EUGÈNE IONESCO AND NORMAN FREDERICK SIMPSON: SATIRIC AND IDEALISTIC ASPECTS OF THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN FRANCE AND BRITAIN

by

DAVID GEORGE HADCOCK ANIDO

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APPROVAL

Name: David George Hadcock Anido

Degree: Master of Arts

Title of Thesis: Eugène Ionesco and Norman Frederick Simpson: Satiric and Idealistic Aspects of the Theatre of the Absurd in France and Britain

Examining Committee:

(Professor Jerry Zaslove)
Senior Supervisor

(Mrs. Andrea Lebowitz)
Examinining Committee

(Mr. Anthony Robertson)
Examinining Committee

(Dr. Hari Sharma)
External Examiner
(Assistant Professor)
(Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology)

Date Approved: Aug. 11 1969
DEDICATION

To my parents.

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant directions of the contemporary theatre has come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the major aspect of "absurdism" (social satire) as it can be isolated in the work of Eugène Ionesco, writing in France, and Norman Frederick Simpson, writing in England. Beyond the satiric elements the thesis will also illustrate how Ionesco has achieved a significant metaphysical level in his drama which presumes a personal faith in the validity of human existence and endeavour.

Ionesco is a prolific writer having written over twenty plays, radio scripts (Le salon de l'automobile), television scripts (Le Jeune Homme à Marier), scenarios (L'Oeuf Dur), and a ballet (Apprendre à Marcher). In addition, the playwright has been much concerned with presenting his ideas about theatre and his personal life. The two most important Journals of Ionesco are Notes and Counternotes, the presentation of ideas on theatre, lectures and interviews, and Fragments of a Journal, some thoughts on the dramatist's philosophy and recollections of childhood.

Eugène Ionesco was born at Slatina, Rumania, in 1912 of a French mother. He escaped the onslaught of the fascist Iron Guard and lived in France with his family until 1925. In this year he returned to Rumania to study at the University of Bucharest, and later between 1936 and 1938, he taught French at a Junior College in the Rumanian capital. In 1938 Ionesco was awarded a bursary to prepare a thesis in Paris entitled, "Themes of Sin and Death in French Literature since
Baudelaire." The thesis was never completed. In 1950, Ionesco's career as a dramatist began when his first play, La Cantatrice Chauve, was produced at Le Théâtre aux Noctambules by Nicholas Bataille. The play was only a partial success because the audience expected to see a "bald soprano" on the stage and were sadly disappointed. But after the production of two more of his plays, La Leçon, and Les Chaises, Ionesco received his greatest boost to date with the publication of an article written by Jean Anouilh on Victimes du Devoir. This play as well as Tueur sans Gages, Rhinocéros, and Le Roi se Meurt, are masterpieces of the modern theatre.

Ionesco has been called an "absurdist", an "anti-playwright", and an "avant-garde writer." He has also been accused by Kenneth Tynan in the famous debate which took place in The Observer in 1958 as not being on "the main road" of contemporary drama. But there is no doubt that Ionesco is like Samuel Beckett, a formidable writer with a novel technique and a parnassian disrespect for older forms of drama. His metaphysical dilemma is similar to the Camusian view of a Sisyphean humanity and the abstractions of his oneric world are rendered as concrete images on the live stage. Ionesco's progress from social satirist to existential idealist is one of the most significant success stories of the modern theatre.

N. F. Simpson cannot be considered on the same level as Ionesco, but he will be considered as exemplifying the "theatre of the absurd" in England. Simpson will be discussed as a social satirist, who, like Ionesco though less capable, presents bizarre and outrageous situations in his plays to reflect a similar disjointedness in his suburban society.
The chapter on Simpson is designed to complement the chapters on Ionesco showing, first, that the avant-garde theatre, derived from the essentially French Dada and Surrealist revolutions, is not limited to one language or situation. The second purpose is to compare the styles of Ionesco and Simpson as a precedent in determining the success and failure of similar techniques used by both men (eg: the "non-sequitur" and the proliferation of material objects in a rapidly dehumanizing world.)

The main object of the thesis is to determine what are the satiric and idealistic elements of the drama of Eugène Ionesco and N. F. Simpson. Ionesco might be speaking for both playwrights in his own expressed desire:

Meanwhile, meanwhile I have done what I could...I have passed the time. But we need to know how to cut ourselves off from ourselves and from other people, how to observe and how to laugh, in spite of everything to laugh.

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CHAPTER ONE

IONESCO AS ABSURDIST SATIRIST

The title "the Theatre of the Absurd" would seem to be more expedient than elaborative. It is a title which conjures concepts beyond the realm of reason, and is suggestive of an esoteric or nihilistic philosophy. There is a certain amount of truth in these inferences, but it is facile to presume that such nomenclature as "absurd", "avant-garde", or "anti-theatre"--which are presented by different critics as synonymous--can contain a style of writing that is notably enigmatic in its originality.

Martin Esslin, the critic who popularized the idea of "absurd" theatre, has succeeded in placing many works of the modern theatre in a helpful perspective. In his book The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin has placed the works of Adamov, Albee, Grass, Beckett, Simpson, Conet, Ionesco, and Pinter, as well as several other writers, under the same banner. The result is some interesting reading, but also an oversimplification since it seems that writers who cannot be considered Brechtian, realist, or expressionist, may be homogenized into the new category.

In his preface to the book, first printed in 1961, Esslin notes that "this book is an attempt to define the convention that has come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd."¹ The suggestion is that the works of

many diverse authors are the culmination of a long tradition that has actually existed since theatre began. Esslin's book, therefore, tends to produce fabricated similarities or generalizations which, while interesting, are not always enlightening: "...there is in Shakespeare a very strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human condition."2 The mention of forerunners of contemporary "absurdists", with such conspicuous omissions as Titus Maccius Plautus,3 suggests that Esslin has chosen his premises with care in order to channel his arguments. Within reason, therefore, one could invent new categories at will and defend the choice by referring back into history searching for witnesses. The motive behind inclusive titles is good--when the works of the theatre are placed in perspective they can be judged as to their literary merit, style, impact on the audience, and potential to influence future playwrights. But the danger exists where conclusivity is implied, and theatre which is impregnated with the elements of the philosophy of the absurd becomes simply "absurd" or "avant-garde" theatre. In a way, this equation of a philosophical system and a theatrical style contradicts the essence of avant-garde which "would seem to be an artistic and cultural phenomenon of a precursory nature, which tallies with its literal meaning...It would be a kind of 'pre-style' indicating and pointing the direction of change...This amounts to saying that the avant-

2Ibid., p. 234.

3The comic plays of Plautus satirized the middle-class society of his day much as Ionesco and Simpson satirize the bourgeoisie of modern society. His swashbuckling heroes and their absurd antics make Plautus as much an absurdist as, for example, Aristophanes--also mentioned by Esslin as absurdist precursor.

4An example of such a category is Robert Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt where Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Brecht, Pirandello, O'Neill and Genet, are discussed under the same title.
garde cannot generally be recognized until after the event.  

In the preface to the second edition of The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin clarifies his position in using the title but does not justify the implicit conclusivity;

A term like Theatre of the Absurd is a working hypothesis, a device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing the features they have in common. That and no more. How could that have led to the assumption that Beckett and Ionesco should behave towards each other as members of the same club or party? Or that Pinter subscribed to the same views on politics or law as Genet? Only by a profound misunderstanding. And even less justified is the view that the development of the theatre proceeds by a series of such movements, each of which comes to power as the previous one articipates or is overthrown.  

Esslin's realization that his "working hypothesis" has caused some misunderstanding among readers, forces the expectation of further proof that this mistake was unwarranted. But, apart from the above mention in the preface, the second edition is hardly revised or different from the first. The critic, like a diver clinging affectionately to a leaky suit, maintains the same poise and technique in spite of his recognition of the necessity for distinguishing between various "absurd" playwrights. However, it is necessary to draw these distinctions particularly in the case of Ionesco.

In his introduction to the first edition of his book, Esslin notes important characteristics of many contemporary Western dramatists. First, they "do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement." Second, "each of the writers...is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world."


6 Esslin, Martin, op. cit., p. 10.
Third, "If they also, very clearly and in spite of themselves, have a good deal in common, it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western World."  

It is most likely that Esslin uses the third point as the premise for his revelation of "The Theatre of the Absurd." This is a justifiable point of view since playwrights in the Western World are indeed preoccupied with major concerns, often more political than artistic. The technological revolution which is part of Europe and North America (far more than the continents of the "third world") has produced a unique kind of hedonism and danger, as well as an international bourgeoisie that is willing to subordinate human emotions and feeling to routine and mechanical control. While Jean Genet and Jean-Paul Sartre emphasize the need for social revolution, Beckett and Ionesco concentrate on a metaphysical revolution. Both are revolutionary trends, but it is a fallacy to suppose that this connection can predominate over the differences; consequently the title of "absurd" is misleading, however convenient.

Esslin's definition of "absurd" is based on a statement by Ionesco: "...Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'"  The idea of purpose and action, further delineated in the plays, introduces the cultural aspects of the absurd. Since "purpose" forms a criterion for the validity of existence the idea of

7 Ibid., p. 22.
8 Jean-Paul Sartre condemns the influence of the bourgeoisie on the theatre in an article entitled, "Beyond Bourgeois Theatre," Tulane Drama Review, 5 (March, 1961).
9 Ibid., p. 23.
absurdity seems to be negative. But later in his notes Ionesco states that the "absurd" is positive in its scope rather than negative. The seeming contradiction of the "absurd" being both "devoid of purpose" and "positive" at the same time is settled in Ionesco's statement:

...the absurd is conceived as being in some way an intrinsic part of existence. Now for me, intrinsically, everything that exists is logical, there is nothing absurd about it. It is the consciousness of being and existing that is astonishing...And I believe I am a comic writer thanks to this faculty...for being able to stand outside myself.10

Ionesco views himself "outside myself" without sacrificing the "consciousness of being and existing" which identifies his humanity. Within the realm of imagination, what man could be compared to what he is makes the latter absurd by comparison, but the basic acceptance of man as he is makes human existence logical. (His subjective fantasies and qualms become objectively logical when he accepts his "being" as the most basic premise.) So the positive cultural aspect of absurdity is that which identifies the human being as the basic value in an anarchic cosmos. The anarchy derives from the evasiveness of absolutes in a universe where man is the only known bearer of consciousness.

It is important to separate the idea of the theatre as creating a stylistically "absurd" drama and the "absurd" as the reflection of the human condition. In an interview with Claude Bonnefoy Ionesco elaborates on his opinion of "absurdity" as part of the human condition before applying it as a theme of the theatre:

Prenez les thèmes du théâtre de Beckett ou d'Adamov qui expriment la condition absurde de l'homme: L'homme va mourir; l'homme a des limites; l'homme n'accepte pas son destin et pourtant il a un destin; quelle est la signification de ce destin? Quelle est la signification du fait que l'homme ne peut donner une signification à son destin? etc...ce ne sont pas des thèmes ce ne sont pas des problèmes uniquement contemporains; ils sont devenus plus aigus, plus perceptibles à cause de certaines situations, de certains événements contemporains.

In the theatre, "absurd" is a catch phrase likely to mislead. It represents that which is opposed to theatrical realism. The shock to an audience that did not see a bald soprano in a play entitled La Cantatrice Chauve probably produced the reaction that called such foolery "absurd" or "anti-theatre" because, in its iconoclasma, it disobeyed the confortable conventions of realism which observed the "unities" of structure and character.

Ionesco distinguished between "le théâtre du boulevard" and "le théâtre contemporain de l'absurde." The boulevard theatre "ne se pose pas le problème de la condition humaine ou des fins dernières alors que le théâtre de Beckett n'est que cela." Here Ionesco explicates the connection of "absurd" to a theatrical style which Esslin has des cribed. In addition the attempt of the pedestrian théâtre du boulevard to simply reflect the assumptions of its audience has been abandoned.

Ionesco draws an important distinction between theatre's perception of the world and life itself. Theatre as art attempts to present life aesthetically and not merely reflexively. In the dramm of Ionesco, ideals are conveyed aesthetically through the medium of the absurd which exists within the context of reality. The positive element of Ionesco's perception is his presentation of his innermost thoughts as live action. His

12 Bonnefoy, Claude, op. cit., 142.
subjective insights permit him to conceive of absolutes and the intrinsic value of existence when they can be realized on the stage. His real world is inescapable, but the theatre alleviates anxiety by providing a vehicle for total freedom of expression. In the theatre, Ionesco transcends reality and finds the solace which mitigates his despair.

Ionesco's strength as a metaphysician lies in his ability to see nightmares to their bitter end without yielding to the most devastating of human emotions--fear of death. His "oneiric universe" is the source of ideas where imagination and anxieties about existence are brought together and his nightmares are stimulated by the feeling that all the accepted (ie: cultural) explanations of man and the world may be little more than fabricated nonsense.

Ionesco's concern and stimulation to write in an avant-garde style derives from the predicament of man as he interprets it. Man, separated from his cultural roots has become lost, and, since these roots are, in Camus' words, "explained by reasoning," it is hard to validate their basis:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.13

Ionesco's strength as a playwright lies in his ability to allegorize the fantasies of his mind and extend his "mental chaos" into the action and characterization of his plays. Through his ability to "detach" himself, Ionesco allows himself to present the nebulous concepts of his subjective world as concrete images on the stage.

13Esslin, Martin, op. cit., p. 23.
In a sense, then, it can be argued that Ionesco's plays are histrionic realism. Nightmares full of monsters and terror have a shocking reality about them since they derive from the synthesis of the external world and the imagination. There is nothing strange, for example, or even absurd, about Bérenger's confrontation with the Killer; the personification of death amid the utopian life of the Radiant City. The reality of Death as an individual experience has nothing intangible or abstract about it. The playwright is obligated to present his ideas on the live stage and is subservient to the confines of that stage. But the important point is that Ionesco's theatre is derived from and is applicable to the real world outside his imagination.

In his plays, Ionesco expresses the "absurd" through various stylistic means, Paul Surer refers to "absurd" expression through language: "le langage, désarticulé et inadapté à la pensée est un moyen efficace d'exprimer l'absurde."\(^1\) A more full account of the language of the absurd has been presented by Sheila Willison in an article distinguishing the techniques of Artaud and Ionesco. She finds that the Absurdists "want to renew in the audience a sense of mystery and awe in face of the realities of the human position vis-à-vis the Universe."\(^2\) Again the idea of "reality" referred to is the supposition that absurd drama does not deviate from reality but concentrates it in a form that is grotesque but recognizable.

Miss Willison continues that "the Absurd dramatists are equally


aware of the power of theatre to renew a sense of life and to convey the reality of the human condition." But because each individual lives the whole reality of human existence, the theatre must translate this reality of everyday existence into something it interprets rather than mirrors. And as soon as such an interpretation takes place, a message is derived a posteriori however discreetly it is conveyed. The technique that allows the audience to comprehend a meaning from a play affords that a catalytic quality promoting the reaction between reality and an awareness of that reality. This, briefly, is Ionesco's technique: he presents his personal ideas and obsessions through the medium of theatre and relies on the audience to activate its own sensibilities.

Part of the "reality" of the human condition is the social context of which Ionesco is an ardent critic. Through such empty and sterile characters as Choubert, the Smiths and Martins, Ionesco pits his satire against the mediocrity of the petit bourgeois world inhabited by an alarming number of human beings. Richard Coe uses an effective definition of the bourgeoisie—a type that Ionesco considers to be both colourless (La Cantatrice Chauve) and dangerous (Rhinocéros):

Ionesco understands by the term 'bourgeoisie'—that aspect of humanity which accepts and cultivates the illusion of material realism as being the equivalent of the whole of reality, which renounces the preception of 'total reality' (the 'inner life') and prefers the superficial comfort of rational logic as displayed in the visible forms of social order; which is therefore hollow within and encrusted without, and in consequence, elementally stupid—and elementally comic. In this sense, the platitude is a weapon of social and political satire, as well as of philosophical criticism of the human condition.

16 Ibid., p. 9.
In the bourgeois mentality Ionesco finds the basic illness of his contemporary society as well as a concrete subject at which to aim his disdain. The comedy of the futile bourgeois world is both absurd and tragic because it is meaningless and renders the human being little more than a machine responding to mechanical and cybernetic impulses (cf: Simpson's *One Way Pendulum*). The subservience of the bourgeois to controlled systems is illustrated by the first plays of Ionesco, notably *La Cantatrice Chauve*. The play has for its mise en scène an "intérieur bourgeois anglais" where the action and ridiculous dialogue take place. The dialogue of the play was influenced by an Assimil English self-teaching grammar book that the playwright was using to learn English. He immediately noticed that the banality of the examples was only too real and that some people actually spoke that way. The curt, simplistic phrases of Mary's opening speech are typical of the play and of the language of Ionesco's satirical subjects:

Mary (entrant) Je suis la bonne. J'ai passé un après-midi très agréable. J'ai été au cinéma avec un homme et j'ai vu un film avec des femmes... 18

This speech is an example of Ionesco's hyperbolic presentation of the simplistic, banal, and meaningless utterances of many people. Such speech censures the mechanical society where ideas are expressed in clichés and thought is abased to routine and programmed response.

