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Who's Afraid of Humans? : Absurdity and Affirmation in Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* occupies an exceptional place in his oeuvre. The play shows the inexplicable transformation of people into rhinos. Though no explanation for the occurrence is offered, unlike absurdist plays it is discursive.

The play also juxtaposes the element of death and choice with an existentialist view of the world. The central protagonist, Berenger is the only one who apprehends an ontological angst. While he staunchly resists the transformation, he eventually finds that he is the "the last man left". After some vacillation, Berenger appears to take a stand against "rhinoceritis".

The play has been interpreted in variously: as a work denouncing totalitarianism and conformism, exposing ideology and representing absurdity. This paper attempts to examine whether the play lends itself to be read in all or any of these ways. Through a study of the structure and language in *Rhinoceros*, it also explores the possibility of the playwrights attempt at demanding a more spontaneous response about the individual and her place in society.

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## Who's Afraid of Humans? : Absurdity and Affirmation in Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

Eugène Ionesco is known as an absurdist playwright.<sup>i</sup> Since his first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* (translated as *The Bald Prima Donna* in the London edition, and *The Bald Soprano* in the New York one) his work has consistently attacked the notion of the theatre as a discursive space, a medium that lends itself to the enunciation of a problem and the search for its solution.

*Rhinoceros* (written 1958, published 1959) is one of Ionesco's most popular plays. It begins on an ordinary Sunday in a town, where suddenly a rhinoceros is sighted twice by the townsfolk. Initially some astonishment is expressed about the strangeness of this occurrence, but eventually a great deal of discussion is devoted to whether the two sightings were of the same rhinoceros or of two different ones, and whether the rhino(s) belonged to the African or Asian species. Soon it becomes evident that people are being transformed into rhinos inexplicably. At the conclusion of the play all human beings succumb to "rhinocerotitis", while the protagonist Berenger remains the solitary human.

Despite a number of characteristics typical of the theatre of the absurd<sup>ii</sup> as also of his oeuvre, *Rhinoceros* is one of Ionesco's most unusual plays. It has been variously interpreted as a play against totalitarianism, against ideology or as an absurd play. Through a study of the structure and the use of language in *Rhinoceros*, this paper attempts an examination of whether the play can be seen as all or any of these and how Ionesco may have been demanding of his reader and audience a more spontaneous or "intuitive" response, an apprehension about the individual and her place in society.

In the preface to the American edition of the play, Ionesco himself encouraged a political reading of this play, even as he urges a rejection of ideology altogether in the explication: "*Rhinoceros* is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are none the less serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies". (*Notes and Counter Notes*, 199)

Ionesco defines himself as staunchly anti-bourgeois, anti-authoritarian and agnostic. While he sees himself as a rebel, he is certain that the political terrain is an inappropriate space

within which to conduct his mutiny: “My revolt was, and remains, romantic. Luckily. It is not political, for anyone who takes sides is a killer in any event. It is the human condition that I find intolerable. It is not being able to understand that is intolerable, and we cannot understand because finitude is our distinguishing characteristic.” (*Present Past, Past Present*, 59) Ideology, for Ionesco, being both the site as well as the cause of the destruction of all that is precious, must be eschewed.

Ionesco’s foray into the theatrical space was a matter of chance. In copying sentences from an English primer in order to learn the language, Ionesco saw how the clichés and truisms illuminated a truth about life and language: “a strange phenomenon took place. I don’t know how – the text began imperceptibly to change before my eyes, and in spite of me. The very simple, luminously clear statements I had copied diligently into my... notebook, left to themselves, fermented after a while, lost their original identity, expanded and overflowed.” As he introduced two characters, the couple Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and putting these sentences in their mouths, Ionesco found his own voice, articulating a truth he wished to communicate through theatre. He describes *La Cantatrice Chauve* as an “anti-play; that is, a parody of a play, a comedy of a comedy”. (Esslin, 135)

