the play except Berenger has been afflicted. Our laughter has turned to horror. The once comic rhinoceros has proliferated into hundreds who become awesome in their power. Berenger is left pathetically, helplessly alone. This is comedy turned to tragedy.

Ionesco firmly believed that the comic and tragic were interchangably mixed. Besides that he saw laughter as the only power we have against the tragedy of living:

Humor is liberty. It is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves--to become conscious of what is horrifying and it laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying. The comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to

bear the tragedy of existence.⁵⁸

The tragedy of existence for Ionesco is death. Even so, there is optimism in his works. For while he was ever afraid of dying, while he was never able to escape the fear of being swallowed in oblivion, there is in nearly all his plays a struggling against death. This is action that by its very existence negates death and affirms life. His theater is not didactic, but nonetheless it depicts as monsters those things which squeeze the life from us: we are victims of idiomatic language, victims of bourgeois conformity, victims of collective ideologies. He seems to tell us that because of these forces we are not alive. And although life to Ionesco contains more pain than pleasure, he sensitizes us to it. He forces us to share, in the special communion of the theater-- common anguish, but nonetheless a miracle.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ionesco, Eugene, Present Past Past Present (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1971), p. 157.
2. Bonnefoy, Claude, Conversations with Eugene Ionesco (Chicago: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 20.
3. Bonnefoy, p. 137.
4. Ionesco, Eugene, Three Plays, tr. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 2 (Retrospect).
5. Three Plays, p. 2 (Retrospect).
6. Coe, Richard N., Eugene Ionesco (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 41.
7. Coe, p. 42.
8. Coe, p. 42.
9. Bonnefoy, p. 132.
10. Three Plays, p. 3 (Retrospect).
11. Ionesco, Eugene, Rhinoceros And Other Plays, tr. Derek Prouse (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 18-19.
12. Ionesco, Eugene, Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco, tr. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 62.
13. Coe, p. 50.
14. Coe, p. 51.
15. Coe, p. 52.
16. Bonnefoy, p. 133.
17. Coe, p. 10.
18. Coe, p. 10.
19. Coe, p. 5-6.
20. Present Past, p. 16.
21. Present Past, p. 15.
22. Present Past, p. 20.
23. Present Past, p. 20.

24. Present Past, p. 16-17.
25. Bonnefoy, p. 16.
26. Four Plays, p. 100-101.
27. Four Plays, p. 107-108.
28. Rhinoceros & Other Plays, p. 123.
29. Rhinoceros & Other Plays, p. 125.
30. Rhinoceros & Other Plays, p. 140.
31. Esslin, Martin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 124.
32. Three Plays, p. 118.
33. Three Plays, p. 144.
34. Three Plays, p. 148.
35. Three Plays, p. 165.
36. Three Plays, p. 166.
37. Present Past, p. 77-78.
38. Coe, p. 90.
39. Esslin, p. 151-152.
40. Coe, p. 91.
41. Four Plays, p. 77-78.
42. Plays Volume III, tr. Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1960), p. 77.
43. Coe, p. 90.
44. Pronko, Leonard Cabell, Avante Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 62.
44. Bonnefoy, p. 13.
45. Plays, Volume III, p. 23.
46. Plays, Volume III, p. 107.
47. Plays, Volume III, p. 109.

48. Three Plays, p. 77.
49. Ionesco, Eugene, A Stroll in the Air & Frenzy For Two tr. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965), p. 59.
50. A Stroll in the Air, p. 116.
51. Esslin, p. 157.
52. Bonnefoy, p. 57.
53. Four Plays, p. 75.
54. Esslin, p. 158.
55. Bonnefoy, p. 108.
56. Esslin, p. 158.

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THE MIRACLE OF BEING: AN ANALYSIS OF FOUR MAJOR THEMES
AS THEY APPEAR IN THE WORKS OF EUGENE IONESCO

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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"And above all neither flight or anything else could give me greater euphoria than that of becoming aware that I was--once and for all, and that this was an irreversible thing, an eternal miracle--I know now in a luminous sort of way that I am, I myself am, everything is. The miracle of being. The miracle of being. The miracle of being."

"You are unhappy, but you don't know it. That's what is wrong with mankind; we've forgotten how to fly. It would be better for us to starve than not to fly..."

Berenger in "A Stroll in the Air"

The purpose of this report is to discover through the study and assimilation of biographical, critical, and artistic expression by and about Eugene Ionesco a general framework from which to view his works. Through the study of Ionesco's journals I became aware of his search for a metaphysical awareness of the miracle inherent in life. This concept was not borrowed from literary criticism, but was taken directly from Ionesco's own writing. This paper will discuss Ionesco's iconoclastic view of language, society, totalitarian governments, and ultimately death itself as those factors which press the essential life force from man. The themes will be supported through discussion of the plays, through citing supporting literary criticism, and through relating significant biographical information.