Another characteristic of the bourgeois world that soon clogs its awareness is its materialism. To show that serious damage to the human organism can be wrought when man surrounds himself with material possessions, Ionesco has written such effective pieces as *Le Nouveau Locataire* in which

the proliferation of material becomes so extensive that it chokes off life and mobility. And there is an inevitability about this destruction--the apartment of the new tenant becomes completely filled with furniture, or in L'Avenir est dans les Oeufs the stage collapses under the weight of the eggs. The outward "encrusting" of which Richard Coe speaks becomes the finest definition of a tomb.

Jean-Paul Sartre, an anti-bourgeois intellectual, "recognizes what is human in the bourgeoisie by what is bad."\(^1^9\) It is Sartre's contention that the bourgeoisie has control not only of the world of commerce--through which it can exploit other men for its own ends--but also of the theatre where it wishes to see the subjective image of itself, demanding not to see the objective. The bourgeois audience is afraid of objectivity in the theatre because this implies criticism and satire:

...the bourgeois theatre does not want any dramatic action. It desires, more precisely, neo-dramatic action; but it does not want the action of man to be represented, it wants the action of the author constructing events. In truth, the bourgeoisie wants to have an image of itself represented, but--and here one understands why Brecht created his epic theatre, why he went completely in the other direction--an image which is pure participation; it absolutely does not want to be represented as a quasi-object.\(^2^0\)

The attitude of the intellectuals towards the bourgeoisie has been one of repulsion and derision because this "class" is unthinking and cybernetic. And from this repulsion grew the elements of Ionesco's satiric style where language is subordinated to slogan ("Long live the white race!"); the Detective in Victimes du Devoir), non-sequitur ("...it's nighttime, my darling./ There are still shadows." Old Man and Old Woman in Les Chaises) and cliché ("Son of a pig in a poke," Father Jack in Jacques ou la Soumission). Language implies communication where one side


\(^{20}\)Ibid.
speaks and the other listens, but the bourgeois cannot listen because of the "encrustation" with which he protects his narrow and selfish view of the universe:

...the petit bourgeois was for me a type of being that exists in all societies, whether they be called revolutionary or reactionary: for me the petit bourgeois is just a man of slogans, who no longer thinks for himself but repeats the truths that others have imposed upon him, ready-made and therefore lifeless. In short the petit bourgeois is a manipulated man. 21

In order to escape from the confines of the bourgeois world of manipulation and "encrustation" Ionesco turns to the subconscious as a basis for his theatrical investigation into the phenomenon of man and the possibility of human liberation. The concept of man as "phenomenon" is applicable to the technique that the playwright employs. Man is an "object of perception" with a "remarkable" 22 quality that defies rational investigation--only the subconscious (the a priori quality of each individual) can give the experience and perception needed for what must eventually become an objective investigation. Primarily, however, it is the subjective consciousness which conceives of the existential reality. The creative process through which Ionesco produces his plays is reflected in the action of the drama.

In Victimes du Devoir, for example, Ionesco presents the contradictory forces of "mental subjective activity"--the inner reality--and the encroachment of the objective attachment--the outer reality. The opening speeches of the play present the playwright at his metaphysical best:

Madeleine: (s'interrompant dans son travail) Quoi de nouveau sur le journal?

21 Ionesco, Eugène, Notes and Counternotes, p. 66.

22 Man is "object" when he views himself from a detached position, but this "alienation" does not preclude the metaphysical subjective.
A conversation ranging from cosmic disorder to canine ordure develops into a discussion on theatre. But the talk about theatre gradually becomes theatre itself as the Detective humbly makes his way onto the scene. The Detective becomes more authoritative when he hears that the man he is looking for has a name which ends in a "t" rather than a "d" (Mallot) as he had previously presumed. Thwarted in his original supposition and duly corrected by Choubert and Madeleine, the Detective becomes a legal interrogator in order to justify his position and reassure his rectitude. The Detective questions Choubert and Madeleine as to the reasons for their very existence without being aware of why he is asking such questions. His position is one of an automaton responding to "orders" from his superiors, and, in this sense, the Detective is similar to the killer in *Tueur sans Gages* who not only questions the reasons for Bérenger's existence, but also is programmed to deprive him of that existence. It is significant that the Detective, having asked the fundamental question ("Quand l'as-tu connu et qu'est-ce qu'il te racontait?"), adds later, "Ce n'est pas à moi de donner la réponse." In a sense, Choubert is Ionesco 'I' and the Detective is Ionesco 'II'. Ionesco 'I' grapples with ultimate questions with the anguish of an honest man in a futile quest for truth. Ionesco 'II' presents the very questions he cannot answer as orders to an audience, demanding that the audience request no "message." The "message" of Ionesco is in the question, as is a different kind of message in the

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curtness of the Detective (authority) or the ominous callousness of the Killer (reality of death).

Choubert proceeds on a voyage through his subconscious where he recalls the adventures of his childhood and his present desire to find a "magic city." In despair, Choubert cries, "mes jouets...en morceaux...mes jouets brisés...mes jouets d'enfant..." as he realizes his daily approach towards death. These recollections of childhood form the "fragments of a universe" that Choubert sees as brief shadows impressed on his subconscious for a tantalizing moment, but they disappear before he can discover their significance. Choubert and Madeleine are becoming old and impotent like the old couple of Les Chaises, and must face death as personally as must King Bérenger of Le Roi se Meurt. Choubert, the victim of his mortal duty which is to die, seeks the innocence and unconscious mirth of childhood. In this way he is much like Ionesco himself:

There is a golden age: the age of childhood, of ignorance; as soon as one knows one is going to die, childhood is over. As I said, it ended very soon for me. So one can be grown up at seven. Then, I believe most human beings forget what they have understood, recover another sort of childhood that, for some of them, for a very few, can last all their lives. It is not a true childhood but a kind of forgetting. Desires and anxieties are there, preventing you from having access to the essential truth.

The Detective makes an important statement on the theme of "forgetting" but it is ambiguous and spoken for the wrong reason. To the Detective "forgetting" signifies a premeditated blindness to the metaphysical predicament of man. He subordinates man's hope to a world of materialism

25 The idea of a "magic" or "radiant" utopian city occurs in both Victimes du Devoir and Tueur sans Gages.
and imperviousness to mortality. "Remember the solidarity of the human race" is, in the Detective's case, implicit of both the "rhinocerization" of humanity (the sense of the Detective) and the brotherhood of humanity in the face of death. Both types of solidarity are defences against childhood but are diametrically opposed in their relative significance to existence. "Rhinocerization" is dangerous and humanly invalid, while "brotherhood" is evasive when men like Bérenger must stand alone. That is Ionesco's thesis.

In his article on "detached committal", Ross Chambers isolates the "fundamental themes of the play." These are "the antagonism of the social and the individual, and the irony that individual values themselves cannot be asserted without becoming social, and as such a danger to the individual." It is in Victimes du Devoir that Ionesco presents himself as an expert metaphysician: Choubert is a human being in a familiar environment surrounded by caricature people. But around Choubert are also the laws of reality, personified by Madeleine and the Detective. Madeleine is the human being, in alliance with whom Choubert first attempted to abolish his loneliness, but, as they wrestle erotically on the floor, their contortions become little more than a meaningless exercise of futile and insensible rhythm. The Detective is a man of regulation for whom "Mallot" must end in "t" rather than "d" for no other reason than that it is the law. Choubert is always an inevitable subject to the laws of reality, however unrealistic these may be, and his only satisfaction is in continuing to question his contingent


situation. This is, in part, the metaphysical content of the play, and the dichotomy and contradiction can only be dealt with through the action of the play.

Ionesco's presentation of the "theatre of the absurd" reflects his detached perception of the world. He allows for an anarchy of ideas to lead his thoughts from an initial doubting of the value of existence to a faith in the validity of man in a terrestrial environment. Briefly stated, the hopeful element in Ionesco's work is his implied faith in a universe that is intrinsically absurd when the dreams of the mind clash with the realities of existence. In order to extend his perception beyond the confines of his mind, and hazard a latent optimism about the validity of human existence the playwright allows for extensive introspection. This "subjective investigation", the subject of the next chapter, gives freedom to the most basic anxieties (ie: fear of death and the mechanical habits of man controlled purely by reason and response) from which he can gain greater understanding of the "reality beyond"--the "objective investigation."

The positive elements of Ionesco's absurdism are not an imposition by the playwright on his art. His personal opposition to didactic drama precludes the "giving of a message" or the advocacy of an ideology. In fact, the positive elements of hope and faith in humanity only developed slowly in the two decades in which Ionesco has been writing. These elements are as yet simply bearings on the apocalyptic not conclusive statements or absolutes.

Ionesco writes to identify the terrestrial human condition and
strives for an ordered philosophy amid the metaphysical chaos of his own perception. His passionate desire not to define but to discover the meanings of existence from his own consciousness gives to his theatre the personal qualities of his philosophy. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Ionesco's writing is subjective and personal, and the most obvious direction from the first plays to the later ones is a progression from satire to idealism.

Ionesco's art is honest because it makes no attempt to fabricate answers to the dilemma of existence. It is a development that gradually realizes existential facts and uses these facts as the foundation of a philosophy. For example, the fact of death is the most difficult for Bérenger to grasp in *Tueur sans Gages* or *Le Roi se Meurt*. But, once accepted as inevitable, the fact of death becomes only an element of time in *Le Piéton de l'Air* as the hero rises above his situation, through his own will power, in the interim between birth and death.

Ionesco has been very frank in discussing his motives for writing plays and revealing his personal philosophy through drama:

> When I am asked the question: "Why do you write plays?" I always feel very awkward and have no idea what to answer. Sometimes it seems to me that I started writing for the theatre because I hated it.  

What bothered Ionesco about theatre was the physical presence of actors on the stage who presumably represented "ideas" rather than merely the reflection of the familiar world:

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I think I realize now that what worried me in the theatre was the presence of characters in flesh and blood on the stage. Their physical presence destroyed the imaginative illusion. It was as though there were two planes of reality, the concrete, physical, impoverished, empty and limited reality of these ordinary human beings living, moving and speaking on the stage, and the reality of imagination, face to face, overlapping, irreconcilable: two antagonistic worlds failing to come together and unite.

The ideas of Ionesco's mind or the fantasies of his dream world ("oneiric universe") seemed too complicated and evasive to permit representation on a stage confined to physical laws. Ionesco was used to productions of the "boulevard theatre" which were exercises in realism and were more slight entertainments that the vehicles of profound philosophies.

But the "human" element of the theatre and its ability to present a "live presence" before an audience convinced Ionesco of the theatre's potential vitality and its power in the transmission of ideas which are implicit rather than imposed on the action:

Drama is one of the oldest of the arts. And I can't help thinking we cannot do without it. We cannot resist the desire to people a stage with live characters that are at the same time real and invented. We cannot deny our need to make them speak and live before our eyes. To bring phantoms to life and give them flesh and blood is a prodigious adventure, so unique that I myself was absolutely amazed during the rehearsals of my first play, when I suddenly saw, moving on the stage of the 'Noctambules', characters who owed their life to me. It was a terrifying experience. What right had I to do a thing like that? Was it allowed?...
It was almost diabolical.

No doubt the personal fascination of Ionesco with the drama of his own creating was exaggerated by his characteristic magnification of the ideas which obsessed his mind. This exaggeration became the underlying force for Ionesco's theatre, and it formed the basis of his satire.

31 Ibid., p. 17.
32 Ibid., p. 25.
in the first plays, *La Cantatrice Chauve* and *La Leçon*:

So if the essence of the theatre lay in magnifying its effects, they had to be magnified still further, underlined and stressed to the maximum. To push drama out of that intermediate zone where it is neither theatre nor literature is to restore it to its own domain, to its natural frontiers. 33

The hyperbolic expression of Ionesco's first plays is faithful to the playwright's assertion that "drama lies in extreme exaggeration of feelings, an exaggeration that dislocates flat everyday reality." 34 By such "dislocation" the reality of the represented world is made more stark and impressive. The "dislocation", however, is not destructive. Rather it is the premise to a clearer existential awareness. That is, the reality of the world or society is illustrated through its own magnification. It is this magnification which carries Ionesco's drama above the level of realism where the absurdity of situations, "underlined by farce," makes these situations the object of satiric investigation, a result realism cannot attain.

When the initial "dislocation" has achieved its purpose of manifesting reality, what Ionesco calls "reintegration" occurs. This "reintegration" is the creative facet of the playwright's art. While the content of the plays is steeped in farce, the underlying seriousness of the dramatist's work is illustrated in his concern that the audience achieve a higher level of awareness than before:

Without a fresh virginity of mind, without a new and healthy awareness of existential reality, there can be no theatre and no art either; the real must be in a way dislocated, before it can be reintegrated. 35

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
The "reintegrated" elements of natural reality and exaggerated reality therefore combine to form the absurd reality which, however paradoxical, is the substance of Ionesco's testimony to art. His progression from the satiric plays of his early years as a writer to the later humanistic Bérenger plays is itself an example of philosophical "reintegration." 36

36 Although Ionesco has only mentioned the idea of "reintegration" in passing (Notes and Counternotes, p. 15) the concept, briefly stated, is the synthesis of the playwright's subjective insights and his objective realizations of these inspirations on the stage. Like the method of Descartes, it is the gradual formulation of a philosophy after a premise of universal doubt.
...in reality, the existence of the world seems to me not absurd but unbelievable, yet intrinsically, within the framework of existence and the world, one can see things clearly, discover law and establish "rational" rules. The incomprehensible appears to us only when we return to the very springs of existence; when we take up a position in the sidelines and obtain a total picture of it.  

Ionesco's "oneiric universe", or dream world, is the fascinating basis for his art. The investigation of dreams becomes a method for presenting the oneiric panorama as action on the stage. "The dreams' enchantment--sometimes joyous, usually frustrating or terrifying--is replaced by a factuality reminiscent of Kafka. The spectator may find the flow of events incoherent or disconnected and the dialogue is often a series of paralogisms or automatic puns, but the characters--whether surprised, indignant or frightened--accept such phenomena as real."  

It is this "dream method" which forms the basis for Ionesco's idea of "reintegration" from which derives, in his later plays, the idealism which the playwright is gradually expounding.  

3 Ionesco's "idealism" in the defense of humanity is the subject of the next chapter entitled "The Bérenger Plays."
"a fresh virginity of mind" with which to "reintegrate" a reality reduced to its lowest terms by "dislocation" is reminiscent of Locke's "tabula rasa" or the Cartesian premise of universal doubt. The idea of a new premise or starting point is precursor to a "reintegration" of experience and sensibility. In other words, Ionesco attempts to make some coherence of the "outer reality" of the world by first exploring the "inner reality" of his own mind.

The task facing Ionesco—his self-imposed task—is the interpretation of objective fact through subjective insight. His subjective investigation of Death, for example, in *Tueur sans Gages* and *Le Roi se Meurt* is a complete personal preoccupation with the individual's confrontation with the avatar of existential absurdity. Once accepted as inevitable, Ionesco "reintegrates" his realization of the power of Death with the creative power of the will which enables Bérenger to fly above his situation and transcend the world in *Le Piéton de l'Air*.

Ionesco's plays are more than tragic farces because of the two major works which present Bérenger (Everyman) face to face with the physical tyranny of the rhinoceros and the metaphysical tyranny of the killer (Death). Because the playwright accepts the Camusian assertion that "happiness and the absurdi are the sons of the same earth" (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), he can accommodate in the same play man's contingency and his will to overcome this contingency (however futile). The inherent paradox is perhaps the most significant result of Ionesco's "accommodation." Were it not for the clarity of the basic dilemmas he lucidly portrays through his hero, Ionesco's art would be less than faithful to its proclaimed testimony. Starting with the dilemma between reality and imagination; subjective and objective; comic and tragic; Ionesco "reintegrates", through
his plays, his inner perceptions into concrete images such as the maturing Bérénger or the empty artificiality of the Radiant City. It is not clear whether Ionesco seeks a "utopia" of body and mind (the Radiant City illustrates the failure of concrete utopias), but it is clear that he refuses to ignore his anxiety or the possibility of salvation.

The most revealing study of Ionesco's "inner reality" has been presented by Richard Schechner. Schechner calls the playwright "an abstract expressionist" and then quotes Ionesco's own words concerning the subjective or oneiric experience:

I try to project on stage an inner drama (incomprehensible even to myself) telling myself, nevertheless, that since the microcosm is the image of the macrocosm, it may happen that this torn up, disarticulated inner world is in some way the mirror or the symbol of universal contradictions.4

The critic continues by stating that Ionesco's "work is romantic and subjective, mirroring his own anguish and inner struggles, translating them into symbols and patterns that have been emphatically embraced by audiences throughout the world."5 To Schechner "the outer world is the setting and the inner world the action of Ionesco's plays." This substantiates the opinion of Guicharnaud and is an explanation for the often inexplicable action of Ionesco's characters. For example, Choubert of Victimes du Devoir passes through many contortions on the stage in his futile search for Maillot. The movement which finally places him on top of a chair is actually an adventure through his subconscious mind. Just as a dance can express the inner emotions of the dancer, Choubert's antics are the outward signs of an inner excursion.

5 Ibid.
through memory and imagination. To the people around him, Choubert's absurd actions are signs of madness, but Choubert, engrossed in his own subjectivity, is unaware of the strangeness of his antics. Moreover, while he is under the spell of his subconscious, Choubert cares little for the opinions of either Madeleine or the Detective.