Unlike the one-act play he usually favors,<sup>iii</sup> *Rhinoceros* was the third full length play Ionesco wrote, the second featuring the character Berenger. It has three acts, with the first and third acts having one scene and the second act having two scenes. The first act opens in a square in a provincial town with the friends Berenger and Jean meeting for a rendezvous outside the café, which overlooks a grocer’s shop. As Jean upbraids Berenger for not making an effort and sinking into drink and indifference, he is clearly uptight, boosting himself by listing Berenger’s many deficiencies. Berenger’s ennui at first seems to be the result of the mechanical life he leads. He justifies his drinking to Jean, “There are so few distractions in this town – I get so bored. I’m not made for the work I’m doing... every day at the office, eight hours a day – and only three weeks’ holiday a year! When Saturday night comes round I feel exhausted and so – you know how it is – just to relax...” (*Rhinoceros*, 5) Later this anguish takes on existential overtones:

Berenger: I don’t like the taste of alcohol much. And yet if I don’t drink, I’m done for; it’s as if I’m frightened, and so I drink not to be frightened any longer.

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Jean: Frightened of what?

Berenger: I don't know exactly. It's a sort of anguish difficult to describe. I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink. That calms me down and relaxes me so I can forget.

*(Rhinoceros, 15)*

The dialogues spoken by Jean and Berenger are largely echoed by the Logician and his friend the Old Gentleman, setting up the two discrete conversations between the pairs taking place simultaneously, with little common in the subjects under discussions. While the Logician explains how syllogisms work to his friend, Jean and Berenger discuss the apathy he suffers from.

Berenger: [to Jean] Then what do I do? Tell me...

Logician: [to the Old Gentleman] I'm listening.

Berenger: [to Jean] I'm listening.

Jean: You're a timid creature, but not without talent.

Berenger: I've got talent, me?

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Berenger: [to Jean] I get so little spare time!

Logician: [to the Old Gentleman] You're not without talent. You just needed to exercise it.

Jean: Take advantage of what free time you do have. Don't just let yourself drift.

Old Gentleman: I've never had the time. I was an official, you know.

Logician: One can always find time.

Berenger: [to Jean] It's too late now.

Old Gentleman: [to the Logician] It's a bit late in the day for me.

Jean: [to Berenger] It's never too late.

Logician: [to the Old Gentleman] It's never too late.

(Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 20)

The two conversations converge, exposing the banality of conversation; the repetitive phrases of encouragement become clichés that undercut the positive Cartesian logical paradigm advanced by both the Logician and Jean, and then diverge till they are brought to an abrupt conclusion with the reappearance of the rhinoceros, this time causing the death of the housewife's cat.

The death elicits a wave of sympathy for the housewife from all the characters in the act – Berenger, Jean, the Grocer and his wife, the Old Gentleman and even the Logician. While the repetition of the stock phrases of pity accentuate the triteness and vacuity of the emotion, nevertheless some residual warmth remains.<sup>iv</sup> The housewife's lament over the loss of her cat and her catalogue of his good qualities: “[H]e was so good. He always used his tray.” (Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 29) simultaneously calls attention to the interpenetration of the ridiculous and the affectionate in relationships. The death of the cat signifies an irreparable loss to the housewife as she rejects the idea of having another to replace this one.

This is a unique event in an existentialist paradigm. The theatre of the absurd is located within a modernist understanding of the world and of the human condition. As Martin Esslin points out, “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. He is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of the memories of a 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.” (15) Within the realm of the theatre of the absurd, life is stripped down to its barest and all moorings merely emphasize the inexplicability

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of life itself. The meaninglessness of the human condition is presented as ontological. Life and death both take place within a void and are interchangeable in an accidental, futile existence.

The death of the housewife's cat in a play that later displays before the reader/ audience the literal metamorphosis of Jean into a rhino becomes an important point of departure from absurdist conventions. Interestingly, Jean's transfiguration occurs when Berenger goes to his apartment to make amends after Jean takes personal offence over their disagreement. While it is clear that Jean is an insecure conformist, eager to inflate his self-esteem even if only by holding himself up as a model of perfection to Berenger, the warmth that the latter feels towards Jean is indubitably sincere.

