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The Fantastic Presences-Absences in *The Chairs* by Eugène Ionesco

Abstract: This study is an analysis of Ionesco's play The Chairs, as a complex theatrical metaphor of the existential void and nothingness. It is an attempt to reveal the imaginative energies of this play, mainly about playing games and storytelling, and its intricate machinery of the dream. The drastic lack of identity is staged by a literal obliteration of the corporal presence of most of the actors, symbolically replaced by empty chairs. The paradigm of proliferation is now applying to vacuum, in an ingenious attempt to battle against the ossified linguistic and theatrical conventions, and to explore the endless expressive possibilities of the theatrical performance. This kinetic scheme acts like a cobweb in which the two protagonists move like helpless insects caught into this deadly texture. Their anguish is thus materialized into a visual projection of their inner labyrinth, as not only the conscious level is addressed, but also the unconscious one. Essentially built on symbolic images, the play allows the audience to become part of this mobile architecture of the scenic space invaded by the ballet of empty chairs, in the search for a new theatrical language, based on different types of perception and aiming to redefine the sensibility of the audience. The deaf and dumb Orator hired to deliver the non-existent message is emblematic for the severe crisis of theatrical forms of expression, and for Ionesco's search of a new language, non-linguistic, able to express a different type of message. It is a firm intention to reinvent theatrical communication.

Key words: theatre, communication, nothingness, chairs, games

*“Quand j’habitais au moulin, toute était joie, et toute était présence”
(Eugène Ionesco, *Journal en miettes*)*

The nostalgia of the paradisiacal years spent at Chapelle-Anthenaise (1921-1924), of the “days of fullness, happiness and sunlight”, as the dramatist confessed to Bonnefoy (Bonnefoy 11), is evident in many of Ionesco’s plays and it is obviously connected with the major frustrations provoked by this “paradise lost”. Some plays are trying to recreate textually the heavenly existential enchantment of the golden age of childhood, as a form of redemption and spiritual control, a symbolic escape from adult life and going back to that perfect world, which recalls a feeling of illumination. On the contrary, there are other plays in which he counterbalances that delirious bliss, that sense of plenitude, with the terrors of adulthood. Marcel Schneider has comprehensively analyzed the way in which the phantasms of Ionesco’s theatre exteriorize the psychical dynamism of obsessions and anguish:

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Toutes ces situations qu'on trouve dans le théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco appartiennent au fantastique: elles traduisent des obsessions, des angoisses, elles extériorisent des dynamismes psychiques. C'est à partir d'elles et autour d'elles que se constituent les pièces, et non à partir d'une idée ou d'une action: leur unité reflète celle du monde intérieur, leur cohésion est celle du caractère, du tempérament de l'écrivain mû par son instinct, déterminé par son anxiété, ses désirs, ses espoirs. (Schneider 397).

In Ionesco's theatre, a faultless *past* of childhood in which everything was *presence* and *joy*, is flagrantly opposed to a degraded *now* of adulthood, dominated by *absence* and *emptiness*. I think *The Chairs* is the most crystal-clear theatrical metaphor of this *nothingness*. Elizabeth Hesson and Ian Hesson have specifically noticed that "the childhood paradise that he continually tries to recreate was characterized by a sense of being the center of the universe – that is, with no distinction between self and external reality and in a time that was an eternal present." (Hesson, Hesson 88).

In 1952, Ionesco wrote a short text for the Program of the Théâtre du Nouveau Lancry, printed for the premiere of *The Chairs*:

At certain moments the world appears to me emptied of meaning, reality seems unreal. It is this feeling of unreality, the search for some essential reality, nameless and forgotten – and outside it I do not feel I exist – that I have tried to express through my characters, who drift through incoherence, having nothing of their own apart from their anguish, their remorse, their failures, the vacuity of their lives. Human beings saturated in meaninglessness cannot be anything but grotesque, their sufferings cannot be anything but derisively tragic. As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it... (Ionesco, 1980: 186).

