

The Faith-Based Initiative of the Theater of the Absurd

Herbert Blau

Some prefatory words, or what, in more classical times, might have been called an apology. In the invitation to this symposium,¹ the topic proposed for me was “The Raging Soul of the Absurd.” I don’t know whether that came out of some tongue-in-cheek take on my temperament derived from the rather reticent things I’ve written, but as it turns out, though I’ve used another title, I will be saying something of the soul, not exactly raging, in another context.

There was also a warning with the invitation—and I hope to be forgiven for saying so—that the audience here was not likely to “consist of specialists or academics per se,” but rather a group of that “dying breed, the ‘educated public,’ which means we need to keep vocabulary relatively jargon free and inclusive.” As it happens, that gave me the idea for what I have written about, while feeling somewhat like Jack, in *Jack or the Submission*, when he’s told he’s “chronometrable”—meaning, perhaps, it’s time for him to change—after exclaiming, “Oh words, what crimes are committed in your name!” This leads to his agreeing to “abide by the circumstances, . . . the game of the rule,” acceding to the familiar, “Oh well, yes, yes, na, I adore hashed brown potatoes.”² Which, actually, I try to avoid, though that may not keep me, with respect for the game of the rule, from making a hash of words, or to use a word coming up later, an “assemblage.”

Chronometrably, I might even wish that Roberta II—Jack’s fiancée with three noses—were right and all we’d need “to designate things is one single word: cat,” the word *chat*, of course, used as a prefix, *sexier* in French, though “The cat’s got my tongue,” able thus to accommodate all propositions. Just before the Roberta with three noses—whose real name, she says, is Liza, with pools in her belly, arms like snakes, soft thighs, and mouth, naked shoulders, hair trickling down—reveals her hand with nine fingers, all the more alluring to Jack, she says, with categorical cattiness: “Cats are called cat, food: cat, insects: cat, chairs: cat, you: cat, me: cat, the roof: cat, the number one: cat, number two: cat,” all the numbers and “all the adverbs: cat, all the prepositions: cat. It’s easier to talk that way . . .” (109).

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Maybe so, maybe not, but not, I suppose, for hardened criminals for whom the unspeakable crimes persist, from a sense of unspeakability, germane to the Absurd, as it's been to critical theory, with its nefarious vocabulary, which I may have to invoke—though I shall try in what I'm saying to be nevertheless inclusive.

The focus will be, for the most part, on Ionesco's early plays, the ones we did nearly forty-five years ago, at The Actor's Workshop of San Francisco. As we moved then, with more than a little controversy, from Brecht to the Absurd, at that time very strange, we were with some presumption trying to educate a public, and ourselves, about what turned out to be a sort of preface to or premonition of what critical theory has been worrying about, or worrying, for over a generation. As to what I'll be saying today, it is not by any means a defense of theory, that's boring; so, too, sometimes is the theater of the Absurd—mostly, however, strategically so.

Returning, then, to my title, its initiating theme . . .

Take it on faith. That's usually said, with more or less comic inflection, when faith at some dubious impasse is what we're least likely to have. If that doesn't exactly correspond to the existential condition from which the theater of the Absurd emerged, it does reflect on the absurd condition of American politics that led, through dangling chads in Florida and a Supreme Court decision with no legal substance at all, to the faith-based initiative of our born-again president, who recently put a definitive quietus to any residue of the Cold War by looking into the eyes of his Russian counterpart and, yes, seeing into his soul. That any skepticism in the gaze was allayed by a former agent of the KGB is almost too wild a conceit, its disarming suspense of the global melodrama belonging more, perhaps, to a James Bond movie than to the theater of the Absurd. But here it would seem we have no choice: we either take it on faith or laugh out loud, laughter redoubling at the thought that it might be either/or, whereas in the faith-based initiative of the absurdist theater you can, at minimum, have it both ways. I say at minimum because, in the drama of Ionesco particularly, you can in a plenitude of unexpectedness, contradiction, and aleatoric calculation, have it either *and* or, or even otherwise, any which way you wish—although that, too, may be the sort of wishful thinking that sometimes passes as faith, as when Mrs. Smith remarks of Rumanian yogurt in *The Bald Soprano* that it “is excellent for the stomach, the kidneys, the appendicitis, and apotheosis” (10). Which may be what Jean-François Lyotard meant by a “materialist Sublime.”

