CHAPTER IV

EUGENE IONESCO:
THE ALIENATION OF A HUMAN GRANDEUR.

When Ionesco’s name is mentioned, almost invariably, several thoughts come to mind: anti-theatre, absurdism, nonsense …. The list could continue for quite some time, without meaning much at all. Albert Bremel seems to agree with this when he says of Ionesco.

*The playwright’s reputation, trussed and ticketed, sits in a box smelling faintly musty and labeled either the Absurd or the Grotesque depending on whether researchers read their catalogue cards. From the west or the east and that “his plays purportedly deal with ‘nothingness’ or ‘absence’ or ‘silence’.”*

Thomas Bishop makes, in his article “The Theatre of the Absurd”, a pertinent remark on the themes, content and stage craft of the absurd theatre:

*in the anti realistic new theatre, it is not so much a matter of what happens (even if often very unexpected things happen), but rather the possible meaning of what is happening.*

He goes on to say that the goal is to show the observer the irrational element of his or her own existence, which is one of Ionesco’s goals.

The term absurd fails to do justice to the works of Eugene Ionesco. The existential thought of the time was that we were born into this life without any hope for transcendence or redemption, and that we are merely passing from one void to another. According to this philosophy, only humans can shape human existence since there is no God, but life can seem absurd in the process. In the theatre of the absurd, this idea is taken further to express the confusion that modern existence can create. Theatre of the absurd with which Ionesco has been categorized does not, adequately, describe the author or his work, since Ionesco does not intend to say that God is fictitious. Rather, Ionesco paints a vivid picture of a society without God.

Of course, meaning is the most important aspect of Ionesco’s work, but what happens is the very way to find that meaning, so seemingly, nonsensical events cannot be completely discounted. He may very well be saying to the
audience, that their existence is irrational and absurd, but this is far too simple a statement for such complex theatre. Though he has publicly claimed that his plays do not hold a hidden meaning. He clearly does not wish to unveil all his secrets in one fell gesture, nor should any one critic claim to do so.

It is through the absurdity lens that Ionesco reveals the true character of society, the character that we would rather hide. Though some critics would like, as Albert Bremel alluded to, merely cast Ionesco aside, put a convenient label on him, this, however, does injustice to a man who gave so much to the theatre. There are also critics like Richard Coe, who flippantly declared in a discourse he gave in Sydney, that, “Ionesco says nothing. He has no ‘message’, hidden or otherwise.” Though Coe admits that this goes against common sense. I contest that it also against the truth.

The popular plays of Ionesco protested the dehumanizing effects of modern civilization-the age of machines in which the individuals reduced to a statistical entity or is reduced to “Mr. Zero.” They present the despair, anguish and mystery of the individual who vainly seeks meaning for his or her existence. The individual desperately tries to evolve a pattern, a form, a value to hold on to that might provide a semblance of order in the face of chaos and confusion. His chief concern is to depict the absurdity and ambiguity of the human condition and the irrationality of the universe. His plays express the futility of human endeavor in a universe ruled by chance. His plays reflect something timeless: themes that have been and will be analyzed continually. Ionesco rarely claims to label himself anything; in fact, he considered himself so contradictory from week to week, his only claim was that “no statement can be absolute.”

In a time of depression after the First World War, art reflected the uneasiness of the society in which it was created. In a world that created the Lost Generation of novelists, dramatic literature was evolving into something new as well, something which would later be coined the Theatre of the Absurd. Fed by the future devastation of World War II, a genre of dramatic literature found inspiration in the uncertainty of life, mostly through playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, a Romanian native who expatriated to Paris, France.
during the Second World War. Though Ionesco is often considered the epitome of the Theatre of the Absurd, the term used to describe the genre of his writing was not conceived until much later by Martin Esslin:

... the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

Compared to writers such as Samuel Beckett and Jean Ganet, Ionesco began writing after a long struggle with the reality of human mortality and the senselessness of language. While trying to teach himself English, Ionesco was struck by the absurdity of language itself. While watching the world succumb to the totalitarianism of World War II, Ionesco realized a foe beyond the surface level of language: logic. Ionesco’s dealings with death and logic in his everyday life were reflected directly into his writing, and his observation of the irrational was dramatized in plays such as *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs*, and *Rhinoceros*. *The Bald Soprano* can be considered the manifesto for anti-theatre—an example of exactly how Ionesco was going to change the scope of the traditional limitations common among other theatrical writers. Ionesco explored themes of excess and exaggeration; he was very aware of his own obsession with these themes: there is something free and unfettered about excess. It’s not eating to live, it’s eating to burst. In fact, many of his plays revolve around a continual growth or repetition of a specific element, something commonly attributed to the Modernist period.

Ionesco’s plot is the beginning of his distortion of the typical theatrical conventions. The plot never leads to traditional climax or resolution. It is circular: the couple that begins the play, *The Bald Soprano*, is interchanged with the visiting couple, who end the play in the same position, as if nothing had happened in the hour in between. There is no designated main character, no overarching moral, and no sense of completion at the end of the play; “the characters themselves do not appear to understand what they are communicating.” The circular quality is also shown through the characters who not only verbally repeat themselves, but also find no developmental change from beginning to end. The circularity and repetitiveness emphasize the excess of his anti-theatre. Many of his following plays continue with these
ideas of repetitiveness and circularity. “The Bald Soprano” had conventional format – scenes, dialogue, characters but no psychology. That means Ionesco’s characters are dehumanized, emptied of all psychological content because they have no internal conflict. Again, Ionesco commented on the lack of psychology in his characters when he remarked that there are no real characters, just people without identity. Rhinoceros is Ionesco’s creation of an anti-play with psychology, because the anti-play becomes more fully approachable in terms of characters and plot.

Ionesco has been called the founder of the “Theatre of the Absurd.” His works changed the face of the 20th century theatre. They stress the absurdity both of bourgeois values, and the way of life that they dictate. The world seems to him infinitely strange and foreign. There is nothing but a succession of “crises” of rupture, repudiation and resistance, impotence, inner bewilderment, terrifying aloneness, frustrated hopes, unfulfilled dreams … etc. His plays explore that man continues in his search for a temporary stay in the flux of life, or a foothold in shifting sands of reality, a sense of rationality in what appears as an irrational universe. Arthur Miller says in this regard:

This is the land of great big dogs, you don’t have man here, you eat him! That is the principle, the only one we live by it just happened to kill a few people this time, that is all. The world’s that way … This is a Zoo, a Zoo!

In this zoo the inhabitants, isolated from the space, are beyond a particular social identity and outside the pale of society. They are reduced to abstractions.

Ionesco thinks that all thought, all art is aggressive. The light of memory, or rather the light that memory tends to things, is the palest light of all. Man is not quite sure whether he is dreaming or remembering, whether he has lived his life or dreamed it. In this way Ionesco repeatedly emphasized the decisive role of imagination, not only for what is usually called mental health, but, what is more important, for the new quality of life brought forth by an active and creative imagination. Bonnefoy says in this point, “imagining is building, it’s making, creating a world … By first creating worlds one can “recreate” the real world in the image of the invented, imaginary worlds.” So just as dreams do, memory makes him profoundly aware of the unreality, the
evanescence of the world, a fleeting image in the moving water. At such a moment, he gazes upon it with a mixture of anguish and euphoria, separate from the universe, as though placed at a certain distance outside it; he looks and sees pictures, creatures that move in a kind of timeless time and spaceless space, emitting sounds that are a kind of language he no longer understands or ever registers.

Marian Toplin and Richard DeFuria claim that Ionesco’s plays are dreamlike, with “over-determined ‘manifest content’ which distort and conceal perfectly rational underlying thought.” This implies a fictionality and a lack of reality that was not at all what Ionesco himself had as an objective, as well as a lack of well-planned ideas. Any dreamlike quality found in his theatre serves, as absurdism does, as a tool to create the only reality possible in theatre, according to Ionesco. Ionesco’s reality, however, was something radically new; an accusation against the actor. Ionesco felt that the actors themselves were the very foundation of fictionality that was unfair and unjust. This fictionality was brought to play by the mere pretence on the part of the actor, rather than actually becoming the character.

Richard DeFuria would suggest that Ionescian theatre is “a purposeful misapprehension of reality”, and by so doing only teasingly suggest that there is more than they are willing to discuss. DeFuria also intimates that Ionesco, and other absurd playwrights, have “given up the fight to resolve problems in a period of anxious waiting.” Based solely on Ionesco’s words from Notes and Counter Notes, this is completely untrue. Yes, Ionesco’s theatre does not misunderstand reality, but rather, breaks our own relationship with it so that we may develop a new one. With this new relationship with reality, it would be possible to see more clearly.

Ionesco’s plays do indeed have a message. Though Ionesco is not often thought of as an anthropologist, he did make anthropological observations through his characters on stage. He once said that he doesn’t pretend that his plays are going to save the world. Instead he hopes that his plays will help his contemporaries to forget at least for a few hours, the oppressive “historical moment”, and thus to break through the automatisms, the cliches and the ideological opacities of everyday life.
Ionesco’s work conveyed what he viewed as man’s struggle to survive in a society, that he said, formed barriers between human beings. His work satirizes the deadliness and idiocy of the daily life of bourgeois society frozen in meaningless formalities. His work characteristically combines a dream or nightmare atmosphere with grotesque, bizarre, and whimsical humor. In his work the tragic and farcical are fused. Ionesco’s plays are very funny; they are serious, they are also obscure and difficult. However, for Ionesco, the texts of these plays are sacrosanct, because this text contains everything required for the character.

Ionesco’s plays show the cruelty which is contrived to alert others to the cruelty loose in the world, the persecutions without purpose, the tortures which victimize the torturer as much as the tortured and end by emptying everybody of humanity, like the citizens of the little French town who turn into rhinoceroses and then… ultimate absurdity! … deliver stirring addresses on the superannuation of humanism “let me no longer hear the name of man!” The cruelty in Ionesco’s plays is never simply another flogging of the bourgeois of the kind in which the French theatre has so happily indulged itself since the time of Moliere, however, much the thorough beating given the middle class in his work may seem to be a beating for beating’s sake. There is compassion for the miserable old couple in The Chairs, but it stops short of sentimental connivance in their delusions and distortions.

There is a certain sharing of the misery that follows the breakdown of communication with a human being in The Killer (1957), but it never becomes what Ortega calls a “lived reality” in which the viewer is compelled to share the schizophrenia vicariously. That kind of torture is not inflicted upon an audience, either by Ionesco, or Beckett, or any of the others who write this sort of play. One may be moved by the sight of Lucky in Waiting for Godot, a rope around his neck and driven by a whip, but one needs not feel a tightening around one’s own neck or a sharp pain across the back. One must recognize the dreary, if hilarious, accents of too many of one’s own conversations in the dialogue of The Bald Soprano, but not because one sits, with the Smiths or Martins in a middle-class English room, on an English
evening, wearing English clothes, sharing English food, English silences, English talk, English pretensions.