This "unreal" reality of the world is poetically rendered by the hallucinating dialogue between real people (corporally present on the stage) and empty chairs occupied by imaginary characters. In my opinion, the main characters of the play are these fantastic presences-absences, which I intend to analyze here. Deborah Gaensbauer sees the play as "an extraordinary illustration of the littered 'ontological void' that constitutes the contradictory experience of the absurd" (Gaensbauer 71). But it obviously stands for more than that void, and Martin Esslin was the first to observe that beyond the intensely analyzed themes and motifs the play embroils imaginative energies that transcend any unilateral interpretation:

A play like *The Chairs* is a poetic image brought to life – complex, ambiguous, multi-dimensional. The beauty and depth of the image, as symbol and myth, transcends any search for interpretation. Of course it contains the theme of the incommunicability of a lifetime's experience; of course it dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence, made bearable only by self-delusion and the admiration of a doting, uncritical wife; of course it satirizes the emptiness of polite conversation, the mechanical exchange of platitudes that might as well be spoken into the wind. There is also a strong element of author's own tragedy in the play – the rows of chairs resemble a theatre; the professional orator who is to deliver the message, dressed in the romantic costume of the mid-

nineteenth century, is the interpretative artist who interposes his personality between that of the playwright and the audience. But the message is meaningless, the audience consists of rows of empty chairs - surely this is a powerful image of the absurdity of the artist's, the playwright's own situation. (Esslin 151-2).

The play illustrates the loneliness of two, the drama of senility, and bitter disappointment all of them transgressed through nonsensicality. The *game playing* and *story-telling* permanently bridge adulthood and childhood, as a ways of defying time and its baneful consequences. An ingenious report is established between lucidity and ludicrousness. At their impressive ages (95 years old, respectively 94), the Old Man and the Old Woman have somehow managed not to achieve anything: wisdom, professional or personal success, material belongings, and social relations; absolutely nothing. The only progress, or rather regress is their childish *forma mentis*. They play "guests" as children do, eternally fascinated by the possible change that a guest might bring into their dull, meaningless life. Given their immateriality, granted by the very gratuity of the game itself, the guests could be anyone, kings or beggars, friends or enemies, real or imaginary entities. Their world is a stage where all these absences-presences, materialized by the chairs, play the game of deceptive reality and unreal human relations. George Wellwarth summarizes: "the impossibility of communication between human beings" (Wellwarth 59).

The progressive accumulation of dreams and hopes has produced a kind of psychic super production, and now, at the final confrontation between their real and their imaginary lives, the process is reversed: superabundance is converted into emptiness, as if Ionesco's theatrical discourse acts like strong acid rain, which wipes out all illusions leaving behind sterile ash, out of which there is no rebirth possible. No Phoenix bird will fly from the ashes; only the two useless bodies will finally plunge into the ocean. Elizabeth Hesson and Ian Hesson have interpreted the moment as a symbolic liberation of egotism:

In *The Chairs*, the old couple's leap into the water surrounding the tower to escape the proliferation of disembodied guests may be seen as the death of egocentric, contemplative perception of reality and the return of the consciousness to affective involvement with the world around it. (Hesson and Hesson 92)

In his fundamental philosophical study of the human condition *Being and Nothingness (L'être et le néant)*, Jean-Paul Sartre states that "man is the being by whom Nothingness comes into world" (Sartre 59). Ionesco's old couple is the perfect illustration of this process.

Ionesco's theatre was always concerned with the lack of identity, but in *The Chairs* this theme becomes so drastic, as it totally annuls the corporal presence of the characters. Maybe Ionesco wanted to visualize an empty theatre hall with the imaginary spectators for whom the actors are playing during rehearsals, doing their best to impress them. Martin Esslin also commented on the reciprocated mirroring between the stage and the theatre hall, at the premiere of the play at the Théâtre Lancry, in 1952, when the hall was almost as empty as the symbolic one on the stage. I think it was Ionesco's way of pinpointing the emptiness of our world, even if we artificially fill it with objects and beings. He wants us to

notice how *absent* are in fact the apparent *presences* around us. He confessed to Claude Bonnefoy:

That's it, it's absence, emptiness, nothingness. The chairs remain empty because there's no one there. And at the end, the curtain falls to the accompanying noises of the crowd, while all there is on the stage is empty chairs, curtains fluttering in the wind, etc. ... and there's nothing. The world doesn't really exist. The subject of the play was nothingness, not failure. It was total absence: chairs without people. The world does not exist because in the future it will stop being, everything dies, you know. Now people have given a clear, reasonable psychological explanation of the play, but what's there is another level of consciousness, an awareness of evanescence. (...) the play itself consisted in empty chairs, and more chairs arriving. A whirlwind of them being brought on and taking over the whole stage as if a massive, all-invading void were settling in. (...) It was both multiplication and absence, proliferation and nothingness. (Bonnefoy 73).

