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## Human Condition Between the Fantastic and the Absurd in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

*Abstract: Eugene Ionesco's preference for Kafka's Metamorphosis gives an important key in understanding his own Rhinoceros, a complex play, based on a sophisticated structure of allegorical, multileveled meaning strata. Although the playwright insisted on his indifference to any kind of ideologies, it seems that it was this very ideological core that explained the unprecedented success of this play, and made it understandable to critics and public. The French political and cultural context, more inclined to denounce the rightist excesses, especially the Fascist ones, favored this unilateral reading of the play and emphasized its possible autobiographical implications. In this essay, I am trying to go beyond this reading and see the play as an illustration of human condition caught between the twin pillars of the fantastic and the absurd. While everybody else transforms into rhinoceroses and humanism itself is menaced by the new philosophy and the new axiology of the dominant pachyderms, the main character Berenger remains allergic to the epidemic rhinocerotitis and refuses to give up human morale and "the irreplaceable set of values, which it's taken centuries of human civilization to build up values". But finally, both conformism and defiance are equally absurd and the play illuminates "the artist's feelings as an outcast" – as Martin Esslin suggested.*

*Key words: theater; absurd; fantastic; totalitarianism; metamorphosis; anti-humanism.*

One of the books that impressed the author of the *Rhinoceros* the most was undoubtedly Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which he confessed about to Claude Bonnefoy:

*Metamorphosis* made a very deep impression on me, and yet I'm not sure that, when I first read it, I really understood it. I felt that it contained something terrible, something that could happen to any of us, even though it was presented in a completely unrealistic form. That thing that struck me most, that I felt most deeply, was the guilt, a guilt without cause, a latent guilt perhaps (...) the fact that anyone can become a monster (Bonnefoy 39).

Critics have often commented on the relation, either as a general tendency to identify the archetypes of the new French avant-garde with writers such as Jarry, Joyce, Kafka, Artaud, or as a direct tie between Ionesco and Kafka. After Martin Esslin emphasized the relation, Rosemary Jackson, one of the most subtle exegetes of the fantastic, notes striking similarities in the manner of figuring the process of alienation and the existential condition, generally (Jackson 159). However, the most explicit remains Claude Bonnefoy who points

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out: “When you talk about *Metamorphosis*, you’re also giving us an outline of *Rhinoceros*.” (Bonney 40)

The inter-textual dialogue between the two masterpieces is more complex than it seems and it can reveal to us new valences of Ionesco’s text, generally unnoticed so far. It reopens the topic of the inexplicable metamorphoses, extremely prolifically debated in the literature, cinematography, and theater of the past decades. In both cases, the logic of the irreversible changes is not simple but plural, and it integrates with the cultural paradigm of the fantastic and compels us to raise such a thorny matter as that of the significance, the meaning served by the intricate network of signifying strata. By this very plural logic, the rhinocerotization (the process by which we become as insensitive as a rhino) is far from being a mere illustration of the ascent of the Nazi ideology and it is the intricacy of this symbolizing process that we intend to insist on.

There seem to be two germinal nuclei in Ionesco’s text: the first – thoroughly analyzed – deeply autobiographical and imbued with anti-fascist ideology<sup>2</sup>, and a second one which remained less investigated, related to the author’s intent to illustrate the fantastic dimension of existence, which changes Ionesco’s play into a meditation on human condition, caught between the twin pillars of the fantastic and the absurd. The Ovidian *Metamorphoses* were the work of the Greek gods, so they had a mythological reason. Here we witness a different type of metamorphosis, left outside the transcendental patronage of gods, a meaningless one, which alters the very concept of humanity.

While analyzing Ionesco’s relation with the French term *L’insolite* (which the author preferred to the absurd) Elizabeth Hesson and Ian Hesson noticed that the absurd play is also a classical illustration of the Todorovian fantastic:

The principal fantastic element in *Rhinoceros* is the metamorphosis of the inhabitants of a small town into the animals for which the play is named. The nightmare on which it is based is that of the rise of Fascism which Ionesco witnessed in prewar Romania. The development of the fantastic follows the classic pattern described by Todorov (Hesson and Hesson 96).

