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IONESCO'S ABSURD ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Deborah Fuller

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of French and Italian

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

### IONESCO'S ABSURD ANTHROPOLOGY

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Department of French and Italian

Master of Arts

Eugène Ionesco's plays are often thought of only as absurd. This thesis explores another possible interpretation of his plays, including *Rhinocéros*, *Le Roi se meurt*, *Jeux de massacre*, *Les Chaises*, *Victimes du devoir*, *La Jeune fille à marier*, and *La Leçon*. These plays are investigated with the help of anthropologist René Girard's theory on ritual, violence, and sacrifice. Since these elements are recurring themes in Ionesco's plays, Girard's theory is a useful key to unlocking what may seem at times to be nothing but nonsense, but is full of meaning. In the first chapter, the rituals and repetitions that abound in Ionesco's plays are discussed in the light of Girardian theory, illustrating the negative effects of

ritual without substance. Chapter two analyses the violent and sacrificial nature of these plays, and their contagious qualities. The third chapter discusses where redemption can be found amidst the violence. This thesis also debates the possible Christian aspects within Ionesco's works relating to the themes of ritual, violence, and redemption.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Les voix chaotiques, bruyantes de tous les hommes qui se combattent même sans penser chercher Dieu, même si Dieu n’est pas en question - ce brouhaha -, c’est peut-être, peut-être pour Dieu, une prière qui s’adresse à Lui sans que nous sachions nous-mêmes que nous Lui en adressons une. Ce bruit humain est peut-être, peut-être une musique qu’Il entend, qu’Il accueille...”*

*- Eugène Ionesco, La Quête intermittente (138-139)*

When Eugene Ionesco’s name is mentioned, almost invariably several thoughts come to mind: anti-theater, absurdism, nonsense... The list could continue for quite some time, without meaning much at all. On this same subject, 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 “[h]is plays purportedly deal with ‘nothingness’ or ‘absence’ or ‘silence’” (411). I concur, though not completely, with Thomas Bishop in his article “The theater of the Absurd” when he says that “In the antirealistic new theater, 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 (1010-11).

The term absurd fails to do justice to the works of Eugène 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 (Oxford 261). In the theater of the absurd, this idea is taken further to express the confusion that modern existence can create. Though Ionesco could not help but be influenced by the thoughts of his contemporaries, he states in *Present Past Past Present* that he admired André Breton, a surrealist, for thinking that life should be poetry and freedom, destroying “the walls of the real that separate us from reality” and continues to comment on existentialism saying that it is important “[t]o be, to exist without being existentialists, for to be an existentialist is to be the prisoner of logomachies, shut up in words while being escapes us” (149). The terminology “theater of the absurd” with which Ionesco has been categorized does not adequately describe the author or the work, since Ionesco does not

intend to say that God is fictitious. Rather, Ionesco paints a vivid picture of 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, "Your existence is irrational and absurd," but this is far too simple a statement for such complex theater. Though he has publicly claimed that his plays do not hold a hidden meaning, Ionesco himself states in the *Préface to Notes et contre-notes*, "Peut-être que mes pièces de théâtre vont un peu plus loin que mes propres commentaires sur les pièces de théâtre; j'espère qu'elles en disent plus malgré moi, car si elles devaient être épuisées par cette polémique, continues en elle, tout entières, elles ne seraient pas grand-chose." (IX). Ionesco clearly does not wish to unveil all his secrets in one fell gesture, nor should any one critic claim to do so. In the pages that follow, I do not claim to have explained *the one correct* interpretation of Ionesco's plays in the only way possible to truly view them. I agree with Saint Tobi when he says, "Finalement j'ai compris que les interprétations étaient justes et injustes à la fois. En réalité chaque théorie a sa part de vérité et aucune la vérité absolue, parce que cette vérité absolue...n'existe pas" (26).

It is through the absurdist lens that Ionesco is revealing 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 does injustice to a man who gave so much to the theater. 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." ("Eugène Ionesco: the meaning of unmeaning" 5). Though Coe admits that this goes against common sense, I contest that it also goes against the truth.

Followers of Freud, such as Marian Toplin and Richard DeFuria, claim that Ionesco's plays are dreamlike, with "over-determined 'manifest content' which distort and conceal perfectly rational underlying thoughts" (Toplin 120). 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 theater serves, as absurdism does, as a tool to create the only reality possible in theater, 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 pretense on the part of the actor, rather than actually becoming the character (*Notes et contre-notes* 3). The

solution for Ionesco is to violently change the habits of his audience, as he says in

*Notes et contre-notes*:

Pour s'arracher au quotidien, à l'habitude, à la paresse mentale qui nous cache l'étrangeté du monde, il faut recevoir comme un véritable coup de matraque. Sans une virginité nouvelle de l'esprit, sans une nouvelle prise de conscience, purifiée, de la réalité existentielle, il n'y a pas de théâtre, il n'y a pas d'art non plus ; il faut réaliser une sorte de dislocation du réel, qui doit précéder sa réintégration (13).

Other Freudian readings, such as one by Richard DeFuria, would suggest that Ionescian theater is "a purposeful misapprehension of reality," and by so doing only teasingly suggest that there is more than they are willing to discuss (976). DeFuria also intimates that Ionesco, and other absurd playwrights, have "given up the fight to resolve problems in a period of anxious waiting" (976). Based solely on Ionesco's words from *Notes et contre-notes*, this is completely untrue. Yes, Ionesco's theater 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, as Scott Sprenger observes in his article “Ionesco anthropologue: mimésis et violence dans *Les Chaises*.” In this article, the problems of mimesis, especially in language, and its role in violence are explored with the aid of an anthropological lens. Ionesco frequently uses anthropological structures, such as ritual and sacrifice, as well as through the object that is always at the center of man’s search, redemption, as the focus of his plays. Since these are topics upon which Ionesco spends the majority of his time, they are worth some careful scrutiny and examination. Anthropologist René Girard deals almost exclusively with these subjects, making his theories ideal in the interpretation of Ionesco’s plays.

Despite any initial surprise at such a choice, Ionesco and Girard do have some common ground to stand on. In an essay about Girard’s anthropology James Williams argues that “[i]nterpreters of various perspectives and with varying commitments would agree that Girard’s view of the human condition is radical” (paragraph 4). Merely substituting Ionesco’s name for Girard’s in this sentence does nothing to change its validity. Girard’s Christian-based anthropology is a valuable key to unlocking many of the mysteries of Ionesco’s works, since many of them are surrounded by religious themes. Ionesco lamented that in modernity, “le sens de la prière, le sens de la méditation, le sens de la contemplation, le sens métaphysique, le sens de la mystique. Tout est

perdu. Balayé. On n'ose plus parlé de Dieu" (*Antidotes* 241). As a result, the theme of meaning that is lost, or unmeaning, is not without religious significance that Girard can help to unravel. Thus, I will discuss the aspects of ritual, violence and sacrifice, and redemption in Ionesco's plays, with the help of René Girard's anthropology.

## CHAPTER 1: RITUAL AND REPETITION

*Le texte [...] composé d'expressions toutes faites, des clichés les plus éculés, me révélait, par cela même, les automatismes du langage, du comportement des gens, le 'parler pour ne rien dire', le parler parce qu'il n'y a rien à dire de personnel, l'absence de vie intérieure, la mécanique du quotidien, l'homme baignant dans son milieu social, ne s'en distinguant plus. –Eugène Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes (159-160)*

Two related mechanisms that Ionesco utilizes in virtually all of his plays are that of ritual and repetition. These themes are widely treated by the French anthropologist, René Girard, who focuses largely on rites and ritualistic behavior in relation to sacrifice and cyclical violence. According to him, in relation to the origin of ritual, “Le rite est la répétition d’un premier lynchage spontané qui a ramené l’ordre dans la communauté parce qu’il a refait contre la victime émissaire, et autour d’elle, l’unité perdue dans la violence réciproque” (VS 137-138). Thus, in the view of Girard, the origin of ritual is a violent act that restored peace and order. Hence, it is very intriguing to observe that each case of ritual and repetition in Ionesco’s plays, just as Girard observed in life, appears to be due to a previous act that somehow ended the chaos. More intriguing still, it seems that although these elements occur in Ionesco’s plays just as Girard would

have lain out, there is one crucial difference. That difference is that despite Girard's claim that ritual's purpose is to avoid conflict and embrace order, in Ionesco's plays it seems to do just the opposite.

Despite the divergence between the theory of ritual and its execution in Ionesco's plays it is difficult to ignore the presence of ritual in them. The incidence of repetitious rituals, ideas, words, and actions is quite prevalent, to such an extreme that one could say that Ionesco seems to be somewhat preoccupied with the theme. Despite the prominent use of ritual in his plays, Ionesco goes beyond allowing the ritual to speak for itself by directly naming it a ritual, as he does in *Le Roi se meurt*, where his stage directions are that "*les répliques qui suivent doivent être dites et jouées comme un rituel, avec solennité, presque chanté, avec des mouvements divers des comédiens, agenouillements, bras tendus, etc.*" (105). This is not merely a coincidence or happenstance. Here, Ionesco is purposefully drawing attention to the ritualistic qualities of the play so that if the actors failed to recognize it previously, they could not fail to at this point in the play, and would, hopefully, convey that same recognition to the audience members.