While indicating that he wished to illustrate all the frustrations of a lifetime by this abstract *whirlwind* of chairs, and also "the evanescence, the loneliness of a world which is there, which isn't there, which will cease to be" (Bonnefoy 125), Ionesco suggests that the paradigm of proliferation, which he used in so many of his plays, is now applying to vacuum, not necessarily to objects (chairs). Nevertheless, in all his correspondence with various directors of the play, he insisted that they should use as many chairs as possible. He was really frustrated that:

The Germans absolutely refused to have fifty chairs brought on the stage, as fast as possible. They also wanted the old woman to be played by an old woman so as to make it seem more real. Now this wouldn't do at all because her performance has to be a positive gymnastic feat, a real ballet with the chairs (Bonnefoy 96).

Sylvie L. F. Richards has accurately noticed: "The vacuity of their life is matched by the bareness of the room. Their attempt to complete their lives, to fill them with some meaning, will be coupled with a graphic attempt to fill the void of scenic space" (Richards 155). It is Ionesco's way of telling us that human relations are illusive anyways, so why would we bother to codify them and represent them on the stage. And he obviously tries to show us the real picture of our social life.

In her inciting psychoanalytic reading of Ionesco's theatre, Gisèle Féal has decoded these absent characters as representations of the unconscious, which invade conscious life, as a result of repeated refutations:

Le personnage absent, représentant de l'inconscient, s'y multiplie sous des identités variées et occupe les chaises vides que le couple de vieillards apporte sur la scène. (...) Les visiteurs invisibles qui entrent à sa suite sont des vécus inconscients. A la fin de la vie des deux vieillards, des forces inconscientes envahissent donc la scène de leur conscience. (...) Les Vieux n'ont jamais laissé parler leur inconscient: quand l'Orateur longtemps attendu paraît enfin, il n'émet que quelques *sons gutturaux de muet*. Sa mutité, comme l'invisibilité des visiteurs, est une image du refoulement. (Féal 231-232).

From the disintegration of language, as happened in Ionesco's first plays, here we witness a literal disintegration of the characters. The tyrannical supremacy of nothingness is attained in two steps: first by the physical absence of the actors playing the invisible roles (replaced by a complicated system of words, gestures, objects etc.), then by the disappearance of verbalized language itself, as the Orator is deaf and dumb. I think that this is an ingenious modality of exploring the endless expressive possibilities of the theatrical performance. Ionesco wrote to the first director of the play: "*The Chairs* is an attempt to push beyond the present frontiers of drama" (Ionesco, 1964: 190).

For Sartre, being and nothingness were complements, the two equally necessary components of the real, as he commented on "the reciprocal forces of repulsion which being and non-being exercise on each other, the real in some way being the tension resulting from these antagonistic forces" (Sartre 50). Ionesco staged a perfect case study of this strange symbiosis, based on both co-existence and interdependence.

The Chairs is also contemplation of the ossified linguistic and theatrical conventions, and of all kinds of redundancies, as the dialogue remains comprehensible in spite of the absence of the invisible guests. Entire roles can be eliminated without losing coherence of the theatrical dialogue. By describing details like costumes, facial expressions, silhouettes, the Old Man and the Old Woman successfully substitute the other actors. Each ghostly character that enters the scene has a story, so the entire play is a collage, based on gatherings of such fantastic episodes.

Beckett was preoccupied with the same type of practical questions in *Waiting for Godot*, in which not only Godot is physically missing, but also any significant theatrical action. The language is thus liberated by its traditional epic function and becomes a musical expression of individual values, which are the real subject of the play. Waiting is the perfect psychical environment for uncertainty. In Ionesco's play we witness the same type of process: the subjective mind-sets of the protagonists become the main theme of *The Chairs*. Terrorized by the total lack of shape and meaning of the universe, the two characters indulge themselves to glide into a veritable oneiric delirium, trying to cope with the purposelessness of their lives.

But it has not always been like that. The Old Man's memory preserves the weird and wonderful memory of a dreamlike chronotope, easily recognizable as the house from Chapelle-Anthenaise, in the suburbs of Paris. Somewhere "At the end, at the end of the end of the city of Paris" there was a perfect world, "The place and the weather were beautiful" (Ionesco 1958, 120), an almost supernatural *topos*. Paul Vernois, one of the most subtle commentators of Ionesco's theatre, deciphered its complex symbolism:

La lumière donne à l'existence sa justification comme un rayon de soleil transfigure le logis du pauvre. Elle se fait pain et vin mystiques capables d'apaiser cette faim et d'étancher cette soif d'absolu, de victoire sur la mort, que l'œuvre de Ionesco rendra plus sensibles d'une pièce à l'autre. Euphorique ou euphorisante, elle écarte toutes les ombres ambiguës que la vie accumule. Ardente, elle conduit au cœur de l'Être par une connaissance à la fois privilégiée et mystérieuse, semblable à celle de l'intuition enfantine déjà exaltée en des termes voisins par le dramaturge. (Vernois 15).