Ionesco has gone beyond any mere duplication of experience, any mere editing of everyday events, into what he himself calls the interrelation of historical and non-historical, of timely and timeless, that reveals the common, inalterable substance which can also be discovered, instinctively within the self. Thus, Ionesco emphasized on people and situations from ordinary life – the role environment plays in the life of man. Generally man was seen as the product and victim of his surroundings which were seen in the form of social situations, political and economic issues and not only in the form of a metaphysical power such as fate or chance or God; these forces were studied objectively and scientifically. These forces merge in man and overpower him to such extent that he loses his identity and will and becomes merely their aspect. Raymond Williams says:

*Society is inside of man and man is inside of society, and he cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until he understands his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from what he is not.*

Thus, Ionesco’s plays are rooted in reality – a true social reality which includes both social relationships and absolute personal needs enforcing a social fact. Chaos and the frightening abyss of discord reign the world. As Milton says in his poem, *Paradise Lost*:

*... the unreal, vast, unbounded Deep of horrible confusion....*  
The untractable Abyss, plunged in the womb of unoriginal Night and Chaos wild.

It is unreal because nothing issues from it; only possibility exists there, the possibility of those elements being brought together into form. Not having form it is unbounded Deep. Nothing complete, nothing began is in it. Unoriginal Night, it has no source, and is a source of nothing.

*In Rhinoceros*, the pervasive disorder in nearly all of his plays, the disorder is not a true disorder, since the rhinoceroses symbolize, in part, the fascism, which is more or less organized, particularly at the time of World War
II, which Ionesco was criticizing. One of the recurrent themes of *Rhinoceros* is the conflict between the "ideal of civilization" and the "ideal of nature".

Jean : After all, rhinoceroses are living creatures the same they've got as much right to life as we have!
Berenger : As long as they don't destroy ours in the process. You must admit the difference in mentality.
Jean : Are you under the impression that our way of life is superior?
Berenger : Well at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incompatible with the standards of these animals.
Jean : Moral standards! I'm sick of moral standards! we need to go beyond moral standards!
Berenger : What would you put in their place?
Jean : Nature!
Berenger : Nature!
Jean : Nature has its own laws. Morality's against Nature.
Berenger : Are you suggesting we replace our moral laws by the law of the jungle?
Jean : It would suit me, suit me fine.
Berenger : You say that. But deep down, no one ...
Jean : We've got to build our life on new foundations. We must get back to primeval integrity ...

In this passage the rhinoceros incarnates the dream of simplifying the complexities of an over-civilized society, of a return to "natural innocence" and to a "state of nature" in which the degeneracy of modern man will be finals purged and redeemed. But, to Ionesco, it is precisely this glorification of nature which constitutes far and away the most dangerous aspect of the Nazi Ideology-dangerous because it may have a quite genuine appeal to the over-civilized mentality. Thus, *Rhinoceros* is fundamentally an analysis of this betrayal. The problem is not "what is Fascism?" but "How does a rational and civilized nation come to accept the Fascist ideal?"

When Ionesco wrote *Rhinoceros* in 1958, he was clearly influenced by the war surrounded him only years before and by the mob mentality war
creates. As more people joined the Nazi party, a majority was born. Those people who stood against it often succumbed to the debased morals of the organization. Ionesco describes his feeling of wonder at how easily his own friends acquiesced to the herd through the metaphor of a human transforming into a rhinoceros:

I spoke to him. He was still a man. Suddenly beneath my very eyes, I saw his skin get hard and thicken in a terrifying way. His gloves, his shoes, became hoofs; his hands became paws, a horn began to grow out of his forehead, he became ferocious, he attacked furiously. He was no longer intelligent, he could no longer talk. He had become a rhinoceros.19

Ionesco chose the metaphor of a rhinoceros because of its thick armor, its ruthlessness, and, most importantly, its herd mentality. Ionesco’s genius lies in his ability to craft a play that shows the dichotomy between mindless mass conformity, and the overwhelming allure of this mentality.

Rhinoceros shows an entire community afflicted with rhinoceritis, the malady of conformity. Average men and women but also philosophers, intellectuals, all catch the bug. Only Berenger retains his humanity, and towards the end, when he is all alone, he begins to feel most uncomfortable with his white human skin covered with light body hair since with the brutes around him seem to rejoice in their thick, green hides. Berenger finds himself alone in a dehumanized world where each person tried to be just like all the others. It’s just because they all tried to be like each other that they became dehumanized, or rather depersonalized, which is after all the same thing.

In Rhinoceros, Berenger feels ‘out of place in life’, among people; for him, the anguish of the subconscious has begun to acquire an outline-blurred, but nonetheless impressive in the conscious minds; solitude seems to oppress him, and so does the company of other people. Life is abnormal business. Additionally, the disorder in The Lesson, for example, is almost entirely limited to the sphere of the professor and the maid.

Disorder becomes a common theme within the framework of Ionesco’s plays. He plays upon the contrast between order and disorder. In
Rhinoceros, as everyone in the town becomes a rhinoceros, the growing disorder is very apparent, as the dangerous contagion spreads like a disease, complete with physical symptoms. The string of deaths, murders and suicides closely parallel the spread of “rhinoceritis” in Rhinoceros is that it starts with one random victim and spreads faster and faster throughout all class sectors of community. So Ionesco’s plays don’t find an end of anguish, despair, mystery and violence. Instead, these diseases seem to reach to the farthest limits possible.

Despite the many ways that people die in Ionesco’s plays, why they die is the most important factor-frequently, the death, or violence, that takes place in his plays is more symbolic than literal. The disturbing evidence of transformation in “Rhinoceros”, for instance, is a result of the contagion and corruption of propaganda. He was attempting to demonstrate, through death and violence, that modern man was on a deadly path. Since Ionesco’s plays are considered part of the theatre of the absurd, the question is thus raised, “Is death absurd?” Perhaps some may think that it is, but it is also a real social issue, one that has long been relevant.

In biblical history, the original violent act was that of murder, when Cain slew Abel. The roots of this violence are to be found in the act of sacrifice itself. Abel sacrificed the firstling of his flocks to God, whereas Cain gave God a portion of his harvests. Thus, in a primitive society, violence is the direct result of suppressing violent urges rather than expressing them in the healthy way of sanctioned sacrifice. Thus, violence and death that are widespread in Ionesco’s plays, and Ionesco was very outspoken about these subjects as well.

Michel Lioure is speaking of Ionesco’s humanism, says that Ionesco thought that the “new man” was recognizable in his uniformity of his language and thought, and by his submission to intellectual and social conformism. This new man, as Ionesco says, is no longer a real person but an impersonation. The denial of who we truly are in exchange for the identity of the masses is prevalent in Rhinoceros, as everyone begins to think more
and more as the rhinoceroses think; to speak how they speak. In *Victims of Duty*, Choubert, Madeleine, and the policeman are all victims of duty, just as the title implies. There is no room for doubt that they fall prey to the system.

In *Rhinoceros*, Berenger, the protagonist, is the only person who does not watch the contagion with a passive eye, and thus does not fall prey to it. In the case of Ionesco, weakness makes a person a good victim because it makes him a bad citizen. The signs that accompanied the illness that plagues the town are no more arbitrary than any of other elements of the play. The very first symptom of the illness, fascinatingly enough, is fear. The fear of the illness, the fear of death, the fear of the symptoms, the fear of others, all of these fears, are just some examples of the fear. In a way, fear is the very thing which allows the illness to spread, since it disables a person’s will. Fear is simply a manifestation of the knowledge that some unwanted event is possible, since weakness is present.

Another significant symptom is redness of the hands, seemingly symbolic of guilt. Quite naturally, the expression “caught red-handed” is one that easily comes to mind. Guilt is a plague of its own society that can ruin the moral fabric of society. Redness of hands is followed by a loss of the senses, such as the ability to smell, hear, see, and even feel—once a person has submitted himself to the propaganda, catch phrases and ideas that are fed to him, he can no longer function as an individual. Consequently, on the intellectual level, that person loses all power of perception, and becomes the automaton that Ionesco despised as a “petit-bourgeois”.

Early reviewers and audiences found Ionesco’s plays obscure and inaccessible, largely because they broke all the rules of naturalistic theatre. Today critics agree that one of Ionesco’s great achievements is in making non-representational and surrealistic techniques acceptable to viewers and allowing them to think beyond the bounds of conventional experience and language. As he became established as an important new voice that was invigorating modern theatre, Ionesco was praised in left-wing circles and reviled by the right because of his iconoclastic approach. However, those on the left soon rejected him because of his refusal to accept any ideology and
his seemingly a political stance—Ionesco once said that ideologies separate us. Dreams and anguish bring us together. He adds that there is no philosophy or ideology that does not think that we live in alienation. Ionesco himself complained that reviewers were too quick to judge his work based on their own ideological bias rather than a thorough understanding or appreciation of his method or literary merit. Contemporary commentators have begun to recognize that even in his early so-called ‘nonsense’ work, there is a clear sociopolitical stance in his passionate defense of individual freedom, even if Ionesco himself always refused to classify it as such.

For the most part, assessment of the plays has concerned Ionesco’s use of proliferating objects to present external forces that dominate the human spirit or to explore the disastrous consequences for human existence, the use of the irrational to liberate the imagination; an existential view of life as both tragic and comic, and the longing for freedom that is distinctive of his characters. Many of these appraisals share a recognition that although the world Ionesco creates are bizarre, chaotic, and frightening, he holds out the hope that the human imagination, if freed, can marvel at the astonishing fact of human existence in a fleeting world. Ionesco once said that only imagination and artistic creation can make more meaningful, more dense, more true.21

Critics saw the multiplying objects in his works as suggesting the alienation and loss of identity experienced by people in a modern society – Ionesco once remarked that it is not a certain society that seems ridiculous to him, it’s mankind. He emphasized the absurdity of a world that could not be explained by logic. His major plays focused on alienation, the specter of death, and the bourgeois mores that have displaced the significance of love and humanity onto work. In several of his plays, Ionesco portrays the modern man trapped in an office, engaged in shallow relationships, and escaping with alcohol from a world he does not understand. Yet this is all presented in the Theatre of the Absurd, the father of which Ionesco was considered, characteristic morbid wit, an often self-conscious, comic sensibility that makes
up laugh at the most horrific ideas – death, alienation, evil – in an effort to understand them.

Ionesco’s plays present, in a tangible way, the solitude, inconstancy, boredom, and anxiety of humans and insignificance of one’s existence. They express Ionesco’s wonderment and anguish at the strangeness of reality. They present a picture of man’s confrontation with nothingness. They show a dramatization of man’s confrontation with emptiness and void, suffering and evil, fear and unbearable sadness and death. These are the horrors of modern man, because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.

