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Ionesco

A Study of His Plays

Richard N. Coe



Ionesco

First published in 1971, *Ionesco* is a study of the plays written by the absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco. Eugene Ionesco's play *La Cantatrice Chauve*, first presented in 1950, established him as one of the most provocative leaders of post-war 'Theatre of the Absurd'. By 1970, his work had been performed by leading actors and companies all over the world. The author attempts to understand this enigmatic playwright and his plays, while trying to explore the reasons behind his quick popularity. This book will be of interest to students of literature, drama, philosophy, and history.



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A STUDY OF HIS PLAYS

by

RICHARD N. COE

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(*Photo: Bernand*)

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Preface to the Third Edition

Behind this little book, there lies quite a complicated history. When it was originally written, in the late summer of 1960, Ionesco had just achieved his first major success with a full-length play: *Rhinocéros*. His total output at that time consisted in the two volumes of plays in the Gallimard edition, together with a number of scattered critical articles, mostly in journals and reviews which were none too easy to come by outside France. And the urgent need was to introduce him, his drama and his ideas to an English-speaking public who, at that time, knew very little about him.

This original material gave seven chapters. However, the severely restricted format used for the 'Writers & Critics' series (in which this book originally appeared) meant that room could not be found for all these chapters, and one of them – that which dealt with Ionesco's theatrical techniques – had to disappear. It was subsequently published separately, under the title 'The Tragic Farce', in the *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*.

By 1967, however, it was clear that the book urgently needed revising. In the time that had elapsed since the original draft was completed, Ionesco had more than doubled the volume of his published work. Those seven years had seen the production of four major dramas, together with a score or so of minor plays and sketches; and in addition, there had appeared three extremely important collections of non-dramatic writings: *Notes et Contre-Notes* (critical essays); *La Photo du Colonel* (short stories); and a volume of memoirs, *Journal en Miettes*, which, in 1968, was to be followed by a second, entitled *Passé-Présent*. None the less, the 'Writers & Critics' word-limit remained the same; consequently, it was necessary to cut out well over a third of the old material in order to make way for the new. It was not that this material was necessarily invalid; it was simply a question of space. The result was something of a compromise. The first four chapters remained

more or less as they were, but were slightly re-shaped, so as to stand by themselves, and to refer quite specifically to Ionesco's 'first period'; the last two chapters, on the other hand, were completely new, and constituted an attempt to summarise the achievements of his 'second period' and to see how, and in what directions, both his ideas and his dramatic techniques had evolved over the years.

For various reasons, however, this (second) edition, although it has appeared recently in the U.S.A., was never published in Great Britain. In 1969, when Messrs Methuen arranged to take over this volume from the 'Writers & Critics' series, the first important change was that, overnight, the intransigent word-limit disappeared, and it became possible to add further material. But at this point, it seemed to me to serve no good purpose simply to restore the material cut out in 1967, since most of it, by that time, was fairly familiar to most people interested in Ionesco. Instead, I decided to leave the two 1967 chapters (now Chs. 6 and 7) as they were, and to add two further new chapters, the first discussing the play *Jeux de massacre*, which was produced in January 1970 (present Ch. 8), and the second looking back over the whole of Ionesco's career since 1950, and studying the growth of his reputation with the critics and the public (Ch. 9). In addition, through Mr Hitoshi Suwabe, I have been able to learn something about the contemporary Japanese theatre, and to compile a short Appendix on Ionesco in Japan; and, most important of all, thanks to the extreme generosity of M. Ionesco himself, I have received permission to print here, for the first time in an English translation, one of the tantalisingly 'lost' plays that were first written for the *Sept petits sketches* of 1953. The *Bibliography* has been enlarged and brought up to date; and a short summary of Ionesco's life and career in the theatre has been added, forming the present Ch. 1. Finally, for the first time, it has been possible to add a small number of illustrations. Most of the more successful productions of Ionesco's plays are by now so well-known that many present-day producers tend to do little more than copy those brilliant original interpretations by Jacques Mauclair or Nicolas Bataille or Jean-Louis Barrault. In consequence, I have tried as far as possible to select photographs which are less familiar to the average play-goer; and I have

preferred to show either productions (or aspects of productions) which, although originating in Paris, are little known outside France; or else versions produced outside Paris altogether.

This present edition, I hope, is complete and coherent in itself, despite the diversity of its origins. None the less, the specialist who requires a fuller discussion of Ionesco's earlier work may be referred to the later chapters of the original edition, and to the pre-1960 *Bibliography*, with which that edition ends.

In 1960, there was no book-length study of Ionesco; now, there are at least a dozen. This is consoling since, knowing that the reader can easily supplement his knowledge elsewhere, I feel marginally less responsible for the all-too-evident deficiencies of this present essay.

University of Melbourne, 1970

R.N.C.