By simply remembering this *topos*, and thus going back to the centre of his being, an inexhaustible source of vividness and new beginnings, the Old Man recuperates the bliss of childhood, with all its lyrical values, and protects himself of the tenebrous present. He becomes a child again; he becomes himself again, and is reconnected to the regenerative power of the starting point of his life, when everything was still possible. His mental pilgrimage through this paradise lost facilitates a beneficent metamorphosis of the world. On the contrary, stepping out of this magic and predictable circle of childhood is unbearable; the centrifugal vector brings about severe and incurable existential traumas, and the most expressive theatrical metaphor of this huge inner void is to be found in *The Chairs*. Only the memories can somehow balance this heartbreaking emptiness, so the couple desperately keeps hold of the past, in order to be able to deal with their short term future, or rather to trick it for a while. But their universe is progressively invaded by shadows, and this incessant growth of darkness and fear complicates the theatrical message. Their premeditated clownish attitude cannot veil the wing of death, so that the only way of confronting the void is to voluptuously plunge into the reverie of infancy.

I believe this type of theatre, essentially built on symbolic images, allows the audience to become part of the dynamic reorganization of the cosmos, through this mobile architecture of the scenic space invaded by empty chairs, acting like a *perpetuum mobile*. The spatial geometrical progression of tridimensional objects, doubled by the acceleration of movements creates the impression of organic growth, as if the wood of the chairs came back to life and is chaotically growing into more chairs, to plague their maculated universe turned into ruins, and to mirror their inner landscape. Schneider has compared Ionesco's scheme of frenzied proliferation of objects with the expansion of malignant cells. Richards has also observed that "the cancrioid presence of the chair-Objects, progressively corrodes and cancels animate presence: the presence of the absent" (Richards 158). In my opinion, this whirlwind of chairs becomes a kinetic archetype that figures the inner labyrinth. Like Daedalus and Icarus, the two characters attempt to escape this labyrinth through their final suicidal flight, and also like the mythological couple they confirm that there is no other escape but death.

The incoherence of the discourse experienced in *English without a Teacher* is represented here spatially. The verbal repetition of absurd words and expressions is replaced with an equally absurd kinetic replication, suggesting a severe deconstruction of the real. The use of non-linguistic channels of communication indicates the search for a new theatrical language, based on different types of perception and aiming to redefine the audience's sensibility. Not only is the conscious level addressed, but also the unconscious one. While critics of Ionesco's theatre have repeatedly discussed the fantastic presences of his plays, in this play, we are confronted with fantastic absences. But I think that the most fantastic aspect here is that of theatrical languages and their never-ending creative potential.

Eugène Ionesco proves in *The Chairs* an amazing ability in the stage management of space relations by firmly indicating the scheme of all movement. The doors have numbers and are alternatively used in an attempt to maneuver the profound vacuity of both the inner and outer space. Paul Vernois has remarked the seduction of this tridimensional space and the metamorphic architectural structure of Ionesco's plays, trying to link this "spatial polarization" with the deepest obsessions of the author:

A l'intérieur du volume du plateau, la dramaturgie de Ionesco anime des axes de polarisation de l'action, trace des itinéraires privilégiés et signifiants où l'obsession s'impose suivant un schéma qui affecte l'apparence d'une épure mathématique. En même temps une combinatoire de ces lignes construit une forme de spectacle dont l'achèvement répudie sur le plan esthétique l'incohérence des pulsions représentées. Ainsi resurgit une harmonie de la représentation que les tentatives antérieures trop discontinues n'avaient pas réussi à maintenir. Le dessein d'une pièce n'est donc pas – ou n'est plus – de mener à son terme une histoire, mais de rendre intuitivement perceptibles par une figuration symbolique et ordonnée, les archétypes oniriques communs à l'auteur et aux spectateurs. (...) Les limites du cadre théâtral sont alors plus probantes que tout élément du décor : elles matérialisent les contraintes mêmes du destin, invisibles au plan métaphysique. (Vernois 54).

