

## Book Review

### *Understanding Eugène Ionesco*

by Nancy Lane. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994.  
xiv+242 pages; selective partially annotated bibliography, index. \$34.95.  
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As a guide for undergraduate students and nonacademic readers, this book clearly fulfills the goals of the on-going *Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature* series. The simple, sequential presentation of Ionesco's most important works, preceded by an equally simple biographical introduction to the playwright, are not necessarily meant to further scholarship in the field, but rather to reflect generally accepted ideas concerning the author. The bibliography (much of which is annotated) is somewhat limited, yet contains all of the major studies on Ionesco which could be of interest to the book's intended readers.

The effectiveness of the book results from Lane's ability to present the potentially bewildering works of an author such as Ionesco, who never minded being misunderstood, in an uncomplicated and intelligible manner. Her introduction adequately identifies the important events in Ionesco's life, and points out the essential themes which appear throughout his works. The rest of the book is dedicated to commentary on the individual plays. Though Lane has managed to group together certain plays under various chapter headings (i.e. "Humanized Theater: The Bérenger Cycle"), the order of explication is always chronological. Throughout the book, she provides basic information concerning the original productions of some of the plays, their critical reception, and her own, often psychologically-oriented, interpretation of them. *Understanding Eugène Ionesco* is a quick, accessible, introduction to all of the key works of Ionesco's theater.

The book's only shortcomings are due to the same simplicity which is the book's principal strength, thus underlining the difficulty of writing such a generalized study in a field in which there are already several excellent, more comprehensive ones. Although a chronological presentation of a given author's works may automatically create a useful structure for examining them, it also accentuates (as in this study) problems of repetition. Lane discusses numerous themes and structures commonly found in Ionesco's plays such as the proliferation of objects, the criticism of authority and totalitarianism, his frequently

unsympathetic portrayals of women, and the many problems of language and space. However, in dealing with a body of work such as Ionesco's, where the same themes recur regularly with subtle differences, a chapter by chapter re-examination of the same or very similar ideas rapidly becomes annoying. In this book Lane too frequently finds it necessary to re-explain the importance of a given theme, and then proceeds to re-examine it, thus underestimating the abilities of her readers to follow her ideas.

A more subtle (and minor) problem also results from the difficulty of writing specifically for this book's intended readers. UMELL series editor James Hardin states in the book's preface that the "series emphasizes the sociological and historical backgrounds of the writers treated" (viii) in order to avoid potential difficulties for non-specialists dealing with literature (and criticism?). Lane clearly opts for a more specialized critical approach. She makes frequent use of a psychological (at times Freudian and at others Jungian) interpretative stance. While not necessary for a basic understanding of the body of Ionesco's work, his later "dream" plays certainly encourage such an approach, and Lane does make a number of interesting points. The problem, however, lies in the fact that in trying to write simply and generally for undergraduate and nonacademic readers her analysis is largely unproblematized and therefore over-simplified. Additionally, there is no real acknowledgment that Lane is applying one approach possible among many, which might imply (again, to the nonacademic reader) that this is *the* way to understand Ionesco, rather than *a* way to do so.

In light of the current proliferation of criticism being published in ever-narrowing fields of interest, the project undertaken by the editor and authors of the *Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature* series is an interesting and valuable one. While it might not provide the excitement and potential for debate that new, original scholarship creates, it will make the study of literature more accessible to a greater number of people, possibly encouraging them to explore further.

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