Ionesco is the supreme individualist in that he is preoccupied with his own introspection. His "detachment" from the world is the separation within himself of reality and his vision of reality. It is an "inner" detachment bearing on the subjective experience and carried into the "outer" reality merely by the hope that this is possible to achieve. The hope derives from the fear that man is an emotionless shell impotent to combat the absurdity of the world yet conscious of a "beyond reality" or cosmic significance. The oneiric world is one of absolutes and truth. The intuitiveness of fantasy and imagination, based on reality, and distorted by the silent action of dreams during sleep, provides revelation. "I dream that I am told: 'The revelation, the answer to all your questions can only come to you in a dream. You must have a dream.' So, in my dream, I fall asleep and I dream, in my dream, that I'm having the absolute dream. On waking, that's to say on really waking, I remember having dreamed that I'd dreamed, but I can remember nothing about the dream within a dream, the dream of absolute truth, the dream that explained everything."6

The dilemma facing Ionesco is that the "dream of absolute truth" is evasive in reality. Man is alienated from the universe through no fault of his own, and it is the "divine spark" of consciousness that

causes his anguish, as the desire to order chaos, both psychic and cosmic, is continually thwarted by contradictions and absurdities. It is this cosmological frustration that prompts Ionesco to explicate the absolutes of his oneiric universe and to dream "the dream that explained everything."

Ionesco's quest for absolutes is evident not only in his journals but also in his severe criticism of ideologies. The playwright consciously strived to avoid the hypocrisies typical of dogmatic anti-ideologists, who oppose existing ideologies with antithetical ones. In Ionesco's opinion, dialectical synthesis is an unacceptable concept since the polarities on which it is based may both be based on false, unjust, irrelevant, or evil motives. While ideology might be temporarily constructive in opposing the evils of totalitarianism or the rhinocerosization of human beings, Ionesco refuses to embrace specific ideologies or to accept apparently complete and satisfactory answers to permanent and omnipresent problems.

David Grossvogel discusses the idea of "absolute" as it applies to the theatre of Ionesco. In general, "since the mind cannot grasp absolutes short of private revelation, reliance upon them must be an act of faith." Grossvogel refers to Albert Camus who would not accept this "faith", something "which sensory evidence mocks." To Camus, a leap of faith avoids the basic metaphysical question about the value of existence. "The way out of this dilemma has been the acceptance of some transcendent reference, an absolute such as Truth or God."

8 Ibid.
But even if the philosopher cannot accept this "reference", Ionesco has a latent hope that such a faith will bring in its reward, and he trusts that "nevertheless...some fundamental principles may remain upon which I can lean consciously and instinctively."\textsuperscript{9} Ionesco is prejudiced against his fate, and his vivid imagination, tempered with nightmares and the hope of revelation, forces him to revolt against his condition. For Ionesco, "the only positive statement of which man is capable is...tied to the absurd."\textsuperscript{10} In other words, an acceptance of absurd reality is essential before there can be hope of coming to terms with psychic chaos or cosmological frustration. By exploring the anarchic labyrinth that is his mind, Ionesco believes that discoveries can be made which can stand as fixed or absolute as the world around fluctuates to the absurd syndrome.

Spared from the categorical conclusions of Dada pessimism or Leibnizian optimism, Ionesco remains as a man of hope who, after two decades of playwriting, has found values and possible answers through his art. As his dreams explore his fantasies and the ideas of his imagination, Ionesco's plays explore the possibility of action in a world where action seems futile. The scope of his work illustrates a gradual rise from the cynicism of \textit{La Cantatrice Chauve} to the positive humanism of \textit{Rhinocéros}. Also, the Bérenger plays illustrate the progression of a human being from naïveté to initiation. Ionesco's work is an example of progression from satire to idealism, and, although farce remains, the playwright allows the ideas implicit in his work to pass freely as part of the action.

\textsuperscript{9}Ionesco, Eugène, \textit{Notes and Counternotes}, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{10}Grossvogel, D., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 59.
Ionesco implies that his subjective aberrations form part of his quest for absolutes. He is a Cartesian in his belief that introspection is the door to perception and that observation can best be made through what is given to the individual: that is, a mind and a position in the universe. This rationalistic approach causes the playwright to accept an initial doubt, or anarchy, as the desirable means of discovering some Platonic order of the good. From the intense subjective experience of his oneiric world, Ionesco derives objective insight that results from his self-questioning; "I hope a time for relatively absolute objectivity, if I may so express myself, will one day come when all storms have passed."11

As a playwright, Ionesco is "engage" in a different way from Sartre or Brecht. Ionesco allows his imagination to conceive of a truth that is constant and immutable even though it may be imperceptible. His objection to ideology stems from his dissatisfaction with the temporal expediency of such theories which perhaps fabricate order from chaos without being sure that this artificial order has foundation. Ionesco is not opposed to order--his technique and style show an obsession for it--but he opposes order based on logical fallacy. Ionesco believes that order is to be discovered rather than imposed. In other words, his order is synonymous with absolutes, and absolutes are more objects of his speculation than established facts. Ionesco bitterly satirizes fallacious order in his most famous "anti-ideological" play Rhinocéros. Just as the Sergeant Musgrave of John Arden's play choreographs his logic to an arithmetically valid, but humanly preposterous, conclusion,

11 Ionesco, Eugène, op. cit., pp. 79-80.
so the human beings who become pachyderms in Ionesco's play are condemned for twisting the logic of their ideology beyond all value. Logic itself is not the answer as far as Ionesco is concerned. Its laws are designed rather than realized, and the portrayal of the Logician in Rhinocéros supplies an illustration of the playwright's disdain for logical conclusions.

While his art is frequently solipsistic, Ionesco is not a true solipsist when the external references of his plays are considered. As has been mentioned, his subjective investigation is preliminary to an objective reference and does not stand alone. Jacques Guicharnaud talks of "the tension between a superabundance of being and the absolute impossibility of justifying the fact of being." This "tension" of which he speaks corresponds to the basic dilemma of the absurd expressed by Camus; it cannot be resolved, merely accommodated. At times, Ionesco appears to be unable to achieve such accommodation:

A finite universe is unimaginable, inconceivable. An infinite universe is unimaginable, inconceivable. Doubtless the universe is neither finite nor infinite, since the finite and the infinite are only man's way of thinking about it; in any case, that finiteness and infiniteness should only be ways of thinking and speaking is also inconceivable, unimaginable. We cannot take a simple step beyond our own impotence; outside those walls I feel sick and giddy. It is in his "impotence" as man that Ionesco finds both a finite and an infinite universe unimaginable. He feels "sick and giddy" when faced with the monsters of his imagination that tantalize his expectation while allowing for only a very limited perception beyond the self.

12 Guicharnaud, J., op. cit., p. 221.
13 Ionesco, Eugène, Fragments of a Journal, p. 25.
But Ionesco's stoic courage is everywhere evident and potentially strong enough to overcome his metaphysical depression: "Death alone can, and will, close my mouth." Death, therefore, is the only absolute negative known, and before it strikes, the human being has the ability to act as long as his free will allows him to forget his anxiety about the world. Ionesco admits the permanence of the dichotomy between reality and the image of that reality: "...history, in its attempt to 'realize' myth, distorts it, stops halfway: when history claims to have 'succeeded', there is nothing but humbug and mystification. Everything we dream is 'realizable'. Reality does not have to be: it is simply what it is. It is the dreamer, not the thinker or the scientist who is revolutionary: it is he who tries to change the world."  

The question, therefore, is one of perception where thought and action become being, and where one sensibility conceives of a certain reality, another may think differently without disagreeing with the previous conclusion. "I can believe as naturally in the potential reality of fiction as in my own dreams." (Notes and Counternotes, p. 16). The significance of Ionesco's philosophy lies in the playwright's ability to conceive of other realities than his immediate experience, without actually perceiving them. This is reminiscent of Kant in the Western World or the passivism of Zen in the Eastern. But beyond the philosophical content of this realization exists Ionesco's histrionic originality which takes the abstractions of his oneiric world and dramatizes them as concrete entities on the live stage. So, for example,

14 Ionesco, Eugène, Notes and Counternotes, p. 16.
Bérenger is the personification of human free will, and the Killer is the personification of the absolute which "can, and will, shut my mouth."

But while these "abstractions" are made concrete, they never lose their initial intangibility as Ionesco searches for the meaning of existence. The liberation of his mind through the fantasy reminiscent of the surrealist philosophy affords the playwright the ability to transcend the controlling conformity symbolized by the bourgeois mentality.

Ionesco's development since La Cantatrice Chauve emanates from the "reintegration" of his subjective insight and his objective experience. His progress is a journey from doubt and apprehension to hope and expectation, and his plays are testimony to this advance.

It is incorrect to call Ionesco an existentialist:

In contrast to the so-called existentialist theatre, according to which man has the freedom and indefeasible power to make himself and make the world, Ionesco's theatre is one of disenchantment. His vision may be similar to the early stages of the existentialist philosophy--the isolation of the individual consciousness in our absurd universe, the unjustified presence of things, and the unbearable fact of existence itself...--but while both Sartre and Camus developed their themes into reasons for action, Ionesco, one literary generation younger, marks the failure of any such ambition.¹⁵

Ionesco's theatre is exemplary of a personal disenchantment with the world, and, if Le Piéton de l'Air is any indication, he yearns to transcend the terrestrial prison. As critic Guicharnaud suggests, Ionesco's "isolation of the individual consciousness" is similar to existentialism's "early phases." But, at this point, Ionesco parts company with the "activists" Sartre and Camus.

Sartre has been the influential leader of the Existentialist movement in France whose idea of 'praxis' (action) and membership in such notable bodies as the Stockholm war-crimes Court is common knowledge. Camus was a journalist, a partisan during the German occupation of France, and an editor of the revolutionary publication 'Combat.' But Ionesco has never considered activism as part of his quest. In fact, his flight from the Iron Guard and his search for tranquility in France is representative of the playwright's desire to seek a metaphysical revolution rather than a political.

Ionesco's metaphysical revolt is thus primarily personal. That is, he is as interested in bringing order to his own psychic chaos as he is in creating testimonial plays for his audience. Ionesco is the Bérenger who stands alone in the rhinoceros world of conformity. Although it is incorrect to call Ionesco an existentialist, there are existentialist elements in his writing. (It also can be argued that there is Christian philosophy in his idealist quest for the "absolute good" and Marxist philosophy in his pursuit of humanitarian ideals). His art is preoccupied with dreams and imagination illustrated through the medium of theatre, whereas "it requires only a rapid glance over the philosophy of the last hundred years to discover in its development a remarkable enlargement of content, a progressive orientation toward the immediate and the qualitative, the existent and factual—"concreteness and adequacy," to use Whitehead's pregnant words." 16 So, while existentialism is "oriented" more toward the "immediate" and the

"existent", Ionesco is oriented toward the metaphysical and transcendental.

In his book on the experimental theatre in France, Leonard C. Pronko notes "four principles of existentialism which are reflected in one or more of the major avant-garde writers today." Pronko, by relating these principles, does not presume to suggest that Ionesco is an existentialist, "it is simply that the school of Sartre sums up a certain attitude that prevailed in France in the forties and continues, in certain respects, to prevail."

Ionesco's philosophy substantiates the first point made by Pronko. That is, "absurdity is the underlying fabric of man's existence. Man, in his moments of honesty and lucidity, is aware that his life has no absolute meaning, and that he must live as in a void. Nonexistence constantly threatens him." This idea of an "unbelievable world" (see footnote #1) appears frequently in the playwright's works and journals, and his fear of "nonexistence" forever plagues his mind:

...when I was four or five years old I realized I should grow older and older and that I should die. At about seven or eight, I said to myself that my mother would die some day and the thought terrified me.

The four Bérenger plays, discussed in the next chapter, are deeply concerned with the idea of death as the negation of life. *Tueur sans*

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Gages and Le Roi se Meurt are dramatic reflections of Ionesco's anxiety over death, an anxiety he first felt at "four or five years old."

Pronko's second principle concerns man being "bogged down in his physical being, attached to a pattern, a fixed idea of good, a conception of himself, which denies his humanity. He ceases to change, to become, is turned into a thing. The overabundance of things is nauseating, for it limits our freedom." The "fixed idea of good" parallels Ionesco's term "rational rules" (see footnote #1). It is a defence by social man who, admitting that there are elements on the universe beyond his understanding, fabricates an order for his life that appears most expedient. By clinging to this "order", man anaesthetizes himself from a concern for development, a development that Bérenger is able to attain in his non-capitulation. The Logician of Rhinocéros is the clearest example of an ordered mind that is unable to transfer the mental formulae into the surrounding world of reality. The "overabundance of things" is Ionesco's preoccupation of the earlier plays. Man becomes more and more mechanized as he reflects the "overabundance of things" that he has created around himself. This is the theme of Rhinocéros where man has become an automaton fatal to himself. Ionesco cannot bear the possibility of man destroying himself by a choking materialism, and, rather than sanction a social revolution as does Sartre, he believes in man's natural ability to "fly" as Bérenger in Le Piéton de l'Air. For Ionesco, the answer to the existential predicament is a metaphysical awakening.

Pronko's third principle; "just as man and his values may congeal through habit, so may language become dead and inoperative, paralyzing our thoughts. With such an instrument no communication is possible..."22

The idea of language reduced merely to a medium of meaningless clichés is instrumental in the themes of Ionesco's earlier plays--especially La Cantatrice Chauve and La Leçon. It was the meaningless jargon of the Assimil language primer, with which Ionesco hoped to learn the English language, that first prompted the playwright to write an "anti-play" where words and actions became meaningless. The mention by Mr. Martin, for example, of a woman who ate chicken in a wasp's nest is incongruous enough to be amusing and is strong enough to satirically reflect the sterility of the lives of the two middle class families, the Smiths and the Martins. The play concludes with the incoherent babblings of these people who reverse their roles only to recommence the whole futile exercise. Ionesco's play is a strong condemnation of "congealed habits" and "dead, inoperative language."

The final principle cited by Pronko is especially relevant to the four Bérenger plays which, so far, culminate Ionesco's progression from satire to a speculative idealism in humanity. "There is no human nature. Man is only what he makes of himself; therefore there is no such thing as a fixed character in the usual sense. Man is an existent in a situation."23

The self-assertion of Bérenger in Rhinocéros or Le Piéton de l'Air, for example, is an act of self-will which is a step forward from the submissive Bérenger of Tueur sans Gages. Bérenger is not restricted by his

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
humanity to the point where he is helpless to attain freedom from his predicament. Catherine Hughes substantiates this idea of self-will in action:

With Bérenger (sic), he (Ionesco) knows that man is superior to the rhinoceros: he is deprived of some part of his essential humanity—his dignity as man—in bowing to the contemporary ethic of conformity.24

The achievement on Ionesco's part is his development from a playwright, preoccupied with the anxieties and perplexities of his subjective consciousness, to a playwright who knows "that man is superior to the rhinoceros." He is no less preoccupied with the subjective world, but he has expanded his perception into the "outer reality."

Pronko is adamant that Ionesco is an absurdist and not an existentialist—"I do not mean to suggest that Beckett, Ionesco, or Adamov are existentialists, or would even acknowledge a debt to existentialism."25 The point is that the premises of both Ionesco and the existentialists are essentially the same as Pronko has outlined.

Another difference between Ionesco and the existentialists apart from the attitudes of "engagé" and "dégagé" are the separate directions of the two individual philosophies. Ionesco progresses towards the humanity and transcendental freedom of Bérenger through the imagination of his "oneiric universe." An existentialist playwright such as Sartre is committed more to immediate concerns. For example, Le Diable et le bon Dieu, an epic attack on institutional Catholicism, shows a specific ideological commitment. Ionesco's plays and journals reveal that he has

no equivalent commitment.

In an interview published in Les Cahiers Libres de la Jeunesse, Ionesco admitted the following about the possible "engagement" of Rhinocéros:

...Let us admit that you have caught me in the act of contradiction and that I have been tempted to write "committed drama," to plead a cause and prosecute. But we all contradict ourselves more or less in life. The most eminent philosophers contradict themselves within the body of their system. But what of the poet, who creates first one work and then another? I do not believe we need overcome and resolve contradictions. That would mean impoverishment. We must allow contradictions to develop freely; perhaps our conflicts will resolve themselves dynamically by counterbalancing each other..."26

Ionesco's acceptance of inherent contradictions is the opposite of the attempt of the existentialists to form a consistent philosophy. Led on by the anarchy of his imagination, Ionesco attempts to order his subjective aberrations only as far as his personal scepticism allows.

In the depths of his mind he is constantly aware of the fears that terrified him in his childhood, above all the fear of death.

It is unlikely that Ionesco himself fully realized the initial step taken with presentation of La Cantatrice Chauve. From this point on, his perception into life and society, and his stage reflection of the synthesized ideas of his dreamworld enabled the playwright to present the human testimony of the Bérenger plays. From the former play to the latter plays, Ionesco moves from a personal feeling of strangeness and bewilderment tempered with scepticism (expressed in his satire) to a "reintegrated" position. This "reintegration", or synthesis of his subjective insights, is expressed most admirably in the humanity of

26 Ionesco, Eugène, Notes and Counternotes, op. cit., p. 115.
Bérenger. It is in the four plays about his "everyman" hero that Ionesco "has translated his dreams into the speeches of his conscious mind." 27

CHAPTER THREE

THE BÉRINGER PLAYS

The four Bérenger plays (Tueur sans Gages, Rhinocéros, Le Roi se Meurt, and Le Piéton de l'Air) make concrete on the stage the abstractions of Ionesco's mind. Written within five years of one another (1959-1963) the plays represent the gradual maturing of the "everyman" hero Bérenger from naiveté to an awareness of his human condition.