“Rhinoceros” is especially good at treating the topic of emptiness without the possibility of fulfillment. Berenger resists becoming a rhinoceros, decides to be one, and then fails to achieve it. Finally, he is left on his own. He must find his own way, without relying on the ideas of others. Though Ionesco seems to promote a bleak future, he is merely prophesying of possibilities to come.

On the surface, it may seem odd that the majority of Ionesco’s plays do not belong to a specific time of period. All things seem to occur at a sort of universal time, and quite frequently, in a sort of universal place.

Richard N. Coe has called Ionesco “the most characteristic protagonist” of the Absurd, and points out that in spite of a slender and uneven output he has been remarkably popular; he gained a large audience, more than any other dramatists of his group. Ionesco has written notes and explanations, and asserts, very strongly, the basic theme of death:

*I have no other images of the world, aside from those which express evanescence and hardness, vanity and anger, nothingness or hideous and useless hate. Existence has continued to appear to me in this way. Everything has only confirmed what I have seen, what I have understood in my childhood. Vain and sordid furors, cries suddenly stifled by silence, shadows swallowed up forever in night.*

Ionesco, then, is concerned with two things: the human condition, and how to present it in the theatre.
We must not, however, burden Ionesco with the whole of Existential philosophy from Kierkegaard.\textsuperscript{24} Ionesco is a dramatist who is concerned both with life and with illusion in the theatre. It was corruptness in the theatre, as he saw it, which finally pushed him to enter it in order that he might alter it:

\begin{quote}
Aristotelically logic, true to myself, faithful to my duty and full of respect for my bosses: I don’t believe in the absurd, everything hangs together, everything can be comprehended in time... thanks to the achievements of human thought and science.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

In Ionesco’s play, \textit{The Bald Prima Donna}, as translated in England, and \textit{Bald Soprano} in the United States,\textsuperscript{26} Ionesco alludes to the movement from the finish of individuality to the assertion of a new life-force. In most production of Soprano this has led to a mechanical way of performing—as if the Smiths, the Martins, Marie, and the Fire Chief were puppets. So the author of this play sets in motion the mechanism of the theatre to portray aimless passions.

Such a play as \textit{The Bald Soprano} can only be understood as the unfolding of human existence on the level of “the one” described by Heidegger. The characters, absent from themselves, become as interchangeable as the lines they speak. Ionesco himself calls \textit{Soprano} an experiment in abstract or non-representative drama... the progression of purposeless passion. Purposeless because it is not the slave of plot, but the direct apprehension of the flow of energy from within the dramatic structure itself. In \textit{Soprano} the characters are dying and language is the true protagonist. What happens in \textit{Soprano} is parallel and homologous to what happens in society.

\textit{Soprano} is probably to stand up very well in time. It does not depend on tricks, but on the cohesion of its parts. It probes deeply and originally. It is playable and offers performers a creative challenge. The Smiths and the Martins are animated by erotic and aggressive impulses, but they don’t have any character, any more than they can be said to possess an identity, a social position, a past. There is nothing personal to say, the absence of any inner life, the mechanical soullessness of daily routine: man totally absorbed in his
social context and indistinguishable from it. The Smiths and Martins have
forgotten how to talk because they’ve forgotten the meaning of emotion
because they are devoid of passions, they have forgotten how to be, and
therefore, they can “become” any one, anything, for, since they are not in
themselves they are nothing but other people, they belong to an impersonal
world, they are interchangeable.

In *The Chairs*, Ionesco is even more direct, though it is typically
considered one of his most absurd. Throughout the play, the old couple
receives guests that only the couple can see or hear. From the beginning of
the play, we know that the old man has a message and he has arranged for
an orator to come to deliver it from him. The old man has already died when
the audience learns that the orator is actually mute and deaf. Regardless, he
still attempts to deliver the message as best as he can, and after seemingly
incomprehensible sounds.

What is even more remarkable is that the invisible guests, who were
previously imperceptible to the audience, act to this message. If the crowd
actually exists, then the old couple is not actually crazy, and the message is
real. The message is real, but the guests did not place any value upon it,
rather they laughed in scorn. Indeed, God is not dead, but to these quests. He
has lost importance and has become laughable. Though most of his plays
seem bleak and tragic, his message is not that the possibility of redemption is
totally gone. Although it may seem that he dwells on catastrophe and horror
he never blames it on God, but the cause, then, of the hopeless state of
modern society.

In *The Chairs*, the orator is supposed to deliver the old man’s
message, and delivers what is supposedly nonsense. Perhaps it is not the
orator who is deaf and dumb, but the audience instead. What is more, the
audience labors through the entire play under the understanding that the old
man and woman were crazy, since there were no actual people sitting in the
chairs. At the end, however, the sounds of the people are heard. Ionesco
instructs that their voices should be heard. What Ionesco is getting at is not
that life is absurd, but that the way we go through life is absurd.
Ionesco is not committed to political or religious codes; but neither can his plays be mere entertainment. In his plays he illustrates the dilemma by parodying both attitudes: that of the conservative critic who believes that theatre serves no purpose beyond amusing an audience, and that of the socially-oriented critic who believes that the theatre must be didactic. There is no more telling image in all Ionesco’s plays than that of the *Cité radieuse* at the opening of *The Killer*: a world where all social problems have been eliminated, yet where death still renders life futile and absurd, for, in the total condition of human illusion, two facts emerge: death and anguish and the only authentic society must be based according to Ionesco, on this common anguish. It is this which gives universality to the fundamental and private obsessions of Ionesco. The result is both thematic and technical:

*If our world is one in which people strike us as inhuman, then let us place robots on the stage. If we feel the physical aspects of life deny us the full development of our spiritual potential, then by all means let that be reflected in a play whose décor or properties slowly dominate the characters. If language is worn out, then let us show the solidified forms of languages as cliché and slogan, or words reduced to pure agglomerates of sound.*

This can be illustrated by *The Chairs* (1952). An Old man and woman have lived a mediocre life on an island. The old man is convinced that he has something important to say before he dies and, encouraged by his wife, he invites all remaining human beings to come and hear the message. A chair is brought for each guest who is invisible and when they are all assembled the old couple leap to their deaths in the sea, leaving the orator (the only other visible character) to deliver the message. But he is a mute and can only grunt (for what important message can be communicated and who could sum up life in a sentence?) The orator leaves and for along time we watch the stage, full of chairs listening to the waves washing on the walls of the house. Although the text includes an episode with a blackboard, this was not used in the first production; Ionesco intended a purely visual and aural conclusion.
Such a play brings us to the second period in Ionesco’s career. Hitherto, he has been mainly concerned with language, which, as Coe remarks, he has raised to the status of an object-in-itself. His characters serve as vehicles for this and could, in some places, be replaced by a tape recorder. Hence forth up to The Killer (1957) Ionesco is concerned more with the proliferation of objects. In this he fulfills the dictum of Artaud that the stage is a place to be filled with dead objects (not the fossils of language) and parodies the theatrical tradition of Zolo (1840-1902) – French writer and critic, and his followers (who, in their quest for naturalism, flooded the stage with objects of everyday living), he also, as Guicharnaud points out, replaces the qualitative one.

By 1957, with The Killer, Ionesco seemed to be taking a new line. His hero, Berenger, reminds us of Camus’s absurd hero (Ionesco is an ardent admirer of Camus). Ionesco rejects political commitment, but he is committed existence in the first of all commitments and the rest are incidental. He is passionately concerned with man’s freedom, and in Rhinoceros (1959) illustrates this by contrasting Berenger with Jean a man organized around slogans and fixed ideas.

Berenger’s best friend Jean is an example of a seemingly rational and stoic character. Jean has a logical answer for everything and is satisfied with his answers, however distorted they may be. Clearly, Berenger is most affected by Jean’s transformation—he is pushed into solitude, barring himself in his apartment. He alienated himself from society and others, that is relevant when he says to Jean “solitude seems to oppress me. And so does the company of other people.”

Berenger, keenly aware of the meaninglessness of everyday existence seeks a kind of oblivion in alcohol until the end of the play when he achieves (or forced into) a more heroic position. Jean has blind strength like a rhinoceros, and argument is impossible with him. By the end of the play Berenger is left alone surrounded by a herd of these thick-skinned rhinoceroses. A shocking but amusing image creating power and violence in the theatre. And perhaps something more, for Coe has pointed out that Ionesco’s
experience is fundamentally Nazi, and that the rhinos are specifically a
denunciation of Nazi ideology, a world where social order is based on logic
(and therefore without meaning), where the civil authorities (it is never
military) are menacing and evil. As for politics, since they, too, are presumably
based on reason, they are obviously inadequate for the solution of problems
in an irrational world.\(^{31}\)

Ionesco, then, is concerned with the deadly nature of bourgeois life, its
mechanical quality and the loss of a sense of mystery, anguish, the loneliness
of individuals and their difficulties in communicating in a language also
deaden by habit – Unlike the tramps and outcasts of Beckett and Adamov,
Ionesco’s characters are lonely in what ought to be a community context; and
unlike Beckett, Ionesco seems to have moved from the very absurd and
dehumanized play to the more sympathetic and human kind of play in which,
perhaps, Mrs. Martin could find a moral.

Ionesco began to explore more sustained dramatic situations featuring
more humanized characters. Notably this includes Berenger, a central chara-
ccter in a number of Ionesco’s plays, the last of which is translated \textit{A Walk on
the Air}. Berenger is a semi-autobiographical figure expressing Ionesco’s
wonderment and anguish at the strangeness of reality. He is comically naive
engaging the audience’s sympathy. In \textit{The Killer} he encounters death in the
figure of a serial Killer. It is \textit{Rhinoceros}’ theme of the dangers of collectivized
ideologies shown through its protagonist, Berenger, that makes the play so
effective. An autobiographical character,\(^{32}\) Ionesco’s Berenger appears
slovenly, the personification of “negligence.”\(^{33}\) However, it is Berenger who
remains human in spite of the total conformity occurring around him. Berenger
is the “\textit{hero in spite of himself}”;\(^{34}\) he makes no heroic attempts in the
traditional sense of the term, yet his human state at the end of the play
indicates something innate within him. Again, Berenger represents a shadow
of Ionesco in his plight:

\begin{quote}
\emph{When I was a young man in Romania – that was after I left
France to spend some years with my father – I remember
how everyone around me converted to fascism, till it seemed
to me that I was the only one left in the world. I thought at
the time that although I was the most insignificant of
creatures a terrible responsibility had befallen me, and that,}
\end{quote}
somehow, I would have to do something, or rather everything. Isn’t this the plight and privilege of the modern hero?²³⁵

Berenger becomes an anti-hero through his passive, or possibly ignorant, ineffectual and ignominious stance against the conformity that surrounds him. Unlike the epic or tragic heroes of drama before him, it is Berenger’s cowardice, ignorance, and laziness that provide protection from the antagonizing epidemic: “I’m not ambitious at all. I’m content to be what I am.”²⁶ Despite this insecurity, Berenger stands alone as rejecting a slogan, and avoids labeling himself into one specific group. Berenger’s ignorance of all things allows him to remain human. Flippantly, Berenger battles the various ideologies around him by realizing he cannot discipline himself to anything. His final, and perhaps only, heroic action is accepting his fate, refusing to believe that humanity as he knows it is lost: “I am not capitulating.”³⁷ Ultimately, Berenger’s humanity, which to Ionesco implies his acknowledgement of suffering and therefore is regarded as a pathetic state, is what keeps him away from the herd. Berenger’s opposition to a willful, heroic character makes Ionesco’s anti-play concrete.