Indeed, a first decoding stage of the *Rhinoceros* materialized in reading and understanding the play as a protest against the Nazi ideology, in full swing during the time span the author spent in Romania. It is well known that Ionesco was using the word *rhinoceros* in his diaries to name those who had entered Nazism’s sphere of influence. In 1940, Ionesco was writing in his diary about a friend who had become a Fascist:

I spoke to him. He was still a man. Suddenly, beneath my very eyes, I saw his skin get hard and thicken in a terrifying way. His gloves, his shoes, became hoofs; his hands became paws, a horn began to grow out of his forehead, he became ferocious, he attacked furiously. He was no longer intelligent, he could no longer talk. He had become a rhinoceros. I would like very much to follow his example. But I can’t (Ionesco, 1971: 80).

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre clearly identified Ionesco himself with Berenger, who resists “because he is Ionesco: he represents Ionesco, he says I resist, and there he remains in the midst of the rhinoceroses, the only one to defend man without our being very sure if it might not be better to be a rhinoceros. Nothing has been proved to be the contrary” (Sartre 6).

Later on, in his foreword to Ahmad Kayabi Mask's doctoral thesis about his theatre, Ionesco, by that time already member of the French Academy, comments that he was already using the term in 1936.<sup>3</sup> And considering the text from this point of view, the absurd proved itself a generous reading range, even if Ionesco declared himself many times not to be concerned with ideologies. Ideology is always something that others have, we are never conscious of our own. Roland Barthes, in his well-known essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, clearly stated that:

There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the 'dominant ideology'; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text (see the myth of the Woman without Shadow). The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must provide its own chiaroscuro (Barthes 32).

Ionesco's play definitively contains that germinal ideology, which also explains its theatrical posterity. Discussing the theatre of the absurd in Eastern Europe, Martin Esslin mentions that "it was precisely the theatre of Ionesco which provided the model for an extremely vigorous and barbed kind of political theatre" (Esslin 316). He also thinks that "*Rhinoceros* is a witty play. It abounds in brilliant touches, and – unlike most plays by Ionesco – it seems easily understood" (Esslin 182).

There is also much to say about the social and historical circumstances that favored such a unilateral reading of Ionesco's play. Tzvetan Todorov gave us some important hints on this context, in an article published in *Le Debat* (The Debate) magazine, where he comments that the moralism practiced in France and not only had obvious leftist connotations and by virtue of this phenomenon the evil let itself named by words such as fascism, racism, anti-Semitism. So in France, reading the *Rhinoceros* as a protest against the fascist ideology perfectly well suited the leftist moralists and their persuading strategy, in which any exposure of the rightist excesses is treated as a work of public sanitation, Todorov specifies. The unprecedented success of the play seemed to have been favored by this very unilateral decoding perfectly responding to a *forma mentis* like the one that Todorov outlined, mainly in the context where this "new moralism" is characteristic to the mass media, the favorite milieu for imposing the art works of today.

The playwright, in his turn, never discouraged the critics' attempt to identify autobiographical valences in his text. Discussing with Claude Bonnefoy about the time spent in Bucharest, where Ionesco always said he was feeling in exile, the dramatist speaks about "moral and intellectual resistance" to ideologies, and makes his interlocutor exclaim: "That sounds just like the story of Beranger in *Rhinoceros*" (Bonnefoy 23). Nevertheless, Ionesco insisted that the play is a portrayal of the essence of totalitarianism, and that he

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<sup>3</sup> "*Le Rhinocéros* signifie, pour moi, ce qu'il y a de plus étranger à l'humaine, ce qu'il y a de plus obtus, le Rhinocéros est pour moi l'animal le plus fermé à l'entendement de l'homme, l'être le moins communicant. On m'a demandé plusieurs fois pourquoi j'avais choisi le Rhinocéros comme personnage symbolique de ma pièce. J'ai dit que c'était par hasard. J'ai déclaré que je cherchais l'animal qui fut le plus absurde pour nous et qu'en tournant les pages du dictionnaire je suis tombé, par hasard, sur l'image du rhinocéros. Je fus donc très surpris, il y a peu de temps, en feuilletant des cahiers intimes, datant de 1936, de m'apercevoir que je traitais de rhinocéros les nazis et les gardes de fer qui sévissaient à l'époque en Roumanie" (Kayabi Mask 14).