Tueur sans Gages, first produced in Paris in February, 1959, presents a "horrified and disillusioned Bérenger" with the opposition of "a ruthless killer who murders two or three persons every day."¹ This killer, the personification of Death, is the only flaw in the utopian perfection of the Radiant City, brainchild of the omnipotent Architect who rules it. Within the bureaucratic order of the city, the Killer tempts his victims with a photograph of "the colonel" and then drowns them in the "ornamental pool" while they are engrossed in the portrait. Only the members of the civil service are immune from the onslaught of the killer because they are more the cogs in the wheel of an interminable system than they are human beings. Tueur sans Gages prepares the way


Rhinocéros illustrates the ultimate mechanical tyranny deriving from human blindness, the fetish for solidarity, and the desire for mob identity. Rosette C. Lamont describes this philosophy of "the police state" as "the supreme achievement of the conformist attitude." Like the civil servants of Tueur sans Gages the rhinoceri are impervious to human feelings, and their grotesqueness foresees the annihilation of the human race. Le Roi se Meurt once again presents Bérenger confronted with the Killer/Death in a lonely personal way. King Bérenger must suddenly come to terms with the fact that he is dying. There is no personified killer in Le Roi se Meurt, only the thought of death rather than the personification of the Killer. Ionesco externalizes the individual's fear of death by demonstrating the contortions of a man who once ruled his rich and powerful kingdom, a kingdom now deteriorated to a hellhole of freaks and zombies. The remnants of what was once the exterior glory of his interior human dignity are visible as the shards of his realm, and Bérenger must wait for death in hopelessness and destitution reassured only by the fact that he has finally come to terms with an absurd reality.

The fourth Bérenger play, Le Piéton de l'Air, produced in February, 1963, proclaims Bérenger as master of his terrestrial situation. Firmly situated in the contingent condition of his "pedestrian" existence, Bérenger is capable of rising to heights of spiritual freedom (symbolized

by his flight above the ground) where activity alleviates the anxieties about existential problems. Bérenger is the "reintegration" of absurd reality and human transcendence. In other words, Bérenger has the capacity to live and act without succumbing to despondency caused by his comprehension of the absurdity of existence. The positive element of the four Bérenger plays is the hero's ability to survive the apocalyptic finalities of the first three plays (ie: Death and "rhinocerization") and reach the transcendental liberty of the fourth.

It is difficult to fathom the significance of Ionesco's progression from Tueur sans Gages to Le Piéton de l'Air. The lack of a "message" and the obscurity as to what elements are potentially enlightening testimony make Ionesco's theatre different from that of "le théâtre du boulevard". (The "boulevard hero", child of the bourgeoisie, is always defined as the outstanding force amid powers that unsuccessfully attempt to denigrate or destroy him. He is recognized as a type of "superhero" capable of overcoming "evil" elements, the clear-cut distinction between "good" and "evil" being simpler for the bourgeois mentality. The "boulevard hero" thus becomes the force of "good".)

Bérenger is no easily-defined hero. He is a man beset with disillusion, fatalism, and an incredible naïveté that initially renders him impotent in a world of complication and implicit absurdity. Bérenger is impotent at the outset because he has no drive to overcome his enveloping difficulties, nor has he the ability to overcome his gullibility. He has only his humanity which later becomes his saving grace though he is not fully aware of the reason why this is so. Bérenger is a "guignolesque" character, that is, Bérenger is a character manipulated
by forces beyond his control. The one element in his command by which he is able to extricate himself from his own dejection is the free will he exercises at the conclusion of Rhinocéros with the words "je ne capitule pas." At this early stage in Bérenger's development (the second Bérenger play) the hero has not yet realized the ramifications of his expression of free choice. In fact, Bérenger's non-capitulation is partially due to his inability to conform with the mob of monsters that has swallowed his associates, his friends, and Daisy.

In Rhinocéros Bérenger has reached a state of self-awareness that is on a higher level than his awareness in Tueur sans Gages. In Tueur sans Gages Bérenger is the classic "liberal" vacillating from one point of view to another without consideration of the basic issues. In his case, the issue is one of personal survival, but he submits to the killer simply because he has not the will to resist. At first Bérenger gallantly opposes the killer in an impassioned defence of his humanity and a self-determination to overcome the monstrosity of the killer's duty.

Bérenger: ...Oh, you really are rather puny, aren't you? Too puny to be a criminal! I'm not afraid of you! Look at me, look how much stronger I am. I could knock you down, knock you flying with a flick of my fingers. I could put you in my pocket. Do you realize?³

But Bérenger soon convinces himself that there is in fact a righteousness in the killer's duty, and he submits to his adversary who stands menacingly before him.

Berenger. ... I don't know. It may be my fault, it may be yours. It may not be yours or mine. It may not be anyone's fault. What you're doing may be wrong or it may be right, or it may be neither right nor wrong. I don't know how to tell. It's possible that the survival of the human species is of no importance, so what does it matter if it disappears... perhaps the whole universe is no good and you're right to want to blast it all, or at least nibble at it, creature by creature, piece by piece... or perhaps that's wrong. I don't know any more, I just don't know. You may be mistaken, perhaps mistakes don't really exist, perhaps it's we who are mistaken to want to exist... say what you believe, can't you? I can't, I can't.4

Bérenger seeks a "message" to assuage his anguish. He is prepared to believe the worst but masochistically desires to hear the killer specify that "the survival of the human species is of no importance." But the reticence of the killer has one constructive element—it does not push Bérenger to an irreversible pessimism. As long as the hero struggles to discover the killer's motive he is, in a sense, fighting to prove the validity of existence by questioning the absurd finality to life.

George Wellwarth writes that:

Ionesco's theme is the moral spinelessness of society, personified in men like Bérenger, the perfect types of Eliot's "hollow men." Bérenger's powerlessness against the killer is, as Ionesco says, due to his own "rather commonplace morality." Bérenger has nothing to stand on; in spite of himself he keeps finding arguments to justify the killer's actions. Having no belief of his own, he represents a society that no longer has any right to defend itself against evil because it is not convinced that it is better than the evil opposing it.5

Bérenger's guignolesque submissiveness is due partly to his social heritage. Because he has never been informed of values other than material ones, he can see little reason for taking a stand against the killer. Bérenger is a "hollow man" inasmuch as he wants to become part

5Wellwarth, George, op. cit., p. 67.
of the cybernetic and depersonalized mediocrity of the Radiant City. His morality is "commonplace" because he has gullibly accepted the norms of his society in wishing to live in an environment governed by the calculating Architect.

Bérenger's attraction to Dany is more a temporary realization of the power of his humanity than it is a sexual attraction. In Dany, Bérenger recognizes a rebellious instinct which forces her to leave the stifling environment in search of a "new world". The dream of the "new world" is something that Bérenger too has imagined, but in his impetuousness to realize it in concrete form he has been hoodwinked into believing that the Radiant City is the object of his dreams. Bérenger cannot understand Dany's exodus because he is naive to the values of freedom he later realizes in Le Piéton de l'Air. Bérenger has been programmed by a conforming society to accept a packaged concept of freedom which is in actuality the disguised tyranny of a police state—a disguise ripped away in Rhinocéros. "Once more Ionesco is concerned with the problem of the suppression of individuality in modern society."6

The important characteristic of the killer is that he is not an element of the society that Bérenger desperately wishes to join. The killer "sans gages" (unhired) is alien to the social structure of the Radiant City. The mysteriousness of this inexplicable phenomenon has rendered the city's people silent and the killer unopposed in taking his prey by means of the "colonel's photograph." The pathetic physique of this the strongest force in the city sends Bérenger reeling in his defiance and threats. But the pistols he aims at his opponent turn to

6 Ibid., p. 67.
stone in his hands. His dramatic monologue at the conclusion of the play is an example of Bérenger's perplexity at his seemingly insignificant adversary. In the killer Bérenger sees, not a magical opposing force against which there is no defence, but "your cold determination, your ruthlessness." Bérenger, though armed with the weapons of society discovers to his dismay, "...what good are bullets even against the resistance of an infinitely stubborn will" (The Killer, p. 108). It is a similar "stubbornness" to that exemplified by the killer that Bérenger later inherits in Rhinocéros refusing to capitulate to the surrounding social tyranny. But his final words in Tueur sans Gages amount to complete submission and refusal to struggle against the onslaught of death. "There's nothing we can do. What can we do... What can we do..." His words are not a question, they are a submission.

The killer of Tueur sans Gages is, in a sense, less lethal than Death in Le Roi se Meurt. The unhired killer of the Radiant City is no worse than the deadly conformity of the Architect's sterile icon. The Radiant City is an institution run by mechanical rules where an individual is lost in the group. Life in this city kills Bérenger to his individuality so that he must conform to the Pied Piper tactics of the killer with the colonel's photograph. Dany repudiates the mob control that Bérenger wishes to enter. Because of his "death" in the end at the hands of the killer, Bérenger is able to "live" again with the individuality he asserts in Rhinocéros.

Bérenger's resurrection in Rhinocéros and his struggle in defence of his humanity during the play illustrate his ability to exert the choice of a free will. In the most human of all his characters, Ionesco has
implicitly reaffirmed his hope that the human being has the will and the courage to rise above the terrors of the existential world and reassert himself. In other words Ionesco is implying that humanity is of sufficient value in itself to continue its existence no matter what the odds are against it. So Ionesco "...has come to have a sense of satisfaction with life and a love of all its aspects, without at the same time relinquishing his deeply rooted pessimism."

This is far from being a hypocritical stance but rather a paradoxical reflection of man's absurd condition. What obsessed Ionesco in his earlier plays such as L'Avenir est dans les Œufs and Jacques ou la Soumission was the meaninglessness of interminable human existence mingled with the strange artificial fabrications of society. But in his later plays (especially the Bérenger plays) Ionesco gradually placed his desire to make more sense of life above his desire to detract from it or negate it. Ionesco, like Camus, presents man as a rebel against his situation. Meursault in L'Étranger asserts his identity through murder; Bérenger in Rhinocéros through non-capitulation. Both men in their rebellion repudiate the idea of a nonsense existence and make their actions relevant to their idealism. This idealism is simply an assertion that there is validity in existence, an idealism raising man above the banalities of terrestrial experience. Man, though firmly rooted in the absurd world, thus becomes a type of Aristotelian tragic hero, doomed initially, yet forever fighting against the forces of doom:

7 Wellwarth, George, op. cit., p. 69.
...Rhinocéros aboutit au refus de tous les systèmes et se termine sur une image de l'homme debout et solitaire. Partout, la même détresse et la même angoisse, mais ici, pour la première fois, l'affirmation que la noblesse de l'homme consiste en ce qu'il peut être un réfractaire.

It is in his rebellion that Bérenger finds strength to overcome the previous laxity which characterized his personality. At the beginning of Rhinocéros Bérenger confronts the cold calculating orthodoxy of Jean:

Jean: My dear man, everybody has to work. I spend eight hours a day in the office the same as everyone else. And I only get three weeks off a year, but even so you don't catch me...

Will-power, my good man!9

Bérenger is able later in the play to assert his "will-power" in a more creative direction, one of self-affirmation rather than subservience. Before he has been an outsider from society but this later becomes his salvation. Within the context of society he is a failure without the initiative to earn a decent living, but as an individual Bérenger senses the futility of ordered fabrication and the mechanical response to accepted norms. The Bérenger of Tuer sans Gages wanted to join the very society that the Bérenger of Rhinocéros cannot as a result of his non-capitulation. But his free will is not exercised until this non-capitulation at the end of the play.

Bérenger's attitude towards humanity is classical and naïve:

Bérenger: Well at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incompatible with the standards of these animals.10


10 Ibid., p. 79.
But his sense of the monstrosity and inhumanity of the rhinocerization of his comrades is strong enough to control his opinion and finally his gallant stand.

Bérenger est le dernier à mesurer la nocivité et la gravité du virus, il lui opposera par la suite une révolte et un dégout instinctifs qu'il sera bien obligé, plus tard, de fonder en raison, sur un humanisme un peu vague mais ferme.

Bérenger's "dégout instinctif" is human as opposed to the "virus" which is animalistic. Bérenger has achieved in his person the one basic difference between man and the lesser forms of life. In other words, Bérenger realizes that it is this "raison" which is the foundation of his "humanism." That this "humanisme" is vague is not surprising because Bérenger's mind is unsophisticated and he is only able to obey the natural instincts of his humanity. The superiority of Bérenger over Botard or Jean is his ability to recognize the "nocivité" (harm) of stepping outside his human nature whether it be to conformity with the work ethic of a puritannical society or the mechanisms of the rhinoceri. Edwin T. Williams expresses in a paragraph both Bérenger's "inarticulateness" and his refusal to conform:

It is only positive in the sense that he recognizes the human element that has been lost. Bérenger never asserts himself. He simply stands and quietly refuses to join the others in their blind submission. He is not articulate. He fails in trying to communicate with Daisy, who he loves and who deserts him perhaps because of this lack of communication. What Bérenger preserves is the humanity which has been destroyed in the others. Slowly, it rises to the surface of his consciousness, never in a deliberate way, but hesitantly, stopping often in eddies of uncertainty. When it does appear, it is a bubble rather than a solid, but at least a bubble which remains intact, floating precariously among the violence of the surrounding turmoil. This is as well as he ever describes it:

"...I feel it instinctively--no, that's not what I mean, it's the rhinocéros which has instinct--I feel it intuitively, yes, that's

the word, intuitively." Bérenger's victory consists in giving
expression to this intuition through action, or at least in "not
capitulating."12

Bérenger's intuition is all that stands between him and certain assimilation
with the pachyderms. In a sense Bérenger personifies Ionesco's intuitive
faith that humanity is worth his concern. While it is possible for the
human being to become animalistic it is also possible for human creatures
to assert their humanity through free will:

Bérenger: ...But they won't get me! You won't get me! I'm
not joining you; I don't understand you! I'm staying
as I am. I'm a human being. A human being.13

In an interview with himself, the "transcendent satrap"14 Ionesco
expresses a positive view towards humanity by counterpointing his disgust
at the dehumanizing social elements he hopes his audience will recognize:

...the heroes of my play, all except one, transform themselves
in front of the public's very eyes (for this is a realistic piece)
into wild beasts, into rhinoceroses. I hope my audiences will be
disgusted with them. Disgust alienates more completely than any-
thing else. And so I shall have achieved the "distanciation" of
the public from the performance. Disgust is lucidity.15

Ionesco levies his "disgust" at heroes who metamorphose into wild beasts
and, by contrast, makes a statement in favour of the humanity of the one
non-conformist. Aware that this implied "pro-humanity message" is contrary
to his self-professed technique of testimony in place of dogma, Ionesco

12 Williams, E. T., "Cervantes and Ionesco and Dramatic Fantasy," Hispania, 45 (1962), 677.
13 Ionesco, Eugène, op. cit., p. 122.
14 In Notes and Counternotes (p. 200) "Satrap" is defined as "the
highest dignity conferred by the...College (of Pataphysics)... "patapa-
physics is, the science of sciences and the ultimate philosophy."
15 Ionesco, Eugène, Notes and Counternotes, Grove Press, Inc.
(1964), p. 204.
extricates himself with a humorous dialogue between his Ego and his
Alter Ego:

Alter Ego: You say that in your play only one of the characters
is not transformed.
Ego: Yes, he doesn't catch rhinoceritis.
Alter Ego: Does this still mean that the audience shouldn't
identify themselves with the hero who remains human?
Ego: On the contrary, they should identify themselves with
him absolutely.
Alter Ego: Then you yourself are still committing the sin of
identification.
Ego: That's true...But as the play also has the virtue of
nonparticipation or alienation, we can claim this play has
realized a synthesis of drama that is both bourgeois and
anti-bourgeois, thanks to an instinctive skill which is
my own...
Alter Ego: You're talking rubbish, old man.
Ego: I know! But I'm not the only one.16

While his intent is camouflaged in this twisting of ideas, Ionesco is
not talking rubbish because Rhinocéros has carried the trend begun in
Tueur sans Gages to a higher level of pro-human testimony. This trend
of the Bérenger plays is the presentation of humanity as the criterion
of value in the terrestrial situation. That this conclusion is not
unique to the author in no way detracts from its importance nor from its
evolution. Ionesco, with the Bérenger plays, reveals himself to be both
a humanist and an idealist.

With expertise Ionesco, in Le Roi se Meurt, presents man as an
individual squarely within his subjective Ptolemaic dilemma. Bérenger,
the king, who has been the centre of his world and who has given futile
commands to the sun, must now face death. Le Roi se Meurt, like Tueur
sans Gages, confronts the very core of the metaphysical dilemma where the
power of a man's mind has no actual strength in a physical context:

16 Ibid.
Guard: ...The sun's late. And yet I heard the King order him to come out.\footnote{Ionesco, Eugène, \textit{Exit the King}, trans. Donald Watson, Grove Press, Inc. (New York, 1963), p. 9.}

Like a body racked with age and perishing by degrees, the Palace of Bérenger I is crumbling. The central heating will not work, and "there's a crack in the wall." (p. 13) The characters besides Bérenger serve as messengers of the reality that the king wishes to escape by falsely presuming a royal immortality. Unlike the Bérenger of \textit{Tueur sans Gages}, Bérenger I does not have the ability to convince himself of the futility of his situation. While his friends try tactfully (and not so tactfully) to inform him of his "ultimate fate", and while his very surroundings reflect his bodily decay, Bérenger clings to his illusion of immortality.