Other critics have recognized the ritualistic elements contained in *Le Roi se meurt* as well as in other plays, as M. Gilles Ernst does in his article, "Symboles et mort cérémonielle dans 'Le Roi se meurt' de Ionesco." In this article, Ernst calls



the play a sacred drama that begins from the moment that “Marguerite prie Marie de prendre place ‘pour les étapes de la cérémonie’” (25). Though Ernst focuses, somewhat erroneously, on the ceremonial aspects of the play in relation to Buddhist ceremonies, he is correct when he observes that “Ionesco ne cesse de souligner l’aspect cérémoniel de sa pièce” and then continues to categorize the play as “un drame para-liturgique” (25). The idea of a liturgy is one that is entirely inseparable with that of a Christian Communion, or, at the very least, a regulated form of worship that is dictated by a formal religion.

A liturgical or ritualistic convention that Ionesco uses most commonly is that of word and sound repetition. In Ionesco’s 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 *La Leçon*. The professor plays an integral role in the ritual.

Appropriately, the professor is not just as secular teacher. He also plays a role that is much more in agreement with the liturgical aspect of the ritual, that of a priest. It is Marie who reveals this information, when she suggests that it would not be necessary to find a priest for the burial since the professor is “un peu curé a [ses] heures si on en croit la rumeur publique” (149). He is only a priest in the loosest sense of the word, however, since he is only ‘un peu’ and ‘a [ses] heures’ rather than a real priest. 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. For example, the word “couteau” is repeated countless times with the professor even saying, “Répétez, répétez: couteau ...couteau ... couteau...” (34-35, 141). Repeating the word “répétez” is not a coincidence, but indicative of many rituals and repetitions that Ionesco chooses to portray in his plays.

These sorts of repetitions and religious dimensions are not unique to *La Leçon*, as they exist in *Rhinocéros*, *Le Roi se Meurt*, *La Cantatrice Chauve*, and *Les Chaises*, to name a few. In *Vicimes du devoir*, the policeman imposes upon Choubert many times. There is a point, however, where he tries to force Choubert to eat bread. Bread carries a wide variety of significations, including life, and of course, the symbol of the sacramental Eucharist. This symbolism, within the ritual, only serves to enhance the liturgical and ritualistic dimensions of *Vicimes du devoir*. Though Charles Isherwood has said that the language in *La Cantatrice chauve* 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 (paragraph 6).

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 and daily ritual has been stripped of its meaning since it has been turned into a habit rather than a meaningful or liturgical rite.

According to Ionesco, language, in relationship to political propaganda, “est fait pour cacher la vérité, tricher, duper” (*Antidotes* 59). As he states frankly in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Ionesco did not have much respect for the masses who bought the propaganda that was sold to them. Ionesco defines the “petit-bourgeois” as being “l’homme des idées reçues, des slogans, le conformiste de partout,” and it is his repetitive language that reveals him as such (*Notes et contre-notes* 159). Scott Sprenger, in his article “Ionesco anthropologue: mimésis et violence dans *Les Chaises*,” comments on this same quote, remarking that through it, Ionesco attracts our attention to the problem of repetitive language and loss of identity (paragraph 1). Ionesco explains this concept further in a discussion of *La Cantatrice chauve*, wherein he explains that through the medium of this play, he attempted to create:

au départ, une parodie du théâtre et, par là, une parodie d’un certain comportement humain, c’est en m’enfonçant dans le banal, en poussant à fond, jusque dans leurs dernières limites, les clichés

les plus éculés du langage de tous les jours que j'ai essayé  
d'atteindre à l'expression de l'étrange où me sembler baigner toute  
l'existence. (*Notes et contre-notes* 14-15)

Here, Ionesco clearly states his intentions in using repetitions as a parody of the human condition. In other words, the conduct of the "petit-bourgeois" was put under the lens in his work. Though Girard attempts it differently, 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 (Choses 17).

One of the plays in which identity loss through repetition is the strongest is in fact in *Rhinocéros*. Even before many have become rhinoceroses, the townspeople rarely have a thought that is original or unique, but have a strong tendency to simply repeat what has already been said. For instance, at the supposed sight of one rhinoceros, the phrase "Oh! un rhinocéros!" is repeated over eight times, by different people followed by, repetitions of "Ça alors!" and "Pauvre petite bête!" (60-64). 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 Bérenger, fits into this category, since, when asked if he had seen

the beast responds, "Il me semble, oui, c'était un rhinocéros! Ça en fait de la poussière!" even though his actions indicate otherwise (26). The stage directions state that although everyone else on stage is avidly watching the rhinoceros, Béranger "*écarte simplement un peu la tête, à cause de la poussière, un peu endormi, sans rien dire; il fait simplement une grimace,*" meaning that he probably saw nothing but dust (25). Fittingly, later, when the town becomes inundated with rhinoceroses, the humans begin 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 since Ionesco argued that theater is "*autant visuel qu'auditif*" (*Notes et contre-notes* 15). 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 *La Cantatrice chauve*, 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. Ionesco indicates that "*M. et Mme Martin sont assis comme les Smith au début de la pièce. La pièce recommence avec les Martin, qui disent exactement les répliques des Smith dans la 1<sup>re</sup> scène, tandis que le rideau se ferme doucement*" (75). In this scene, it is clear that this scene is a common

occurrence in the Smith/Martin household. The Smiths/Martins, like countless other characters in Ionesco's plays, cannot seem to break free from their personal cycle of repetition, and are representative of society, and its inability to do the same.

Several of Ionesco's plays are not merely a vessel for repetition, but a ritual in their entirety. *La Leçon*, is one such play, and is merely a repetition of a repetition, from beginning to end, of events that had occurred before and that Ionesco leads us to believe will continue to transpire. The professor and the maid play out the same ceremony time after time. For instance, at the beginning of the play, a doorbell rings, then, the maid cries, from off stage, "Oui. Tout de suite," then once on stage, "Patience. J'arrive" (85). At the end of the play, once again, the bell rings. Yet again, the maid shouts, "Tout de suite, j'arrive! [...] Patience!" (149). Ionesco's stage directions note that the maid "apparaît tout comme au début" (149). We also know from what the maid says that the professor has killed his students before, since this particular student's grave will be the fortieth in a long series of graves (147). The maid also indicates that "tous les jours c'est la même chose!" (145). If the maid appears exactly as she did at the beginning, one wonders when that beginning actually is. Since this particular student is merely the latest in an undeterminable string of victims, the beginning is well beyond the portion of the cycle that the audience is permitted to observe.

According to Girard, the beginning of ritual is always at a spontaneous point in time that the violence first occurred. The event then was very likely similar in many senses to the ritual seen on stage, and in all likelihood took place due to a conflict that rose up between the professor and the original sacrificial student. Though some of the dialogue may be new and unique to this particular episode in the Professor's sacrificial cycle, most of the dialogue has been carefully rehearsed by the Professor time after time, and he is the leader of the ritual.

Since the play is a ritual, the lessons begin the same way each time, with the professor in a normal frame of mind. Eventually, as the ritual progresses through its various stages, it is increasingly plain that there is something more to the scene between the professor and the student. The maid, Marie, interrupts their lesson, only to realize that she has walked into the middle of a frequently repeated ritual. She hears the language that is being repeated, especially that of the student who claims to have a toothache, and warns the professor of the consequences of his repetitions. The maid remains, despite her consciousness of the cycle, a willing participant of the repetitions and rituals of the professor's making. The ritual of *La Leçon* is not the typical ritual that Girard describes. In fact, it is in some ways very unlike a ritual in that it does not seem to end the violence, but perpetuates it.

One very crucial part of the ritual occurs when the student begins to experience physical manifestations of the ritual's development. In this case, the student's psychosomatic symptoms commence. The very first indication that something may be amiss is evidenced in the form of the extremely memorable toothache that she develops. The signs of her illness are first physical and then verbal, as the stage directions state "l'étudiant a l'air soudain de souffrir." (121). She then says, "J'ai mal aux dents" as she does countless other times to follow (121).

The toothache is not a random pain, such as perhaps a pain in the big toe would be. The student's pain is a direct result of the onslaught of the professor's weapon of choice. Girard discusses a tribe, called the Dinka, which uses what is essentially the same weapon. "Le paroxysme dans le sacrifice Dinka, se produit, semble-t-il, non avec la mort elle-même, mais avec les imprécations rituelles qui la précèdent et qui passent pour capables de détruire la victime. Comme dans la tragédie, donc, la victime est immolée essentiellement à coups de mots" (VS 142). Thus, it is not a physical weapon that leads to the ultimate death and sacrifice of the student, but the ritual itself; the words repeated. This concept can also be supported by the words of the professor himself, while he is ostensibly teaching the student about the duality of words.



According to the professor, words are both meaningless and meaningful, as the case may be, and “seuls, tombent les mots chargés de signification, alourdis par leur sens, qui finissent toujours par succomber, d’écouler...” and, as the student chimes in, “...dans les oreilles des sourds,” and the professor continues, “...et dans la pire confusion...Ou par crever comme des ballons” (119, 121). The meaning of the words that the professor repeats and sometimes subtly encourages the student to say, is his ritual’s intangible weapon, which, when repeated, lead only to tragedy. Consequently, by *saying* the things that the professor wants her to say, the student is affected by the weapon of words, which first affects the region of her body that participates in producing speech, namely her teeth.