In Rhinoceros he watches his friends turning into rhinoceroses one by one until he alone stands unchanged against this tide of conformism. It is this play that Ionesco most forcefully expresses his horror of ideological conformism, inspired by the rise of the fascist Iron Guard in Romania in the 1930s.

The play, Rhinoceros, is often read as a response to the sudden upsurge of Fascism and Nazism during the events preceding World War II, and explores the themes of conformity, culture, philosophy and morality. In this play totalitarianism is depicted as a disease that turns human beings into savage rhinoceroses. The hero of the play, Berenger, is a simple sort of everyman, who is also an image of Ionesco. Rhinoceros, whose protagonist retains his humanity in a world where humans are mutating into beasts, remains Ionesco’s most popular play. Rhinoceros is an absurdist allegory, on
which Ionesco’s fame largely rests. Apparently the play is a lurid picture of the ignoble submission of the helpless to the Nasis.

One finds in Ionesco’s works a coherent view of human relationships, stemming from the initial impact of a hostile father-son relationship. The protagonists appear psychologically in the positions of children being scolded by the father figures of authority. In his methodology, the father-son relationship is a paradigm of the political and social control exercised over the citizens by the state. Ionesco admits that hostility was prominent between him and his father. One vision of his father’s cruelty is retained in his memory since he was four years old, this when his father caused his mother to attempt suicide by drinking iodine. In *Victims of Duty*, the father forces the mother to drink poison, in *The Letter*, the father actually aborts the mother.

The purpose of that cruelty is demonstrated by the plays of Ionesco who, though educated in France, was born in Rumania and knows something at first hand of middle European tyrannies. He has called concentration camps the quintessence of the infernal society into which we are every day plunged and has found the fantasies of Kafka in the real world of the twentieth century dominated by fear, by that cruelly perfected type of egoism to which fear gives rise, and by the absurd yearning for power. The cruelty, in Ionesco’s plays, is contrived to alert others to the cruelty loose in the world, the persecutions without purpose, the tortures which victimize the torturer as much as the tortured and end by emptying everybody of humanity, like the citizens of the little French town who turn into rhinoceroses and then … ultimate absurdity! … deliver stirring addresses on the superannuation of humanism (“Let me no longer hear the name of man!”). The cruelty in Ionesco’s plays is never simply another flogging of the bourgeois of the kind in which the French theater has so happily indulged itself since the time of Molliere, however much the thorough beating given the middle class in his work may seem to be a beating for beating’s sake.

There is compassion for the miserable old couple in *The Chairs*, but it stops short of sentimental connivance in their delusions and distortions. There
is a certain sharing of the misery that follows the breakdown of communication with a human being in The Killer (1957) but it never becomes what Ortega calls a "lived reality" in which the viewer is compelled to share the schizophrenia vicariously. That kind of torture is not inflicted upon an audience, either by Ionesco, or Beckett, or any of the others who write this sort of play. One may be moved by the sight of Lucky in Waiting for Godot, a rope around his neck and driven by a whip but one needs not feel a tightening around one's own neck or a sharp pain across the back. One must recognize the dreary, if hilarious accents of too may of one's own conversations in the dialogue of The Bald Soprano (1958), but not because one sits with the Smiths or the Martins in a middle-class English room, on an English evening, wearing English clothes, sharing English food, English silences, English talk, English pretensions, English fatuities. Ionesco has gone beyond any mere duplication of experience, any mere editing of everyday events, into what he himself calls the interrelation of historical and non-historical, of timely and timeless, that reveals the common, inalterable substance which can also be discovered, instinctively, within the self... And thus he has preserved for the spectator the reflective element, the detachment, which characterizes the theatre in all its most significant periods.

The theatre of the Absurd is, in general a rebellion against all priorities in politics and religion, and in this case in art alike. In a vision of loneliness, fear, anxiety, despair, depression and danger painted with passionate expression. Ionesco supplied The Theatre of The Absurd with the fundamental traits under many different forms. The tragedy of his protagonists lies in their failure to make absolute choices, to come to terms with the world around them.

The absurd man has experienced an increasing lack of self-confidence and a powerful sense of insignificance and also is far from heroism. So they are "anti-heroes", that are convenient to the anti-theatre which was named as such because of its outward defiance of a theatrical norm in terms of its plot, character, and language. The depersonalization, the silence, and the boredom are anti-theatrical features, they are typically absurd. He has dramatized the condition of boredom. In his plays the alienation of the
individual or the subjection to the threatening hostility of a senseless existence is demonstrated directly without any need for comment by the characters who are themselves quite unaware of their predicament. The word “boredom” is never mentioned in any play by Ionesco to describe the situation of the characters. He avoids being over-explicit leaving the spectators to experience the total impact of the play and to interpret what they see.

Initially, the proliferation of objects – chairs (in the chairs), eggs (The Future lies in Eggs), furniture (The New Tenant), coffee-cup (Victims of Duty) – parallels Ionesco’s tendency to see the world of personal relationships as stifling and sickening, which consequently makes it impossible for him to deal with society in terms other than caricature. In Ionesco’s The Chairs the voice of the departing invisible guests blend with the voices of the off-stage audience leaving after the end of the show, which makes the onstage empty chairs no more than an extension of the rows of chairs in the stalls. In this play the couple attempt to pass on their total life experience to humanity by inviting to a gathering a vast crowd of guests who never arrive but whose non-presence is symbolized by a proliferation of empty chairs. Having convinced themselves that the crowd is assembled, the old couple kill themselves, leaving the narration of their message to an orator they have engaged who, as an added irony, turns out to be a feeble minded deaf-mute.

Ionesco’s The Chairs presents a picture of man’s confrontation with nothingness represented by empty chairs. But in the empty chair in “Monologue” the protagonist perceives a presence and a segment of the past. In ‘Monologue’ the character addressing an empty chair is a dramatization of man’s confrontation with emptiness and void, while the vivid imagining of a person sitting on the chair is man’s private fantasy projected into the void. Ionesco, in his play, The Chairs, has dramatized the condition of boredom.

He insists upon the nothingness and repeated absurdity of life. M.H. Abraham’s says that the play is “absurd” in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic as well as irrational; it is a deliberate parody of the traditional assumptions of Western Culture, of traditional drama, and even of
its own inescapable participation in the dramatic medium. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogue is often funny and pratfalls and other modes of slapstick and used to project the sense of metaphysical alienation and anguish.

It is well-known that Ionesco based his concept of drama on the notion of freedom and that his plays tend to grow in total freedom out of themselves, R. N. Coe, in this point, says:

\[
\text{invariably, I find in myself that it is some primary image, some initial rejoinder, which sets off the whole mechanism of creation … I never know exactly where I am going}^{41}
\]

the terms of Ionesco’s definition, humor creation and freedom are inseparable.

The image, typical of Ionesco, shows his frustration as a dramatist who is trying to convey his life experience to a crowd of vacant chairs through the mediation of actors who don’t understand his message. Similar images of despair concerning the isolation of the individual in the universe and the inevitability of death dominate Ionesco’s work. His break-through into English speaking theatre came with \textit{Rhinoceros} 1959; Eng Trans 1960, in which totalitarianism is depicted as a disease that turns human beings into savage rhinoceroses.

Ionesco’s plays demonstrate the dissociation of the signifiers and signified of modern life in which man has had every bulwark of security bombarded: community, religion, politics and family. What do these things and the words that represent them mean when the original sentiment associated with them is gone or in danger of disappearing? Ionesco’s portrait of the human condition is not a comfortable one. He provides a hard look at a world populated by individuals who can no longer rely on anything with assurance, least of all other individuals.

Through the couple’s dialogue or rather separate monologues with silent guests, Ionesco shows that the old man and woman are the symbolic progenitors of the human race. They realize the world is off kilter, but they don’t have the means to change it. They place all their hope in the orator, who
is sterile creator, the unsuccessful actor; he is a negative, passive character, one who will clearly not fulfil the role entrusted to him. On the other hand, the Orator emerges as the son whose story the Old Couple had begun to relate. His appearance on stage is highly dramatic since he is a flesh-and-blood character and cannot fail to remind us of the traditional image of the return of the prodigal son.

The key to the play lies in the old woman’s narration of their son’s departure. He left them long ago saying, “The streets are full of dead birds, of dying baby birds... it’s you who are responsible”. The importance of baby birds lies in the old Man’s statement that his mother called him her “little chuck”. Symbols of the pet name of a mother for her child, the dead birds represent the death of human tenderness and understanding. This is the world in which the old man and woman live, whether they are responsible for it or not. Neither the dying baby birds nor the old couple are the central focus of the play. Rather, they each represent the focus; the moribund nature of the relationship that should tie all human beings together. The old couple’s relationship is certainly the springboard for the play. But its importance lies in the contrast formed with the absence of visible guests, which is the manifestation of Ionesco’s belief in the modern breakdown in human connection. Through the play, The Chairs, Ionesco reveals that humanity is just like the empty chairs in empty room.

Ionesco, in his play, Rhinoceros, explores the mechanism of life imposed by a machine-oriented society, or society that seeks to eliminate individuality and impose ready-made ideas and slogans, Ionesco’s view of “Rhinocerization” as a hidden commentary on the repelling reality that encapsulates people’s lives under a totalitarian state-this being Nazi Germany in Ionesco’s case or in broader terms European Fascism. “We must move with times.” A work states when he joins up, while another insists “it is my duty to stick by my employers and friends, though thick and thin”, words which manifest “the gradual acceptance, though complacency and expedi-
ency, of the Nazi hooliganism as the ordinary and correct way of life”.

But Ionesco’s criticism extended beyond this to every type of “collective hysteria” or what one might call “current opinion”, which, if not resisted, can soon grow into a “regular epidemic”, or become a kind of “Mental mutation.”

“Rhinoceritis”-the disease of totalitarianism - makes people lose consciousness of self and unquestioningly accept the false slogans of the state. Ionesco explores the disintegration of reason and morality under a totalitarian state which is also encountered in The Killer in the image of the “radiant city” which has been designed and built by bureaucrats.

In “The Bald Prima Donna”, Ionesco attacks what he deplores most namely

the leveling of individuality, the acceptance of slogans by the masses, of ready-made ideas, which increasingly turn our mass societies into collection of centrally directed automatons.