The further depths of Ionesco's metaphysical writing are reached in the Doctor's description of the cosmic disorder which parallels Bérenger's slow decline to death. Ionesco presents a universe brought to confusion by the anguish of a man facing death alone. From Bérenger's point of view, his death signals the end of the universe because he cannot accept the fact that his minute life-span is merely a tiny mark on the history of an "inconsequential planet" hurtling through an infinite void in a flash of time.

From the throne room, the stage of Bérenger's anguish, the audience can be convinced that "anarchy is loosed on the world" as reports from the Doctor and Bérenger's two wives tell of a further decline in the Kingdom's state. The room imprisons King Bérenger as does his closed mind which can think of nothing beyond the depression of his impending doom. The people around him want only that the death should "take
place decently" and should be "a success, a triumph." They care less for Bérenger's intensely personal feeling of finality and lack of comprehension in such a cruel situation.

The king is not willing to accept his mortal position as a cog in the wheel of humanity. Apart from the procreative duty, existence is absurd in his eyes and he blames his parents for giving him life—a timespan only long enough to allow a painful consciousness of an absurd reality, yet too short to allow for immortality.

Bérenger: Why was I born if it wasn't for ever? Damn my parents! What a joke, what a farce! I came into the world five minutes ago. I got married three minutes ago.18

Among Ionesco's female characters Marguerite and Marie are two of the most interesting. It is questionable why Bérenger has two wives, but their polar differences serve to show that the king was once a man of mixed tastes. Of all the characters in the play it is Marie who comes closest to explaining to Bérenger the trauma which confronts him:

Marie: My darling King, there is no past, there is no future. Remember, there's only a present that goes right on to the end, everything is present. Be present, be the present!19

It might be that Marguerite and Marie are two aspects of the same person. The idea of two wives instead of one is characteristic of Ionesco whose technique is often to present paradox personified. There are two "egos" in the Bérenger who faces the unmercenary killer, and there are two in the Bérenger who will not (or cannot) succumb to the rhinocerization of his comrades. Bérenger I is willing to exchange the annihilation of the world for his own immortality:

King: ...Let every human creature die provided I can live forever, even alone in a limitless desert.20

18Ibid., p. 45.
19Ibid., p. 50.
20Ibid., p. 52.
Bérenger thus expresses an ultimate existential argument of solipsistic individuality, introverted beyond reality.

King Bérenger has progressed to a greater maturity than the Ingenu Bérenger of *Tueur sans Gages*. The Bérenger who faces the killer can only utter words of submission ("There's nothing we can do") prior to his death at the hands of his antagonist. This Bérenger has not accommodated the idea of death before his personal confrontation with the personification of this idea. He is unsophisticated enough to presume that he can fight off his avatar with the weapons of society, and when these fail he has no recourse but to submit. But the royal Bérenger becomes the epitome of the Aristotelian tragic hero. A man of high birth is brought "down" by the reality of his mortality. The play is a ritual, or as critic Cecil Smith calls it, "a soaring hymn to existence." The King has previously believed that his royalty entitles him to cosmic powers over the universe. His dream of Empire and eternity is marred only by the personal mortality he is forced to face:

King: The Empire... has there ever been another Empire like it? With two suns, two moons and two heavens to light it. And there's another sun rising, and there's another! A third firmament appearing, shooting up and fanning out! As one sun sets, others are rising... dawn and twilight all at once... Beyond the seven hundred and seventy-seven poles.21

*Le Roi se Meurt* is an existential parable in which the everyman hero is elevated to the social level of kingship. But, reflected in the rubble of his once-magnificent kingdom, the king faces a killer as real as that which faces the commoner Bérenger in *Tueur sans Gages*. Society is irrelevant to both men. The one attempts salvation by using his pistols, and fails. The other attempts to conquer death by royal decree, and fails.

21Ibid., p. 92.
The fate of both men is sealed by their individual mortality. King Bérenger's anxiety is more intense than that of the commoner Bérenger because the latter feels defeated by the reflection of his humanity, the runted killer. The King feels defeated by immense forces he once naively thought he could control by fiat being the central power in the universe.

*Le Roi se Meurt* synthesizes what Catherine Hughes calls "Ionesco's plea for man." The play acknowledges the individual's "royalty" in a temporal existence and concludes with the emphasis on the conclusion of life. Ionesco faces the reality of death by admitting its absurdity and by revealing in the character of the king the destructive force of anxiety about death. With this reality faced, the decay of the "kingdom" need be regarded only as a natural phenomenon.

One paradox facing the king is that, while his body deteriorates, his mind remains agile though clouded with apprehension. This paradox causes him to wish for the incarnation of an immortal mind:

King: "When I've gone, when I've gone. They'll laugh and stuff themselves silly and dance on my tomb. As if I'd never existed. Oh, please make them remember me! Make them weep and despair and perpetuate my memory in all their history books. Make everyone learn my life by heart. Make them live it again...Let my likeness be on all the ikons, me on the millions of crosses in all our churches. Make them say Mass for me and let me be the Host...Let them cry my name throughout eternity, and beg me and implore me."23

The irony of Bérenger's statement is in his desire to embalm his "likeness" rather than reflect his humanity in the faces of his children. His immortality is in a sense a death-wish because it implies


23 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
"preservation" of a worn-out form rather than the continuation of life. Bérenger cannot accept his future role as a memory of the past because to him time is of the essence and he attempts to incorporate time into his own actions. The king's fight against capitulation cannot succeed, but shows a noble desire to live in the face of Death. In comparison with the commoner Bérenger of Théor sans Gages the king has risen to a new level of non-capitulation realized also in the Bérenger of Rhinocéros. Unlike Lear, Bérenger the king refuses to forfeit his kingdom, and finally, fading into the mist of the unknown, he dies seated proudly atop his throne. It is this image that remains fixed in the minds of the audience, an image of the Sisyphean hero accepting his contingency, yet continuously fighting against it in the hope of transcendence or salvation.

It is in the fourth Bérenger play, Le Piéton de l'Air, that Ionesco presents a Bérenger capable of transcending his terrestrial situation.

The title of the play incorporates the basic dilemma central to Ionesco's earlier works. The "pedestrian" is man, contingent on his environment, and the "air" is the means of escape from this predicament. Like Daedalus imprisoned in the labyrinth Bérenger wishes to escape by flight even though his natural ability is that of an earthbound creature. He believes in his spirit that flight must be an innate human faculty and not the property of a machine:

Bérenger: ...Tout le monde cublie. Comment en ai-je pu oublier ce procédé? C'est simple, pourtant, lumineux, enfantin. Quand on ne vole pas, c'est pire que si nous étions privés de nourriture. C'est pour cela sans doute que nous nous sentons malheureux.24

Wary of the mechanization that was responsible for the rhinocerization of a small French town, the reader of Le Piéton de l'Air can understand Bérenger's informed apprehension of the power of machines:

Bérenger: ...L'engin remplace l'homme et ses fonctions. Retrouvons la fonction authentique à travers ses déformations. 25

It is in "la fonction authentique" that Bérenger can escape his earthly labyrinth.

In her article, "Air and Matter: Ionesco's 'Le Piéton de l'Air' and 'Victimes du Devoir," Rosette C. Lamont interprets Bérenger's flight into the air from one of Ionesco's journals:

In "Mes Pièces et Moi" Eugène Ionesco suggests that a feeling of lightness, airiness, sometimes accompanied by the discovery of a gift of levitation restores the lost paradise of youth and innocence, whereas the proliferation of matter constitutes a concretization of man's imprisonment in the material world. 26

The feeling of "lightness" as opposed to the gravitational burden of "matter" is the quintessence of Le Piéton de l'Air. It is also an explanation of Ionesco's capability of accommodating a world he found clogged with useless objects and obsolete words and ideas. His testimony to acceptance of the world is realized in the last Bérenger play which is a culmination of the adventures of the previous three.

The idea of the proliferation of matter is central to the playwright's work. First, matter is the corporeal substance which makes a man a "pedestrian" rather than a pure or free "spirit." Second, matter is inhuman, or rather "ahuman", and in such plays as Le Nouveau Locataire represents death to the life force. This death in the play of the tenant

25 Ibid., p. 171.

arises out of his immobility as the perennial furniture is paraded into his apartment and finally forms an interminable line down the Paris streets and along the river. Even the eggs in *L'Avenir est dans les Oeufs*, symbols of new life, become so numerous on the stage that the floor and the entire company of actors "s'effondrent." Because the egg is the incarceration of life and must be broken before it can become life-producing it is primarily a death symbol before a life symbol because, unless destroyed, it forms a prison. Likewise in *Les Chaises* the old man and the old woman are forced to jump from their living room window as the ever increasing rows of chairs take away all their free space and, like the eggs and the furniture, cause their destruction. Perhaps the most stark example of the danger of proliferated matter occurs in *Amédée ou comment s'en Déguber* where a corpse expands materially until it reaches grotesque proportions and halts mobility. It is in the air that mobility is therefore unrestricted.

In the "upper void" Bérenger can find a personal freedom. But even in his temporary state of anarchic suspension he is made aware of the material world beneath him.

Bérenger:  

J'ai vu des colonnes de guillotinés marchant sans têtes, des colonnes de guillotinés...sur d'immenses étendues. Et puis, et puis, je ne sais pas, des sauterelles géantes, des anges déchus, des archanges caïnus.  

The objects beneath Bérenger are death symbols while his ability to fly "sans hélice et sans ailes" is a vital act.

Miss Lamont mistakenly calls *Le Piéton de l'Air* one of the "darkest tragicomedies of Ionesco." The play is only a "tragicomedy" insofar

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27Ionesco, Eugène, op. cit., p. 195.
28Lamont, R. C., op. cit., p. 361.
as it reflects the predicament of a humanity born to die. If the play represented only this fact it would be less than significant. What the play does represent is a testimony to the action and ability of the hero Bérenger, a hero capable of a spiritual extrication from a harsh reality to the transcendental realm of the "air."

Bérenger: Si, la plupart du temps, je ne sais plus m'envoler, j'ai gardé conscience qu'il m'est nécessaire de le faire. Je sais de l'absence de quelle chose je souffre. C'est une affaire de santé. Si nous ne voulons pas, c'est que nous sommes infirmes.29

Bérenger's flight is "a matter of health" and signifies his ability to make an attempt at validating his existence. His flight is a state of mind which gives to a human being a motive for prolonging his earthly existence. This condition as reflected in the play could hardly be considered as the "darkest" expression of Ionesco. Without vacillating to a blind optimism, the play culminates Ionesco's quest to grant Bérenger his "raison d'être."

In the conclusion of her article, Miss Lamont makes a summation of Ionesco's "compounded" art which contradicts her previous statement of "darkest tragicomedy:"

Compounded of air and matter, Ionesco's plays never allow us to forget the tragic quality of life made bearable only by a Dionysian explosion of laughter, coupled with a deep respect for the transient, evanescent combination of mind and flesh which is our existential condition.30

The "evanescence" of the mind/flesh combination is the positive result of Ionesco's subjective investigation. Having reduced the "existential condition" to the paradox between spiritual and physical existence, Ionesco chooses to laugh rather than succumb to a destructive despondency.

29 Ionesco, Eugène, op. cit., p. 167.

30 Lamont, R. C., op. cit., p. 361.
Bérenger's flight is not merely an escape, it is also an adventure of discovery, a personal "épanouissement." Faithful to the Bergsonian theory, Ionesco's laughter is not that of derision but that of a man risen above his predicament. This rise is a state of mind for the "flesh" remains constant in its contingency and finitude. His laughter is an objective act setting the subjective anxiety in a personal perspective. "Objectivity means being in harmony with one's own subjectivity, not lying to others or to oneself." Both hope and disillusionment are born of the same faculty: the one exists in the "slough of despond", the other in the "transcendental realm." Ionesco himself states:

Meanwhile, meanwhile I have done what I could...I have passed the time. But we need to know how to cut ourselves off from ourselves and from other people, how to observe and how to laugh, in spite of everything to laugh. Ionesco's laughter is his "deep respect for the transient" and his desire to overcome "a vast weariness" which "overwhelms me." Often his laughter is an expression of sadness: "I cannot help laughing bitterly when I see all around me believing they believe, and being engulfed." His bitterness, however, is related to his faith that "belief" is possible: it is not cynical or dejected.

The four Bérenger plays reveal the playwright's unmistakable expectation of a "better world:"


I am constantly waiting for things to change for the better: amid all the conflicting parties, I have chosen none. I am in the position of someone who hopes to win a first prize in a lottery without having bought a ticket. I am not sufficiently absorbed in the human comedy. I don’t belong wholly to this world. I cannot quite detach myself from this world nor from the other. I am neither here nor there. Outside it all. I’m afraid of making a wrong choice, so I choose neither religion nor politics. The fear of failure is what makes one fail. If Grace should not come, that would be the 'coup de grâce.'

It is in these plays that the uncertain Ionesco, through his latent idealism, makes implicit the remedy for the seeming lack of Grace. His implication is that activity in the world (eg: the flight of Bérenger) takes away many of the anxieties which abound. Activity for Bérenger is not a cure for anxiety, it is simply a therapeutic pastime by freeing his mind from its preoccupation with the absurdity of existence.

George Wellwarth makes the following conclusion about Ionesco’s Bérenger plays:

In the plays of his second period (The Killer and Rhinocéros) Ionesco abandoned the view of pessimistic fatalism in which man is a helpless puppet futilely and despairingly hammering against incomprehensible forces that always overwhelm him. Instead of the doctrinaire determinism which he derived from Antonin Artaud, Ionesco gave man a certain amount of free choice within the context of his temporal life. He thus made man morally responsible for his actions. With moral responsibility human existence once more took on meaning. Human actions once again became significant because they could be shown to have foreseeable results. Ionesco made the transition from preoccupation with ultimates, which is so characteristic of absolutists such as Artaud, to a concern for immediate, if relative, results--in other words, to the limited rebellion of Albert Camus, which concentrates on an individual ethical protest designed to bring about a relative alleviation of the human condition within the foreseeable future.

Man’s free choice, a state of mind, becomes the constructive force

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in his actions. It is in the ability to rebel against absurdity that man finds the "relative alleviation" from his anxiety. Ionesco's offering to his audience remains faithful both to his personal philosophy of subjectivity and his idea of "testimony." Tueur sans Gages, Rhinocéros, Le Roi se Meurt, and Le Piéton de l'Air, testify to the ability of one man, Bérenger/Ionesco, to overcome his predicament while all the time being aware of its absurdity.

Bérenger is a tragic hero, but he maintains in the end, as the result of his apocalyptic adventures, his nobility and dignity as a member of the human race.
CHAPTER FOUR

NORMAN FREDERICK SIMPSON: SOCIAL SATIRIST OF THE ABSURD

Little significant criticism has been written about the plays of Norman Frederick Simpson. With the exception of Martin Esslin, most major critics of the contemporary theatre dismiss Simpson as a secondary playwright overshadowed by his fellow writers.

Allardyce Nicoll, in his book *British Drama*, notes Simpson's maturing style by a brief reference to two plays: "N. F. Simpson writes his nonsense play, *A Resounding Tinkle* (1957)--with an almost 'sophomoric' cleverness reflected in the character-names of Mustard Short, Denzil Pepper, Miss Salt and Miss Vinegar--and follows this with the more mature cleverness of *One Way Pendulum* (1959)...."¹ This nebulous, and probably sarcastic, cognizance of Simpson is placed within a discussion of 'the theatre of the absurd'--a style that Nicoll could only have known exiguously when his book was written in 1962 (Esslin had first coined the term in 1961). John Russell Taylor, writing in *Anger and After*, presents an unworthy abstract of Simpson's work: "Whether one likes or dislikes N. F. Simpson's work, it seems to me, there is very little

to be said about it.\(^2\) If Taylor's opinion is to be accepted, then it would, with the exception of Pinter, censure the writing of the absurdists in England. There is no doubt that Ionesco is a far greater artist than Simpson, but the similarities between Simpson's work and Ionesco's early writings suggest a potential renown for the author of *The Hole* and the *One Way Pendulum*.