Let us note that Ionesco did not limit specific repetitions to one play, but that one certain repetition in *La Leçon* particular plays a role in *Victimes du devoir* as well. Towards the end of the ritual between the student and the professor in *La Leçon*, the student says, “Vous me faites mal aux oreilles, aussi. Vous avez une voix! Oh, qu’elle est stridente!” to which the professor responds, “Je vais les arracher, moi, tes oreilles, comme ça elles ne te feront plus mal, ma mignonne!” (141). One thing which is nearly identical in nature occurs between the policeman and Choubert in *Victimes du devoir*. Choubert tells the policeman, as the student told the professor, “Vous m’écortcher les oreilles, Monsieur

l'Inspecteur..." which evokes a similar response from the policeman to that of the professor's, "écoute bien ce que je te dis, Choubert, écoute, laisse tes oreilles, ne les bouche pas, sinon, je te les boucherai, moi, avec des claques..." (222). The policeman appears to parallel the professor, just as Choubert seems to parallel the student in role and purpose. Just like the professor, the policeman attempts, in a way, to force-feed Choubert, information.

The replaying minutes or hours or even days later is not what is most striking about repetition in Ionesco's plays, however. For instance, in *Jeux de massacre*, there is only a difference of seconds, rather than hours. In the stage directions, Ionesco instructs that two scenes are to be played out simultaneously on the stage. There is a division down the middle of the stage, and the scenes mirror each other. Both scenes involve a married couple, who have been separated because of the catastrophic deaths occurring in the city, and both are together because one spouse crept into the town. The characters in both scenes say the same lines and act out identical actions. Eventually, however, they begin to say things slightly differently.

The differences are in precise conjunction with Girard's theory of ritual. According to him, the only way for ritualistic imagination to succeed is "en laissant la violence se déchaîner un peu, *comme la première fois*, mais pas trop, en répétant, c'est-à-dire, ce qu'elle parvient à se remémorer de l'expulsion collective

dans un cadre et sur des objets rigoureusement fixés et déterminés.” (VS 143).

Accordingly, the differences that occur in these nearly identical scenes are what would hopefully ensure their ritualistic success in the collective expulsion and purgation of whatever is ailing the society. Curiously, the effect of ritual on violence that Girard outlines does not occur within the framework of Ionesco’s plays. Rather, the violence seems to escalate, as it does in *Jeux de massacre*.

Moreover, Ionesco often hints that there will be more violence to come. In *La Leçon* the last scene lets us peek into the beginning of the professor’s next cycle, where another student will almost certainly die. Additionally, when Nicolas decides that Choubert must find Mallot, it is clear that the cycle the policeman started has begun again since everyone commands everyone else to “Avalez! Mastiquez!” (228).

However much a ritualistic cycle appears to be unbreakable, for the typical participants of a ritual, a relationship that is equally repulsive and attractive exists between them and the ritual, causing them to swing back and forth between in a sort of love/hate relationship. Girard explains this interesting phenomenon more fully in *La Violence et le sacré*:

La communauté est à la fois attiré et repoussée par sa propre origine; elle éprouve le besoin constant de la revivre sous une forme violée et transfigure; le rite apaise et trompe les forces

maléfiques parce qu'il ne cesse de les frôler; leur nature véritable et leur réalité lui échappent et doivent lui échapper puisque ces formes maléfiques proviennent de la communauté elle-même.

(143)

The participants of ritual cannot help but feel some repulsion simply because of the indications the ritual holds for the community. Conversely, according to Girard, they are attracted to it because it holds a hope to heal the breach of the past, maintain balance in the present, and avoid future conflict.

The presence of the repulsion/attraction relationship in Ionesco's plays is undeniable given that many of Ionesco's characters go through periods of being caught up in the ritual and being repulsed by it. Using the professor as an example, it is quite easy to note that throughout the ritual, he is a more than willing participant. Marie, the maid interrupts the ritual to warn the professor, saying, "Non, monsieur, non!... Il ne faut pas!..." to which the professor responds, "Marie, vous exagérez!" (115). To be sure, he treats very lightly her concern and warning despite her promise that it will lead directly "au pire" (115). Yet, regardless of and notwithstanding his refusal to halt the ritual's progress, he is as remorseful as a child once it is terminated. The stage directions indicate that he is "pris de panique" and he instantly proclaims, "Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait! [...]Elle est mo-orte... C'est terrible" (145). Then, after having given the

professor a severe rebuking, she asks him, "Au moins, vous le regrettez?" To which, the professor responds, "Oh, oui, Marie, je vous le jure!" (147). The same sentiment holds true in *Victimes du devoir*, since Madeleine, just as Marie of *La Leçon* did, chides Nicolas for his hasty actions, saying, "Vous agissez sans réfléchir, et après on le regrette!" (227).

The attraction and repulsion of the ritual can in part explain the relationship of the public with Ionesco's opus of plays. In Ionesco's theater, the audience is not merely present to function as observers, but as participants as well. Sprenger touches on this when he observes that :

[...] on aperçoit que le propre du théâtre, selon Ionesco, est la communication *indirecte*, ce qui exige une observation et une participation active du public. [...] la lucidité doit passer par une prise de conscience la transmission inconsciente et quasi-invisible de l'effet mimétique (ou contagieux) des personnes fictifs *sur nous-mêmes*. (paragraph 9)

According to Sprenger, the audience is not fully aware that it is participating, since the communication is indirect and on the subconscious level, where we desire to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical.

For the audience to be participants in the play reinforces Ionesco's thoughts in *Notes et contre-notes* that theater was not real enough. He despaired that in the world of the theater as a whole:

[il] y avait là comme deux plans de réalité, la réalité concrète, matérielle, appauvrie, vidée, limitée, de ces hommes vivants, quotidiens, bougeant et parlant sur scène, et la réalité de l'imagination, toutes deux face à face, ne se recouvrant pas, irréductibles l'une à l'autre : deux univers antagonistes n'arrivant pas à s'unifier, à se confondre. (5)

The unification of the two worlds in Ionesco's theater works only if the audience members are, on a certain level, players in the play. In *Jeux de massacre*, for example, the audience has seen the entire town burn and every citizen in it die. Then, the curtains part and a very average man comes before the audience and addresses himself to them, saying, "Mesdames, mesdemoiselles, messieurs" formally, as if he were about to make a profound statement or announcement about the play to the audience (112). Suddenly, before being able to relay his message, he dies of the plague. This is very similar to the ending of *Les Chaises*, when the Orator delivers a message that seems to be nonsense. Sprenger explains that this evokes audience participation, since, "[p]aradoxalement, toute spéculation sur ce que le vieux et/ou l'Orateur *auraient dit*, si seulement ils

avaient pu le dire, passe à côté de la lucidité que Ionesco cherche à provoquer en nous par ces non-sens et silences” (paragraph 9). As in *Les Chaises*, the audience of *Jeux de massacre* is left wondering what the man *would have said* if he had only been able to speak. As a natural consequence of the audience’s part in the ritual, they are horrified, just as the professor is when they realize what has happened. This may be a valid explanation of the seemingly legitimate love-hate relationship of the public with Ionesco’s work.

Though Ionesco’s onstage rituals and repetitions may sometimes seem like utter nonsense when they are noticed, they are full of meaning and purpose. Girard’s theory on ritual is helpful in unlocking the meaning beneath the surface of absurdism. The rituals are part of the significant under-workings of the plays that they are part of. What Ionesco demonstrates is that although ritual may be unconscious or lacking meaning, modern society continues to behave under its constraints, perhaps in an attempt to bring meaning where there is none. Although all of his plays have significant ritualistic aspects, they are missing an important element. Modern society has been stripped of sacred things and relies wholly on secular knowledge to save it. Thus, in a way, the rituals are neglected shells of what they once were. René Girard comments that:

Quand les hommes négligent les rites et transgressent les interdits,  
ils provoquent, littéralement, la violence transcendante à

redescendre parmi eux, à redevenir la tentatrice démoniaque,  
l'enjeu formidable et nul autour duquel ils vont s'entre-détruire,  
physiquement et spirituellement, jusqu'à l'anéantissement total [...]

(VS 359)

Accordingly, there are serious consequences that will occur in a society that is so neglectful. Within the plays of Ionesco, it seems that these consequences are to be found within the violence that the rituals are supposed to help the community avoid. Girard asserts later that there is only one person that can stem the destruction of a society. He states that "si la violence est le seul sujet de toute structure mythique et culturelle, le Christ, lui, est le seul sujet qui échappe à cette structure pour nous libérer de son emprise" (Choses 301). This is the exact aspect of violence that is missing from Ionesco's plays. Consequently, the characters of Ionesco's plays are unable to escape the steel grip of the rituals that must also lead to inexorable violence.