Lyotard was making the case for transcendence flattened by a generation of critical theory which, in the wake of Bertolt Brecht, and revisionist Marx, looked with a jaundiced eye on the “theological space” of theater with its deployment of illusion to put reality in perspective and, determining cause and effect in the appearances on stage—whose psychic economy is essentially bourgeois—something like fate or godhead in the wings. If you've been keeping up with

theory, from early deconstruction to the new performativity, you'll have heard a lot of talk about invisible power, legislating meaning and regulating desire, though this, on first appearance, would hardly seem to apply to the capricious imagination or diabolical virtuosity of the theater of the Absurd. Yet if there's no divinity in the dramaturgy shaping our ends, the indeterminacy of the Absurd is not exactly up for grabs, as if in the absence of faith, roots, origin, authenticity, or any grounding for truth, some utterly unaccountable but nonetheless scrupling vigilance presides over the abyss, as over the arbitrariness of the announcement, belabored manically in *The Bald Soprano*, of Bobby Watson's death, which was in the paper and not in the paper, poor Bobby, a "veritable living corpse . . . how cheerful he was!" or was it his wife? his uncle? his aunt? son and daughter? mother? his entire family in fact? all of them commercial travelers, "What a difficult trade!" So much for the moment for the bourgeois family as reality principle in advancing capitalism, but whether or not we think of ourselves as fellow travelers, the dialogue through the sequence, its clamorous orchestration, is more cunningly berserk than "an association of ideas," which is how Mr. Smith says he remembered what he will in a moment confuse again or forget: "Which poor Bobby do you mean?" (11-13).

Anarchic-seeming as it sounded when the Absurd came on the scene, it soon became apparent that there's method in the madness and, given the protocols of explosive disorder in the tradition of the avant-garde, the scandal of form as well, in all the mimicry of chaotic absence laughing up its sleeve, like Mary the maid who confides to the audience that her real name is Sherlock Holmes or the clock striking 29 times (or striking as much as it likes); or for that matter, in the systemic wobble at the play's inconstant heart, the series of baffling recognitions and misidentifications, all of them "true in theory" (23), the gratuitous mystery to which, obviously, everything leads (though, to be perfectly truthful, it was a mistake by an actor that Ionesco let stand, giving the play its title). The critical moment occurs after Mrs. Martin says to the departing Fire Chief—who has confessed in all subjectivity that his dream, his ideal, is that of a world in which everything has caught fire—"Thanks to you, we have passed a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour." Whereupon, as if reminded to follow through on Descartes' method of doubt, with the requisite objectivity, the Fire Chief stops to say, "Speaking of that—the bald soprano?" Which is, as a philosophical question, the first and last we've heard of her, except—after "*General silence and embarrassment*," the laughter sneaking in—that "She always wears her hair in the same style" (37). As for the totality of inconsequence in the momentum of non sequitur, abrogating meaning and value, that hardly draws a blank, which is to say there may be nothing to get but we get it nevertheless, like the "Nothing to be done" in *Waiting for Godot*, the nothing that comes of nothing, or the anomaly of a nothingness that not only passes the time but is virtually formulaic.