wanted to draw the attention to the projection onto the repeatability of the phenomenon he had wanted to catch:

I wanted to emphasize the cyclical, repetitive nature of the history and show that the totalitarian movements of today are, in depth, pretty identical to those happening thirty or forty years before. (...) There is no essential difference between the leftist and the extreme rightist totalitarianisms<sup>4</sup> (Bonney 99).

The moralists depicted by Todorov do not seem to care about the profound identity of totalitarianism of any kind: "the moralist does not put the Nazi and the communist crimes at the same level." Or, it is just this common nucleus of all dogmas, which can make us unrecognizable as a species that Ionesco seems to be interested in: "I simply meant to show how a mutation is possible in collective thought" (Bonney 70). The basic issue that the playwright raises is the peril of the collective insanity, the adherence to a destructive ideology being but the first step towards alienation, towards the split with the Man's Self. Such a changing process, irrespective of the details, is hallucinating, grotesque, dehumanizing:

Look at the crowds, they're depersonalized, people don't have 'faces' in a crowd. People become faceless when they form groups that are too large; or if they have a face, it's a collective face, and monstrous. It is the face of anger, of destruction, the face of hell (Bonney 117).

Ionesco, along with other French critics, among whom François Mauriac, used to talk about this substitution of the individual consciousness for the collective one, characteristic to the totalitarian states of any bias. The topic of the intellectual's condition in such a context becomes extremely important. In front of these alienating worlds of relativism and value reversal, the intellectual, as an emblem of lucidity, has nothing left but his critical sense, in whose name he rejects excesses of any sort.

The commoner becomes the almost inevitable victim of the monstrous mystification, of the political confusion favoring the opportunism and madness, in one word, the chaos. He who, despite all this, succeeds in preserving his lucidity like Ionesco's character, has the responsibility to expose these political, moral and intellectual obscenities, this treacherous attack against mankind's dignity and values.

Even if the parable-like substratum, directly referring to Nazism, is very transparent, (they talk about the wave that is sweeping things away, about "surrender," "capitulation," the herds of rhinoceros are singing and marching etc.), an unilateral decoding of the play is nevertheless restrictive, therefore insufficient. Allegorical, successive strata gradually open the reading of the text towards a wide range of overlapping meanings, involving all possible menacing changes such as: political joining, genetic mutations, extraterrestrial invasions etc. In Ionesco's play one can see any fantastic and uncontrolled proliferation: "It is the fear of uncontrollable forces getting the upper hand, of everything suddenly exploding? Is it the dread of madness?" (Bonney 110)

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<sup>4</sup> This fragment of interview is missing from the English edition, so I translated the text from the Romanian edition (see works cited).

The centrifugal forces pushing us far from our human essence are outlining perfidious, dissimulated shapes of a sort of *anti-humanism*. If we want to try to place the topic, which goes beyond the time the play was written at, into a contemporary context, we could even notice the likely irreversible “mutation” that turned us into the insensitive, careless creatures who we are these days, and above all, the paradox, by which contemporary man no longer appreciates mankind’s eternal values, but he is ardently keen on the proliferation of the mass destruction devices or on those of alienation, estrangement and seclusion. Children no longer play with each other, learning simple social co-habitation rules, but they prefer computers, which fulfil any wish, without demanding anything in exchange, our virtual doubles make us impersonal, the menace or the hope of cloning coming ever closer, navigation on the internet without contact and direct communication seems to solve any problem. Everything goes on abstractly without the involvement of the human factor in the go-between relations, and we hardly get worried about all this arsenal of manners of cultivating selfishness.