The possibility of meaningful relationships within the world of *Rhinoceros* is again suggested when in the last act, Dudard leaves on seeing Berenger and Daisy, for whom he was rumored to have romantic feelings, share a sense of care and bonding. Daisy too joins the rhinos when she decides against Berenger after he slaps her, obviously feeling the absence of affection.

However cracks had already appeared between them earlier. Berenger and Daisy speak of their love for one another in a shrinking space, using vocabulary akin to that used in Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach".<sup>v</sup> Yet the destabilization of a secure world represented on the stage begins to have its debilitating effect on their relationship. It undermines the ability to sustain any relationship by portraying language as fast losing its basic communicative capability.

Berenger: I *am* right, Daisy. And the proof is that you understand me when I speak to you.

Daisy: What does that prove?

Berenger: The proof is that I love you as much as it's possible for a man to love a woman.

Daisy: Funny sort of argument!

Berenger: I don't understand you any longer, Daisy. You don't know what you're saying, darling. Think of our love! Our love...

(Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 101, original emphasis)

This crisis in language dissipates the affection between Daisy and Berenger. It is also concomitant with the pitting of this weakening verbal human language against the increasingly attractive and versatile animal language of the rhinoceros. This “language” is first heard as the trumpeting of the rhino early in the text as it rushes down the street near the square.<sup>vi</sup> At first this trumpeting is incomprehensible. Later in Act II, in the office, while Daisy can only grasp that the rhino chasing Mrs. Boeuf wishes to communicate, through its repetition of bewildering gestures, Mrs. Boeuf’s extrasensory identification of the rhino being her husband brings forth an aural confirmation, as the stage directions spell out: To Mrs. Boeuf’s cry of recognition, the rhinoceros “replies with a violent but tender trumpeting.” (Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 48) Jean’s transformation, too, is first represented by the intensification of the hoarseness in his voice.

In Act III, while Berenger finds the sounds of the rhinos increasingly threatening, and they remain the last human man and woman on earth, Daisy suggests to Berenger that they try “to understand the way their [the rhinos’] minds work, and learn their language.” (Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 100) The human element that the rhinos retain is suggested variously: Mr. Boeuf’s tenderness towards his wife, Dudard’s comment about the rhinos’ behavior being reminiscent of children at play, the Logician continuing to favour his boater’s hat even after his transformation into a rhino and the “melodious” (102) chorus of the trumpeting of the rhinos. Indeed, the social ties between humans may have helped swell the numbers of the rhino population, with many humans choosing to join their transformed loved ones.

In the case of Jean and Botard, it is clear that both choose the transformation owing to their temperaments. Jean is an obsessive conformist, quoting socially established concepts of duty and will power in order to justify his actions and vehemently imposing a positive worldview upon himself and Berenger. Similarly, Botard too uses terminology that invokes certain ideologies, virtually quoting Marx when he calls religion the opiate of the people and insisting upon a trade unionist intervention in ensuring the grant of insurance to Mr. Boeuf on turning into a rhino. The latter observation not only mocks Botard, exposing his rhetoric as empty and inane, but also furthers Ionesco’s agenda of presenting on stage an anti-ideological theatre.

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In his anti-plays, Ionesco has used the motif of proliferation often and with great effect. Martin Esslin draws our attention to the lack of any attempt by the playwright to explain the superabundant increase of material objects that is characteristic of his plays. He states that Ionesco's "horror of proliferation... expresses the individual's horror at being confronted with the task of coping with the world, his solitude in the fact of its monstrous size and duration." (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 147) This is seen in *Rhinoceros* in the increasing number of rhino heads that increasingly crowd the entire back wall of the stage till there is no space left. The play also employs other motifs typical of Ionesco: a social setting with relationships – the husband and wife, teacher and student, employer and employee; the uneasiness about the human condition; the crisis of language and communication.