"How curious it is, how curious it is," as they chant in *The Bald Soprano*, no

roots, no origin, no authenticity, no, nothing, only unmeaning, and certainly no higher power—though the Emperor turns up invisibly in *The Chairs*, as from a “marvelous dream. . . , the celestial gaze, the noble face, the crown, the radiance of His Majesty,” the Old Man’s “last recourse” (149-50), as he says, before he entrusts his message to the Orator and throws himself out the window, leaving us to discover that the Orator is deaf and dumb. Thus the delusion of hierarchy and, spoken or unspoken, the futile vanity or vacuity of speech. But even more curious, “what a coincidence!” (17) is how this empty datum of the Absurd became the litany of deconstruction, which hedges its bets, however, on a devastating nothingness by letting metaphysics in after presumably rubbing it out, that is, putting it “under erasure” (*sous rature*), as Derrida does in his grammatology, conceding what Nietzsche told us, that God is dead, but using the word anyhow, because we can hardly think without it, or other transcendental signifiers, such as beauty or eternity—which are, indeed, the words spoken by the Old Man to the invisible Belle in *The Chairs*, mourning what they didn’t dare, a lost love, “Everything . . . lost, lost, lost” (133).

There would appear to be parody here, and one might expect that Ionesco—in a line of descent from Nietzsche to poststructuralist thought—would not only disclaim the older metaphysics but laugh as well at the ridiculousness of any nostalgia for it, as for the originary time of a radiant beauty endowed with Platonic truth. And indeed the Orator who shows up dressed as “a typical painter or poet of the nineteenth century” (154) is, with his histrionic manner and conceited air, surely not Lamartine, who asks “*Éternité, néant, passé, sombre abîme*” (“Eternity, nothingness, past—dark abyss”) to return the sublime raptures they have stolen; nor is he remotely the figure of Keats with his Grecian urn, teasing us out of thought in equating beauty and truth. What we have instead, in *Amédée or How to Get Rid of It*, is the spellbinding beauty of that which, when they forget to close the lids, emanates from the eyes, which haven’t aged—“Great green eyes. Shining like beacons”—of the incurably growing corpse. “We could get along without his kind of beauty,” says Madeleine, the sour and bitter wife, “it takes up too much space.” But Amédée is fascinated by the transfiguring growth of its ineluctable presence, which might have come from the abyss of what is lost, lost, lost. “He’s growing. It’s quite natural. He’s branching out.”³ But if there’s anything beautiful here, it seems to come—if not from the Romantic period or one of the more memorable futurist images, Boccioni’s *The Body Ascending* (Amédée’s family name is Buccinioni)—from another poetic source: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?” It’s as if Ionesco were picking up, literally, T. S. Eliot’s question in *The Waste Land*: “Will it bloom this year?”⁴ If it not only blooms, or balloons, but flies away, taking Amédée with it, the oracle of Keats’ urn—all you know on earth and all you need to know—seems a far cry from the hilarious mordancy of this transcendence, or what in *The Chairs*, even if the Orator

had spoken, would have radiated upon posterity, if not from the eyes of a corpse, from the light of the Old Man's mind (157).

Yet the truth is that, for Ionesco, the Absurd is predicated on "the memory of a memory" of an actual pastoral, beauty and truth in nature, if not quite yet in art. Or so it appears in "Why Do I Write? A Summing Up," where he summons up his childhood at the Mill of the Chapelle-Anthenaise, a farm in St-Jean-sur-Mayenne, "the country, the bar, the hearth. . . ." Whatever it was there he didn't understand, like the priest's questions at his first confession, it was there, too, that he was "conscious of being alive. . . . I lived," he says, "in happiness, joy, knowing somehow that each moment was fullness without knowing the word fullness. I lived in a kind of dazzlement." Whatever then happened to impair this radiant time, the dazzle continues in memory, as something other than fool's gold: "the world was beautiful, and I was conscious of it, everything was fresh and pure. I repeat: it is to find this beauty again, intact in the mud"—which, as a site of the Absurd, he shares with Beckett—"that I write literary works. All my books, all my plays are a call, the expression of a nostalgia, a search for a treasure buried in the ocean, lost in the tragedy of history" (6). As for the estrangement, alienation, and the metaphysical anguish that came with that history, they may be, given the politics of cultural studies today, and much theater practice as well, dismissed as disempowering or ideologically redefined, but when push comes to shove in civilization and its discontents, they are for Ionesco, though "unbearable, so empty, and useless" (15), something like the truth of being—though being (*pace* Heidegger) is ideologically suspect, too, as a sin of "essentialism," along with that humanistic entity or mere illusion called "the self."