At a wider level, the *Rhinoceros*’ theme seems to be the dehumanization occurring by all means and ways, the loss of the identity as a species of mankind, engulfed by the gear of the social, political, technological, cultural etc. existence.

From Gregor Samsa’s *Metamorphosis*, which was a weird exception, to Ionesco’s collective poly-metamorphosis, that became a rule (with the single exception of Berenger) a radical evolution has occurred, namely the abnormal has become normal. With Kafka, nobody is surprised at this odd process extremely embarrassing to the theories of the fantastic, claiming that authors make hesitation one of their themes. (It is known that one of the long debated shortcomings of Todorov’s theory is its ineptness at classifying works like Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* or Gogol’s *The Nose*.) In Ionesco’s text the questioning attitude is assigned to the main character who experiences “a sort of anguish difficult to describe” (Ionesco, 1960: 17) and by which “the phenomenon in itself is disturbing. To tell the truth, it absolutely shatters me. What can be the explanation?” (Ionesco, 1960: 74).

The pluralism of the possible decoding is included into the generative structure of Ionesco’s text and it gets a well outlined self-mirroring dimension materialized in the meta-textual insertions making a theme out of the appeal to the esthetic manner of the fantastic. The textual operators by which he introduces into the discussion the play’s key word – *the rhinoceros* – are characteristic to the fantastical address: “unthinkable” (Ionesco, 1960: 13), “fantastic” (Ionesco, 1960: 13) “like a comet” (Ionesco, 1960: 11). The animal is depicted as:

a stupid quadruped not worth talking about. And ferocious into the bargain. And which has already disappeared, which doesn’t exist any longer. We are not going to bother about some animal that doesn’t exist (Ionesco, 1960: 16).

Although we vaguely know that rhinoceros still live, somewhere far from the European civilized world, yet they are seen as a prehistoric animal, a living fossil, in order to suggest a world invaded by the thrilling reality of a past that seemed to have vanished long time ago, (also present in *The Jurassic Park*) or maybe of an unpredictable future, anyway an irrational and incomprehensible reality. The perspectival mosaic in the play is also very interesting as the characters differentiate themselves by the way they treat the problem of becoming rhinoceros. Their individual positions on the metamorphosis that they are going

through become a very good excuse to take stance on the invasion of everyday life by the fantastic. Nevertheless, the single major exception remains Berenger, who makes his first appearance as a non-conformist – “I just can’t get used to life” (Ionesco, 1960: 7) – and he remains *different* until the end. Claude Bonnefoy diagnosed: “the drama of solitude, of individuality, of conscience faced with the workings of society” (Bonnefoy, 1970: 110). Berenger is the sole one having an estrangement feeling for the changing of those around him:

I’m conscious of my body all the time, as if it were made of lead, or as if I were carrying another man around on my back. I can’t seem to get used to myself. I don’t even know if I am me (Ionesco, 1960: 18).

The burden of the materiality, grafted on the topic of the inadaptability seems to be unbearable. But when it comes to the invasion of the absurd and the fantastic in the world that he has never understood, he will develop intolerance, unlike his chameleonic fellow people, who easily accommodate themselves to any circumstances.

Aristophanes (cited on Ionesco’s list of theatrical preferences), who had known Socrates personally, presented him in his comedy *The clouds* as an eccentric figure, walking with bare feet on Athens’s streets, scantily dressed, surrounded by his disciples, teaching them a serene way of life, indifferent to suffering. The portrait hints at young Socrates, still on his path to what was to become his philosophical concept. He is depicted as a bizarre, atypical man, not fitting into the well functioning society of the time. But the social and moral crisis provoked by the Peloponnesian war, in which Socrates fought as a soldier, brought about big changes in his mentality. The eccentric was deeply involved in the problems of his anguished city. Berenger is not far from this model: “For Ionesco, there is no anchor, no retaining wall, no boundary to protect something perhaps distinctively human. Being has become fluid and may assume any form of state of consciousness. Nothing guarantees the nature of man” (Killinger 65).