The author is dizzy writing this play because his whole career indicates a deep problem concerning individualism. In this point he says, “while writing this play I felt genuinely uneasy, sick and dizzy.”

There is a demand for virtuosity in Ionesco’s theatre, in addition, the actor is a critical part, without whom Ionesco’s theatre would be reduced to mere marionettes without passion and humanity. The virtuosity demanded is that of the clown; the ability to compel an audience to be involved through originality, inventiveness, imagination and sheer skill. As Jean Vilar said, agreeing with Ionesco, an actor is not a machine, and “there is no technique of interpretation, but only practices and techniques.” Like the text, characters are pretexts who possess the potency for fully developed humanity. Ionesco described his characters as empty frames which the actors can fill with their own faces, their own shapes, souls, flesh and blood, “but he exposes his ‘empty frames’ to events of immense anguish, pain, confusion and terror”. They demand the actor’s fullest emotional resources. Donald Watson clarifies this apparent enigma:

He [Ionesco] could content himself with masks rather than faces, with the marionettes rather than actors, but for one thing; these fixed characters, rigid caricatures of ourselves,
have to respond to the dramatic action which is imposed on them by the author, just as we gropingly, try to adjust ourselves to a world we no longer understand.\textsuperscript{50}

The characters, in most Ionesco’s plays, are threatened with annihilation, either spiritual or physical. The Old Man and Old Woman in \textit{The Chairs} throw themselves from the window of the light house, presumably to their death, and the title character in \textit{Jack or the submission} succumbs in a sexual paroxysm, surrendering his own individuality to the onslaught of family and society. Ionesco creates the essential life-and-death situations. The forces against which humanity struggles are awesome, and Ionesco has provided only the archetype or the framework of both the destructive forces and the alienated, frequently pathetic victims.

Ionesco concerns with communicating his personal vision. He also strives to tell the truth—the truth about his intuition of the human condition. The truthful exploration of psychological, inner reality is in no way less true than the exploration of an outward objective reality. In deed, the reality of vision is more immediate and nearer to the core of experience than any description of an objective reality. Ionesco must be trusted to have, indeed, supplied the structural tension that moves an audience frequently to laugh and at the metaphysical anguish and weep at the ridiculous. “\textit{He agreed that the essence of both comedy and the tragedy lay more in the structure of the piece than in a guignolesque acting technique.}”\textsuperscript{61}

Since World War II, dramatic form has been in a state of constant flux, and acting has been hard-pressed to respond to the changing forms that reflect the shifting vision of life. The theatre of the late 1950s was characterized by a new commitment to radical social issues. Its decisive break with naturalism was manifest in its exploration of the dark and irrational recesses of human nature through new theatrical techniques.

Like Shaw and Brecht, Ionesco contributed to the theatre with his theatrical writings.\textsuperscript{52} Ionesco wrote mainly in attempts to correct critics who he felt misunderstood his work and therefore wrongly influenced his audience. In
doing so, Ionesco articulated ways in which he thought contemporary theatre should be reformed.\(^5^3\) In the first section of *Notes and Counter Notes*, titled ‘Experience of the Theatre’, Ionesco claimed to have hated going to the theatre as a child because it gave him “no pleasure of feeling of participation.”\(^6^4\) He wrote that the problem with realistic theatre is that it is less interesting than theatre that invokes an “imaginative truth” which he found to be much more interesting and freeing than the ‘narrow’ truth presented by strict realism.\(^5^5\) He claimed that “drama that relies on simple effects is not necessarily drama simplified”\(^5^6\)

Ionesco broke all the rules of naturalistic theatre. One of his great achievements is in making nonrepresentational and surrealist techniques acceptable to viewers and allowing them to think beyond the bounds of conventional experience and language. His writings, particularly *The Bald Soprano*, inspired a revolution in dramatic techniques and helped inaugurate The Theatre of the Absurd. They express the futility of human endeavor in a universe ruled by chance.

Though *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* can be considered Ionesco’s most recognizable plays, *Rhinoceros* remains in the foreground because of its timeless themes and accessibility. It is not just entertainment in the form of lyrical word mangling and a shocking twist of reality. It is a form perfected to incorporate something deeper and must be treated with the same respect in a modern day setting. Ionesco’s ultimate goal within *Rhinoceros* was not to shock people with theatrical stage effects and witty dialogue; that was merely the form.

*Rhinoceros* is one of Ionesco’s most effective anti-plays because of the skill with which he uses that framework. Ionesco’s anti-logic is used, not to express the banality of language and parlor-room dialogue, but to deliver a full-on attack of collective ideologies. Unlike plays like *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, *Rhinoceros* goes further, to employ the anti-play structure to desecrate modern logic. It can be effective because the primary focus of the play is its theme – a theme that is timeless and can be appreciated in both its
historical and current context. It is a “terrible farce and fantastic fable” and can remain as such in a current production. It is a question and a comment on the ideologies that still plague society.

The haunting of the fascist conformity during World War II is perhaps more frightening when a current audience is reminded that these ideologies still exist, that conformity still abounds in society and no one is safe from it. *Rhinoceros* is a warning sign of those who have succumb to the masses of collective ideology, and it retains its strength because of the continuing epidemic of mass conformity.

Ionesco thinks that what worried him in the theatre was the presence of characters in flesh and blood on the stage, considering their physical presence destroyed the imaginative illusion. It was as though there were two planes of reality, the concrete, physical, impoverished, empty and limited reality of these ordinary human beings living, moving and speaking on the stage, and the reality of imagination, face to face, overlapping irreconcilable two antagonistic worlds failing to come together and unite.\(^{57}\)

Ionesco attacked the basic premises of all existent theatre, which is to say those based on realistic and naturalistic acting. To him such a theatre was entirely self-contradictory and self – defeating:

> Yes, that was it, every gesture, every attitude, every speech spoken on the stage destroyed for me a world that these same gestures, attitudes and speeches were specifically designed to evoke; destroyed it even before it could be created. It seemed to me an absolute abortion, a fatal mistake, sheer fatuity.\(^{58}\)

Ionesco adds:

> It was the very image of the world that appeared to me strange and improbable but truer than true, in the profoundly simplified form of caricature, as though to stress the grotesque and brutal nature or the truth. And from then until I was fifteen any form play would thrill me and make me feel that the world is very strange, a feeling so deeply rooted that it has never left me. Every live show awoke in me this feeling for the strangeness of the world, and it impressed me no-where more than at the theatre.\(^{59}\)
This grotesque and brutal view of the world formed the basic of a philosophical concern in Ionesco’s dramas and had a great influence on the ideas for shaping views on acting and the theatre. It also reinforced his belief that the theatre was dead to him; it had lost its naivete and its power to captivate him. Ionesco felt that the theatre could achieve its renewal only through its own unique idiom, through heightened exaggeration of its own unique effects. It was not for him to conceal the devices of the theatre, but rather make them still more evident, deliberately obvious.

For, Ionesco, the theatre of realism not only contradicted itself, but eliminated the imagination. He desired to explore the extreme limits of the idiom of the stage, accepting no other restraints than the technical limits of stage machinery which he frequently stretched to “extreme limits.” Ionesco’s rebellion against the realistic theatre was prompted by his unique view: “I want only to render my own strange and improbable universe.” This rebellion extended to the actor who is charged to fulfil a function in this “vision of existence” created by Ionesco. His characters are devoid of psychological and the myriad motives that determine behaviour. He speaks to the actor: Avoid psychology or rather give it a metaphysical dimension. Drama lies in extreme exaggeration of the feelings, an exaggeration that dislocated flat everyday reality-dislocation, disarticulation of language, too. Moreover, if the actors embarrassed me by not seeming natural enough, perhaps it was because they also were, or tried to be, too natural; by trying not to be, perhaps they will still appear natural, but in a different way. They must not be afraid of not being natural.

Ionesco indicated in an interview that his characters in Amedee, or How to get Rid of It and in The Bald Soprano are “dehumanized, emptied of all psychological content because they have no internal conflict.” Again, Ionesco commented on the lack of psychology in his characters when he remarked that there are “no real characters, just people without identity (at any moment they may contradict their own nature or perhaps will change places with another).” In yet another passage with reference to The Bald
Soprano he called the roles, “characters without characters-puppets.” In an essay, “Discovering the Theatre,” Ionesco, remarked that he was totally opposed to the actor “changing skins … the actor identifying totally with his role.”

Instead of a psychologically developed and plausibly naturalistic character, the actor in Ionesco’s theatre is presented with a character that is a mere framework, which the actor must fill out. The fact that Ionesco’s characters are devoid of life and humanity prohibits the actor’s attempt to identify conventionally with the role. Ionesco describes his characters as “empty frames, which the actors can fill their own faces, their own shapes, souls, flesh and blood.” Furthermore, he states that the characters in many of his plays are so structured that the actors “have no need to slip into the skins of their characters, into the other people’s skins, all they have to do is slip straight into their own skins.”

Ionesco calls for a great humanness on the part of the actors who use themselves as the source for their character rather than relying on a developed psychology or the causative connection of motives appropriate to conventional character analysis. Without a developed psychology with which to identify or mimetically reconstruct, the actors must react spontaneously and without reflection or preconception to the situation of the play in terms of their own instincts and emotion. Above all, they must be inventive:

into the disconnected and meaningless words that they utter they can put what they like : comedy, drama, humor, themselves, what they have in them that is more than themselves.

It is true that Ionesco’s characters are trapped in a situation, just as human beings are trapped; and his characters are puppets, devoid of psychology – but it is not the case with the actor. It is, in fact, because of the hollowness of the characters that the actor has the freedom of instinct and imagination. And it is because of the humanness of the actor that Ionesco chooses to create fixed characters and rigid caricatures of ourselves. The character remains the actor’s “skin” and because of the challenge of the
dramatic action imposed upon them by Ionesco, the response requires a human being (the actor) with instinctual and passionate drives: “Emotion and instinct are the essential things: There are how we are realized.”

Ionesco’s characters are placed in a dramatic situation, and it remains the actors’ responsibility to show the human responses of the characters through their own responses to the situation of the play’s action. This is the principal reason why Ionesco says that the script is only a pretext for the play. He speaks of his characters as puppets because the human response is lacking, and consequently, it is the actor’s job to supply it. William T. Oliver recognizes this problem, but sees the actor as enslaved. He states: “By and large, absurdists provide the actor with the normative pattern and expect him to supply what little particularization is needed from his own being.”

The significance of the chairs in The Chairs, the physical metaphorical or actual change of Jean in The Rhinoceros, the three noses on Jack’s bride-to-be in Jack, or The Submission, and so on, to see that Ionesco viewed the theatre as the harmonious blending of all elements, of the mise-en-scene. Ionesco was determined to effect a renewal of the dramatic idiom, which meant that words, too, must find a balance in the mise-en-scene: the aural must be balanced with the visual.