"I've invited you . . . in order to explain to you," says the Old Man in *The Chairs*, "that the individual"—that avatar of the self spawned by the Enlightenment—"and the person are one and the same." That established, he says a moment later, "I am not myself. I am another. I am the one in the other" (145). About the self, to be sure, there was a certain equivocation on the stage of the Absurd, from Beckett's tramp insisting that the little messenger from Godot not come tomorrow and say that he never saw him to the quarrel about the doorbell in *The Bald Soprano*. "Experience teaches us," says Mrs. Smith in a fit of anger, "that even when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there" (23), as if there were no one to be there, no person or individual, nothing resembling a self. Of course, we don't have to believe her, no more than we believe Derrida or Deleuze or the new orthodoxy of dispersed subjectivity, that the self is no more than the liability of identities elided into language. For in its utter untenability, untenable as utterance, the self is also liable to be taken on faith. "This morning when you looked at yourself in the mirror, you didn't see yourself," says Mrs. Martin to Mr. Martin, who is undeterred by that. "That's because I wasn't there yet . . .," he says (36). How curious it is, how curious it is, we

somehow think we exist.

As for the existence of a “work of art” in our demystifying period, if art has not been entirely divested of privilege, it has been relegated to the status of another kind of “discourse,” while (with the canon in jeopardy too) the aesthetic has been turned into an antiaesthetic. One might think that Ionesco was there in advance with his notion of an *anti-play*, taking to its metonymic limit, not this, *that*, not that, *this*, words slipping, sliding, decaying with imprecision, the empty play of the signifiers: epigrams, puns, platitudes, suppositions, deductions, pleonasm and paradoxes, doggerel, proverbs, fables, the repertoire of prosody, or in a vertigo of nonsense and nonsensical iterations, an eruption of mere vocables, plosives, fricatives, a cataclysm of glottals or, in the screaming choral climax of *The Bald Soprano*, with a staccato of cockatoos, “cascades of cacas” (40) careening over the stage. Or as the Professor demands from the Pupil in *The Lesson*, sounds projected loudly with all the force of her lungs, like that diva of performance art, Diamanda Galas, not sparing the vocal cords, but making a virtual weapon of them. Or the sounds warming in their sensation—“‘Butterfly,’ ‘Eureka,’ ‘Trafalgar,’ ‘Papaya’”—above the surrounding air, “so that they can fly without danger of falling on deaf ears, which are,” as in the insensible resonance of the bourgeois audience (Brecht’s culinary theater), “veritable voids, tombs of sonorities,” to be awakened, if at all, by an accelerating merger of words, syllables, sentences, in “purely irrational assemblages of sound,” an assault of sound, “denuded of all sense” (62-63).

Manic obsessive, cruel as he becomes, what the Professor appears to be defining, through the crescendo of intimidation, is not only the apotheosis of an anti-play, but a kind of alternative theater or another form of art. Indeed, he might be describing, “from that dizzying and slippery perspective in which every truth is lost,” what Artaud tries to reimagine, in relating the Orphic mysteries to the alchemical theater, its “complete, sonorous, streaming realization,”⁶ as well as certain experimental events of the sixties, turned on by Artaud’s cruelty, *its* faith-based initiative, which came, like the return of the repressed, at the exhilarating crest of the theater of the Absurd. Thus, in the period of the Living Theater and *Dionysus in 69*, or *Orghast* at Persepolis, we saw performers (the word “actor” shunted aside, tainted like “the author” by conventional drama) pitilessly expelling air from the lungs, or caressingly over the vocal cords, which, like Artaud’s incantatory murmurs in the air or, in the Balinese drama, the “flights of elytra, [the] rustling of branches,”⁷ or, in the brutalizing ecstasy of the Professor’s lyric imagining, “like harps or leaves in the wind [that] suddenly shake, agitate, vibrate, vibrate, vibrate or ovulate, or fricate or jostle against each other, or sibilate, sibilate, placing everything in movement, the uvula, the tongue, the palate, the teeth,” and as you might still see it today (back in an acting class) with exercises in the tradition from Grotowski to Suzuki (tempered by the Linklater method), the polymorphous perversity of it all: “Finally the words come out of the nose, the mouth, the ears,