## CHAPTER 2: VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE

*On se massacre de plus en plus. Pour une bouchée de pain, pour un bout de terrain, pour agrandir un empire, pour du pétrole, du fer ou du cuivre. Finalement, les raisons vraies des guerres ne sont pas les raisons des massacres. Le massacre a sa véritable raison en lui-même. –Eugène Ionesco, Un Homme en question (116).*

In the same way that Ionesco is persistent in his treatment of ritual, he is equally unrelenting in use of violence in his plays. Ritual and sacrifice are highly correlated to the point of being inseparable, as is also the case in Girardian theory. Girard's idea of the close relationship between ritual and sacrifice is vividly demonstrated in Ionesco's plays, such as *La Leçon*, *Le Roi se meurt*, and *Vicimes du devoir*. Since Ionesco's plays are considered part of the theater 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. Girard says that "la 'jalousie' que Caïn éprouve à l'égard de son frère ne fait qu'un avec la privation d'exutoire sacrificiel qui définit le personnage" (VS 18). Thus, according to Girard, in a primitive society, violence

is the direct result of suppressing violent urges rather than expressing them in the healthy way of sanctioned sacrifice.

Violence has a slightly different cause, however in modern society. Local, state, national, and world governments create acts of legislation which forbid blood shed. Though some nations attempt to justify killing as an act of war, this justification does not erase the scandal that is connected with it. Violence is triggered by losing sight of the sacrifice that ended blood sacrifice, that of Jesus Christ. In *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* and *La Violence et le sacré*, Girard proposes that mimetic desire is at the heart of this singular phenomenon in the modern world. Keeping both of these sources of violence in mind, it is important to consider the violence and death that are widespread in Ionesco's plays. Offstage, Ionesco was very outspoken about these subjects as well. He has said, speaking of his fellow human-beings, "d'un bout à l'autre de la planète, ils s'entre-tuent. Ils s'imaginent avoir des raisons. Serais-je le seul à ne pas être fou? Les camaraderies ont assassiné l'amour et l'amitié. Plus cela va, plus c'est effrayant" (*Un Homme en question* 114). It is only natural that his overwhelming concerns about the conditions that he observed in the world should come to fruition on the stage in the worlds of his creation.

At the heart of all of the violence, on Ionesco's stage as well as off, is the turmoil that mimetic desire creates. Society, according to Girard, can never

escape the problem of mimetic desire. It naturally follows, according to girardian theory that this problem must lead to violence, especially towards sacrificial violence. Girard clearly explains that, “Deux désirs qui convergent sur le même objet se font mutuellement obstacle. Toute *mimésis* portant sur le désir débouche automatiquement sur le conflit” (VS 205). Jaques Schérer, in his article “Ionesco, logicien idéaliste,” seems to agree with the idea of mimesis, since he claims that “on est toujours le conformiste de quelqu’un,” meaning that one is always following another’s ideas. Ionesco, in *Le Roi se meurt*, places the problems of the kingdom, including the jealousy, born of mimetic desire, between the two queens, on the somewhat reluctant back of the king, Bérenger the 1<sup>st</sup>.

In *Le Roi se meurt*, the object that causes the jealousy that Girard defines above is the king himself. This problem presents itself at the beginning of the play, where it is clear that Marguerite, the king’s first wife, does not regard his second wife, Marie, very highly, since Marie monopolizes the affection and time of the king. Despite being unable to openly admit that she is jealous, Marguerite accuses Marie of negatively affecting the king, telling her, “Cette influence détestable que vous avez eue sur lui. Enfin! Il vous préférait à moi, hélas! Je n’étais pas jalouse, oh, pas du tout. Je me rendais compte simplement que ce n’était pas sage. Maintenant, vous ne pouvez plus rien pour lui,” (lines 43-47, 37).

Because of her domination of the king's love, Marie has more influence over him, making it intolerable for Marguerite.

Girard helps establish an understanding of the sexual dimension of this jealousy, as he explains, "la sexualité contrecarrée débouche sur la violence" (VS 58). The pattern of jealousy leading to violence happens just as Girard describes, since it is nearly impossible for the two women to share in the affections of their mutual husband, there are inevitable problems. Of this anthropological phenomenon, Girard outlines further that "la sexualité provoque d'innombrables querelles, jalousies, rancunes et batailles; elle est une occasion permanente de désordre, même dans les communautés les plus harmonieuses" (VS 58).

Marguerite herself is the one that proves that sexual rivalry exists when she complains to Marie:

Vous l'avez laissé faire, vous l'avez même aidé à s'égarer. Ah! La douceur de vivre. Vos bals, vos amusettes, vos cortèges, dîners d'honneur, vos artifices et vos feux d'artifices, les noces et vos voyages de noces! Combien de voyages de noces avez-vous faits?  
(*Le Roi se meurt* lines 27-31, 35-36)

She continues a little later, "Finis de folâtrer, finis les loisirs, finis les beaux jours, finis les gueuletons, fini votre strip-tease" (lines 98-100, 42). A honeymoon, for example, strongly implies sexuality, and of course, the sexual signification of the

English word “strip-tease” is incontestable. These lines indicate that Marguerite is bothered by Marie’s overtly sexual relationship with the king, despite her denial of jealousy. Marguerite is not the only jealous one, however, since Marie knows very well that Marguerite is jealous, which causes a lot of animosity between the two of them. After Marguerite is sure that Marie’s power over the king has diminished, she remarks, “Et vous voilà toute baignée de larmes et vous ne me tenez plus tête. Et votre regard ne me défie plus. Où donc ont disparu votre insolence, votre sourire ironique, vos moqueries? (lines 47-50, 37).

Mimetic jealousy is also a great cause of communal crisis in *Jeux de massacre*. The cultural divide between the rich and the poor sectors of the town become a gaping chasm of animosity and suspicion as each citizen seeks for survival. There is a memorable scene in which some ladies are shopping in a small boutique. Once the women are sure that the owners are dead, they begin to loot the store. The women put on as many clothes as possible, but begin to bicker with each other over who should get what. Girard says of triangular desire, “le prestige du médiateur se communique à l’objet désiré et confère à ce dernier une valeur illusoire. Le désir triangulaire est le désir qui transfigure son objet” (MRVR 25). In the case of the ladies in the boutique, the moment one has seen an object, the others must have it, its value now highly increased, just as Girard predicted.

For the women pillaging the boutique, mimetic desire sparked a frenzy of covetousness and greed that reached its zenith in violence and disorder. With a greater frequency of “À moi! Non, à moi!” pushings, and grabbings, it is only logical that eventually, these women would do most anything to attain the objects of their desire, including what Ionesco outlines in the stage directions, “*Elle reçoit des coups d’ombrelle [...] Tout cela crie, piaille, se bagarre*” (98-99). If the value of an object desired is high enough, the “anything” that the desirer would do can escalate to serious violence and murder until that object is finally attained.

Violence, in the form of sacrifice, is, as discussed in the first chapter, the result of ritual born in an original communal crisis. This communal crisis could end in disaster if left to play out on its own, and thus must be impeded by sacrifice to atone for the conflict. According to Girard, a scapegoat is needed to resolve and end the violent path the community is traveling to avoid a greater conflict or disaster. In the case of *Le Roi se meurt*, the conflict is not only rooted in the tempestuous marriage between the king and his two wives, but in the plague-like disorder that begins within the castle and eventually extends to the entire nation.

Due to the unconventional theatrical methods that Ionesco employs, it is not unanticipated to find pervasive disorder in nearly all of his plays. In *Rhinoceros*, 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. Additionally, the disorder in *La Leçon*, for example, is almost entirely limited to the sphere of the professor and the maid. In *Le Roi se meurt*, however, the disorder is much more remarkable and extreme.

The growing disarray begins at the castle itself, which appears to disturb the residents of the castle. There is filth everywhere, and Marguerite notices that the palace is dusty and there are maggots on the ground. The blame is laid on the head of Juliette, the maid (Ionesco, lines 25,30). The King also chastises Juliette for letting spider's webs multiply in his chamber. Her response demonstrates the mysterious phenomenon of disorder in the kingdom, for, she declares that she can never clean fast enough to stem the tide of the quickly multiplying grime. Of the spider's webs, she says, "Je les ai enlevées toutes pendant que Votre Majesté dormait encore. Je ne sais d'où ça vient. Elles n'arrêtent pas de repousser" (Ionesco, lines 32-33, 51). This seemingly unstoppable wave of disorder cannot be contained within the palace walls, as we discover from Marguerite, who says:

Son palais est en ruines. Ses terres en friche. Ses montagnes  
s'affaissent. La mer a défoncé ses digues, inondé le pays. Il ne  
l'entretient plus. [...] Au lieu de consolider le sol, il laisse des

hectares et des hectares s'engloutir dans les précipices sans fond.

(lines 116-122, 43-44)

All of this in combination with earthquakes, the kingdom's disappearing population, the King's waning power over his realm, is powerfully suggestive that all order in the empire of King Bérenger the 1<sup>st</sup> is rapidly dissolving.