Nevertheless, Ionesco's view of the theatre as a medium suited to the presentation of the ontological condition of the human condition existing in a void is undermined by the very element of choice in *Rhinoceros*. Were the characters in an existentialist paradigm, life and death would be rendered equally unattractive and futile. The very fact of a significant alternative to being human mirrors the same destabilization of an existential world that had rendered the loss of the housewife's cat irreparable.

Moreover, the element of an alternative privileges the notion of the exercise of rationality, which contradicts the fundamentals of an existentialist ontology. Ridiculous as logic may have been rendered by the truisms echoed by Jean and the Logician in Act I, the fact remains that nowhere in the play is the use of reason completely discredited or abandoned. Act III shows us Dudard, who unlike Berenger is a seemingly well-adjusted man, effectively employing logic in order to calm his panicked friend. Dudard placidly endorses the conventional views that Jean has embraced convulsively. While the latter was deeply insecure, Dudard appears at ease with his position at work and by extension, with the world and with himself. His internalization of the discourses of rationality, duty and patriarchy lends him an air of normality, contrary to Berenger's existential angst. Even as he acknowledges the appeal of transforming into a rhino, he is able to resist the lure of following everyone else. It is only when he is disquieted by Daisy's decided choice of Berenger over himself that he exercises the option of joining the community of rhinos, glibly, if somewhat cynically, applying conventional tropes and phrases in order to justify his actions:



Dudard: I feel certain scruples! I feel it's my duty to stick by my employers and my friends, through thick and thin.

Berenger: It's not as if you were married to them.

Dudard: I've renounced marriage. I prefer the great universal family to the little domestic one.

(Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 91)

By implication then, Dudard sees the earlier pattern of society being replicated amongst the rhinos, for all that humans have "transformed" themselves. The conclusion then suggests a lone Berenger resisting a community of rhinos. In his conversation with Dudard, Berenger clarifies the basis of his choice. Significantly, he pits human intuition, not reason, against animal instinct.

Berenger: [distracted] You think I'm getting all het up, do you? I might be Jean. Oh no, no, I don't want to become like him.... But I do feel you're in the wrong ... I feel it instinctively — no, that's not what I mean, it's the rhinoceros which has instinct — I feel it intuitively, yes, that's the word, intuitively.

Dudard: What do you understand by 'intuitive'?

Berenger: Intuitively means... well, just like that! I feel it, just like that.

(Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 83-84)

It seems easier for those who apply logic and are unaware of the absurdity of human life to join the rhinos, whether owing to the lure of continuing conformism, or arriving at it by a so-called logical response or even in order to regain some warmth through kinship. At the end, Berenger recognizes the utter futility of language itself since he is the only human being remaining. He attempts to reiterate the existentialist notion of people as interchangeable in his examination of their photographs. Yet these devices do not result in a feeling of deepening of human despair. The discussions and arguments throughout the play, especially those meant to expose the futility of all ideology, merely strengthen its discursive nature.

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After a closer look at the photographs, Berenger decides to join the rhinos since they are good looking, whereas he is not. Unaccountably, even though he attempts to transform into a rhino, imitating its roar and fretting about his human appearance, it is too late. He realizes that now that he wishes to make the same choice as everyone else, the possibility of an alternative is closed to him. This suggests that Berenger may always have been denied an alternative since he was conscious of the absurdity of human existence.<sup>vii</sup> In a sense then, the “resistance” that he puts up declaring himself to be the last man left, refusing to capitulate, renders him less a Sisyphean hero<sup>viii</sup> than a slightly ironic figure. Ionesco, as Martin Esslin avers, “mocks the individualist who merely makes a virtue of necessity in insisting on his superiority as a sensitive, artistic being.” (180)

It is during the performance, however, that the ambivalence of the play can truly be depicted. Should the audience see the solitary Berenger ranged against the entire population and feel a sense of empathy? Should the presentation be understood symbolically as the truth of the alienation that is inevitable to human existence? Or, one may comprehend Berenger as the last man left, offering resistance as a self-affirmation;<sup>ix</sup> yet suffering from the human frailty of one who has changed his mind repeatedly and, despite the audience/ reader/ his own desire for consistency, may do so again soon after the curtain drops? <sup>x</sup>

### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Arguably this label is one that Ionesco owes to Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which imposed a nomenclature upon the diverse works of many disparate playwrights.