the pores, drawing along with them all the organs we have named, torn up by the roots, in a powerful, majestic flight, . . . labials, dentals, palatals, and others, some caressing, some bitter and violent" (62-64). And some, too, expressing "all the perverse possibilities of the mind," as Artaud says of the contagious revelation of the Plague⁸—the contagion there, if not the revelation, in Ionesco's *The Chairs*, with "a bad smell from . . . stagnant water" below the window and, with mosquitos coming in (113), the unrelieved stench of the pathos of "all that's gone down the drain" (116).

Whatever's gone down the drain, including the thirty-nine other pupils who gave their bodies, "Aaah!" to the sounding out of *knife*, "my arms, my breast, my hips . . . knife" (*Bald Soprano* 74), the Professor also seems to be anticipating certain psychophysical effects of vocal behavior that, by way of punk, funk, and heavy metal, are now commonplace on MTV, while on the theoretical level he seems to be outdoing Roland Barthes on "the grain of the voice," through which, when words really speak—that materialization of language by way of the body, its fleshiness or tactility—what you hear is "the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose," whose meaning is a seduction from which "*signifiante* explodes," erotically more and other than words, bringing into performance "not the soul but *jouissance*."⁹ It's feasible, too, to see the Professor's vocal lesson not only through the perverse possibilities of his mind, but in the terms used by Foucault writing of Deleuze, his theater of phantasms, which functions at the limits of bodies, but *against* bodies, too, sticking to them, but sticking it to them as well, cutting them open and multiplying their surfaces, as a site of metaphysics for the *disillusioning* of phantasms; in short, a space of thought "never hallowed by an idea," a "theatrum philosophicum" as an "epidermic play of perversity."¹⁰ So far as the metaphysics is vocalized in the "phantasmaphysics" of sensations at the skin ("Theatrum" 172), below the eyelids, up the nostrils, or in the dirt below the fingernails, what it is not, as Barthes writes about the membranous voice, is some fetishism of *breathing*, where in the affect(ation) of meditation most techniques begin, bringing into performance, as from a secretly mystical center, some deep emotional truth or facsimile of the soul.

Metaphysics, as Artaud suggests (and Deleuze is indebted to him), may with the sonorous streaming come in through the pores, but only while escaping, in the vibrations, frictions, ovulations, sibilations, the repressive simulation or "tyranny of meaning" (Barthes 185). As for the tyranny in *The Lesson*, true, the libidinous soundings of the linguistic theory there—that "all the words of all the languages . . . are always the same" (65)—takes a hallucinatory course to the lethal pedagogy of the knife, which, though the Pupil feels it, voluptuously, in every part of her body, is something else again than Artaud's cruelty or Barthes' conception of voice, whose truth is to be hallucinated ("Grain" 184). Which is not exactly the state of mind of the Smiths and Martins, in the vociferous fury of *The Bald Soprano*, their

vain pursuit of meaning, where the concluding lesson is about the runaway signifiers, not this *that*, not that *this*, spreading over the stage: "It's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here!" (42).

But wherever it is or might be, *it*, the indeterminate referent through the anarchy of it all, "a work of art," according to Ionesco—unembarrassed by the phrase, which he uses frequently, honorifically, without much slippage—"is not a disordered set of associations. It's a structured series of associations around a theme. A work of art is primarily a construction,"¹¹ though it may be pushed to the point of paroxysm, "where the source of tragedy lies."¹² The tragic, too, has become dubious in our time, as politically disempowering, starting with the critique by Brecht and moving by way of poststructuralism into feminism, the new historicism, queer theory, and the gendered, racial, and ethnic politics of cultural studies. In any case, when Ionesco speaks of art as a construction he doesn't mean by that what, through Foucault and others, we've come to think of as "social construction," as if the work were composed by an aggregation of discursive circumstances or, in the anonymous performance of language, as a sort of accretion of history.