By the menacing proliferation of the chairs, these weird absences-presences that materialize the Daedalic universe, the obsessions are visually represented on the stage, to suggest the oneiric archetypes which have replaced the myths. But that gives humankind a chance to actually reunite with the mythical roots, as Ionesco himself explained: "The man whose mind feeds on dreams may re-discover the archetypes" (Bonney 113).

Social obsessions prevail here, as the chair is a symbol of authority (The Holy Chair, The Throne etc.). To offer somebody a chair is an acknowledgment of one's personal value, while to contest one's right to use it means usurpation. All the imaginary guests are worthy of a chair, while the hosts have no time to sit. Their reserved chairs are the side ones, from which they plunge into death. The more chairs they carry, the more exhausted they are, but they continue to run enthusiastically to bring in more. Once they initiated this crusade, in the name of the message to humanity, they are determined to triumph or perish. Some lines confirm the repeatedly failed ventures to step forward:

In order to forget, Your Majesty, I wanted to go in for sports... for mountain climbing... they pulled my feet and made me slip... I wanted to climb stairways, they rotted the steps... I fell down... I wanted to travel, they refused me a passport... I wanted to cross the river, they burnt my bridges... (...) I wanted to cross the Pyrenees, and there were no more Pyrenees. (Ionesco, 1958: 151).

George Wellwarth has observed that Ionesco's plays are "demonstrations of the incongruity between the human condition and the human being's desires" (Wellwarth 51). I think he is right, as the ending of the play consecrates this double polarity: on the one hand, the necessity of flying (even if Icaric), on the other hand, the continuous bumbling, as the destiny remains a merciless tyrant. But the Old Man continues to fight intrepidly with the windmills of illusion, vigilantly watched by the enthusiastic feminine Sancho Panza. His never satisfied need to triumph is almost mystical, as his final confession is made in the presence of the King, symbolically functioning as a Great Priest as well.

The oneiric bewilderment reigns supreme in their closed universe, and in order to make it visible Ionesco imagined a complicated choreography: while the centrifugal movements towards the doors indicate a need to escape this universe, the centripetal ones towards the audience prove that there is no possible escape. Deborah Gaensbauer is definitively right to describe this semicircular décor as the "Ionescian version of a circle of hell" (Gaensbauer

71). I imagine this kinetic scheme designing an imaginary cobweb, in which they both move like helpless insects caught in this deadly texture. Like the characters of the Greek tragedy, they are doomed, although their hubris is not clearly uttered. Their anguish is materialized into a visual projection of their inner labyrinth. Ariadne's thread was replaced by the promised message, which proves to be inexistent. Paul Vernois observes:

Ionesco a donné une extraordinaire image scénique de l'écheveau de rêves vains que les psychiatres désignent par le nom de cocon, terme évocateur d'une aliénation constituée peu à peu par l'individu atteint de névrose ou de psychose. Il a pris soin en effet, en tête de l'édition de sa pièce (*Les Chaises*), de tracer un croquis très précis de la mise en scène qu'il souhaitait. (Vernois 89).

As the whole play is a multifaceted theatrical meditation on void and nothingness, the message also manifests itself only as an absence. A perfect sample of *anti-theatre*, *The Chairs* is an *anti-play* with *anti-characters*, using an *anti-language* to express an *anti-ideology*, and has an *anti-message*. I think the dysfunctional deaf and dumb language of the Orator becomes the metaphor of the physiological impossibility to verbalize inner realities. The first title Ionesco intended for this play was *The Orator*. Arnold P. Hinchliffe questions his possibility to deliver any message: "what important message can be communicated and who could sum up life in a sentence?" (Hinchliffe 62). But the Orator also has a meta-theatrical function. He is actually a mime, an "actor" belonging to a pre-verbal stage of theatrical communication. Ionesco wrote to his first director of the play "what is needed is plenty of gesture, almost pantomime" (Ionesco 1964, 189). Ahmad Kayabi Mask has faithfully noted this mechanism:

Le meilleur moyen théâtral employé par Ionesco pour traduire l'irréel, en faire une réalité sur scène, est le mime. Le mime se présente comme un retour aux sources du théâtre, comme un essai de théâtre pur. Il se situe à l'extrême limite des possibilités dramatiques. (Mask 122).

The old couple is thrilled to have a chance to deliver their message to humankind, even if that message is also an absent-presence. It does not exist but it could have existed. I think this absence of the message is a new avatar of emptiness, which thus becomes so meaningful, saying many more things than words could have expressed. The Old Man believes that only art can save the world through its message:

I alone could have saved humanity, who is so sick. (...) I could have spared it the evils from which it has suffered so much this last quarter of a century, had I had the opportunity to communicate my message; I do not despair of saving it, there is still time, I have a plan ... alas, I express myself with difficulty... (Ionesco, 1958: 151-2).

