

Staging the Surreal in excess of Absurd Theatre: an Exploration of Surrealist Echoes in Select Plays by Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994)

Ananya Mukhopadhyay

Revolutionary Cry of the Mind: Reading and Interpreting Eugene Ionesco as a Surrealist

Born in Rumania in 1909, Eugene Ionesco grew up to suffer the ruin of humanity at the hands of totalitarian regimes promoting unjustifiable oppression. The crisis that the dramatist had to undergo when he was trapped by the Fascist Iron Guards in 1940 or threatened by the pernicious forces of Left imperialism during 1967, as recorded in his autobiographical work *Present Past/ Past Present* (1971), evidently led to Ionesco's radical nonconformity to despotic ideological regimes (*Present Past* v). He believed that no form of social system could eradicate human sorrow and hence, like the surrealists, Ionesco too vehemently rejected the cliches promoted by "reason", only to resort to the nightmarish world of the human subconscious. Surrealism, one of the most influential cultural and artistic movements that began in the 1920s, had percolated deep into the literary and creative spheres of France by the time Ionesco began to write for the theatre. Like many other French writers, Ionesco was mesmerized by the surrealist ideas and images as he admits in one of his interviews given to *The Paris Review*: "None of us would have written as we do without surrealism and dadaism. By liberating the language, those movements paved the way for us ..." (6). Surrealism performed a response to the logical ideologies that tried to justify the atrocities of the Great War. It incorporated within its corpus themes, ideas and images of violence that lay at the heart of human existence in post-War Europe. Psychoanalytical books of Freud like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Uncanny* (1919) immensely influenced Andre Breton, a student of neurotic science and radical surrealist thinker-artist for whom Freud was the one "capable of upsetting the mental world from top to bottom." (*Manifestoes* 72). Lois Gordon wrote in 1996, "The Surrealists ... found a broad and encompassing salvation in psychoanalysis. To them, Freud explained civilization and its discontents and at the same time ... he provided a kind of metaphysics for the exile ..." (32-33). Surrealism is infused with the desire to completely shatter to pieces the corrupt and unjustifiable social order and hence is "not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination ... and ... expects nothing save from violence" (*Manifestoes* 125). Steeped in images of violence and death, the initial plays of Ionesco namely, *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951), and *The Chairs* (1952), hint at the surreal world of man that exists in the form of "disintegrated play" (*Manifestoes* 26) of the autistic language of surrealism. These plays are pervaded with paranoia, insanity, delirium and irrationality which coalesce to create a dense, uncanny surreal world where it becomes difficult to comprehend whether the characters are flesh and blood human beings or mere automatons whose rebellious laughter blatantly defies death, thereby transcending the boundaries of the absurd. Such a surreal universe is connected to Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny* which has had a huge impact on surrealist thought. The old couple in *The Chairs* or the Martins in *The Bald Soprano* or the Professor and his Pupil in *The Lesson* behave in an incomprehensible manner and their autistic dialogues add to "the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic-mechanical-processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person." (Freud *The Uncanny* 135).

Instead of delving deep into the political affiliations of the surrealists, I choose to focus on their artistic revolution which considered human catastrophes during the World Wars as images (*Manifestoes* 123) and attempted to challenge them with subversive images that arose from the human subconscious in the absence of moral or social restrictions. Breton believed in "the power of images" that could cause "true revolutions" (*Manifestoes* 22) in order to shake the roots of social order and liberate the very thought process of man. Ionesco's theatre is a revolutionary cry of the mind in the sense that it speaks through "mental images" (*Present Past, Past Present* 26) and dares to project the subconscious universe of dreams that counters the absurd tragedy of human existence

with the automatic weapon of humour. In his 1924 *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Breton states: “It is in fact from the disgusting cauldron of these meaningless mental images that the desire to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd, distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil, is born and sustained.” (125). For instance, a sense of disorienting, uncanny laughter becomes palpable as the degenerated old couple in Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* perceives the death of Bobby in a comic manner and Mr. Smith opines: “He was the handsomest corpse in Great Britain.” (Ionesco 12). Similarly, in *The Lesson*, Ionesco’s bold play with desultory, disintegrated utterances enables him to laugh at the rising tide of English bourgeois culture that crippled humanity. Beneath the guise of the comic figure of the Professor, “a little old man with a little white beard...very timid, his voice deadened by his timidity” (46), lurks the despotic, brutal master raping and murdering his pupil. Ionesco’s depiction of the paralyzed old couple amidst vacant chairs and odorous waters in *The Chairs* attempts to negate or reduce to a sense of undeniable laughter, the pain and misery inflicted upon mankind by the World War. However, what makes Ionesco’s humour particularly surrealist is that it is not encumbered with excessive comic sentimentality and inherits the elements of the enigmatic or the uncanny while saving itself rigorously from getting overshadowed by the absurd. Surrealist humour can be a way of perception and it is used to dispel the fear, anxiety and misery associated with death. Such humour speaks through violent metaphors. The immobile, comic figures in Ionesco’s plays resemble those survivors of war whose miserable condition had stimulated the imagination of Andre Breton and Jaques Vache to create surrealist humour which was “the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm ... partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the ‘mortal enemy of sentimentality’, and beyond that a ‘superior revolt of the mind’” (Breton *Anthology of Black Humour*).