By the scenery it has chosen, Scene One of Act Two introduces us abruptly into a bureaucratic age, with its specific landscape, with its gray, Kafkian world of the petty white collar workers and their hierarchy ranging from the boss, the deputy boss, secretary, to the tables and chairs according to the importance of each of the wheels of this perfectly operational gear. In the intricate language of the spatial relationships (intimate, private, social, public) this boss / subalterns ratio characterized by asymmetry has a strictly social hue. Berenger stands somewhere aside, which shows he is a *commoner*, a collateral small wheel of the system – the rebel coil that pops out of its place when the system changes, given his unfitness. He represents the clerk’s condition from the perspective of Caragiale’s and Kafka’s characters. Ionesco himself once worked in the production department of a firm of law publishers, so he knew this atmosphere well.

The Law publishing house is the realm of the perfect order, which is to be quickly invaded by disorder, which gives birth to the first rhinoceros. The lawmakers of this world are the most amazed with its gears. There is no accident at all that the first symptoms of this disease, *rhinoceritis*, comes with the office’s boss, Papillon. Daisy notices the transformation: “You keep your horny hands off my face, you old pachyderm!” (Ionesco, 1960: 50). It is again the woman’s intuition that helps Mrs. Boeuf to recognize her husband in the rhino trying to dash into the office. Gregor Samsa too was eager to leave for his

office, despite this weird genetic mutation that affected him. We should not ignore the suggestion of their name *Boeuf* (the French for *beef* or *ox*) hinting at the animal kingdom, with an integrating meaning.

Paul Vernois, about whom Ionesco said he had explained better than he himself had ever succeeded everything he wanted to convey by his plays, emphasized a vertical spatial scheme:

During half of the play's action, in Act II especially, the plot is carried out at two levels: after the destruction of the stairs, Berenger's office had become a sort of watchtower for the game chase. We are informed that Mr. Boef, who turned into a rhino, is downstairs. The first leap towards animality and loss of the individuality is made by Mrs. Boeuf; (...) The Firemen arrive in due time to save the imprisoned but eventually they just bring them closer to the rhinoceros and turned them into some victims absorbed by the increasing mob of monsters. Joining the rhinoceros is a sort of falling till the moment when they were completely extinct. The myth is so well contrived that even the notion of blame or values (esthetical particularly) vanishes when the difference between humans and rhinoceros is abolished (Vernois 65; my translation from French).

The domestic space also gets infected, and scene two, taking place at Jean's place, allows Berenger, but also the audience, to witness the actual changing of his friend into a rhinoceros, in full view of the audience. The metamorphosis traces certain symbolic routes and subordinates all the channels of theatrical communication to itself. Every time Jean enters the bathroom he comes out looking *more and more like a rhino*. The change is marked, both outside (he turns greener and greener, develops a leathery skin, grows a horn above his nose, his voice gets deep, his movements are characteristic of a caged animal), and at the mental level. The change in mentality grows really seriously, as a rhinoceros, Jean is dreaming of crashing the people in his way. He already has the awareness of the fact that he had altered, as compared to his species, and he places himself in another perspective. It is for this reason that what we used to see as extremely weird becomes quite natural to him: "It obviously gave him great pleasure to turn into a rhinoceros. There's nothing extraordinary in that" (Ionesco, 1960: 66).

The nihilism in which human values dissolve when compared with the new axiology of the rhinoceros becomes obvious. Like all the rhinoceros, he wants to replace the morale of the people ("Morality's against Nature"; Ionesco, 1960: 67) with a "primeval integrity" – understood as the nature of a beast, the law of the jungle. Berenger grasps the difference in mentality which makes the alteration possible – the key of the whole process because the outside does nothing but mirror the inside undergoing the alteration process: "You must admit that we have a philosophy that animals don't share, and an irreplaceable set of values, which it's taken centuries of human civilization to build up..." (Ionesco, 1960: 67). It deals with the upheaval of a whole system of values characteristic to mankind, with the collapse of the whole humanism which Berenger invokes without managing to be convincing.