Miss M. C. Bradbrook, in her book *English Dramatic Form*, makes scant reference to Simpson's preoccupation with the private fantasies of his characters in nonsense plays. "His *One Way Pendulum* is set partly in subtopia and partly at the Old Bailey, a model of which has been built in the suburban sitting room."\(^3\) It is surprising that Miss Bradbrook even takes the trouble to mention Simpson when she finds little significance in Simpson's satire of suburban life which, at times, touches on the same idea of the metaphysical predicament of man expressed by Ionesco. The "subtopia" and model of the Old Bailey are examples of an automaton society pregnant with institutions and an impulsive desire to seek immortality through material possessions. Taylor finds such elements of Simpson's plays unsuccessful but fails to give any convincing evidence to support his claim: "His plays, aspiring to be considered illustrations of the Absurd...end up as a rule with absurdity in a much humbler form, and one which very rapidly loses its charms in a life-and death struggle with the law of diminishing returns."\(^4\)


\(^4\) Taylor, J. R., op. cit., p. 64.
Martin Esslin is the most favourable critic of Simpson, and Esslin's theories and writings on the theatre of the absurd make him the most influential authority. Esslin makes the necessary observation that Simpson's work is "philosophical fantasy strongly based on reality." He adds, "Simpson's world bears the mark of the fantasies of an eminently sane, intelligent man with deep learning and a delicious sense of humour." Finally in his appraisal Esslin describes Simpson's writing as "proof that the Theatre of the Absurd is by no means unable to provide highly effective social comment. It is the provision for social comment, usually satiric and outrageous, which presents the constructive elements of Simpson's drama. On the metaphysical level he has so far been unable to reach the level of Ionesco, and, while his social satire lacks the intense subjective perception of his French contemporary, Simpson's absurdist technique presents a significant exposition of the Theatre of the Absurd in Britain.

Nevertheless it is evident that Simpson has remained on the circumference of intellectual favour, deserving mention but seldom accolade or even detailed criticism. It would be wrong to call Simpson one of the foremost dramatists of our time, because, under the accepted criterion of "greatness"--the amount of commentary written on an author and the volume of an author's work--Simpson is overshadowed by several of his British Contemporaries, notably John Arden, Harold Pinter, and John Osborne. But there is no reason to claim that he is any less significant than Arnold Wesker, Ann Jellicoe, or David Mercer. Apart from his major

plays (The Hole, A Resounding Tinkle, One Way Pendulum, The Form, and The Cresta Run) Simpson has written several shorter plays (Gladly Otherwise, Oh, and One Blast and Have Done) and a book of three television/stage plays entitled More Tall Tinkles. Recently, however, he has published little of significance and appears to be more interested in television dramas than stage plays. It is in his major plays that Simpson presents himself as a dramatist with potential and a philosophy derived from the medium of theatre. These plays show the development of a positive thesis as will be shown following a brief comment on Simpson's idea of the Absurd.

"'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.' In common usage in the English-speaking world, 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous'." Esslin's definition of 'absurd' applies to Simpson (as it does to Ionesco) whose plays are, in a very British sense, ridiculous. The use of the weighing machines as singers in One Way Pendulum combines the musical connotation of 'absurd' with the incongruity, unreasonableness, and illogicality. Ionesco's interpretation of absurdity is more cynical than is Simpson's dramatic nonsense. Nowhere, for example, does Simpson present Death personified as does Ionesco in Tueur sans Gages, or the monstrous and grotesque cruelty of the rhinos in Rhinocéros. But both Ionesco and Simpson are writing from unique personal experience; the intensity of which is dissimilar. Ionesco was forced to leave his native Rumania to

7 Ibid., p. xix.
escape the "rhinocerizing" tyranny of the fascist Iron Guard whose anti-semitic terror swept the country for nine years. Simpson, however, lives in a country where a prevailing sense of humour and a relatively stable political situation characterize the national identity and prevent the type of pessimism that Ionesco experienced. In their respective contexts Ionesco and Simpson are comparable yet they are individually distinct; and their juxtaposition should demonstrate instructive parallels of social and metaphysical awareness.

Ionesco's first plays were dubbed 'anti-plays' by the critics, but they established the form of a simple plot with cybernetic characters and clichéd absurd language. Later, Ionesco made a gradual transition from the dehumanization of his characters to the pathos of the Bérenger of Rhinocéros. Ionesco made no commitment to "give a message" to his audience as he considered such preaching detrimental to individual interpretation. A negative message permits choice on the part of the onlooker, while a positive message suggests the playwright's absolutism in regards to reality. "A playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message."\(^8\) To avoid the charge of nihilism imputed to him (especially by Kenneth Tynan in his articles in The Observer) Ionesco added that "a work of art is the source and the raw material of ideologies to come"\(^9\)

Simpson similarly uses mechanical characters (the Paradocks, for example) and simple plots, but his plays show no progression from mechanical to pathetic character. His characters are more nearly caricatures,

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 80.

which are not empathy-provoking like Déranger in their representation of
the futility of the human condition. Simpson's characters excite sympathy
and curiosity because their situations are more comic and ridiculous
than futile. Consequently the tragic quality of the Ionesco character is
alleviated in Simpson's less-intense parallels.

Simpson complies with Ionesco concerning positive messages. In
an interview with Gordon Reece printed in the New Left Review (10:
July-August, 1961) Simpson is quoted as saying that "I have never written
anything that wasn't 'tongue-in-cheek' and I can't imagine myself taking
any other attitude. One of the reasons is that I dislike 'authoritative
statements'. I feel that everything Man can say about the Universe is
so woefully inadequate that the attempt to be authoritative and take
oneself seriously at the same time is so pitifully arrogant that I
can't help treating it with a certain amount of derision."\(^{10}\)

Ionesco and Simpson both rely on the vehicle of comedy which
stimulates, through laughter, a detachment from the action and an
objectivity that lends to a necessary self-criticism. In his interview
with Reece, Simpson gave his reasons for using comic detachment. "For
me, the artist has more in common with the scientist in that he addresses
himself to Man as the seeing animal than with the preacher, who addresses
himself to Man as the doing animal. The ability to write a play does
not confer on anyone the right to educate--which would presuppose that
he alone had access to the answers."\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Reece, Gordon, "Talking to N. F. Simpson," New Left Review, 10
(1961), 59.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 60.
Simpson's comedy presents a unique personal style dissimilar from that of his contemporaries. The playwright has been accused of superficiality and extreme levity: "...the gags are all very much the same type; deprived of any possible foundation in character they rapidly reduce themselves to various forms of the same obsessive verbal doodling."\(^{12}\) The only hyperbole evident is to take a joke "and run it right into the ground by overexplicitness and rigid application of logic instead of letting it get its laugh and then go."\(^{13}\) But Simpson avoids a pitfall of the Theatre of the Absurd which Laurence Kitchin describes as being "infective rather than therapeutic." It is Kitchin's opinion that "one of the dangers of communicating below the level of consciousness is to let loose primitive forces beyond the control of the playwright. It happens every time a film intending to condemn concentration camps gives the audience a sadistic thrill."\(^{14}\) This implies the thin line between harmless laughter at another's temporary misfortune and the sadistic laughter at another's injury. Kitchen refers to Artaud who, as father of the so-called "Theatre of Cruelty" took the absurd condition of humanity to a more negative and bitter depth than was necessary. Simpson however succeeds in presenting a true medium of laughter that has the ability to be therapeutic because it is not devastating enough to be infective. If this technique is mere levity then it suggests that the audience itself might be looking for infection rather than an expansion of consciousness stimulated by the humourous twisting of familiar situations.

\(^{12}\) Taylor, J. R., op. cit., p. 64.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 58.

Simpson is more closely related to the Bergsonian theory of comedy than he is to that of Artaud or Camus. Bergson defines three elements to which comedy applies. The first is the human element instrumental in all comedy: "Several (philosophers) have defined man as "an animal which laughs." They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man..." By their very ridiculous actions Simpson's characters produce the facade of humanity which has a close "resemblance to man." The suburban existence of the Paradocks and Groomkirbys is based firmly on the reality of suburbia, but the distortion makes their situation truly laughable.

The second element of comedy is the "appeal to intelligence" which allows for the "laughing animal" to objectify his laughter. "...the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple." The cerebral quality of Simpson's comedy derives from his ability to isolate a situation he finds to be ridiculous and to exaggerate it beyond all proportions. None of his characters reveals pathos or much substance in their personalities, because they are designed to be as lifeless as the life they lead. The three main male characters of The Hole, Cerebro, Endo, and Soma, are merely sounding boards for familiar clichés and have little reality themselves as people. Simpson's comedy satirizes the ways of people and their different character-types but underneath this presumes the

16 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
basic spiritual validity of the human being despite the depersonalized
caricatures of individuals he presents on the stage. The depersonalization arises simply in the caricatures on the stage but leaves the
object of this caricature (people) intact.

The third element of comedy is the "group appeal" where humourous situations are shared by individuals who see all men as capable of similar predicaments. "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo."17 The suburban setting of many of Simpson's scenes is familiar to a bourgeois audience as are the many implements (ranging from fire poles to compost heaps) which find themselves in places on the stage where they would not usually be discovered. Simpson aims his plays directly at his audience since the characters on the stage mirror the individuals in the audience.

One element of the comic described by Bergson as "mechanical inelasticity" is the most relevant to Simpson's plays. It is the presentation of paradox which upturns the familiar while leaving a continuity of unfamiliarity. For example, all objects found in the home of Bro and Middie Paradox (nutcrackers, elephant, snake) are familiar, but their position in the household is ludicrous because they are either out of context or are used for purposes for which they were not designed. Simpson terms this contextual distortion "a slight nudge to the frame of reference" which is, in many instances, an understatement. Further to the "mechanical" element of comedy also applicable to Simpson, Bergson describes how routine as an integral part of an individual's collective existence can be used to comic purpose:

17 Ibid.
...take the case of a person who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by some mischievous wag, the result being that when he dips his pen into the inkstand he draws it out all covered with mud, when he fancies he is sitting down on a solid chair he finds himself sprawling on the floor, in a word his actions are all topsy-turvy or mere beating the air, while in every case the effect is invariably one of momentum. Habit has given the impulse: what was wanted was to check the movement or deflect it. He did nothing of the sort, but continued like a machine in the same straight line. The victim, then, of a practical joke is in a position similar to that of a runner who falls—he is comic for the same reason. The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain 'mechanical inelasticity', just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.18

The "habit" in Simpson's plays is the routine of the suburban inhabitant whose impulsiveness to mechanical action is widely known and frequently scorned. Simpson employs the "topsy-turvy" effect as part of his absurd technique by misplacing objects and distorting familiar phenomena. He presents his drama in a context out of context with the familiar world and this "perversity" is the strength of his satire.

Both Ionesco and Simpson are writing for a "democratic" theatre where the audience must exercise its freedom of choice in a world where absolutes and didacticism are anachronisms. This does not imply that other modern playwrights, such as Arden or Beckett, do not leave the final decisions to reader or audience (neither Sergeant Musgrave's Dance nor Endgame could qualify as "epic" theatre in the same way as the work of Brecht.). It does signify, however, that Simpson has accepted the continental absurdist thesis that a metaphysical awareness is best created by a visual and aural experience rather than by indoctrination.

18 Ibid.
Brecht, unlike Simpson or Ionesco, was concerned with an Epic theatre where narrative overruled plot. Like Shaw, Brecht made direct appeals to reason, humour, and theatricality, using the method which he labelled the "alienation effect". Brecht, in attacking naturalism and the bourgeoisie, made his attack on two planes—one with the action of the stage, and one by direct communication with an audience denied the Ibsen-esque intimacy of the "fourth wall." A strong case can be made to illustrate the influence of Brecht on some British playwrights, notably John Arden, but there is little Brechtian epic method employed by Simpson. Martin Esslin, in an article entitled "Brecht, the Absurd and the Future," believes that a possible synthesis of these techniques may not be out of the question. But, as Andrew Fitch more realistically claims, "in all probability the Absurdists and the Brechtians will continue to dispute the validity of their approaches, seeing one another as the antithesis and even the negation of their most profound convictions."

As will be illustrated in a discussion of his plays, Simpson is unmistakeably an absurdist writer who, while he writes in the shadow of Ionesco, is responsible for many original contributions to a distinct form of theatre.

Simpson successfully presents a combination of a detached humour and the fusion of tragedy and farce. The very titles of his plays are significant in their irrelevance and paradox. The Hole is the eponymous title of the foundation for varied philosophies of the Visionary and

Cerebro, the two fundamentalists. A One Way Pendulum is a contradiction in terms because of the nature of pendulums and exemplifies the idea of "mechanical inelasticity" since it deviates from the "habit" of pendulums. It is also symbolic of an unnatural force impeding the natural motion of an object—comparable to society's obstructive influence on human personality. A Resounding Tinkle signifies climax and anticlimax. "Tinkles" seldom "resound" because they are onomatopoeically as close to silence as noises can be.

Born in 1919, A.D. by his standards, Simpson is neither a member of the "after anger" category of playwright, nor a young man. He holds a degree in English Literature which he considers irrelevant to his work despite the academic quality evident throughout his work—especially in his vocabulary. Simpson spent much of his life as a schoolteacher, and has only recently devoted his full attention to playwriting.

A Resounding Tinkle was first produced by the Royal Court Theatre on December 1st 1957 and was directed by William Gaskill. The script had previously won the third prize in a playwriting competition sponsored by The Observer. The play was later shortened because in its original form it was somewhat long and a little tedious for stage production. The action reveals at the beginning a typically Simpsonian suburban living room where Bro and Middie Paradorc (two of Simpson's perennial characters) discuss a recent purchase. Uncle Ted is introduced into the conversation as a man who likes critical essays with his coffee, an unusual taste (with emetic consequences) symbolizing a fetish of an average person in a twisted and exaggerated way. It seems no more ridiculous that a person should take essays with his coffee than that he
should fill his lungs with smoke except that the second case has been familiarized through habit while the first is strange. Bro, in a reference to the obvious, resolves that spanners that are used for tightening can also be used for loosening. These adjustable spanners have been foisted on the Paradocks by one of the tiresomely omnipresent peddlers that haunt suburbia to sell people things that may be unwanted yet have impressive performance. The foisting of ideas, implicit in the sale of material objects, may also be unwanted unless they appear constructive to the limited minds of the suburbanites like the Paradocks. The main problem is a matter of where the value is to be placed in both object and idea, and it is Simpson's satirical opinion, implicit in A Resounding Tinkle, that values have been placed on the wrong ends.

Later, Bro discusses the trading of a giraffe for an elephant, and this exaggeration emphasizes the incongruous and reflects on the subject to be satirized. Through this hyperbole of the idiosyncrasies of a particular environment, Simpson's absurdity achieves a significant social commentary. He uses this absurdity in exhaustively in the British context and so presents a positive attitude towards the promotion of social development. He does not, however, go as far as inducing metaphysical awareness as does Ionesco.

The theme of the proliferation of material objects is illustrated by Ionesco in Le Nouveau Locataire. The tenant is happy with the freedom of a new home, but the pile of his belongings gradually chokes off movement until he is stifled by the surrounding material. Simpson effectively chooses an animal to represent the stifling materialism that
Ionesco symbolizes by furniture. The elephant is more dangerous because it has the potential to "go beserk in the night". It represents an uncontrollable life force that is alien to the suburban situation just as the rhinoceri are alien to the small French town. The idea of a life-destroying life force concerns mankind in all its soullessness. Just as the materials anaesthetize people to their humanity and make them about as aware as an elephant, so these people begin to identify with their possessions instead of their humanity.

Bro and Middie decide to trade the elephant for a snake because snakes are less clumsy and can be shortened. But here is little change in the degree of incongruity in the presence of non-domestic creatures like snakes or elephants in a house. The examples are deliberately chosen to create this effect. Simpson's amalgamation of choking materialism and an unthinking life force into an incongruous presence, within an ordered way of life, is his Theatre of the Absurd. He conveys his apprehensions through the satire characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd—a vehicle capable of presenting the grotesque.

Simpson, like Ionesco, conveys through language the very deficiency of language to communicate. His dialogue consists of a succession of clichés spoken by characters who are more interested in talking than listening. These clichés are mouthed unconcernedly by the actors, but the effect is not lost if the audience infers correctly. An example of this suggestive cant is Middie's reference to Uncle Ted's passion for motor scooters—"I shall be glad to see the last of that craze." The craze is a novelty or an influential trend that threatens to upset the
comfortable suburban conformity of the Paradocks. Uncle Ted's rebellion is not signified by angry words, but by the purchase of a material thing that is representative of change in a keep-up-with-your-neighbour world. The change may not necessarily be for the better because those for whom it is designed are unable to interpret the constructive qualities of change.

Simpson is a political iconoclast whose satire suggests a similarity between democratic franchise and the sale of goods at the door. An unknown man, who has persued the street dictionary at random, asks Bro to form a government. Middie's immediate reaction is stereotype--"you might do something about all these bottles. What does it look like if the Cabinet arrive suddenly?" Middie's existence is centred around the philosophy of giving the "right impression" to all who enter her introverted domain. If the Supreme Being were to drop in, she would make sure the chairs were in formation. Bro and Middi see the world from their own subjective angle, and the significant events outside are interpreted according to their selfish formulae. Bro, for instance, is more concerned with the disruption of his regular hours than he is with the responsibility of forming a government. "How can I start forming a government at six o'clock in the evening?" The responsibilities placed on every citizen in a democratic society are irrelevant in a 'nine to five' working week. The irony of the situation is the discovery that the messenger is merely "someone having a joke". The Paradocks, complacent in their world of suburban rivalry, allow little of the outside world to influence them. As citizens, they are impervious to the meanings of democracy, and as people they are uninterested in all but
their immediate society.

Simpson takes a further step by suggesting how unimportant to the Paradocks is the intimately human experience of sex. Uncle Ted, now tired of the motor scooter craze, has changed into a female. It is possible that Ted's hermaphroditic ability is a reference to homosexuality. (But there is a comical significance in Middie's reaction:)

"...Uncle Ted! Why, you've changed your sex! You look lovely--doesn't he, Bro? But why ever didn't you let us know?" Sex is as unimportant as the change of a job or the purchase of a new suit, and is left void of any creative experience.