<sup>ii</sup> As Michael Y. Bennett rightly points out, in trying to impose a meaning upon the novel aesthetics and themes that playwrights with similar preoccupations were bringing to the theatre during this period, Martin Esslin lists a number of characteristics of absurd theatre, which may not be shared by individual playwrights. For instance, while Samuel Beckett renders the existentialist void through a bare stage, Ionesco chooses to show the futility of life by representing social relationships within a proliferating materiality, till both are rendered meaningless.

<sup>iii</sup> In his search for an “absolute” theatre, Ionesco prefers the one act play: “I don't think one should try to put too much into a play. In a three-act play there are necessarily superfluous things. The theatre needs a very simple idea: a single obsession, a simple, very clear, self-evident development.” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 157)

<sup>iv</sup> The slight warmth is generated by the confidences exchanged by Jean and Berenger are accentuated by the chivalry and charm that the Old Gentleman extends towards the housewife. Bennett quotes Emmanuel Jacquart's essay “Ionesco's Political Itinerary” to emphasize his own point that Ionesco stands neither for totalitarian systems nor for individualism, but for “the need for warmth and freedom”. (*Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, 90-91)

<sup>v</sup> B. Mangalam's essay "Who's Afraid of Rhinoceros?" discusses how the play briefly depicts Daisy and Berenger in the third act in the liberal humanistic ideals of the nineteenth century well-made play only to deconstruct their role as the last couple on earth who will combat rhinocerotis.

<sup>vi</sup> The stage directions repeatedly clarify that the trumpeting and sounds of the rhinos be used to signal their presence and then their proliferation. In a sense we find that the intrusion of the inexplicable is first presented to the audience/reader in an aural manner. Only after the completion of Jean's transformation into a rhino takes place off stage in the bathroom, indicated aurally, is the first rhino actually seen on stage.

<sup>vii</sup> Else it is inexplicable that while Dudard and Daisy were permitted to change their mind, Berenger is denied this choice.

<sup>viii</sup> Michael Y. Bennett sees Berenger as a Sisyphean hero. For Bennett, being human is not a passive posture: Berenger is and remains human since he actively resisting rhinocerotis, whether through the unsuccessful attempt to convince Daisy to have children with him, or through his final affirmative declaration. This would also bolster Bennett's assertion that in moving from public into private spaces, the play urges its audience/ readers to take an individual, personal stand.

<sup>ix</sup> While it is obvious that Berenger makes a choice, one may well question his ambiguous acceptance from which this self-affirmation stems. Even if one accepts his stance as self-affirmative and one that confers meaning to his life (in the positive existentialist mode that Sartre advocated), the question of remains: What would constitute this resistance? Would it be the search for a cure for rhinocerotis, understanding it to mean conformity and a belief and adherence to tradition and/ or ideology? Or would it be a continuing recognition of the absurdity of life, yet deciding to soldier on?

<sup>x</sup> Berenger has earlier changed his mind about drinking and changing his attitude and lifestyle in Act I. Berenger appears in *rhinoceros* for the second time in Ionesco's work. Although the second appearance is not the coherent continuity of the same character, there are some similarities between the two characters with the same name. Berenger was introduced in *Tueur Sans Gages (The Killer)*, where in the final scene when he is about to be killed, Berenger drops his hands and remains motionless, as if he is a marionette. Ionesco writes about how his childhood fascination with Judy and Punch shows appears in his attempt at an "absolute" theatre with caricatures, but without the ugly puppet strings. Though there are no specific stage directions to that effect, the final posture adopted by Berenger may have a considerable influence on the understanding of the protagonist as well as of the play and its 'meaning'/ message.

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