Jean's reply comes peremptorily, unequivocally: "Humanism is all washed up! You're a ridiculous old sentimentalist" (Ionesco, 1960: 68). The rhinocerization should be therefore understood as an anti-human exercise, which *The Lesson* – a variation on the same theme –

had prepared. Wellwarth observed that the entire play is “an obvious commentary on the disintegration of reason and morality under a totalitarian state” (Wellwarth 67) and that:

Berenger pulls himself up to the level of the universal rebel described by Camus. For the sake of justice, humanity, and decency – above all, for the sake of the highest virtue of all, the virtue of moderation – Berenger sacrifices himself despite all the specious dictates of reason” (Wellwarth 68).

Act Three builds a perfect symmetry with the previous scene, and a striking infringement of the expectations comes up later. Only the roles change: Berenger now swaps places with Jean and he is fretting like a caged animal, many lines are identical, some mechanisms suggest that history repeats itself, but the petty bourgeois stiffened in his closed universe rejects surrender.

Conversely, Dudard is tolerant and seems to be neutral, permeable to the new ideology, by a dangerous availability of the spirit according to which understanding means justifying. He sees *rhinoceritis* as “just another disease” (Ionesco, 1960: 75), acting epidemically, so he does not reject his getting contaminated and has no pricks of remorse and he takes into account the moral systems’ relativity: “The Evil! That’s just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It’s just a question of personal preferences.” (Ionesco, 1960: 80), “Who can say where the normal stops and the abnormal begins? Can you personally define these conceptions of normality and abnormality?” (Ionesco, 1960: 84). This could be a refined irony which Ionesco is aiming at the intellectuals’ condemnable tolerance and the extreme weakness of those who chose to criticize the category of the rhinoceros from inside.

He finds justifications for everyone and these range from the sincerity of Papillon’s metamorphosis to Botard’s complex of inferiority and resentments towards his superiors. The process itself has a justification. Berenger wonders about the rhinoceros: “are they practice or are they theory?” (Ionesco, 1960: 84). Dudard unequivocally answers: “Both” (Ionesco, 1960: 85). Berenger is the only one whom he cannot understand so that Dudard calls a Don Quixote.

The metamorphosis takes apparently different routes, marked by different attitudes towards the fantastic’s invasion of everyday life. For the blunt spirits and the flat logical minds like Botard’s, there is no mystery and imagination, fancy is a shortcoming: “I’m a Northerner myself. Southerners have got too much imagination.” (Ionesco, 1960: 41). And he clearly defines his stance against such a *forma mentis*: “I believe what I see with my own eyes. Speaking as a former teacher, I like things to be precise, scientifically valid; I’ve got a methodical mind” (Ionesco, 1960: 40). For him the rhinoceros are non-referential phantasmagorias as fictitious as the extra-terrestrials: “No rhinoceros has ever been seen in this country! (...) Your rhinoceros is a myth! (...) A myth - like the flying saucers” (Ionesco, 1960: 44).

Suspicious in the phenomenal world, he does not accept the unlikely, not even as mere possibility. His theory, more powerful than the visible reality, changes suddenly into a debate on the limits of the obvious, the possible, and the credible. The rhinoceros’ proliferation is seen as “a collective psychosis” (Ionesco, 1960: 45), “a hoax” (Ionesco, 1960: 46), “an infamous plot” (Ionesco, 1960: 49) – anything else but a genuine invasion of the pachyderms. He is confident that he owns the single code of reality: “I know the whys



and the wherefores of this whole business (...) I hold the key to all these happenings, an infallible system of interpretation" (Ionesco, 1960: 54-55). Botard becomes the open enemy of the unusual, of the fantastic, of the extraordinary: "I'll get to the bottom of this so-called mystery" (Ionesco, 1960: 56). And nevertheless, despite all theory, he becomes a rhinoceros, a sign that all the dogmas have a common irrational core, which irresistibly attracts some people.

On the other hand, for the lawman Dudard, the reality invaded by the fantastic is certified by reading the newspaper: "It's in the paper, in black and white, you can't deny that" (Ionesco, 1960, 39). He describes Botard's attitude as "absurd," offering both an ethical and an esthetical framework to the rejection of the miraculous element.