In his plays, Ionesco used multiplying objects as his metaphor for the absurdity of life. In The Chairs (1952), an elderly couple served as hosts for an audience which would assemble to hear a speaker deliver a message that will save the world. The couple arranged seating for their never-to-arrive guests, and the stage became crowded with chairs. Convinced that their audience had arrived and was seated, the hosts killed themselves, leaving them to hear the speaker-orator- who turned out to be a mentally – impaired deaf-mute. In The Victim of Duty (1953), Coffee Cups multiplied, and in The New Tenant (1957), the protagonist’s apartment became progressively filled with furniture. Critics saw the multiplying objects in these works as suggesting the alienation and loss of identity experienced by people in modern society. Ionesco once marked that “it is not a certain society that seems ridiculous to
“me, its mankind,” and rather than “theatre of the absurd,” he preferred the phrase “theatre of derision.”

In the play, *Rhinoceros* (1959) totalitarianism transformed everyone into a savage rhinoceros except Berenger, who thinks about joining them but in the end decided to fight them. The inspiration for the play was Ionesco’s reaction to a friend having joined the Nazi party, but its significance was in its denunciation of mindless conformity to a mob mentality.

Ionesco believed that man’s condition in the universe was absurd—beyond human rationality and meaninglessness. He added that the only way for a life to have meaning was to commit responsibly to something beyond the self. In Ionesco’s play, *Rhinoceros*, a man overturns his apathetic, irresponsible life by committing himself to saving humanity. It appears that the old man’s “message” is an attempt to do the same thing, and his wife, the old woman, believes that with a mental commitment, the husband, the old man, will attain some kind of meaning. His reliance on the Orator to deliver the message can be viewed as a self-conscious move by Ionesco, as he, too, relies on actors to speak his words. Here the self-conscious techniques were used frequently in the Theatre of the Absurd, generally as ways to keep the audience honest; they were reminded that what they were watching was not an escape, but as artificial representation of life. In *The Chairs*, Ionesco uses self-consciousness more subtly and for a more personal effect, as a comment on himself as a frustrated playwright. This theme will grow more important as the play continues.

Ionesco’s plays are built on bizarre, illogical or fantastic situations using such devices as the humorous multiplication of objects on stage until they overwhelm the actors. In *The Chairs*, The Old Man and Old Woman create fantastic lives to escape their real ones, they regret the past but don’t take accountability for it, and the Old Man is not able to deliver his own message but relies on the Orator, thinking that his life will become meaningful with his message, but he has lived an irresponsible life. He and his wife indulge in the fantastic illusions to escape from reality. He has been a neglectful parent and
son, abandoning his dying mother and failing his son who called his parents responsible for departure. His final touch of irresponsibility is his inability to deliver the message himself as he relies on the Orator.

The Old Man is bored of his repetitive existence. He has told the same story to his wife every night for their seventy-five married years, and his day is filled with routine. Life is cyclical for him, in fact, he seems to be confused about his age. He sobs on his wife’s lap-whom in fickle fits he calls his “Mamma” and then decides she is not the Mamma. He calls himself an orphan, though he is the one who abandoned his mother.

Old Man (weeping suddenly): I’ve spoiled it? I’ve spoiled it? Ah! Where are you Mamma, mamma, where’re you mamma? ... hi, hi, hi, I’m an orphan. He (moans) ... an orphan, dwarfan ... (The Chairs, p.118)

The Old Man has a faded memory of his past. We can view that the Old Man was Ionesco’s projection of his literary frustrations. Ionesco has toiled on his message, but from his life and philosophy, and the actors, or the Orator, don’t understand his work rendering it meaningless. On the other hand, the Old Man is an irresponsible, coward, afraid and unable to deliver his message himself, and Ionesco may be launching a self–critique.

Indeed, Ionesco was not here for nothing. He made available contribution as only he knew how. In his early days, Ionesco found that the sacred aspect of theatre was missing, rendering it unbelievable. It is through his works that he was attempting to re-sacrifice the genre, lending something of the real to the unreal. Ionesco felt that something was missing from the theatre, and as soon as he gained what he called a critical spirit, it is through his plays he attempted to restore to society its missing sacred dimension, or at least through the ritual of theatre.

Ionesco has reached the total decomposition of the stage and achieved the irrationalist theater of which he dreamt. The frame of the stage-world, the letters of ordinary language are broken. He attempts to use language to express nothing, he tries to express something with no valid means of
expression. ‘Words create confusion,’ he notes, ‘words are not language.’ Language suffered a familiar crisis. War, with its inflated rhetoric, its propaganda, its diplomatic double talk allowing for broken promises, sapped the very essence of communication.

There are always things to say. Since the modern world is in a state of decomposition, you can be a witness to the decomposition. His works appear at first so strange and disconcerting and seem so fond of the weird and the monstrous, it is not because they are immured within the universe of dream or delirium, but precisely because they open out into his world in which the central theme of literature during the last twenty years is the absurdity of this world where man is left alone to fill in the void of God, give a name and meaning to things and freely, but unjustifiably, create his own values, literary expressions, but these expressions are irrational, disintegrated that of personality and that of language.

Ionesco uses nonsensical dialogue in the form of familiar cliches and slogans to mock commonplace notions about the world. He populates his stage with meaningless physical objects to emphasize his theme of unreason and convey a nightmarish sense of inanity. His reputation today is as one of the masters of a provocative performance style that engages audiences directly and urges them to think by giving bizarre embodiment to the commonplace. Some commentators have tried to capture the “meaning” behind the apparently meaninglessness of the language and situations Ionesco presents, while others claim that viewers and readers should look beyond meaning and concentrate on the “manner” rather than the “matter” of his works. For the most part, assessment of the plays has concerned Ionesco’s use of proliferating objects to represent external forces that dominate the human spirit; his assault on empty forms of language; the use of the irrational to liberate the imagination; an existential view of life as both tragic and comic.

In Ionesco, language not merely creates existence, having done so, proceeds to tyrannise and victimise its own creation. That language can
create existence is seen most clearly in *The Chairs*, where some five-and thirty creatures of flesh and blood and unmistakable materiality are conjured up, literally out of nothingness, by the words and gestures of decrepit characters. That language can destroy is seen most vividly in *The Lesson*, where the unhappy Girl – Student disintegrates stage by stage before our eyes beneath the sheer weight and impact of meaningless syllables, and is finally stabbed to death with the word ‘knife’. But these are, in one sense, crude examples. The use of language for the deliberate creation or destruction of others is, comparatively speaking, a rare and insignificant phenomenon beside the experience of words creating or destroying their own utterer.

Technical speaking, Ionesco has raised language from the status of a secondary medium to the dignity of an object-in-itself. It does not exist to serve the characters; the characters are simply a vehicle—and a fragile, highly expendable one at that—by which language is conveyed to the awareness of the audience.

Andre Breton once defined the poet’s first duty as that of “*stirring up language to a new state of effervesence*” in this sense, Ionesco is a true poet, for his final objective is the reconstitution of a new language in which poetry—even the most traditional, ‘poetic’ type of poetry—can once again be written—By showing up the meaninglessness of conventional idiom, by shattering the hard and crystallized, phraseology of common speech, his achievement is to throw back into the melting-pot all those individual elements of which rational language is composed; and from there, a whole vocabulary can then emerge anew. For the purpose of demonstrating in dramatic terms the absurdity of language, Ionesco’s favorite weapon is the platitude. Certain plays, or scenes within plays, are made up almost entirely, line by object line, of cliches, slogans and conversational commonplaces.

Ionesco was struck by the emptiness of the cliches of daily conversation. Out of such nonsensical sentences he constructed his first play, *The Bald Soprano* (1948) which was a comic parody of a play, an “anti-play” as he called it, portraying human life as automatism and language as a
senseless fragmentation of sentences. The language theme continued in Ionesco’s second play, *The Lesson* (1951) tutoring subjects ranging from the logical constructs of mathematics to the less rigorous rules of language. Consequently, language becomes rarefied, with words and material objects gaining a life of their own, increasingly overwhelming the characters and creating a sense of menace. His use of language expresses the futility of meaningful communication in modern society.

A part from the general devaluation of language in the flood of mass communications, the growing specialization of life has made the exchange of ideas on an increasing number of subjects impossible between members of different spheres of life which have each developed their own specialized jargons. In this point Ionesco says:

> As our knowledge becomes separated from life, our culture no longer contains ourselves (or only an insignificant part of ourselves), from it forms a ‘social’ context into which we are not integrated. So the problem becomes that of bringing our life back into contact with our culture, making it a living culture once again. To achieve this, we shall first have to kill the respect for what is written down in black and white …. to break up our language so that it can be put together again in order to re-establish contact with ‘the absolute’; or, as I should prefer to say, ‘with multiple reality’; it is imperative to ‘push human beings again towards seeing themselves as they really are.’

Ionesco was determined to effect a renewal of the dramatic idiom, which meant that words must find a balance in the mise-en-scene: the aural must be balanced with the visual. If one believes that ‘theatre’ merely means the drama of the word, it is difficult to grant it can have an autonomous language of its own. It can then only be the servant of other forms of thought expressed in words, of philosophy and morals. Whereas, if one looks on the word as only one member of the shock troops the theatre can marshal, everything is changed. First of all, there is a proper way for the theatre to use words, which is as dialogue, words in action, words in conflict. If they are used by some authors merely for discussion, this is a major error.
means of making words more theatrical: by working them up to such a pitch that they reveal the true temper of drama, which lies in frenzy; the whole tone should be as strained as possible, the language should almost break up or explode in its fruitless effort to contain so many meanings.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{But the theatre is more than words; drama is a story that is lived an relived with each performance, and we can watch it live. The theatre appeals as much to the eye as to the ear. It is not a series of pictures, like the cinema but architecture, a moving structure of scenic images.}\textsuperscript{77}

Perhaps no other moment in the theatre can better clarify Ionesco’s point of view than the lament of the Old Man in \textbf{The Chairs}, where the language and physical action achieves the unity and paroxysm Ionesco desires. The scene embodies not only the limitations of language to express the existential anguish of the Old Man, it becomes a testament to the unified visual power of the theatre as Ionesco suggests:

\begin{verbatim}
Old Man (Weeping suddenly) : I've spoiled it ? I've spilled it ? Ah ! Where are you Mamma, Mamma, where are you Mamma ? … hi, hi, hi, I'm an orphan. (He moans) … an orphan, dwarfan….

Old Woman : Here I am, what are you afraid of ?

Old Man : No, Semiramis, my sweetheart, you’re not my mamma… orphan, dwarfan, who will protect me ?

Old Woman : But I’m here my darling ?

Old Man : It’s not the same thing … I want my mamma, na, you’re not My mamma, you …

Old Woman (caressing him) : You’re breaking my heart, don’t cry, my little one.