This disorder is a genre of violence that threatens to continue unless an acceptable sacrifice is made to stop it. Disorder itself is also a common theme within the framework of Ionesco's plays. He plays upon the contrast between order and disorder. In *Rhinocéros*, 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 in *Jeux de massacre* closely parallel the spread of "rhinoceritis" in *Rhinocéros* in that it starts with one random victim and spreads faster and faster throughout all class sectors of the community. Violence, which spreads via mimetic desire very much like a contagious disease, is exactly what Girard delineates:

Entre la maladie, par exemple, et la violence volontairement infligée par un ennemi, il existe des rapports indéniables. Les souffrances du malade sont analogues à celles que fait subir une blessure. Le malade risque de mourir. La mort menace, également,



tous ceux qui, d'une façon ou d'une autre, active ou passive, sont impliqués dans la violence. (VS 53)

A direct product of Ionesco's expert weaving together of both elements that Girard discusses is the absurdity that many readers and audiences become preoccupied with. According to Girard, as can also be found in Ionesco's plays, once violence has tainted the community, it ceases to be a choice, and becomes practically involuntary. As Sprenger explains:

*Rhinocéros* présente un exemple éclatant dans la mesure où ceux qui répètent les clichés -- signe d'une infection du virus mimétique -- se transforment en rhinocéros violents qui victimisent les autres, qui, eux-mêmes, se transforment en rhinocéros et ainsi de suite. Les clichés qu'on répète n'ont pas de sens en eux-mêmes ; leur fonction est d'aveugler les agresseurs devant leur propre violence.

(paragraph 18)

Those that are beginning to be the perpetrators of the mimetic crisis, blinded to their own participation. The disease of violence, caused by the mimetic violence, once it has begun to spread in a community, has only one remedy, that of the sacrifice of a scapegoat.

Unfortunately for the characters of Ionesco's plays, the communal violence, spreading with a will of its own, does not allow anyone to escape its

path. In the case of *Le Roi se meurt*, Marie, who ardently loves the king and who is loved in return, is unable to avoid participating in the sacrifice of her beloved. It appears that the “conflits se multiplient, le danger des réactions en chaîne grandit” in the exact manner that Girard would have predicted (VS 63). Though at the beginning of the play Marie tries to help the king to resist the influence of Marguerite, telling him that he must only place all his will against it, she herself demonstrates that she is unable to maintain her good intentions (lines 204-205, 63). Eventually, she cannot obey the king’s commands once the voice of contagion calls her to obedience, and even disappears. The contagion is not exactly what girardian theory dictates, however, since Ionesco’s plays do not find an end for the violence. Instead, the violence seems to reach to the farthest limits possible. In *Le Roi se meurt*, all the characters of the play disappear, demonstrating that even though the sacrifice of the king is under way, it can not derail the train of violent events that are taking over the kingdom. The king’s sacrifice cannot make right what went wrong and restore order.

A common sub theme within Ionesco’s plays is that of the role of willpower in the contagion of violence and mob mentality. In *Rhinocéros*, as in *Jeux de massacre* as well as *Le Roi se meurt*, *Victimes du devoir* and countless other examples, Ionesco’s characters claim to be able to use their will to avoid the infectiousness of mimesis. In *Rhinocéros*, Bérenger states his belief that “si on ne

veut vraiment pas se cogner, on ne se conge pas!" (173). In *Jeux de massacre*, it is the same argument. A group of medical thinkers argues the case of choice as far as death is concerned. The fourth doctor claims that "on meurt [...] malgré soi. C'est pour cela que les personnes polies meurent en s'excusant," which is countered by the sixth doctor who claims that "on meurt lorsque, consciemment ou non on accepte la mort. C'est l'être qui cède, qui renonce" (83). The brave and valiant should hold out and not give in, according to the sixth doctor. However, it seems that the brave and the valiant are a thing of the past, since, in the end, every citizen of the town gives in to the popular idea of death. Some are so eager to avoid the plague that they kill themselves in advance. In the case of *Rhinocéros*, Bérenger is the only person who cannot seem to fall in with what the rest of the population is doing.

While the contagion of violence on the grand scale seems to be inescapable, victimization seems to be a choice. On the surface, especially in a modern society where it is the fashion to claim victimhood, one may try to deny the role which one's own *volonté* plays in one's own victimization. *Volonté*, however, is inextricably linked to the process of sacrifice and victimization. One popular expression that I have often heard is that of "crucifying yourself." Why is it that this expression should be reflexive rather than an act that someone else performs upon you? The answer is because the victim is not a victim against his

will. According to Girard, the perfect sacrificial victim is one who accepts, desires and even “passe pour manipulatrice même de sa propre mort” (Choses 42).

Indeed, the student, for instance, is despite her protestations, a willing victim. As a matter of fact, the stage directions just before her death indicate that she is “à la fois extasiée et exaspérée” (*La Leçon* 141). She is in a state of exasperated happiness, meaning that she is not about to stop the ritual leading to her sacrifice.

For such a localized subject, Ionesco manages to give it surprising variety and texture. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the Dinka tribe and the use of chants and words as a weapon, as well as the Professor’s use of an invisible, neo-español knife as an instrument of death. Claude Abastado has also remarked that in *La Cantatrice Chauve*, “ils s’effondrent, se tuent avec le langage qui les fait exister” (qtd. in Zumbiehl 282). For Ionesco, words are a very popular weapon, in view of the fact that he uses it in *La Leçon*, *La Cantatrice Chauve*, *Le Roi se meurt*, *Rhinoceros*, etc. In *Jeux de massacre*, there is a multiplicity of manners by which the townspeople die. Of course, in the beginning, the majority of people that die are slain by the mysterious plague, but as time passes, something much more remarkable begins to occur. People begin to shoot each other out of suspicion and kill themselves to avoid the plague, by hanging themselves, and jumping out of windows. Eventually, people die of hunger, since the town is quarantined,

which leads to cannibalism. The wave of death found here, is just as language is in a ritual, a symptom of the disease of mimesis, revealing that mimesis really is a deadly plague.

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 violence of transformation in *Rhinocéros*, for instance, is a result of the contagion and corruption of propaganda. Ionesco was attempting to demonstrate, through death and violence, that modern man was on a deadly path. Michel Lioure, in 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 (paragraph 6). Lioure also quotes Ionesco about how this "new man" is no longer a real person, but an impersonation since "'l'homme nouveau' est celui qui 'a renoncé' à sa personne' et vit 'dans l'impersonnel', (PP 116)" (paragraph 6). The denial of who we truly are in exchange for the identity of the masses is prevalent in *Rhinocéros*, as every one begins to think more and more as the rhinoceroses think; to speak how they speak. In *Victimes du devoir*, 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. Indeed, the Policeman indicates that he is "fidèle à [son]

devoir, respectueux de [ses] chefs," but this only leads to his demise, when he admits, "Je suis... une victime... du devoir!..." (220, 227).

Within the framework of victimization, there are certain characteristics that render someone a more desirable victim. Girard explains the qualities that are common among victims:

A la limite ce sont toutes les qualités extrêmes qui attirent, de temps à autre, les foudres collectives, pas seulement les extrêmes de la richesse et de la pauvreté, mais également ceux du succès et de l'échec, de la beauté et de la laideur, du vice et de la vertu, du pouvoir de séduire et du pouvoir de déplaire; c'est la faiblesse des femmes, des enfants et des vieillards, mais c'est aussi la force des plus forts qui devient faiblesse devant le nombre. Très régulièrement les foules se retournent contre ceux qui ont d'abord exercé sur elle une emprise exceptionnelle. (Bouc 31-32)

In other words, an acceptable victim is one who, while being a member of society, is, at the same time, at one extreme or another in the fabric of the community. Accordingly, in every instance of sacrifice in Ionesco's plays, the victim always fits the description that Girard gives above. In one particular instance, in *Jeux de massacre*, it is prisoners who die, the rich man, the youthful, and the extremely old as well.

The first victims of the plague in *Jeux de massacre* are not mere infants, they are twins. As indicated by Girard in *La Violence et le sacré*, in primitive societies, when twins arrive, “[i]l arrive qu’on fasse périr l’un d’eux ou, plus souvent encore qu’on les supprime l’un et l’autre” (86-87). The twins present a particular problem to the community since “ils évoquent et paraissent annoncer le péril majeur de toute société primitive, la violence indifférenciée” (87). In the case of the death of the twins in *Jeux de massacre*, they were not exterminated at their birth, but allowed to live, meaning that they were allowed to bring a state of indifferentiation and the ensuing violence of which Girard spoke.

Moreover, consistent with Girard’s theory about twins, there is also a fear of contagion and contamination. As soon as the death of the twins is discovered, the scene is filled with contention, accusations, and suspicions. These feelings are manifestations of subconscious fears of contagion, which according to Girard is justified since, “[d]ès que les jumeaux de la violence apparaissent, ils se multiplient avec une rapidité extrême, par scissiparité, semble-t-il, produisant la crise sacrificielle” (VS 87). In accordance with this statement, the other characters seem to mirror each other as twins. For instance, the father of the twins says to his friend that “[l]e dimanche, c’est moi qui pousse la petite voiture des bébés. J’ai deux jumeaux. Ma femme tricote” which is answered by his friend admitting to the opposite (11). Later, when these men enter the scene again, Ionesco directs

that “[l]e troisième et le quatrième homme ont toujours l’un le tricot, l’autre la voiturette. Maintenant, c’est celui qui avait le tricot qui a la voiturette et vice versa”

(14). Even though the babies were originally the children of the third man, when they are discovered to be dead, the fourth man plays the role of their father, crying, “On a tué mes enfants!” perhaps indicating that there are two sets of twins (16). This is reinforced when the third man dies at the end of the scene and exclaims, “J’ai fait le mal. Oh, mes petits enfants”(21). This is not simply a case of one set of twins causing a chain reaction of violence within the community, but of two sets of twins. It is significant that the great massacre begins with twins, as they are the source of violent contagion, which in the first scene alone kills over 20 people.