As for Daisy, she displays huge readiness for the incomprehensible: "I thought you were more poetic. Where's your imagination? There are many sides to reality. Choose the one that's best for you. Escape into the world of imagination" (Ionesco, 1960: 98). She knows that "the world is sick" (Ionesco, 1960: 101). Her wish to understand the rhinoceros' psychology and language will end by contamination, even if she stands by Berenger for a while.

Their endurance gives one more chance to mankind and Berenger hopes, for a moment, to restore Adam's condition: "together we can regenerate the human race" (Ionesco, 1960: 102). More realistic, Daisy understands that there is no way back: "After all, perhaps it's we who need saving. Perhaps we're the abnormal ones. (...) There aren't any more of our kind about anywhere, are there?" (Ionesco, 1960: 103). We are now witnessing the tragic upheaval of the ratio between the rule and the abnormality that became a given fact, a rule. The Eros itself is redefined as "a morbid feeling", "a male weakness" (Ionesco, 1960: 103).

Breaking the balance of the couple is related to the suggestion of a failure of mythical recovering integration, and the duration's malfunctioning leads to other perception levels: "In the space of a few minutes we've gone through twenty-five years of married life" (Ionesco: 1960, 104). The noise made by the rhinoceros is heard differently, same as the grotesque ballet of the armies invading the world. Whereas Berenger can hear but a beast's roar, for Daisy the discordant roaring turns into a rhythmic marching song, and their invasion into a theatrical performance of dancing and playing. Moreover, she thinks that they are god-like beautiful.

The duplicity or more exactly the multiplicity that the play's discursive strategy relies on is helped by the very symbolic elements it resorts to. The rhinoceros' typology – organized by opposition systems such as unicorn / bicorn, African / Asian – is a transparent hint, which can be understood as a pretty clear suggestion of the fact that the dogma goes beyond all boundaries no matter if ethnic, racial or any other kind, and it acts irrationally by the collective unconsciousness. Its aberrant nature can be proved by the technique of the paradox and by *reductio ad absurdum* and entering the zone of the fantastic coincides with an invitation to give up pragmatic logic and along with it the whole arsenal of certitudes, characteristic to the realistic perception. Devices of dismantling the real are typical to the fantastic. Making use of arguments perfectly valid in an illogical logic is also typically fantastic, the logician proves that the Asian rhinoceros are African and the African ones are Asian. His syllogisms become the entrance ticket into a world ruled by nonsense: "Here is an example of a syllogism. The cat has four paws. Isidor and Fricot both have four paws. Therefore Isidor and Fricot are cats" (Ionesco, 1960: 18). By virtue of this unquestionable rule a dog is a cat, and Man can perfectly well become a rhino, even without its four legs,

as everything is but a game, where the mice are terrorized by cats, and crashed by the rhinoceros, in turn etc. (“Logic is beyond life,” the author insisted on warning us.)

The logician, whose social and professional status is written down in his ID, as an ontological fact, has a precise function, that of describing the loss of contact with the real. Into this world of metamorphoses beyond control he has the privileged status of a Magician because logic has become similar to the miracle. However, as a token of the fact that there is no more salvation, the Logician, the paragon of perfection of the human reasoning defining his superiority among other beings, becomes a rhino, and thus he actively participates in legitimizing the system. Berenger’s lamentation is desperate and frightening: “That’s the bloody limit! The Logician’s turned into a rhinoceros!” (Ionesco, 1960: 86).

Withstanding the rhinocerization, Berenger is the living evidence that the inside and outside ugliness are not inherent to the human essence: “You won’t get me! I’m not joining you; I don’t understand you! I’m staying as I am. I’m a human being. A human being” (Ionesco, 1960: 105). The moment of doubt in the end is ridiculously tragic:

And what if it’s true what Daisy said, and they’re the ones in the right? (He turns back to the mirror.) A man’s not ugly to look at, not ugly at all! (He examines himself, passing his hand over his face.) What a funny-looking thing! What do I look like? What? (Ionesco, 1960: 106).