The text may be, as Barthes said in "The Death of the Author," a multiplex space of diverse writings, none of them original, but rather "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (*I-M-T* 146); but when Ionesco speaks of his work he leaves no doubt that he is—as much as William Faulkner with Yoknapatawpha County—the sole proprietor of the site of multiplicity; and if things need to be deciphered or disentangled by the audience that's because "the mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" focused, as Barthes says, in the reader or the audience (148), has been conceived and perpetrated by the imaginative powers of the artist, who has through those powers the capacity to construct. This is so even when the construction resembles, as at the frenzied end of *The Bald Soprano* or in the equally frenzied arrangement of chairs—when the Old Woman says, "I'm not a machine, you know . . . Who are all these people?" (*Chairs* 137)—the deterritorialized or nomadic space of *A Thousand Plateaus*, conceived by Deleuze and Guattari as an assemblage, an "economy of violence" in which "speed is added to displacement,"¹³ in what they call the war machine. Which might, indeed, be a description of the accelerating structures of Ionesco's drama, an exacerbation of assemblage, seemingly irrational and denuded of all sense, as the enmity of the characters emerges, as if it were genetic, from the banality of its beginnings.

But if the irrationality is there, in the perversity of the Professor and his harrowing lesson, as in the proliferous invention that, with a teasing hysteria, seems to generate the plays—like the "spontaneous imagination" of the surrealist's creed, to which Ionesco was susceptible—the economy of violence is not without control, nor is the violence of the comic in Ionesco that, brought to paroxysm, circles back

to the tragic. Or so it is in conception, whatever it may be in performance. The issue *is* construction, which is not without *affects* that, in “the active discharge of emotion, . . . are projectiles just like weapons” (*Thousand Plateaus* 400), of which the assemblage, with gaps, detours, always decentered, dispersed as it may seem, is the formal cause—so much so in Ionesco that for all the innovative turbulence the form seems merely the warp of something quite conventional. “Assemblages are passionate,” say Deleuze and Guattari, “they are compositions of desire. Desire has nothing to do with a natural and spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire. The rationality, the efficiency of an assemblage does not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them” (399).

For Ionesco, it appears, the order of things is “let the torrent rush in” and then assume “control, grasp, comprehension” (*Notes* 124). But what rushes in, as we can see from play to play, would seem to be a function of the same order of understanding, with a “metaphysical consciousness” that, in a world that is “at once marvelous and atrocious, a miracle and a hell” (“Why Do I Write” 13), determines social awareness, as well as his apparent indifference to the political that made him, through the period of the Absurd, the subject of critique, as, say, Beckett never was—mainly because Ionesco’s indifference to the political didn’t at all make him indifferent to the critique. The compulsion to respond—from the initial debates with Kenneth Tynan to those with leftist critics when Paris was Brechtianized—was documented by Martin Esslin in his indispensable guidebook to the vicissitudes of the Absurd as it moved into the theater. I won’t review the movement, through Ionesco’s self-defense, from the judicious to the polemical to the didactic, which could have used now and then, in its more philosophical stuffiness, a little Brechtian alienation. But when he wonders through the didacticism why, in every gesture, if not *gestus*, there is a potential disaster or catastrophe, a killing instinct we can’t control, he inevitably returns to the tortuous question of whether or not there is meaning in the world, or whether we were merely born deceived into a reality that is incurable.