ABBREVIATED TITLES BY WHICH SOME OF
IONESCO'S WORKS ARE CITED IN THE TEXT

Except where otherwise stated, references by which Ionesco's plays are cited are to the collected edition published by Gallimard (Paris) in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (N.R.F.) Series. Where two references are given together, the second (in brackets) refers to the English translation, either of *Notes and Counter Notes* (tr. Watson) or, when no other indication is given, to *Plays* (tr. Watson and Prouse).

PLAYS

- N.R.F. = *Théâtre* (Collection N.R.F.), Vols. I, II, III or IV, as indicated (Vol. V to appear in 1970).
Plays = *Plays*, tr. Donald Watson (Vols. I, II, III, V, VI, VII) and Derek Prouse (Vol. IV). Vol VIII (tr. Donald Watson) to appear in 1971.

NON-DRAMATIC WORKS

- Auteur* = *L'Auteur et ses Problèmes*.
Bon. = Claude Bonnefoy, *Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco*.
J. Miettes = *Journal en Miettes*.
N.C.-N. = *Notes et Contre-Notes*.
Notes = *Notes and Counter Notes*.
Pb.C. = *La Photo du Colonel*

I

The Man

Eugen Ionescu (the name, later Gallicised to 'Ionesco', means simply 'Johnson') was born in Slatina, about a hundred miles west of Bucharest, on 26 November 1912 – or alternatively, on 13 November, should you happen to prefer the Old-Style Russian Orthodox calendar then in use. His family was originally of peasant stock; but his grandfather had already risen to be a school-teacher, while his father was a lawyer. His mother, Thérèse Icard, was French, and at the age of twelve months he was brought to Paris, where he lived most of his early childhood, together with his mother and his younger sister, at first in a flat in the Square de Vaugirard, later in the rue Blomet, finally in the rue de l'Avre – both these last in the fifteenth arrondissement.

His first schooling was in Paris, at an *École Communale* (rue Dupleix). Not long after the first world war, however, when he was about nine years old, he was found to be suffering badly from anaemia. In consequence, he and his sister were sent away to the country; and for the better part of three years he lived on a farm at La Chapelle Anthenaise, not far from Le Mans, looked after by a peasant family while his mother worked to earn a living in Paris.

These months in a remote village were some of the happiest he was to know in his life, and in his reminiscences he returns to them over and over again. He went to the village school,

read voraciously and unselectively, and above all dreamed of future glories. At one point, he decided to become a Saint (Jean Genet, at the same moment in time, was indulging in similar fantasies); at another, filled to the brim with post-war French patriotism, he saw himself as a Field-Marshal. Already, at the age of nine or ten, he had started to write his *Memoirs*; now the patriotic inspiration turned him towards the drama, and there resulted a Grand French Patriotic Play, of which (perhaps for better rather than for worse) no trace remains.

Some years earlier, his father had had to go back to Rumania, leaving his family alone in France. Now, in 1925, when Eugène was thirteen, his mother decided to join him. But the move was not a success. The marriage had never, apparently, been a very happy one; after the return to Bucharest, it ended uncomfortably in a divorce. These were miserable years for Ionesco. He had to start all over again at school, he had to learn Rumanian instead of French; he took on his own shoulders his father's faults and his mother's suffering; and, on top of all that, he began to be self-conscious about his own imagined ugliness. But there were consolations, and the first of these was literature.

One of the boy's first problems was to adapt himself to a new patriotism. As the French jingoism that he had dutifully learnt from his teachers in Paris was replaced by the Rumanian jingoism he learnt from his teachers in Bucharest, his mind became tormented with confusion: characteristically, he restored his intellectual balance by rewriting his Grand French Patriotic Drama in the shape of a Grand Rumanian Ditto, and then proceeded to work the whole nasty thing out of his system by writing a thoroughly un-Grand and un-Patriotic comedy . . . a sort of pre-view of *La Colère*:

The bit of it I can remember ended something like this: everything in the house got smashed. Seven or eight children all got together, they had their tea; then they smashed the cups,

they smashed all the rest of the crockery, they smashed the furniture, they threw their parents out of the windows . . .¹

As he grew up, however, he began to be attracted by some of the later French symbolist poets, and in particular by Francis Jammes; and by the age of sixteen or seventeen, he was beginning to write his own imitations in Rumanian. Little is known about the extent and quality of these juvenilia; however, no sooner had he enrolled as a student at the University of Bucharest, reading for a Degree in French, than he got caught up irremediably in the excitements of the literary scene. When his first-ever published article appeared in the Rumanian literary review *Zodiac*, he was only just eighteen. By the year following (1931) he was ready with a whole volume of verse, and this was published in Craiova – the ‘city’ which lay nearest to his old home-town of Slatina – under the title: *Elegii pentru ființe mici* [‘Elegies for minute Creatures’]. This was followed by a whole torrent of verses, dialogues, articles and polemics. As early as 1933, he discovered a genre which he still finds eminently satisfying today: the ‘interview-with-Ionesco’; and the earliest specimen was published in Ion Vinea’s review *Facla* on 12 October of that year. In *Facla*, he found an ideal outlet for his ideas, and he collaborated so successfully with this journal that, from 1936 onwards, he became its regular dramatic critic.