In her everlasting praise of her husband, the Old Woman persistently talks about his lack of ambition in life. Like a traditional Romanian dirge singer, she evokes all the missed opportunities of his life, echoing his own narcissistic beliefs:

Ah! yes, you've certainly a fine intellect. You are very gifted, my darling. You could have been head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general, if you have wanted to, if only you'd had a little ambition in life... (Ionesco, 1958: 114).

The message is virtually an opportunity to at least say what he was not able to do in his unfortunate life, as he defines himself as “the collector of injustices, the lightning rod of catastrophes” (Ionesco, 1958: 151). Sartre also described “Nothingness as a sort of geometrical place for unfulfilled projects” (Sartre 53). But the Old Man fears he cannot handle such a huge discursive burden, so he hires a professional orator, who knows that silence is the most prevailing message to express nothingness. About his role, Ionesco indicated: “just as the invisible people must be as real as possible, the Orator must appear unreal” (Ionesco, 1958: 154).

The deaf and dumb Orator is highly emblematical for the severe crisis of theatrical forms of expression, and the search for a new language, non-linguistic, able to express a different type of message. It is a firm wish to reinvent theatrical communication. The author noted in 1951, while writing the play, “I think I am inventing a new language” (Ionesco, 1964: 192). Yet the archaic deaf and dumb language is a perfectly coherent and a hundred per cent translatable semiotic code of gestures, which was totally functional for the monks during their oath of silence. I think it also suggests a process of going back to the primeval energies of language. We are allowed to watch live the process of inventing communication, as the deaf and dumb Orator does not seem to know his own specific language. This non-language is the sign of regression to a pre-human condition, as it happens in *Rhinoceros*. God gave the *logos* to his favorite creation, but now He is taking it back as humankind has failed His divine project. The *Book of Genesis* indicates that man was created in the likeness of God (“in our image, after our likeness”). In *Rhinoceros*, that too is taken back. (Cap-Bun 71-82)

By witnessing this regression we somehow plunge into pre-creation, into the original emptiness, which is the ultimate form of nothingness. While still working on the play, the author noted: “original chaos” (Ionesco, 1964: 191). So he really wants us to mentally return to that point where “The world doesn't really exist” – as Ionesco himself put it. And that is supposed to be beneficial, since “Nothingness carries being in its heart” (Sartre 52). Everything becomes possible after this spiritually turning back to the point zero of existence. Nevertheless, for Ionesco, this perilous play of *nothingness* becomes playing of *silence* and imprints deep scars into his consciousness. After writing *The Chairs*, Ionesco could no longer write a new play for a few years. Jean Vannier analyzed the consequences:

Mais le silence, c'est aussi l'absence du Théâtre: celui-ci ne peut consommer la destruction du langage sans supprimer lui-même. Et sans doute le théâtre de Ionesco vit-il en un sens de sa mort même: mouvement qui fait précisément toute sa force ; mais il ne vit aussi que parce qu'il retarde cette mort jusqu'au bout. Suspendu entre la vie et la morte du Théâtre, l'Anti - Théâtre de Ionesco est toujours fragile, parce que le silence est sa *fin* dans sens du mot: dans la mesure ou il en réalise vraiment l'essence et aussi, a la limite, dans la mesure

ou il le supprime du même coup. Et c'est pourquoi, finalement, tout théâtre de la terreur est une impasse: il ne s'accomplit vraiment qu'en se niant. (Vannier, 1956).

I totally agree with George Wellwarth, who noticed that “*The Chairs* is Ionesco’s most tragic play.... Life, Ionesco is saying, is a hell in which each person is imprisoned in his own separate soundproof cubicle, invisible and inaudible to everyone else” (Wellwarth 59). Nonetheless, Ionesco was definitively fond of this play, which he considered to be very characteristic of his theatrical vision. In the summer of 1978, he allowed Beverly Pabst to photograph him in the Forest of Cerisy-la Selle, sitting on a chair, and surrounded by nine other empty chairs, dispersed into the green labyrinth. (“Eugène Ionesco a Cerisy-la Selle / l’été 1978”. Photograph by Beverly Pabst.) So, Frederick Lumley is probably right to consider the play to be his masterpiece: “*The Chairs* will remain Ionesco’s *chef d’oeuvre*, and a minor masterpiece in twentieth century drama” (Lumley 211).

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