There is an interesting comparison between Uncle Ted's sex change and Ionesco's *Maid to Marry*. The maiden of the Ionesco play, who has been the object of conversation throughout the play, enters the stage with "a robust and virile (physique), a black moustache; wearing a grey suit... (with a) very strong masculine voice." But, while Uncle Ted can change back "when she gets tired of her new sex", the maid of *Maid to Marry* is irrevocably male. Simpson's character embodies the element of free choice; Ionesco's does not. Bro and Middie can change their way of life as soon as they become self-aware; Berenger in *Rhinocéros* cannot change even though he is well aware of his situation. Man in Simpson is what he is by his own will and environment; man in Ionesco is what he is by capitulation from which there is no retreat.

In Simpson's quiet suburban world the role-playing of the characters is not immediately harmful and is certainly comic. But in the anarchic and violent world of Ionesco the roles have more disastrous consequences.
This does not make Simpson's work less pregnant with social warning because its satire is effective even if it is understatement when compared to the vividness of Ionesco. Simpson's technique, however, is relevant to the particular British audience for which he writes in an age where many social problems are similar around the world. But different interpretations are necessary for divergent contexts.

In perspective, Simpson's original and abridged versions of A Resounding Tinkle cannot be discarded as mere levity. Bro and Middie are spared from tragedy because the outside forces are magnified apprehensions of their own imaginations and not immediate in danger. But if the Faradocks were placed under the influence of regurgitated racism or an unstable and violent society they might well become the rhinos of Ionesco.

In the play Simpson does not ignore religion, idolatry, or ritual. These are forces that could lead to a destructive hysteria, and enter the plays to induce consciousness. Over the radio comes a prayer for enlightenment:

Prayer: Give us light upon the nature of our knowing; for the illusions of the lunatic are not the illusions of the sane man, and the illusions of the flagellant are not the illusions of the alcoholic, and the illusions of the delirious are not the illusions of the lovesick, and the illusions of the genius are not the illusions of the common man:

Response: Give us light that we may be enlightened.
Prayer: Give us light that, sane, we may attain to a distortion more acceptable than the lunatic's and call it truth.
Response: That, sane, we may call it truth and know it to be false.
Prayer: That, sane, we may know ourselves, and by knowing ourselves may know what it is we know:
Response: Amen.
Middie: That was rather nice.20

The prayers are recitations that have no persuasive effect on the Paradocks who maintain their passivity throughout. They are unable, moreover, to perceive the distortions expressed by these prayers. In their reaction they are predictable which is an attitude of complete apathy. From the outcome of the play, Simpson does not imply that this apathy is destructive, but if the situation were more critical socially, apathy would have extremely negative effects. Were Simpson to illustrate the same metaphysical implications for human beings as does Ionesco, the apathy of the Paradocks would be explicitly dangerous. But in their sterilized social context they are merely comic and not even to be pitied. If the world of the Paradocks were to collapse around them, it would do so not with a resounding 'bang', but with a tinkling 'whimper.'

The Hole was also produced by the Royal Court Theatre in April 1958. (Both The Hole and A Resounding Tinkle had been previously performed in a double bill in December 1957.) It is a play which combines philosophical profundity with the nature of reality. Philosophy has been concerned with the difficulty of discovering reality through the perceived image of that reality—hence Berkeley's maxim "esse est percipi." The paradox of The Hole is the symbolic void, the insubstantial emptiness, which is the cavity upon which "we build our faith."

The Visionary is initially on the stage, and forms a constructive force above the void as the nucleus of a queue. He is an isolated individual who lives in the realm of his own illusions, and is unable to

communicate with the sympathetic Endo who postulates; "...just waiting. In the abstract, as you might say. There seems to be no one else in the queue." To which the Visionary replies, "perhaps they have queues of their own." The Visionary is an existentialist intellectual who perceives what he conceives. Endo is a follower of whatever collective situation will accept him and has little relevance as an individual in the existentialist sense because he is oblivious to the truths and illusions that the Visionary has had revealed. Both men lack one balancing aspect of their personalities. The one lacks realization of his individuality and the other of his collective situation. Even together they are polarized by their limited perceptions.

The Visionary admits his former wish to have "queues radiating out from me like the spikes on a prison railing. Like nodules endlessly attenuated." His desire to be "cosmically first", besides being ridiculous, is the fault of any megalomaniac who believes the universe to revolve around him and represents a form of solipsism. But the Visionary is satisfied to queue in solitude; happy in his subjectivity and existential isolation. He awaits his Godot and the passage of time is irrelevant to his eternal quest.22

Endo: ...I should think the days must go by very slowly for you.
Visionary: I've never timed them.23

Endo is concerned with his contingency and bodily comfort while the


22Simpson wrote The Hole soon after the London success of Beckett's Waiting for Godot and there is the possibility that the idea of Godot might bear on the presence of the Visionary.

23Ibid., p. 3.
Visionary makes these secondary to his spiritualism and self-delusion. He eats to keep food out of his mind and can generate his own warmth. The Visionary attempts escape from his human situation even though he is surrounded by flasks, an alarm clock, a sleeping bag, and other sundries that represent the material world. The Visionary's preoccupation is a stained glass window that is symbolic of a preordained image that allows light to illuminate but permits no further vision. The Visionary remains on this level of isolated expectation throughout the play, impervious to the chaos that revolves around him.

Endo makes a frustrated attempt to comprehend the Visionary's utterances, but Cerebro, the pseudo-intellectual, is rendered incapable of such a comprehension due to his conclusive, scientific forms that compute solutions to all problems facing him.

Cerebro: We ought to be able to work something out if we put our minds to it. He must be waiting for something.\textsuperscript{24}

The effect of the Visionary's expectation must have a cause in Cerebro's "scientific" opinion, since, only then can the Visionary be responsible for a rational act. Cerebro rationalizes all that he perceives into a solid conclusion, and anything that will not fit is discarded.

In Soma, more nearly an intellectual than Cerebro but an instigator rather than an activist. Cerebro encounters his philosophical superior. Soma enters the stage as a Kantian revolutionary questioning the validity of all conclusions. Soma opposes Cerebro on his own ground by refuting the latter's inferences. Cerebro reacts by vacillating from one opinion

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 4.
to another; constantly jumping to irrelevant conclusions like a computer gone mad. But Soma cannot disturb the Visionary who has so firmly set his own value judgement in his mind that his opinion is immutable. Since the Visionary has not reached his conclusion by rational deduction, his argument for the stained-glass window cannot be refuted by the kind of deduction Cerebro uses to verify the golf game:

Cerebro: A man is addressing a ball. And it seems a legitimate inference that a man with all the air of a golfer addressing a ball is in fact playing golf...

Cerebro's perception is confined to a priori formulations of reason and he must face the consequence of such rigidity. The Visionary, however, must face the isolation of solipsism. All four male characters represent different modes of interpreting the universe. Each is limited in his ability to comprehend the much broader reality of existence, and the clarity of these caricatures in the play is positive in its impact on a self-questioning audience.

The interjections of Mrs. Meso and Mrs. Ecto form the backdrop for the action in the foreground of the stage. Their mundane conversation about two husbands who are totally different from one another forms the second level to the play. These two levels are, first, the philosophical ranglings and contortions of the male characters, and the nonsense cliché-ridden spoutings of the female characters. The two women are unmistakeably suburban in their derivation:

Mrs. Meso: Have you ever thought of trying to get Sid breathing properly?
Mrs. Ecto: I've tried everything, Glayds. It isn't for want of trying that Sid isn't normal, believe me.
Mrs. Meso: I thought perhaps if he could get his breathing straight it might be a start for him.

Mrs. Ecto: He's out of step with it— he's breathing in all the time when he should be breathing out and that puts him out all the way along. He can't get back into phase with it except by breathing in twice running.

Mrs. Meso: Or breathing out. He could surely breathe out twice running?

Mrs. Ecto: I've tried him with that too. Once he starts breathing out he has to go on till he's finished. And then when he tries to breathe out a second time—

Mrs. Meso: -- he's got no more air left.

The humour of the Meso-Ecto interludes that intertwine through the play with those of the men has the single purpose of social satire. Except for the mention of a "cosmic rut" in which one of the husbands believes himself to be enveloped there is no metaphysical implication, and even in this case the idea of "cosmic" is completely submerged in the mechanism of the cliché.

Meanwhile, Cerebro's logic carries him to further absurd conclusions on the nature of whatever lies in the hole. His theory of the golf game is logically contrived—"a legitimate inference." But, when he has exploded the golf theory, Cerebro tries to firmly establish "a comprehensive hypothesis which will account for the presence in a single tank of fifteen mutually incompatible species of fish." While Cerebro vacillates from one opinion to another everywhere finding premises to bind his conclusions (thus illustrating the fallaciousness of "faulty" reasoning), Endo is carried along by the former's argument through his sheer inability to form a counter-argument. Endo is a passive citizen who, aware of the tyranny of his "superiors," is unable to

26 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
27 Ibid., p. 17.
isolate the tyranny and attack it. He must therefore condescend to a
submissiveness that fosters domination by Cerebro. Through the caricature
of Cerebro, Simpson personifies the contradictory norms of a hypocritical
society, which norms feed the comic spirit of his play.

The religious recital of the creed according to the Aquarium
Trinity is less a reference to Christian liturgy than to newly-fledged
political ideologies and national anthems. The religious reference
parallels the unthinking recital of prepared verbiage to signify beliefs
held. But this reference equates political recital and renders little
distinction between religion in an ecclesiastical sense or religion in an
ideological sense. The hole has given rise to several theories all of
which have been discarded in favour of the Aquarium theory. All three
men agree on the latest theory. But their agreement is far from being
a mutual understanding. Cerebro accepts the philosophy of the aquarium
because his mind must categorize unknown phenomena and place them into an
ordered and formulated context. Endo agrees with Cerebro because he is
gullible and unable to identify or reject faulty inference. But Soma
plans simply to drive Cerebro and Endo deeper into their self-delusion.
Soma seeks to destroy reason for the sake of destruction, and is, con-
sequently a dangerous antagonist. He can change a peaceful opinion into
hostility through appropriate interjections. He need use only the
persuasion of disagreement:

Cerebro: He's harmless.
Soma: He's dangerous.
Endo and Cerebro: (...as though by reflex) He's dangerous. 28

28 Ibid., p. 21.
Soma's influence could cause mob violence as well among the Endo's as among the Cerebro's. Cerebro's false reasoning causes his vulnerability to Soma's influence because any logical argument looks good to Cerebro despite its frequent non-validity. Martin Esslin likens Soma to Stalin and Cerebro to Marx. This comparison stresses the gulf between theory and practice. Cerebro forms a theory, and then imposes it on Endo at Soma's urging. Soma has the virtual dictatorial supremacy over Cerebro because he is a man of action when instigating revolutionary influence. His "Stalinism" applies a selfish trickery to the honest, but farcical, attempts of Cerebro to discover the truth--which evades him due to his lack of real intelligence. Cerebro postulates theories that can never be practised; but that is the privilege of the theoretician. His theories fall short when he considers them as truths rather than hypotheses. Soma takes Cerebro's theories and pushes them to the point of absurdity, and, as Hume pushed Empiricism to reductio ad absurdum, makes a mockery of rationalization. In this presentation of calculated falsehood expressed by his caricatures, Simpson subtly implies the dangers of false political ideology. If the satire is aimed at religion it is only a comic appraisal of the metaphysical "leaps of faith" characteristic of religious cults. But the danger of any "religion" implicit in Simpson's satire lies in the political manipulation of people. Religion, like rigid ideology, frequently blinds its disciples to reality and, like the Visionary's stained-glass window, is translucent rather than transparent. The viewers are thus blinded to further realizations of consciousness because their perceptions are ordered and not personally

created from reality. The linguistic representation of such blinding
in the cliché which embalms accepted norms whether they are truth or lie.
His warning against such social and ideological opaqueness is Simpson's
positive presentation of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The "non-sequitur" is an important linguistic device in Simpson's
plays, especially The Hole. Simpson uses the non-sequitur as a curt
aphorism that has extensive reference. The first use of a series of
these aphorisms carries the action to an onomatopoeic climax:

Cerebro: He's signalling.
Endo: He's tapping on the pipes.

Soma: He's in solitary confinement.
Cerebro: He wants to make contact.
Endo: He's tapping out a message.

Soma: He's pacing up and down.
Endo: He's been given solitary confinement.
Soma: He's got seven years.
Endo: He's in for three months.
Soma: He's trying to make contact.

Endo: He's tapping. They found him breaking and entering and
now they've put him inside.
Soma: He's done wrong, and he's chosen to do it illegally... 30

The brevity of the lines builds tension and suggests a loss of control
by the characters on themselves. Endo breaks the sequence with a longer
sentence and the tension is temporarily broken. There follow the
individual reactions about justice where each character reveals the
dichotomy between sound moral principles and selfish convenience.
For example:

Cerebro: I hold no brief for sadism, but I can't help thinking
that a good dose of old-fashioned torture would have a lot
to be said for it. 31

30 Simpson, N. F., op. cit., p. 23.
31 Ibid., p. 24.
Through such hypocrisy among his characters Simpson reveals his critical attitude of a society guilty of a similar bigotry.

Lip-service to civility becomes sadism when the characters appear emotionally violent and call for the imaginary prisoner to be "broken on the wheel", burned at the stake, and struck with a club. The action is out of control until an explosion orgasmically silences them. Satisfied, the onlookers eulogize the man whose blood they formerly cried for. To Cerebro, "nothing in his slops became him like the emptying of them." To Endo, "he's paid the price", and to Soma, "Justice." The hypocrical elements of a retributive society are illustrated in Simpson's exposition of sadism, crime and punishment, and Old Testament retribution:

Cerebro: I've got no more time for retribution than the next fellow, or anything remotely suggestive of it as far as that goes; God forbid that we should get back to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth or any of that nonsense in this day and age--but all the same you can't get away from it with things as they are it's a damned sound principle to act on and I for one am all for it.  

Cerebro feels guiltless because it is the State that has acted, and he feels no more responsible for the State's actions than the Visionary cares. The audience, however, might reconsider its opinion of capital punishment and carry further the critical attitudes of social injustice suggested by the action of the plays. Simpson designs his art specifically to this end of social criticism and makes a positive attempt to drive it home by hyperbole and humour.

There is a further convulsion using non-sequiturs. The dialogue reflects a paradox as works of civilized man are connected with acts of barbaric man to portray chaos. The total breakdown of order represents

32 Ibid., p. 24.
a civilization gone mad:

Endo: We must get out the reference books.
Cerebro: We must look up hari-kiri.
Endo: Send for Whittakers.
Soma: Look up voodoo.
Endo: Send for dictionaries.
Cerebro: They're atavistic.
Soma: Send for maps.
Cerebro: For dictionaries.
Endo: Encyclopedias.
Cerebro: Their killing their victim.
Endo: They're in a trance.
Cerebro: It's a ritual dance.
Endo: It's fetishistic.
Cerebro: Look up Mau-Mau.33

Leaders are needed at this juncture, but none are in evidence. All simulations at cultivation, civility, or refinement are lost in a fervour of madness. Soma, as an instigator of rebellion and a political arsonist, stimulates the frenzy by cries of "Forward!" And when a workman emerges from the hole and announces that he has been working on a junction box, Soma tries to make Cerebro reject the fact that has now destroyed all of the latter's florid interpretations:

Soma: ...what happens if these ideas begin to take hold? What sort of anchor have you got left?34

But Cerebro maintains support for his scientific interpretation, while Soma summarizes the consequences of the manifestation which Endo and the two women accept. The Visionary, however, remains uninfluenced. The Hole is an absurdist rendition of the follies of individuals that are magnified into the follies of a society. To derive set messages from the play would be to fabricate "answers" in the same way that Cerebro fabricates golf games and fish aquariums. But the play through sardonic

33 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
34 Ibid., p. 35.
implication is a successful satire which allows the theatre to act as the medium for social criticism.

One Way Pendulum was first produced in December 1959 at Brighton's Theatre Royal. The curtain opens on three "centrally placed weighing machines." Machine number one is obstrusive and "flamboyantly ugly" while the other two machines are smaller. Kirby Groomkirby then enters with an adjustable music stand that supports no music but Kirby adjusts its height nonetheless. Kirby proceeds to instruct number one machine in the essentials of a musical scale, because he presumes that any machine that can speak a weight can surely sing. The machine at first cooperates but soon reverts to its natural inclinations and speaks "fifteen store ten pounds." Satisfied that the other machines are prepared to perform correctly, Kirby taps his baton on the stand and row upon row of weighing machines appear projected on a rear screen. The complete mechanical choir then launches "full-throatedly" into a rendition of the Halalujah Chorus, and Kirby conducts them with "splendid panache." The grandeur of the occasion is spoiled, however, by the renegade number one machine that exudes metallic noises during the appreciative silence which follows the climax.