He insistently asks the question, but that the natural is incurable, like the growing corpse in *Amédée*, is something he refuses to accept. If it’s a law, then he denies it, but what to *do* is another matter. If he approaches at times, then avoids, the elegiac estrangement of the Beckettian nothing to be done—whether with Hamm’s old stancher or Pozzo’s mournful “On!”—he can’t quite buy the solutions of those who deny on ideological grounds what he virtually takes on faith, that “a human fraternity based on the metaphysical condition is more secure than one grounded in politics. A question without a metaphysical answer is far more authentic. And in the end useful than all the false and partial answers given by politics” (“Why Do I Write?” 14). Unable to imagine the infinite and condemned to know nothing, what we can be conscious of is this: “all is tragedy,” universal

tragedy, unexplainable by original sin. As for politics, particularly revolutionary politics, that's a delusion. "We make revolutions to institute justice and tyranny. We make injustice and tyranny" ("Why Do I Write?" 10). What can be done if at all? Forget ideology, and kill as little as possible. After World War II, what else can you expect? The simple wisdom is this: "Ideologies do nothing but prompt us to murder. Let's demystify" (11).

The irony is, however, as we look back today on the drama of Ionesco, that it's the demystifiers who might still take issue, like the older Brechtian critique, with its circuiting back to tragedy, or the insupportable semblance of it, through the extremities of its comedy. If momentarily eruptive and disarmingly off the wall, the charge might be that it is debilitating in its excess, its elephantiasis of the bizarre merely self-indulgent, a cover-up of paralysis, no more than a copout, in mockery of the reality that absurdly overwhelms it, like the interminable corpse of *Amédée*, "*the long, long body . . . winding out of the room*" (63). No matter that in the absurdity there is a longing for the supernal, or the memory of a memory of a memory of something else, as in the "*sinister room*" with sprouting mushrooms, enormous now with "*silvery glints*" and, as *Amédée* gazes out the window, all the acacia trees aglow. "How beautiful the night is!" he says. "The full-blown moon is flooding the Heavens with light. The Milky Way is like creamy fire, honeycombs, countless galaxies, comets' tails, celestial ribbons, rivers of molten silver, and brooks, lakes and oceans of palpable light. . . ." And the correlative of the corpse in the Heavens, its long, long body winding, "space, space, infinite space" (59).

As early as *Amédée*, conscious of the critique that he was jeopardizing human behavior by invalidating objective judgment, Ionesco brought his defense, if whimsically, onto the stage, as when the American soldier, who is helping him with the corpse, asks *Amédée* if he's really writing a play. "Yes," he says. "A play in which I'm on the side of the living against the dead." And as he says again later, when—though he stands for "immanence" and is "against transcendence" (75)—he's up in the air with the ballooning corpse: "I'm all for taking sides, Monsieur, I believe in progress. It's a problem play attacking nihilism and announcing a new form of humanism, more enlightened than the old" (69). If for Kenneth Tynan—just prior to the emergence of the Angry Young Men, and the renewed vitality of social realism—progress and humanism were still in, with the demystifiers today they are certainly out, as among the illusions of the Enlightenment protecting bourgeois capitalism. If, in any event, there was nothing programmatic to be taken away from the incapacitating ethos of Ionesco's drama, with its fractious view of reality as senseless, purposeless, useless, absurd, there is still in the texts the prospect of performance that is nevertheless enlivening and, if a burlesque of possibility, ebullient in negation, as if the vertigo of nothingness were itself the source of energy that reversed, as in chaos theory today, the direction of the entropic. If entropy was—when I studied thermodynamics, about a decade before our doing

Ionesco's plays—a measure of the unavailable energy of the universe, the drama of the Absurd, with its law of increasing disorder and commitment to evanescence, sneaked up in a dizzying anguish on whatever made it available. That too may be an illusion, which is not exactly absurd.

Notes

1. The symposium was a retrospective, "Fool's Gold: Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd," held at Stanford University on July 28, 2001.

2. Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays: The Bald Soprano, The Lesson, Jack or the Submission, The Chairs*, trans. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove, 1958) 87. References in the text will be to the titles of the plays.

3. Eugène Ionesco, *Amédée, The New Tenant, Victims of Duty*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove, 1958) 15.

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