Old Man : Hi, hi, let me go, hi, hi, I’m all spoiled, I’m wet all over, my career is spilled, it’s spoiled.

Old Woman : Calm down.

Old Man (sobbing, his mouth wide open like a baby) : I’m an orphan … dwarfan.

Old Woman (trying to console him by cajoling him) : My Orphan, my darling,
\end{verbatim}
you’re breaking my heart, my orphan. (she rocks the Old Man who is sitting on her knees again)

Old Man (Sobbing) : Hi, hi, hi! My Mamma! Where is my mamma? I don’t have a mamma anywhere.

Old Woman : I’m your wife, I’m the one who is your mamma now.

Old Man (giving in a little) : That’s not true, I’m an orphan, hi, hi.

Old Woman (still rocking him) : My pet, my orphan, dorfman, worphan, morphan, orphan.

Old Man (still sulky, but giving in more and more) : No … I don’t want; I don’t wa-a-a-ant.

Old Woman (crooning) : Orphan-ly, orphan-ly, orphan-lo, orphan loo.

Old Man : No-o-o… Noo-o-o.

Old Woman (same business) : Li lon lala, li lon la lay, orphan-ly, orphan-lay, relie-reloy, orphan-li-rettee-retta….

Old Man : Hi, hi, hi, hi. (He sniffs, calming down little by little.) Where is she? My mamma. It should be evident that the language and physical behaviour reinforce the depths of despair experienced by the ninety-five-year-old man and his ninety-four-year-old wife. The language disintegrates from a painfully conscious and rational recognition of a condition to an irrational, primordial moan of despair—all the time with the Old Man on the Old Woman’s knee in childlike caress.

The scene also represents a building block of their desperation, which leads to the panic-driven fantasy of creating the eminent guests for whom chairs are so essential. The play’s major metaphor, the proliferation of always empty chairs, epitomizes the irony of the couple’s existential loneliness. Certainly, this scene is one of the twentieth-century theatre’s most ironically pathetic moments. It also represents one of Ionesco’s most successful attempts at challenging the actor’s humanness through an aural and visual impact that serves to balance the mise-en-scene. Ionesco’s vision is well expressed in his *Notes and Counter Notes*:

Just as the words are complemented by gesture, acting and pantomime, which can take their place when words are no
longer adequate, so they can be amplified by the scenic elements of the state as well.\textsuperscript{80}

To communicate this experience dramatically Ionesco starts by showing us familiar characters in a familiar world – usually presented in a familiar theatrical convention – and then lets the unfamiliar erupt through the picture until it disintegrates and we are faced with an illogical world, which has an alarming and unfamiliar logic of its own.

Ionesco’s treatment of story and situation, properties and set, character and emotion is all of a piece. Each element reflects the dynamic tension of his world: a world in which the familiar and the unfamiliar, the logical and the illogical coexist but never correspond. All this is expressed originally in the authors’ language.\textsuperscript{81} Just as \textit{The Lesson}, both implicity and explicity, demonstrates his attitude towards words. There he makes it clear that for him words gain insignificance as they lose in meaning. Luckily, as they do so, they also tend to make us laugh. Ionesco’s style often produces comedy, but it does much more than that. Ionesco, in his play \textit{The Lesson}, shows language as a means of dominance when the student is made to collapse gradually under the impact of the ranting utterances of the professor, until she is finally stabbed with the word “Knife”. The image which best describes this verbal domination is, and George Wellworth explains the deranged rhetoric used by the Nazis:

… nothing was more appalling about the Nazi area than the extent to which the German intellectuals (the teacher, the artists, all those, in short, whose task is to guard the truth) willingly used their powers to pervert the truth, to give falsehood the appearance of truth... so the words lose meaning, they become deadlier: the professor’s frenzied gabble and Hitler’s hysterical ravings—which were not only meaningless but unintelligible as well—are one and the same – semantic anarchy equals moral anarchy.\textsuperscript{82}

Ionesco wants his language to be lifeless, unemotional, neutral, uncommunicative or simply robot-like. His use of this kind of language is to serve as a
critique of the nature of the relationship between a totalitarian state and its people.

Perhaps the main point of interest was the discovery that his treatment varies quite distinctly from one play to the next. Mixed in different proportions in each play are the following styles, which we might call: banality, exaggeration (to include repetition and inconsequence), illogicality, dislocation and elevation.

The first, which I am taking to be roughly equivalent to ordinary conversation, is perhaps the basic style and can be found in all the plays. But our everyday platitudes and commonplaces have been enlivened in various ways. These special uses apart, banality is employed almost all through his plays. These banalities are funny in themselves, but when used to point a contrast between the strangeness of the action and the response normally reserved for familiar happenings, they can be highly amusing, and darkly significant as well. Then Ionesco makes these banalities more interesting by varying the ways they are used. Sometimes this simply takes the form of repetition:

*Old Woman* : *It’s your turn.*
*Old Man* : *Your turn.*
*Old Woman* : *Your turn.*
*Old Man* : *Your turn*
*Old Woman* : *Your turn.*

The incidence of repetitious ideas, words and action is quite prevalent, to such an extreme that one could say that Ionesco seems to be somewhat preoccupied with them. Ionesco uses most commonly the word and sound repetition. In his plays, word repetition serves two purposes: the first purpose that repetition serves is within the confines of ritual in a ceremonial or ritualistic way. One of the most blatant examples of this can be found in *The Lesson*. The professor plays an integral role in the ritual. He is the embodiment of religion or religious practice stripped of meaning. The professor, from the beginning of the ritual to the end, does nothing but encourage his student to repeat words and phrases. Charles Isherwood has said that the language
in *The Bald Soprano* was nothing but “*pointed pointlessness,*” devoid of emotion or meaning, it is far too simplistic to be true, especially once one has considered the other aspects of each of these plays.\(^8^4\)

The second, and no less important purpose which repetition serves, is to underline how easy it is to lose individual identity in politics and propaganda. In fact, Ionesco felt that the majority of what people do and say is merely a reflection of going through the motions of what is expected of them, rather than the result of individual thought. This sort of repetition is not necessarily purposeful, nor does it occur on the conscious level. This repetition has been stripped of its meaning since it has been turned into a habit rather than a meaningful rite.

Ionesco did not have much respect for the masses who bought the propaganda that was sold to them. He attracts our attention to the problem of repetitive language and loss of identity. He clearly states his intentions in using repetitions as a parody of the human condition. He also criticizes mimetic behavior in the modern world, commenting that, as a community, we are transforming into “*troupeaux*” which could possibly bring a herd of rhinoceroses to mind.

One of the plays in which identity loss through repetition is the strongest is in fact *Rhinoceros*. Even before, many have become rhinoceroses, the town people rarely have a thought that is original or unique, at the supposed sight of one rhinoceros, the phrase “*oh ! un rhinoceros !*” is repeated over eight times, by different people. The audience never sees the rhinoceros, but can hear it and see the cloud of dust that it creates. The people do not seriously question why the rhinoceros is there, or perhaps, more appropriately, why others say they have seen one. Once one person has professed to have seen it, the others join in. Even Berenger, fits into this category, when asked if he had seen the beast response. Fittingly, later when the town becomes inundated with rhinoceroses, the human beings to quickly see things
from the perspective of the beasts, just as they saw things from the perspective of their neighbors earlier.

Though these repetitions are found primarily in the language of the characters, they can also be observed in their actions and mannerisms. Additionally, the phenomenon of word and sound repetition is not always portrayed by one character doing or saying things he had done or said before, but in the form of other characters acting out the scenes of prior characters. In *The Bald Soprano*, for example, the scene that begins the play is presented, nearly identically, at the end as well. The Smiths enact the scene at the beginning, while the Martins take their place at the end.

What seems to be nonsense is not completely nonsense. Ionesco has, in part, written his plays in a similar manner to the parables of Christ when he said, “who hath ears to hear, let him hear,” since to some, his works forever seem mysterious and devoid of real meaning. Only those who have ears to hear will be able to understand which words are truly absurd and which are not. Through the veil of the characters of his play, *The Lesson*, the professor and the student, Ionesco states that words stripped of their meaning are sent out to hover in the air. The meanings will not always be understood, since they will sometimes fall upon deaf ears, or upon ears that are unwilling to hear, and will consequently cause horrible confusion and consternation. These words, laden with meaning, when they do not fall upon deaf ears will burst a balloon. His message was not meant to be soothing or peaceful, but loud and disruptive. Thus, to begin to understand, one must learn to be anew.

Not only does Ionesco make this point through what his characters say, but through what happens in his plays. For example, in *The Chairs*, the orator is supposed to deliver the old man’s message, and delivers what is supposedly nonsense. Perhaps it is not the orator who is deaf and dumb, but the audience instead. What is more, the audience labors through the entire plays under the understanding that the old man and woman were crazy, since there were no actual people sitting in the chairs. At the end, however, the
sounds of the people are heard. Ionesco instructs that their voices should be heard. What Ionesco is getting at is not that life absurd, but that the way we go through life is absurd, with all of our robotic tendencies our failure to look beyond ourselves. So the lack of meaning results in an increase of violence that threatens to spread out of control as it does in his plays. Sometimes words seem more sticking because they appear out of place in their context: many of the proverbial remarks in *The Bald Prima Donna* are perfectly normal in themselves, they amuse us by their irrelevance, and their inconsequence.

Next there comes some forms of illogicality. A characteristic example in *The Bald Prima Donna* is the time it takes to go through the family history of the lady who used sometimes in winter, just like everyone else, to catch a cold. This play is full of illogical almost surrealistic, humor: You may sit down on the chair, when the chair hasn’t any, or ‘I’d rather see a bird in a field than a marrow in a wheelbarrow. It is full of verbal fun, puns and nonsense. Occasionally we find language being used in a similar way in *The Lesson*: the professor’s reminiscence of his friend, the Viscount.

The kind of language is full of pitfalls. One can only go on revising, polishing, and hoping. Ionesco seems to have used *The Bald Prima Donna* as an experiment in verbal technique: it is more a question of finding equivalents in one’s own language than of making a straightforward translation, and the danger is that one may get carried away.

When we come to *Jacques* and *The Chairs* we find language being pushed a stage further: towards dislocation. In *The Chairs* it happens at two particular moments: first, the old couple’s story, so familiar to them that a few detached syllables are enough to induce helpless laughter; and then the moment when the conversation between them dies and syntax falls apart.

Ionesco also uses the elevated style. When he wishes to convey his vision of ‘muddy slime’ or ‘airy splendor’, his vocabulary becomes more conventionally romantic and a new regularity or rhythm heightens the effect: *Amedee* gazing at the night sky, the professor carried away by language, Roberta II and Jacques in their verbal evocation of a sexual encounter, and
Choubert descending into the depths of climbing the mountain into space. A large part of *Victims of Duty* is written in this style.