This important appointment was evidence of his fast-growing reputation among the Rumanian literary avant-garde. He had already been writing for the ‘little reviews’, *Azi* and *Floarea de Foc*; later on, we find his name among the contributors to *Viața Literară*, *România Literară* and *L’Universul Literar*. In 1934, the publishing-house *Vreamea*, in Bucharest, brought out his first full-length book: *Nu*. This was in fact a collection of unashamedly aggressive and ‘scandalous’ articles, whose first section was entitled: ‘Myself, Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu and Camil Petrescu.’ These three

¹ *Bon.*, p. 65.

illustrious writers were at the time considered to be the true leaders of the Rumanian literary avant-garde; and, as was to be expected, 'Myself', chuckling with daemonic glee, chopped the reputations of all three up into little pieces. In a later chapter of the same book, however, he returned to these same three authors, and this time extolled them to high heaven. The literary Establishment of Bucharest was understandably distressed by the first, and even more so by the second stage of this Hegelian dialectic and, mused Ionesco many years later, 'a promising career as a critic was irretrievably ruined'.²

This last statement is very much an exaggeration. The 'scandal' of *Nu* quite plainly did nothing to destroy Ionesco's reputation; on the contrary, it enhanced it. Hélène Vianu³ has given us a detailed analysis of Ionesco's literary theories and manifestos, together with a fascinating portrait of his 'Angry Young Man' attitudes during these years of post-surrealist intellectual upheaval, in her 'Préludes ionescoïens'. What is interesting to discover is in fact how many of his later themes and obsessions are foreshadowed in these early essays. His antipathy, for instance, towards the established critics ('Criticism is valuable only in so far as it is a battle. Criticism when it is calm, serious and self-assured is neither useful nor important'); his dislike of 'literature'; his terror of death. At all events, by the late thirties, his reputation and his career seemed quite assured. After taking his degree, he had earned his living by teaching French in the Svantul Sava State School in Bucharest. In 1936, his mother had died: but he had also married: and his bride, Rodica Burileanu – then a student of philosophy – is that same Rodica who is now known to hundreds if not to thousands of visitors from all over the world for her hospitality, her intelligence and her unforgettable cooking. By 1938, he had published in *Vremea*

² Georges Lermnier, 'Dialogue avec Ionesco' [1959], p. 51.

³ Hélène Vianu, 'Préludes ionescoïens', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, No. 117, Jan.–Mar. 1965, pp. 103–11.

(9 January) a resounding article entitled 'The Vocabulary of Criticism' and was being invited to contribute to that old-established and respectable liberal journal, *Viața Românească* . . . and it was in 1938 that the great break occurred in his life.

Among the dangers attendant upon growing literary reputations is that of being offered academic scholarships. This is what happened to Ionesco. He was offered – and he accepted – an award that would take him back to Paris, there to work on a French State Doctorate thesis entitled: *The Themes of Sin and Death in French Poetry since Baudelaire*. It was never completed. Too many events intervened – too much excitement at being back in Paris, too much nostalgia for his childhood at La Chapelle Anthenaise (which he revisited in 1939), too much worry about Germany, Rumania and the ever-threatening onrush of the Rhinoceroses across Europe. In September 1939, when war broke out, Ionesco seems to have been in Paris: the following years are blank.

At the moment of the Liberation, we discover Ionesco and Rodica in Marseilles: Eugène's literary activities had been reduced to translating a novel by Pavel Dan from Rumanian into French. As soon as the roads were open, the family returned to Paris; Rodica was pregnant and, on 26 August 1944, their daughter Marie-France (now completing her *maîtrise* at the Sorbonne) was born. The five years which followed were those during which Ionesco's life corresponded most closely to the traditional picture of the struggling young genius – or to that of his own *Amédée*. Living in a rather seedy flat situated at No. 38, rue Claude Terrasse,⁴ Ionesco earned his living as proof-reader to a firm of legal publishers – an occupation which is recalled in *Rhinocéros*, Act II, sc. i.

⁴ A street on the outskirts of Paris, close to the Porte de Saint-Cloud. It is tempting to try and see an omen in the name; for Claude Terrasse was a composer who made his reputation in the theatre, and who was so much admired by Alfred Jarry that the creator of le père Ubu dedicated to him one of the chapters in his 'pataphysical novel, *Dr Faustroll*.