At the beginning of the crisis, everyone becomes nervous, hysterical, and suspicious. Before the twins even die, however, the fear of contagion is voiced by the first two women to speak. They think that “seulement les singes attrapent” the disease, “pourtant, ce sont les gens qui apportent le virus” (8). Out of ignorance of the true origin of the problem, or how to curb the tide of death, even family members and close friends become objects of distrust. From the onset of the wave of illness and death that sweeps across the town, each citizen eyes their neighbors suspiciously, looking for the signs of the plague. Girard mentions that illness is also a quality that increases a person’s suitability for sacrifice, since, “la



maladie, la folie, les difformités génétiques, les mutilations accidentelles et même les infirmités en général tendent à polariser les persécuteurs” (Bouc 30).

Consequently, in *Jeux de massacre*, any sign of weakness a person displayed opened the door for their eventual sacrifice. Though everyone in the play eventually becomes a victim, it is no great surprise that Alexandre, for example, a man who is an invalid and must have regular visits from a nurse and doctor, should be one of the first to die of the plague, which had nothing whatsoever to do with his pre-existing ailment. Furthermore, in *Victimes du devoir*, once Choubert begins to manifest physical maladies, the policeman becomes more and more violent and aggressive. The professor displays this same phenomenon in *La Leçon* once the student becomes sick. These maladies only tend to increase the pace of the ritual towards its ultimate end of sacrifice. In both of these cases, and the others that are similar in Ionesco’s works, there is a deeper reason for their victimization. They are unassertive and passive in the tide of what is happening around them, making them a victim. In *Rhinocéros*, Bérenger 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 them a bad citizen.

The signs that accompanied the illness that plagues the town are no more arbitrary than any of the 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."

This idea is very comparable to what happens to Choubert in *Victimes du devoir*. Throughout the harassment of the policeman, Choubert endures the privation of various senses. He is required to immerse himself in mud, until his mouth, nose, eyes, and ears are submerged, greatly limiting his senses (*Victimes du devoir* 192-193). Depriving him of his senses makes him much more apt to do the will of the policeman, and eventually changes his will. Once this has been

accomplished, there is more brain-washing to come. The policeman then forces Choubert to eat unpalatable bread in order to “boucher les trous” in his memory (217). Thus, what was washed away in the muck and mud will be replaced by the substance chosen by the professor. Choubert is no longer himself, and behaves more like a child than the adult he really is.

*Volonté*, then, comes into play, much earlier than expected, when a person chooses to accept what is said, rather than to think for himself. At that specific time, when that choice is made, it is improbable that he or she would know consciously that he or she were choosing intellectual death; however, that is indeed what they are choosing in light of Ionesco’s works. In the case of *Victimes du devoir*, this is exactly what happens to the policeman. Throughout the play, he antagonizes Choubert, all in the name of duty, telling Choubert that what he is making him do is also a duty. Consequently, in the end, it is duty that kills the policeman, and not Nicolas. The policeman chooses death long before he knocks on Choubert’s door, when he decides that the only important thing in life was to do one’s duty. This, however, is not the only instance in Ionesco’s works where duty leads to victimization, as it also occurs in *Rhinocéros*. As Dudard is going through his mental metamorphosis into a rhinoceros, he tells Bérenger and Daisy that his duty requires him to “suivre [ses] chefs et [ses] camarades, pour le

meilleur et pour le pire" (216). This decision leads directly to losing his identity and becoming a rhinoceros.

Ionesco tells us what our duty is through Bérenger's response to Durard, in which he says, "Au contraire, [...] votre devoir est de vous opposer à eux lucidement, fermement" (217). Thus, as discussed earlier, the only way to avoid the sacrifice is not to be inwardly weak. Girard postulates that the teachings of Christ must be adopted by mankind because "[s]i tous les hommes aimaient leurs ennemis, il n'y aurait plus d'ennemis" (Choses 290) However, for this to come to pass, "il faut que chacun, séparément, et tous, tous ensemble, se donnent sans retour à l'entreprise commune" (290). Thus, the source of strength which protects from all violence is found in following the teachings of Christ.

The violence in Ionesco's plays is a key to expose the meaning within them, but this cannot be done without a girardian perspective. Within Ionesco's plays, rather than avoid the wrongs that cause all their woes, the characters seem to do the exact opposite. Girard observes that this happens in society and that "les communautés se jettent délibérément, semble-t-il, dans le mal qu'elles redoutent, croyant ainsi l'éviter" (Choses 36). The professor, for example, thinks that studying neo-espagnol will not lead to what Marie calls "pire" and plunges headfirst into what really leads him directly to conflict. For Girard, only Christ can really put an end to all violence, since, "Jésus meurt [...] contre tous les

sacrifices, pour qu'il n'y ait plus de sacrifices" (Choses 289). Humanity is freed from the oppression of violence, only by looking to the perfection of Christ to live, after understanding its own faults. Through his theater, Ionesco is demonstrating the relationship between the violence on stage and the violence reality. In a similar way to Christ's model, the violence in Ionesco's plays show how easy it is to become a part of the violence. The violence on stage then becomes a form of sacrifice for the community, in the hopes of keeping the community from real violence by exposing the ramifications of a community without meaning.

### CHAPTER 3: REDEMPTION

*J'écris aussi (surtout?) dans l'idée que peut-être ma déroute, mon désarroi d'homme désemparé, touchera le Seigneur. Rien ne lui est impossible : il peut encore m'élever à Lui, nous élever à Lui. - Eugène Ionesco, La Quête intermittente (152)*

Though many, such as Rosette Lamont and Leonard Pronko, have claimed that Ionesco's plays are starkly antireligious, this, I shall argue, is clearly not the case. Lamont even goes as far as to say of anti-theater, that "the creator of this new genre is as removed from the creature he depicts, and from his own self as the God he seeks and cannot find" (328). Though there are aspects of the profane in his pieces, Ionesco was more interested in demonstrating to the public the emptiness that exists without a form of spiritual redemption or fulfillment. Ionesco himself has discussed openly his belief in spiritual matters. In fact, of himself, Ionesco said, "C'est moi le Monsieur qui essaie de comprendre l'Infini. Le Monsieur qui voudrait bien qu'On lui expliquât l'Infini. Le Monsieur qui se met face à face avec l'Infini" (*Quête* 168). Thus, it is Ionesco who wishes to know what is to come, who is searching for that elusive *more*. Moreover, he states in *Antidotes*, that "sans la métaphysique, nous ne serions rien" (209).

The metaphysical search for more is not necessarily fruitless, for all mankind, but certainly for those who choose not to find it. Michel Lioure discusses the humanist aspects of Ionesco's works, especially his thoughts on atheism, quoting Ionesco from *Un Homme en question* where Ionesco says, "Mais cet 'humanisme athée' lui-même était 'en décadence', et c'est 'la mort de l'homme', affirmait Ionesco, que 'les idéologues français' clament avec une 'joie sinistre' ou un 'cynisme désenchanté', (paragraphe 4). Death may not be merely death, but also the death of the soul of man which is caused by the plague of atheist ideals.

*Rhinoceros* is especially good at treating the topic of emptiness without the possibility of fulfillment. Bérenger resists becoming a rhinoceros, decides to be one, and then fails to achieve it. Finally, he is left on his own. Hans Meyer, in his article, "Le vide idéologique," states that Bérenger "finit par accepter d'être ce qu'il est et de rester le dernier homme, jusqu'au bout, se défendant et ne capitulant pas sur le plan intellectuel" (122). He must find his own way, without relying on the ideas of others. This is the way to redemption. Allowing oneself to be influenced by others is a form of sacrificing, which ultimately leads to killing oneself, as the king Bérenger does in *Le Roi se meurt*. Though Ionesco seems to promote a bleak future, he is merely prophesying of possibilities to come. Indeed, Sprenger argues that Ionesco "cherche à démontrer c'est que les

structures désacralisées du monde moderne sont insuffisantes pour canaliser le désir résiduel de l'absolu" (paragraphe 37).

On the surface, it may seem odd that the majority of Ionesco's plays do not belong to a specific time period. All things seem to occur at a sort of universal time, and quite frequently, in a sort of universal place. This stems, in my opinion, from the desire to make the characters and plays more identifiable to any audience across historical time. In *Le Roi se meurt*, Bérenger is the king of all times and of all places. He is a universal king. Françoise Gaillard has also noticed this phenomenon, specifically in *Le Roi se meurt*, and remarked that: "Le mélange d'achronie et du présent vécu, tirant l'éternité vers le présent, ou gonflant le présent de la dimension de l'éternité, invite à y lire, comme signification transparente, l'identité atemporelle, de l'homme avec lui-même : cet éternel humain des classiques" (714). This creation of a classical eternal human is not necessarily meant to be a moral figurehead. On the contrary, this universal human is to be a sign of what society has become.