Man no longer looks for himself in God’s face and resemblance. The divine reference vanquishes and along with it the self-consciousness of the species is altered. We are witnessing a crisis of the human at the level of the phenomenology. Let us remember one of the definitions that the author used to give of the *absurd man*: “man wandering without purpose – forgetful of his purpose, cut off from his essential, transcendental roots” (Bonney 127). The pictures he believes he can recognize himself in are uglier and uglier and the rhinoceros’ heads get more and more beautiful. All the ratios, such as good / bad, moral / immoral, fair / unfair, nice / ugly, logic / illogic, go upside down: “They’re the good-looking ones. I was wrong. Oh, how I wish I was like them! I haven’t got any horns, more’s the pity! A smooth brow looks so ugly” (Ionesco, 1960: 106). Berenger becomes a sort of *living dead*, the sole representative of a species which has to die because it was unable to adjust itself to the new circumstances. The real rhinoceros share the same fate today. Martin Esslin commented that:

His final defiant profession of faith in humanity is merely the expression of the fox’s contempt for the grapes he could not have. Far from being a heroic last stand, Berenger’s defiance is farcical and tragicomic, and the final meaning of the play is by no means as simple as some critics made it appear. What the play conveys is the absurdity of defiance as much as the absurdity of conformism, the tragedy of the individualist who cannot join the happy throng of less sensitive people, the artist’s feelings as an outcast, which forms the theme of writers like Kafka and Thomas Mann (Esslin 183).

Denying your own identity and your own system of values is as tragic as possible. If at the beginning it was the alteration of the others that was tragic and illogical, now the feeling of helplessness of integrating into the changing process grows stronger and stronger. Living among the wolves he could have howled, but he cannot. The climax of this feeling of maladjustment and incompatibility with the world is experienced in all its possible

variations: "Now I'm a monster, just a monster. Now I'll never become a rhinoceros, never, never! I've gone past changing. I want to, I really do, but I can't, I just can't" (Ionesco, 1960: 107). Vos observed that:

In the long soliloquy which concludes the play, Berenger, the only person not yet turned into a rhino, has not only lost all standards of judgment, but also, more crucially, he has lost his own identity. He is caught in an absurd dilemma. (...) The choice for Berenger is not between animality and his humanity, but between becoming a rhinoceros and seeing himself as a monster, the lone figure who has not experienced a mutation. Both options are images of the grotesque, and Berenger is left hanging between them (Vos 26).

His tone ranges between that of bravery, when uttering the wish of not changing himself, and that of helplessness. The eventual revival is no longer convincing: "I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until in the end! I'm not capitulating!" (Ionesco, 1960: 107). Berenger is trapped into the rigidity of his ontological condition like in a tomb. His refusal to surrender is no longer a deliberated act of will, but only the direct outcome of a limitation of the helplessness of being like the others. The lack of the metamorphic calling becomes tragic.

The self-denial of the human is total – Berenger is no longer a hero or willing to regenerate mankind, but he becomes the last representative of an extinct species. What it was usually believed about the rhinoceros was now valid about the people. The new condition of the human, the non-human one, and anti humanitarian one by definition, and the basic calling is that of the self-destruction as a species by a deliberate metamorphosis. We have here a re-definition of the monadic sufficiency of the human: We can find in Man the germs both of creation, regeneration and of destruction. We no longer need scenarios explaining either the divine creation or destruction. The tragic condition of the singularity in an incomprehensible world seems to be the genuine topic of the play, whereas the issue of dogmatism remains collateral.

If human beauty acts axiomatically, in the beginning – a copy of the divine – it is questioned later. Getting ugly – as a reflection of the evil, which has got into our souls – happens by being mutilated from the inside to the outside. The rhinocerization becomes a manifestation of the unlimited freedom of option of the beings assumed to be sensible and the hideous triumphs, as an ideal manifestation of the absurd.

Therefore, the rhinocerization, as it is projected by Ionesco's play, is a complex symbolic stratified process irreducible to the position of the mere parable of a historical and political moment capable to illustrate genuinely the fantastic dimension of the human existence.

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