Ionesco also has a less conventional way of giving a poetic dimension to his prose: he increases its density by playing carefully and often unostentatiously on rhyme, assonance and alliteration. He employs this technique most in *The Chairs*, and in parts of *Victims of Duty*, but more discreetly than in *Jacques* or *The Bald Prima Donna* and without comic intent.

Most important of all, perhaps, is Ionesco’s rhythm. It is this rhythm of language, moulding and moulded by the rhythm of the action, that is for me the greatest unifying force in his art as a dramatist. A more prominent functional use of language is the demonstration of absurdity of the statements of a totalitarian government, whose words fail to convey accurate meanings because, on the one hand, they disregard the personal connotation they have for each individual and, on the other hand, they are no more than a parrot-fashion repetition of ready made slogans or an automatic reply of words dictated to an answering machine. Ionesco uses language to explore the political inhumanity of our time, moreover, he has demeaned and brutalized language beyond any precedent. Words have been used to justify political falsehood, massive distortions of history, and the bestiality of the totalitarian state.

In the absence of meaning, words seem to take absolute control and drive the speaker wherever their arbitrary energies may choose to go. The vernacular element of Ionesco’s style helps to make his comic ideas clear. Antithesis and the vernacular work together to promote clarity, point and interest. In this choice of words he prefers the comic place to the exotic; in matters of syntax he chooses the simple constructions in preference to the formal and artificial. He fills his sentences with idiomatic usage, and even when he uses formal figures of speech he keeps their terms familiar and concrete. All these stylistic features are not comic in themselves, but they are apt tools for the expression of his particular materials of plot, character and thought which are intended to ridicule popular notions about social ethics. In addition to all these devices Ionesco used sound effects to make his writing...
more effective. Ionesco uses them, namely, to convey his thoughts and ideas in as effective a manner as possible.

Ionesco also uses exclamation which often serves to prevent the dialogue from becoming weak. When repeated, exclamations express impatience, surprise and mild contempt. He is also remarkable for his witticisms as well as witty writings. Witticism, according to Freud is aggressive wit or a tendency wit. It is a derisive turn of phrase directing the laugh at a particular object or person. Witty writing or sustained humor, on the other hand, is “harmless” wit because it evokes a laugh or smile without malice.

Ionesco uses a profound type of irony which deals with the irony of life in which a character finds himself in conflict not merely with his own way of life, but with life itself over which he has no control. The ironies of situation, of circumstances and of life don’t so much depend on the spoken word, as they depend on the idea behind it.

Ionesco’s dramatic language and action are a metaphor for the human condition. This is why Ionesco sought to “destroy the usual, coherent rational language, make of the text a pretext for a play”\(^\text{86}\). Similarly, no rational analysis will serve to explicate the character or the character’s behavior, the pattern of behavior is fundamentally incoherent. Ionesco is opposed to the novelistic use of language which defines motives or causes for a character’s behavior, considering the theater as a visual art. It is not literature. It must express itself through a different medium. Consequently, there is no plot, no architectural construction, no puzzles to be solved, only the inscrutable enigma of the unknown; no real characters, just people without identity (at any moment they may contradict their own nature or perhaps will change places with another), simply a sequence of events without a sequence, a series of fortuitous incidents unlinked by cause and effect, in explicable adventures, emotional states, and indescribable tangle, but alive with intention, impulse and discordant passions, steeped in contradiction.\(^\text{87}\)

As dramatic language, Ionesco’s words grow out of the demands of the action. As such, they represent true gestural language. Ionesco says:
I only attempt to create primitive theatre with images, colors, voices, movement and gestures, pieces of wood and painted planks ... and words, also (sometimes not enough, sometimes too many) that mean nothing, at least not in a clear way, a side from their integration in scenic development.

Ionesco explains that these movement and gesture must be clear, emphatic and, above all, concrete and specific. Thus, the fact that one can not approach a Ionesco play through the application of systematic, coherent, logical analysis. Instead, one must respond to text as an image of experience in all its mystery and inscrutability. However, the text, for Ionesco, is sacrosanct. He demands the actor meet its demands fully, however bizarre the requirements may be. Again and again, the actor is asked to ‘play the text’, since it contains everything required for the character. The actor must respond to the text and to the character’s requirements, not to a personal bias. Ionesco says in this point:

I’m not writing literature. I am writing drama. I mean that my text is not just dialogue, but also ‘stage directions’. These should be respected as much as the text, they are essential, they are also sufficient.

Ionesco’s text is sufficient to achieve the dialectically comic/tragic quality of the role and play. Much of the language means nothing in itself. Ionesco’s purpose of language disintegration is to show the absurdity of everyday life. He uses nonsensical language. Words suggest other words because of sound and regardless of meaning. Ionesco uses nonsensical sentences to portray human life as automatism and language as a senseless fragmentation of sentences. Mr. and Mrs. Smith uttered cliches, while the couple visiting them, the Martins spoke to each other as though they were strangers until they realize that they shared the same home and child. The dialogue amongst the four eventually disintegrates into meaningless sounds. Instead of creating meaning, Ionesco destroys the notion of communication through language, claiming that language is full of cliches and meaningless slogans; language is unable to fully provide effective communication.
There are in fact two languages: the language of the mass media, and the language of the individual, the poet. The first is concerned to hide the truth, the second to reveal it; but, since they unhappily share a common vocabulary, the second gradually being destroyed, or at least completely stultified, by the first. When words are by definition lies, then to speak the truth becomes impossible; the only vehicle of truth is silence. This problem—one of the most insoluble of our time—was already apparent forty years ago to absurd writers who attempt to speak the truth, all they achieve is a sort of artificial compromise between truth and lies, between reality and slogans; and this compromise is what is commonly called literature. Words no longer demonstrate anything. Words just chatter. Words are literature. Words are escapism. Words prevent the utterance of silence. Ionesco’s plays are conflicts between sound and silence, in which silence, in the end, always wins.

Ionesco attempts to use language to express nothing, then he tries to express something with no valid means of expression. Words create confusion. Words are not language. The essential truths of existence cannot be expressed directly, then they can only hope to be expressed indirectly: through images, through allegory, through all the fantasies of the imagination.

The Old Woman in The Chairs, for example, believes that language will weld and weld man and the world and that it affords the only access to the truth of things. But her hopes will be dashed and the playwright will expose the duplicity and failure of words on all levels. Consequently words are no longer the vehicles of thoughts or feelings; they are themselves actions the initiators of dramatic events. So the failure of language leads us into a kind of Realm of Terror and words fall like stones, like corpses. Words can communicate nothing and language becomes dead—not a living language, but—silence.

The most fundamental of all Ionesco’s preoccupations: the ultimate value of language as such about ‘non-communication’, as about people who had nothing valid or true or individual to communicate; for Ionesco the current use of language, not to reveal, but rather to disguise or to distort the truth is
nine times out of ten due to a deliberate will to distortion, rather than to any inherent defect in the nature of language itself.

For Ionesco, the cliches and truisms of the conversation primer deintegrated into wild caricature and parody with language itself disintegrating into disjointed fragments of words. Ionesco, through his writings, expresses modern feelings of alienation and the impossibility and futility of communication with surreal comic force, parodying the conformism of the bourgeoisie and conventional theatrical forms. In them Ionesco rejects a conventional sorry-line as their basis, instead taking their dramatic structure from accelerating rhythms and / or cynical repetitions. He disintegrates psychology and coherent dialogue, thereby, depicting a dehumanized world with mechanical puppet-like characters who speak in non-squiturs. Language becomes rarified, with words and material objects gaining a life of their own, increasingly overwhelming the characters and creating a sense of menace. This gives the impression that the characters are not even listening to each other in their frantic efforts to make their own voices heard. Scientists have suggested that all acts are meaningless, and philologists (with the logical positivists) have shown that language, too, is arbitrary and meaningless as a means to the knowledge of reality.

Language achieves its goals through the context of the production elements: scenic movement and gestures, sound, lighting, and the humanity of the actor. The proliferation of language, along with the complexity of structure, demands an actor’s acute awareness. It is not a language that is easily absorbed, with its repetitions, non-causally related patterning, complex tonal structure and highly charged utterance. Ionesco used all sorts of comic devices both stylistic and dramatic, and above all he made use of the comic contrast and conflict.

Language is used almost physically as a kind of bludgeon or blunt instrument, where, in fact, the border-line between word and gesture is almost erased, where the spectator is, to all intents and purposes, physically assau-
lted by the barrage of quasi-meaningless sounds, emitted by the characters on the stage:

Mrs. Martin : You cackle gobblers! You gabble 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 : Ba Zar, Baseball, Basson!

Mr. Martin : Business! Bosnia! Buster!

Mr. Smith : Aeiou, aeiou, aeiou!

Mrs. Martin : Bedfg, imnpq, rstvwxz!

Mr. Martin : Do re mi fa sol la si do!

Mrs. Martin : Said the barely 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!

In this type of passage, language is used, no longer to make the spectator think, but to provoke him, to force him, by the sheer violence of sound in a pre-linguistic state, to react, and to react no less forcibly and decisively than man who has been jabbed with a red-not poker. In Ionesco language not merely creates existence, but, having added a new dimension to the theatre, proceeds to tyrannize and victimize its own creation.

The victimization of man by language is now complete; the death of language has plunged and dizzying backwards, not wearily into everlasting silence, but into primeval chaos, where all things are confounded in obscurity. Edward Albee, in a touching tribute to Ionesco, remarked, “My own stylistic sources can be found in his work. ... He was a major force in shaping nontraditional drama in the second half of the 20th century.”
Chapter Four

Notes

11. Ionesco, “*Notes and Counter Notes*”, p. 3.
12. Richard Defuria, “*At the interaction of Freud and Ionesco,*” MLN. 87.7 (1972) : PP 971-976.
13. Ibid, P. 976
17. Ibid., p.30.
33. Ionesco, Rhinoceros, p.4.
35. Ibid., p.73.
36. Ionesco, Rhinoceros, p.75.
37. Ibid., p.107.
44. Ibid.p.108.
45. Richard N. Coe, “Ionesco ; A study of his plays”, p. 75.
47. Martin Esslin, “The Theater of the Absurd”, P.143.
50. Donald Watson, “The plays of Eugene Ionesco,” Tulane Drama Review (October 1958)p. 29
53. Ibid , p.33.
54. Ionesco, “Notes and Counter Notes”, p.15.
55. Ibid., P.15.
56. Ibid., P.28.
57. Ibid., P.17.
58. Ibid., P.17.
59. Ibid., P.20.
60. Ibid., P.33.
61. Ibid., P.159.
63. Ibid., P. 118.
64. Ibid., P. 159.
65. Ibid., P. 181.
68. Ibid., P. 182.
69. Ibid., P. 185.
75. Ionesco, “Notes and Counter Notes”, Pp. 28.29.
80. Ibid., P. 26.
87. Ionesco, “Notes and Counter Notes”, P. 159.
89. Ionesco, “Notes and Counter Notes”, P. 208.