*Le Roi se meurt* in particular carries significance far beyond the surface a dying king. The king is not the universal human, as Gaillard seems to imply, but rather, the universal deity. He is the creator of all that exists in his kingdom. He is the author of the great works, and the founder of the great cities. He is the all powerful ruler of his kingdom. Before the crisis that is presented on stage, the



king is used to exercising powers normally attributed to deity, and others speak of him as one might of a god, calling him the “*maître de tous les univers,*” and saying that “*il avait créé le soleil*” (lines 44, 69; 143-144). Yet, despite Bérenger’s status as king and god-like personage, he is the sacrificial victim of the play.

His role as a god is the exact reason for which he has been singled out as a victim. With the rise of an atheistic culture, such as Ionesco lamented, even those who espouse the ideals of the ‘king’ find themselves participants in his demise, which only leads to their own. Marguerite, who is the instigator of the Bérenger’s downfall, does not manage to outlast him. Her existence terminates before she is able to witness the completion of the sacrifice she began. This is “*la mort de l’homme*” which Ionesco relates to atheism (Lioure paragraph 4). Though all that is around him disappears, the king is the last visible object on the stage. Even when he can no longer be seen by the audience, it is not necessarily because he has departed. Ionesco’s stage directions indicate that “*le Roi assis sur son trône doit rester visible quelque temps avant de sombrer dans une sorte de brume*” (165). The haze is representative of the darkness and confusion in which society operates. Thus, God has not died, but society can no longer perceive him.

Ionesco clearly demonstrates the unforeseeable effects that the coming forth of an atheistic culture would create. Here, in this particular play, it is man who dies and not God, despite man’s best efforts to dethrone Him. René Girard, in *La*

*Violence et le sacré*, seems to describe the situation that Ionesco created in *Le Roi se meurt* flawlessly:

Quand la religion se décompose, ce n'est pas seulement, ou tout de suite, la sécurité physique qui est menacée, c'est l'ordre culturel lui-même. Les institutions perdent leur vitalité; l'armature de la société s'affaïsse et se dissout; d'abord lente, l'érosion de toutes les valeurs va se précipiter; la culture entière risque de s'effondre un jour ou l'autre comme un château de cartes. (VS 77).

The king's castle and kingdom of cards does indeed fall, however its fall is not due to any loss of power on the part of the king, it is due, rather, to the loss of belief by the people.

Given that modern society has disassociated itself from God and religion, the possibility for redemption and transcendence have vanished, just as King Bérenger the 1<sup>st</sup> witnessed his kingdom disappear before his eyes. Inasmuch as this is concerned, the Christian, Denis de Rougemont, is a useful source of understanding, since he was greatly admired by Ionesco, who says in *Antidotes* that "la pensée de Denis de Rougemont est globale, elle se retrouve à tous les niveaux, elle est totale et non pas totalitaire, elle n'est pas dogmatique mais elle donne les clés, les méthodes indispensables à l'indispensable pensée personnelle pouvant répondre aux problèmes d'aujourd'hui" (239). In his book *L'Amour et*

*l'occident*, de Rougemont says that in modernity, we are unable to attain transcendence because we no longer believe that it is possible. This significant failure is because society “épouse l’une après l’autre les illusions que lui proposent divers objets, trop facile à saisir” (308). The illusionary objects are ones without substance or meaning, such as the aspects of Ionesco’s theater that have the appearance of nonsense. These seemingly non-sensical things are an illustration of the meaning that we have lost in everyday life, without realizing that it is no longer there. Society has lost transcendence, as de Rougemont claims and Ionesco illustrates, not because it is not possible, but because we no longer understand it or have faith in it.

Despite the lacking possibility of transcendence, the tireless search for it has not ended. Before the dissolution of religion, society was able to focus its search for redemption in and through religion and its sacraments. The idea of finding transcendence through union is one that haunts us even in modernity where our society is largely secular. Ionesco does indeed, as Sprenger says, “essaie de démontrer comment les modernes sont motivés par un désir de l’au-delà, par la promesse d’un autre monde” (paragraph 33). In many cases, transcendence is never found - especially in Ionesco’s plays; this perceived lack of transcendence is at the root of the multiplying problems in society.

A wedding is a societal ritual that can be found in nearly every era and culture, however marriage is what exists after the ceremony is over. Whom one marries and the lifestyle one leads as a result is defined by social rules and in its own fashion, it defines social rules. Denis de Rougemont argues that the true idea of love has become tainted by modern media. It is no longer a real expression of actual emotions, but the playing out of what he calls "la passion profane" (304). This passion is actually, according to de Rougemont, "une forme d'intoxication, une 'maladie de l'âme'" (304). De Rougement attributes infidelity and marital unhappiness to the insatiable search for something that cannot be attained. If this idea is followed, then the marriage in the modern world becomes something completely distorted. It has become a process of developing relationship after relationship only for each one to fail, since false ideals do not lead to ultimate happiness. The inability to find transcendence in other fields of life could also be explained by what de Rougemont describes. Likewise, on the subject of marriage, Girard explains that "[il] n'y a pas de vérité, si élémentaire soit-elle, qui ne soit médiatisée par la culture" (VS 312). Through modern media, society is fed a vision of what a perfect ideal life could be, when behind the smoke and mirrors, there is only emptiness.

Ionesco expresses, through his characters and their dialogue, Denis de Rougemont's theory about modernity and scientific progress. In his short play

*La Jeune fille à marier*, for example, he demonstrates that despite the many advances that modern civilization enjoys, there is a nugget of tradition that creates a longing for the old ideals. For example, the Gentleman says:

Aujourd'hui, voyez-vous, madame, les plaisirs, les distractions, les émotions fortes, le cinéma, les impôts, les discothèques, le téléphone, la radio, l'avion, les grands magasins[...]Tout ce qui fait le charme de la vie moderne, tout cela a changé l'humanité à tel point qu'elle en est devenue méconnaissable !... (254).

This statement is significant not only to demonstrate their longing for simpler times, but also to convey a bit of what Denis de Rougemont discussed in *L'amour et l'occident* when he said that "le panurgisme esthétique atteint de nos jours une puissance inconnue, développés pas tous les moyens techniques, et parfois politiques, en sorte que le choix d'un type de femme échappe de plus en plus au mystère personnel, et se trouve déterminé par 'Hollywood,'" (305). Though modernity can have a positive effect on mankind, it also jeopardizes the most fundamental aspects of society, including marriage and family, creating a false ideal.

It seems, from his plays, that Ionesco agrees with de Rougemont on the subject of modernity and the negative consequences that it holds for society and the marriage state. That profane passion which Denis de Rougemont calls a

“maladie de l’âme” is one of which, “nous sommes tous plus où moins intoxiqués” (304). In both *Victimes du devoir* and *Le Roi se meurt*, couples in crisis turn to the passionate idealized love they mistake for actual love. As Denis de Rougemont suggests, there is no real substance to passionate love, something that Marguerite seems to recognize as well when she accuses Marie of being “artifices” and “feux d’artifices” (*Le Roi se meurt* 29-30). Society claims in films and novels that it is this kind of love that can save us, and consequently, in *Le Roi se meurt*, Marie even tries to influence Bérenger to believe in the idea, as she says:

L’amour est fou. Si tu as l’amour fou, si tu aimes insensément, si tu aimes absolument, la mort s’éloigne. Si tu m’aimes moi, si tu aimes tout, la peur se résorbe. L’amour te porte, tu t’abandonnes et la peur t’abandonne. L’univers est entier, tout ressuscite, le vide se fait plein. (lines 59-63, 127)

Marie’s ideas on love turn out to be nothing more than words, however, since she herself disappears suddenly from existence on the stage (152). In addition, Ionesco relies on this same formula in *Victimes du devoir*. Madeleine, in an attempt to help her husband, claims that “l’amour est toujours jeune, l’amour ne meurt jamais” and that “quand on aime on ne vieillit pas [...] les larmes deviennent des sources pures... des sources de vie, des sources immortelles...” (190-191). Madeleine does in fact become old, and she blames it on the policeman

not long after he has embraced her, and she proclaims, "Tu m'as vieillie" (194).

Their embrace would have been adulterous, as well as a betrayal of real love.

Madeleine's and Marie's view on love has very much to do with the phenomenon that de Rougemont discusses. Thus, this crazy love that fills the void and keeps one eternally youthful, is, in modernity, the mythical passionate love to which he refers. Since, according to him it is an illness of the soul, it has the distinct possibility of proving fatal, since he even claims that "Aimer, au sens de la passion, c'est alors le contraire de vivre!" (308). This fatality in passionate love is the demise of King Bérenger the 1<sup>st</sup>'s kingdom and way of life, as well as the source of trouble for Madeleine and Choubert.

In Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* Mrs. Smith carries out a perfectly meaningless conversation with Mr. Smith while he reads his journal. Though she continues to talk to him, he never seems to be actually listening to her at all. It should be noted, that though there is much of the seemingly meaningless in the conversations of the characters in this play, what Mrs. Smith says here is not meaningless. The conversation can appear meaningless not because the words don't make sense, but rather because her topic of conversation is trivial and lacks depth or interest. What is the significance of this? Rosette Lamont would most likely propose that it is all a lie as is everything else in the play, as she says, "Marriage is not the only lie in Ionesco's devastating picture of bourgeois society

and human conduct. [...] Lies cross each other in intricate patterns, weaving the web of illusion. There is no single truth." (322). How is marriage a lie? If we refer once again to Denis de Rougemont, we can see that modern marriage is only a lie if we accept the myth of passion. Accepting this myth only leads to disillusionment and an unsatisfactory life. Lamont goes on further to say that Ionesco's "contrapuntal treatment of lies, illusions, ancient guilts and broken dreams, illustrates effectively the insubstantial basis on which we build our lives." (323). In this case, she was more correct than she could have guessed since the real lie is the possibility of a mythical passionate love that lasts in an indissoluble union in a society without substance.

Even those who openly profess some sort of belief, or who outwardly seem to be demonstrating a belief, may find that their belief turns out to be nothing but illusion. Ionesco makes that starkly clear in *Jeux de massacre*, when he shows us two couples side by side in two nearly identical scenes. The differences begin when one couple attempts to turn to God, but the other does not. Ultimately, however, the scenes both end in the death of one person from each couple. The irony is that the wife of the couple that supposedly turns to God, does not actually stay by her husband's side, whereas, the husband of the couple that did not openly turn to God would not leave her. The faithful husband, Jean, promises his dead wife, "Je resterai près de toi, je ne m'en irai pas. Jusqu'à la fin



des temps, je serai là" (59). Meanwhile, Lucienne, the unfaithful wife, has left her husband's side screaming, leaving him to erroneously declare, "Je sais que tu es là, ma chérie. Je te vois. Je t'entends. Je te sens. [...] Je ne suis pas seul" (59). For Jean, all hope of transcendence is past. He clings to his only hope's dead body, without relinquishing it. For Pierre, the abandoned husband, however, he mistakenly believes that it is still possible; that he can sense it. However, what he thinks is there, has left and will never return.

As for the dissolution of an entire society, it is clear, that religion, or at least a hope for transcendence, is an element beneath the commotion of *Jeux de massacre*. In this particular play, there is nothing but death from beginning to end, and the community seems to fold, as Girard put it, like a house of cards. Death, disease, and murder plague the town, until it burns to the ground. Where is the source of this catastrophe? Where did it originate? The answer may be found in the elusive character of the black monk. He is in a majority of the scenes, looking on, clearing the dead, but never offering consolation or anything else at all religious. For the most part, only the audience can see him, or perhaps, notice him. When persons on stage do see him, it is not for what he is, but simply, "un homme en noir" (61). Even if his role as a monk is recognized, it is never valued, as one rich woman comments, "rien qu'un pauvre moine" (61). Ionesco purposefully chose a religious figure to be his omen of things to come.

Moreover, he is in the first scene and the last scene as a kind of ominous bookend to the play.

In choosing a monk for this role, Ionesco was making a moral statement about the people in the town. He was not making a statement about rich people, or poor people, or criminals, or cannibals, nor was he making a statement about doctors, politicians, or the young or the old. On the contrary, he was making a statement about *all* people. People from nearly all walks of life are represented here. Among the first to die are infants. Why is this? Perhaps because society is missing its opportunity for transcendence, and eventually even the children will be a part of the blindness of society. Some of the people in the play claim that perhaps disaster can be avoided by repenting to appease an angry god. Perhaps, but even these people fail to notice the black monk as he follows death from scene to scene.

In *Les Chaises*, 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 for him. The old man has already died when the audience learns that the orator is actually “sourd et muet” (85). Regardless, he still attempts to deliver the message as best he can, and after some seemingly incomprehensible sounds,

he writes on a chalkboard, “ΛADIEU ΛDIEU ΛΡΛ” (86). Although Λ is the Greek letter lambda, the French words adieu and dieu are clear. God is indeed part of the message.

What is even more remarkable is that the invisible guests, who were previously imperceptible to the audience, react to this message. The production notes state that “[o]n entend pour la première fois les bruits humains de la foule invisible: ce sont des éclats de rire [...] faibles au début, ces bruits vont, grandissant” (87). 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 guests, He has lost importance and has become laughable.

Though Ionesco rarely *openly* treats spiritual matters in his plays, it is always just under the surface. He lamented that he was not thought of as having something more. After having read an entry in a dictionary of contemporary French literature, he exclaimed, “Quelle pauvreté! Aucun des écrivains de notre temps, moi inclus, bien entendu, ne présente une valeur spirituelle” (*Un Homme en question* 106). 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 states, “[e]t les innombrables terreurs, voulues par les hommes. Pourquoi? Ce n’est pas Dieu

qui est responsable de tout ce mal, c'est nous..." (*La Quête intermittente* 83-84).

We ourselves are at the center of the problem as Girard affirms since "ces formes maléfiques proviennent de la communauté elle-même" (VS 143). The cause, then, of the hopeless state of modern society is due purely to itself.

## CONCLUSION

*Mais peut-être que nous sommes là pour quelque chose, pour une mission... Peut-être l'ai-je accomplie? Peut-être, oui, j'ai fait ce que j'avais à faire, peut-être, peut-être. Je refuse de penser que je suis là pour rien. Je ne le pense pas car c'est impossible, si on y pense bien... - Eugène Ionesco, La Quête intermittente (83).*

Indeed, Ionesco was not here for nothing. He made a valuable contribution as only he knew how. In his early days, Ionesco found that the sacred aspect of theater was missing, rendering it unbelievable (*Notes et contre-notes* 5). It is through his works that he was attempting to resacrilise the genre, lending something of the real to the unreal. Ionesco felt that something was missing from the theater, and as soon as he gained what he called a critical spirit, he realized that within the theater “il n’y a[vait] plus de magie; il n’y a[vait] plus de sacré” (*Notes et contre-notes* 8). It is through his plays that Ionesco attempted to restore to society its missing sacred dimension, or at least expose its absence, through the ritual of theater. His plays, though he only wrote them each once, are performed, ritualistically, again and again.

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 will forever seem mysterious and devoid of real meaning (Matt. 13:9). 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, *La Leçon*, the professor and the student, Ionesco states that words stripped of their meaning are sent out to hover in the air and, “seuls, tombent les mots chargés de signification, alourdis par leur sens, qui finissent toujours par succomber, d’écouler [...] dans les oreilles des sourds [...] et dans la pire confusion...Ou par crever comme des ballons” (119, 121). According to this passage, 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 as 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 hear anew.

Not only does Ionesco make this point through what his characters say, but through what happens in his plays. For example, in *Les Chaises*, 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 *“assez longtemps pour que le public – le vrai et visible – s’en aille avec cette fin bien gravé dans l’esprit”* (87). What Ionesco is getting at is not that life is absurd, but that the way we go through life is absurd, with all of our robotic tendencies, and our failure to look beyond ourselves.

As Michel Lioure points out in his article, *“L’humanisme d’Eugène Ionesco,”* *“Le monde moderne lui semble atteint par une ‘crise de la culture’, une ‘crise de la civilisation’, (Ant. 69), un bouleversement matériel, social, mental, intellectuel et moral tel que ‘tout est à remettre en question’”* (paragraph 1). These crises are at the heart of Ionesco’s plays, and are made manifest through the sacrificial dimensions seen therein. Lioure also notices the sacred element that Ionesco brings to his work and comments that *“Ionesco, dans son théâtre et ses essais, s’est fait le défenseur d’une morale, d’une philosophie et d’une culture humanistes, en lesquelles il conserve, en dépit de toutes ses craintes, une confiance à la fois inquiète et fervente”* (paragraph 1). The philosophy and humanist culture that Lioure refers to are most definitely anthropological in nature.

Ionesco’s plays show that ritual is part of daily life, but it no longer means anything. The lack of meaning results in an increase of violence that threatens to

spread out of control as it does in his plays, if there is no responsibility taken by the community to exist in harmony without the mimesis that causes mortal conflict. Without meaning, ritual and sacrifice no longer hold a promise of redemption, since, as Denis de Rougemont points out, we cannot find substance in something that is empty or hollow. As Ionesco states in *La Quête intermittente*, that without a sacred aspect to life, there is only “vertige,” but “[l]e religieux vous remet les pieds sur terre. Dans la morale” (122). The vertigo is the confusion and terror of ritual and violence, but the religious aspects return order to life.

There are many valid interpretations of Ionesco and his theater, in fact, the academic air is beginning to ring with hints of the meaning within the absurdity. Among these valid arguments, the anthropological aspects that I have explored should not be ignored. Due to the fact that there is such a great abundance of ritual, sacrifice and the search for transcendence, they cannot have occurred merely by some bizarre coincidence or accident. He meant to teach us that we may be using ritual and repetition, without even understanding why, or what its origin was. He wanted to encourage us to think about the meaning of our words and actions, while thinking about who we are as individuals. So, Ionesco did succeed at fulfilling his mission, since he left us the message contained in his plays.



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