The comedy and theatricality of the opening scene are easily appreciated. But Simpson has produced more than mere comedy by the design of an important relationship between man and machine. Groomkirby's logic has been distorted in its deduction from a misleading premise to an absurd conclusion as he supposes that a weight-speaking machine must have humano-mechanical abilities to interpret orders and sing. It is
the paradoxical revelation of how the mechanical qualities of a man's mentality can work in relation to a humanly programmed machine. Non-cooperation on the part of the large machine is the result of a stubborn nature within the machine and something that will be eliminated through practice—not by the turning of a dial. The very act of conducting presupposes that the machines can somehow visualize the emotive wishes of the conductor. The intermingling of human and mechanical characteristics in both the machines and Groomkirby are evidence of Simpson's concern with the automatic habits of people in general and British suburban dwellers in particular. The comic presentation does not belie or preclude substantial social relevance. Groomkirby maintains a partial control over the machines, but he himself can only eat to the sound of a cash register bell without which he would starve in Pavlovian frustration.

There is no foreseeable problem of the stifling proliferation of physical objects as there is in Ionesco's (The Chairs) Les Chaises or Le Nouveau Locataire (The New Tenant). Instead, the fear of Mrs. Groomkirby is that the five hundred machines will accumulate dust and become too noisy for a peaceful neighbourhood. She is not concerned with the psychological implications of having the machines in her house—or several cars in the garage for that matter. Nor is there any parental concern for Kirby's complete dependence on machines as a means for existence.

In all its humour, the first scene of the play is an important reference to the relationship between Man, machine, and a mechanical society. Logic is a mechanical reasoning, and Kirby uses it ad absurdum.
His invalid conclusions are the result of an imperviousness to human feeling and the monstrosity of Kirby's inhumanity is in the end revealed as the cause of multi-murders to satisfy his fetish to wear black—but not without cause. By a similar crooked logic, the Court exonerates Kirby because he has used reason in the satisfaction of his fetish. The Court is also the defender of reason and Simpson here more nearly implies reference to a monstrous Nazi-like "rational" inhumanity than in the rest of his milder social satire.

The second scene adds a new dimension to the individual idiosyncrasies of the characters. Each has his own personal preoccupation, but none of these are of any interest to other members of the Groomkirby family. Each person is isolated in self-interest. While Mrs. Groomkirby and Barnes are aware of the lack of mutual interest within the family, they are unaware of its significance as a loss of love and respect. The lack of love within the family has macrocosmic ramifications on the surrounding society:

Mrs. Groomkirby: Cluttering up the place. What with Kirby upstairs and him down. Never speaking to each other from one week's end to the next.35

The "cluttering" of the "place" is ambiguous because it is not certain whether people or objects are in the way. In this family, people appear to be in the way, and objects collect dust. The recognition of this reality in the play gives force and dimension to Simpson's adroit social awareness.

Groomkirby is interested in the law and in carpentry. His library contains such banal and twisted titles as Perjury for Pleasure and

Do's and Don'ts for Dovetailers—conveniently capsulized formulae applicable to a strange reality. Mrs. Groomkirby is enveloped in her role as housewife; "...something else for me to dust, I expect..." She sees no further significance in anything around her.

Aunt Mildred is forced by physical disability to remain in a wheelchair. But a travel brochure takes her thoughts to the Outer Hebrides and from there to a ceaseless list of further destinations. The contrast between physical disability and spiritual restlessness is significant as well to the family as to Mildred herself. All are socially isolated and limited by their introverted natures, but all have a desire to achieve some goal—no matter how ridiculous this goal may be. Sylvia, for example, is aware of the force driving Kirby, and she disapproves of it. The inherent tragedy lies in the futile results of otherwise potentially constructive imaginations. Kirby is unaware of the significance of his actions and is impotent as a human being, because he cannot recognize the perspective of his actions. In other words, Kirby is completely unaware. Sylvia herself is dissatisfied with her situation and keeps a skull on the mantlepiece to remind her of death ("not all that much") but has no idea of death as a concept or even as a reality. Death is merely another happening in life brought on by the mechanico-fatal plottings of time and is as much of a nuisance as Sylvia's passivity to it, but both people are as contrary to life as a creative force as death itself. The mention of death in Simpson has not in any way the significance of death in Ionesco. The facing of death in Tueur sans Gages is deeply personal and metaphysically final. Death in Simpson is relegated to
the distortions of the social and metaphysical desert in which his characters wander.

Money is important to this play as it is to capitalism. Kirby's food bell must be the bell of a cash register, and he must feed money into his machines, which, like men, will only work for pecuniary reward. His father places money into a row of parking metres and waits for the time to expire so that he can get his money's worth of time as well as regain the expenditure. The last example is a blatant example of Simpson's critical mind—with money and time as the criteria of the lives of most people creative activity and philanthropy remain outside the average imagination (or lack of it.) But while money will manipulate men and machines alike, the laws of Nature are unbribable. Mr. Gridlake cannot defy death by placing his skis on backwards and skiing into a tree, nor can Mr. Gantry fall off a cliff and land harder just because he has made a mathematical miscalculation. The inference from this is that man is subservient to the realities of his natural environment, and that obeisance to artificial fabrications is a contortion leading to disaster.

The intervention of the Court in Act Two brings the outside world into the living room of the Groomkirby household. The law, a mechanical force working under specific rules to control the naturally anarchic actions of the human being in an existential situation, becomes the icon of official cliche in the satire of the playwright. The court scene becomes tedious in length and irrelevant in substance, and, while effective in its criticism of "legality", suggests an imposition by
the playwright on his subject. The Court in its rationalism recognizes Kirby's logical behaviour in preparing a reason for wearing black clothes of mourning. Because he has acted in such an exemplary and rational way Kirby is found innocent of any reprehensible crime despite the criminality and murderousness of his plot.

Judge: ...As for your desire to find a logical pretext, this is the one redeeming feature I have been able to find in this case. ...You began a few months ago by telling your first joke to your victim and then striking him with an iron bar. What did you get out of it? The excuse to wear black for forty-eight hours? ...And so it has gone on: victim after victim... ...I have been influenced by one consideration, and it is this: that in sentencing a man for one crime, we may be putting him beyond the reach of the law in respect to those other crimes of which he might otherwise have become guilty. The law...is not to be cheated in this way. I shall therefore discharge you.

Kirby's pantomime of life has been completely preoccupied with death, and his ludicrous plan to attract millions of people to the North Pole (by the music of his machines), causing an imbalance in the Earth's rotation, makes a mockery of existence. Kirby is a Hitler whose megalomania is grotesque, and Simpson's presentation of such a cybernetic mind provides One Way Pendulum with important psychological significance. If the inability of the Court to pronounce justice is a conscious criticism by Simpson of the British system of law, then it carries beyond to satirize any organization where logic is institutionalized and worshipped

Simpson's personal imposition suggests a certain dislike for the sterility of law courts. While this is perfectly valid, it detracts from the natural flow of the drama and tends to beg the question as does John Osborne's interminable condemnation of the Press in Under Plain Cover.

Ibid., pp. 91-92.
as the accepted system of reason. Simpson's parody of the law court
is more a warning to the human conscience than a condemnation of legal
institutions.

There are comparisons between Simpson's next play, The Form, 38
and Ionesco's, La Leçon. La Leçon was first published in June 1950,
and it is plausible to suppose that Simpson had at least heard of it,
if not read it. There are evident parallels between the two plays perhaps
the result of impression rather than the direct influence of Ionesco
on Simpson. Both plays begin in characteristic Aristotelian fashion
with a rising action and a clearly-defined antagonist-protagonist
relationship. Also, both plays conclude after a circular action has
reversed the relationship between characters. Language plays an
important part in the similarity between the plays. In La Leçon it
becomes what Esslin calls "an instrument of power." 39 When the play
ends in the rape-murder of the pupil, the nature of authority has been
revealed in all its cruelty. In The Form language becomes an instrument
of meaningless verbal gymnastics where the authority of the questioner,
Mr. Chacterson, has no effect on the respondant, Mr. Whinby. Whinby
has already predicted the questions by preparation of the answers, and
his prolepsis cleverly weakens the authority of Chacterson. In La Leçon
the pupil is finally overcome by the "superiority" of the professor
whose overwhelming authority exercises a dictatorial control over her

38 The Form was first produced at the Arts Theatre Club, London, in

39 Esslin, Martin, op. cit., p. 95.
freedom and ends in her complete submission. The magnitude of authoritativeness is relative to the different political contexts within which Ionesco and Simpson are writing, but the style of the absurd is similar in the reversal of protagonist/antagonist roles and question/answer ordering.

Whinby in *The Form* is reprimanded for being too exact in his filling in of the form, a symbol of bureaucracy.

Chacterson: ...Now, tell me, Mr. Whinby--this form we asked you to fill in. You state here that you were christened at two o'clock on the tenth of June nineteen thirty-eight. A Friday.
Whinby: That's right.
Chacterson: What we asked for, Mr. Whinby, was an approximate date.
Whinby: Oh.
Chacterson: Two o'clock on Friday the tenth of June 1938 doesn't sound very approximate to me.
Whinby: It doesn't, does it? How about six o'clock on Monday the ninth of May.
Chacterson: Yes, that would suit us quite nicely. Any particular year?
Whinby: You probably know more about these things than I do.

Whinby's capitulation ("You probably know more about these things than I do ") signals the point where he takes over the initiative from Chacterson. Chacterson must make the next move, and, when he does, Whinby poses an irrelevant question. Chacterson must find out whether Palmerston was "at the Foreign Office in 1950" and admit to Whinby, "I think you may well be right." After the blackout and Whinby's change to protagonist, the reversal of roles can be traced to the "christening date." The professor of *La Léçon* gains strength as the unopposed instigator of events, but Chacterson is completely outwitted. His loss

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of authority like that of a political party in power becomes Whinby’s gain. The reversal of roles follows Chacterson’s suggestion that the questions be made to fit the answers—"That’s your trouble at the moment. You’re paying too much attention to the questions." If the answers are presumed to be more important than the questions, then the answerer will dominate by begging the question, a logical fallacy, and the exercise becomes an a posteriori form. Expressed theatrically, the questioner and answerer change places as the relative importance of their roles alter. Thus the two characters become subservient to their linguistic functions.

Chacterson: Once the replies are lined up, the questions follow naturally of their own accord. (p. 14)

Whinby, now Dr. Whinby, describes mastery of the speaking voice as mastery of pitch, tone, volume and articulation. He has become an expert in the form of language without any adherence to its meaning. Language, therefore, is an ordered formal concept, without substance, a thing that can be carelessly recorded. The decisive influences on Whinby’s life are, in his own words, his birth, the circulation of his blood, and his ability to talk. He is a physical object, in human form, working under a pre-ordained system of meaningless symbols. His language is not a means of communication, but a means of gaining power. The linguistic forms of the play complement the cliché in the institutionalization of language and its subsequent dangers of tyranny. Though milder than Ionesco’s implied satire in La Leçon Simpson’s play is a revelation of the mechanical nature of bureaucratic society where political power can be won or lost in relation to the manipulation of
linguistic forms.

John Russell Taylor dismisses The Form as "a tiresome one-act fantasy." This evaluation fails to realize that the play is an attack on language as a conclusive interpretation of ideas. As an example of the Theatre of the Absurd the play qualifies because of its distortion of the linguistic social context. Its censure of question-answer language forms resembles stylistically La Cantatrice Chauve, La Leçon, and Les Chaises, which first presented Ionesco's theory of language as drama. The absurdity of Simpson's play lies, as it does with Ionesco, in the use of language to denigrate itself.

The Cresta Run was first performed by the English Stage Company in October 1965. It is one of Simpson's less successful plays, but alludes to the social satire that the playwright creates as warning to a vacillating society. Leonard and Lillian Fawcett are Simpson's perennial suburbanites. Their front door is meticulously locked by bolts and chains to exclude burglars and other external dangers. The outside world imposes itself on the quiet home of the Fawcetts in the person of Sir Francis Harker, chief of a spy agency, who implicates the couple in an intrigue involving the threat from a foreign power. While Harker represents the establishment of society, Leonard is the ingenu dragged into the tentacles of an organization that can survive only through his help. Leonard is told to accept an important secret capsule, symbolic of "social responsibility", which is a first step to his self-inflicted and subsequent exploitation. His ultimate humiliation is

Taylor, J. R., op. cit., p. 64.
exemplified by an imminent parachute jump into a foreign sewer—a personal debasement in a hostile and alien environment. Only in the end, when it is already too late, does Leonard realize his plight; "Then, like a flash, the truth dawned upon me! I had been poisoned." Leonard is the only Simpsonian character who comes close to being self-aware, but, unlike Berenger, he is blind to any results deriving from his temporary revelation.

In The Cresta Run Simpson has added an important warning to his characteristic satire of suburban living. The outside world that feeds on the reliable conformity of suburban life can exploit it to the point of destruction. The State plays espionage games while business plays consumer games, and in the one the preservation of a way of life is concerned while in the other the sovereignty of the individual is threatened. Leonard, the gullible "hero", falls from self-respect to abasement in his jump from aircraft to sewer. But like the Bérenger of Tueur sans Gages, his epiphany dawns too late.

John Russel Taylor, in his disdain for The Form, quotes the opinion of critic Charles Marowitz who remarked that "there is about Simpson the odour of civil service levity; the kind of pun laden high-jinks one associates with banter around the tea trolly and the frolics of Ministry amateur societies."42 "This seems to me to place him exactly," comments Taylor. The trouble with this criticism is that both critics have taken Simpson too seriously and at face value. It is precisely the "odour of civil service levity" that Simpson wishes his audience to sense. In that Government organization the reduction of the human

42 Ibid., p. 64
sensibility to a cog in the bureaucratic machine is blatant in most countries in the world. The theme of The Form and The Cresta Run is to bring the reductio of the civil service mentality ad absurdum. It is the ordered automaton society in which men lose the delicate balance between reason and feeling and become automata that Simpson condemns in his satire. His very background as schoolteacher and civil servant ensure his mimicry will be based on familiar ground. The method of absurdity employed by Simpson will exaggerate and distort for effect but it maintains its focus of attention. His technique of the absurd is the transmission of perceptions through hyperbolic impressions. The Hole, for example, is a visual effect materialized, and the non-sequitur monologues convey flash impressions to the audience. The medium, therefore dramatizes the message, but the message is non-definitive and must be conveyed as a complete impression, however inferred, to avoid the final statement or moral that both Ionesco and Simpson consider irrelevant and contrary to their "responsibilities" as playwrights. His absurdist plays are Simpson's method of solving Man's struggle to discover the reality of Phenomena through their images.

Simpson's preoccupation with "mechanical man" presents a disturbing characteristic of human nature, even though his plays never reach the extreme of Rhinocéros. His three new television plays We're Due in Eastbourne in Ten Minutes. The Best I Can Do by Way of a Gate-leg Table is a Hundredweight of Coal. and At Least It's a Precaution Against Fire, all concern the cybernetic suburban mediocrity of Simpson's perennial Paradocks. Though they are less important than his major works so far discussed and are hardly suitable to the stage, despite the author's
wish that they be presented in the live theatre, they add to the volume of Simpson's social satire.

Simpson is an important social critic whose theatre reveals a technique of understatement couched in the ridiculous, which is yet comprehensible to his audience. His civility cannot be mistaken for weak writing or blind optimism—indeed his plays have ominous overtones. But he seems to credit his audience with a ready will to ameliorate the social and personal distortions that he sees and transmits so clearly. In this way, Simpson qualifies as a playwright with a positive attitude towards his art. A further important achievement theatrically is the academic comedy that makes his plays enjoyable entertainments and holds the attention of the audience he hopes to influence.

Simpson's style impresses on the reader an idea of the playwright as an observant and intellectually humorous person who replaces clichéd quests into reality with levity and optimistic objectivity. Simpson is a humorist, writing comedy in an age where people appear to have forgotten how to laugh. He has introduced a personal style into the modern British theatre, and his amusing plays are adaptable to both stage and television—which renders them available to two different audiences. In bringing his interpretation of an international "theatre of the absurd" to a British context, Simpson illustrates that his theatre is not insular or provincial but designed for humanity in general. In fact, Simpson's social criticism is only on the surface a comment on his own country. His plays demonstrate Man in relation to himself and his environment and may later, as with Ionesco, extend into the realm of metaphysical investigation. Simpson's plays are statements on Man's position as an
existential and social creature, and it is in this that Simpson's significance as a developing artist lies. His sympathy for his fellow human beings reveals the positive attitude of a playwright who only condemns the dehumanizing elements of individual personalities without condemning the personalities themselves. Simpson's humanism pervades his work.

It is only in the last few years that Simpson has left his school teaching to devote his time to playwriting, but, from what he has written so far, it is foreseeable that Simpson might soon be recognized as one of the modern theatre's important social satirists.
Once again, do I really want salvation?—I was going to say: do I really want to be saved? but that suggests 'seeking safety', 'running away'. Do I really want to fulfil myself, to know myself really? To be truly master of my life and of my death, or else do I simply want to produce, to go on producing, literature?

-Eugène Ionesco
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(Contains: L’Impromptu de l’Alma; Tueur sans Gages; Le Nouveau locataire; L’Avenir est dans les Œufs; Le Maître; La Jeune Fille à Marier).

(Contains: Rhinocéros; Le Piéton de l’Air; Délire à Deux; Le Tableau; Scène à Quatre; Les Salutations; La Colère).

(Contains: Le Roi se Meurt; La Soif et la Faim; La Lacune; Le Salon de L’Automobile; L’Œuf Dur; Pour Préparer un Œuf Dur; Le Jeune Hommex a Marier; Apprendre à Marcher).


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