On Staging Surrealism: A Literature Review

The revolutionary ideas of surrealism have not really received any proper justification in the arena of the theatre, partly because of the indifferent attitude of the pioneers of surrealism towards the theatre, in contrast to their indulgence towards poetry and painting, say, and partly because of the “misconception about the incompatibility of surrealism with the stage” (Rapti 2). As far as the post war epoch is concerned, I have traced a predominating tendency amongst critics and writers to dismiss surrealist texts as difficult, incomprehensible or inconsistent. Ruby Cohn in 1964 states: “Although poetry and painting were rocked to their foundations by the Surrealist explosion of the imagination, the theatre of the time was virtually untouched.” (159). In 1967 J.H. Matthews claims that theatre “has been the least developed mode in Surrealism.” (239). Mark Bennison in 1971 traces among critics a tendency to dismiss “surrealist plays” as “formless, nonsensical, and meaningless ... sophomoric jokes.” (190). In the year 1980 Annabelle Henkin Meltzer writes: “Surrealism had not sought to develop an aesthetic for the theatre, but rather had abducted a literary genre for its own purposes.” (167). However, the major 1926 fallout between Andre Breton and Antonin Artaud, the “ultimate surrealist” (Sandrow 32), can also be one of the reasons behind the neglect that has been meted out to surrealist theatre.

Like Artaud, whose stage continued to display a distinctive surrealist edge even after his expulsion from the group, I believe that Ionesco, although never an official member of the group of surrealists, utilized the revolutionary traits of surrealism in his theatre. The surreal elements in Ionesco’s theatre have often been subsumed unjustly within the theatre of the absurd. In an article entitled “Use of Language by Eugene Ionesco in His Works: *The Chairs* and *The Bald Soprano*” (2016), it has been concluded that the disoriented characters in Ionesco’s plays struggle with abortive attempts to make themselves social with the aid of broken language and claims that it is “the only idea of Ionesco behind all his works, in which he draws a huge line between language and communication.” (Suleman 78). The article “The Absurd World in Eugene Ionesco’s Anti-Theatre *The Bald Soprano*” incorporates within the absurd elements pertaining to the “illogical, conflict-less, surreal” (Bhuyan 41) but does not ruminate upon the prominent presence of the

surreal as a separate arena for analysis in Ionesco's plays, despite claiming that Ionesco projects "a dream situation upon the stage." (Bhuyan 42). In his famous book *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin, it seems, has unknowingly hinted at the presence of the surrealist marvellous, that is, the existence of something unusual and uncanny in quotidian life, which in Ionesco's theatre flows with patterns of "intensification, acceleration, accumulation, proliferation to the point of paroxysm..." (133). The correspondence that Ionesco shares with some of the most prominent surrealists of his era indicate that surrealist texts do have the potential to provide groundbreaking scripts for the theatre. I refer to A. Strauss's observation in "The Fictions of Surrealism" in support of my argument, "In the theatre, which Surrealism failed to conquer in the thirties, we can chalk up a belated victory in the case of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd: it seems to me that Ionesco was exactly the kind of playwright that the Surrealists were looking for and didn't find ..." (447). A. Strauss however does not provide a detailed analysis of elements of the surreal that are to be found in Ionesco's plays in excess of the theatre of the absurd, which my paper attempts to explore.

On the Surreal in The Bald Soprano (1950): Staging a Humorous Play on Automatism

The Bald Soprano, written two and a half years before the most prominent absurd drama *Waiting for Godot* (1953), explores an incomprehensible, irrational dream universe stemming from the deepest realms of the human imagination. The human psyche, tortured by the icy clutches of war, tends to embrace the chaos and cruelty that forms the basis of indelible memories of pain in the post-World War society. The fractured dialogues of the fluid figures of Mr. and Mrs. Smith in the play do not merely embody the absurdity of human condition but also hint at the disinterested psychic flow of automatism as promoted by the surrealists. There is an instance of strange, unfamiliar humour when the angst-ridden, immobile couple seem to completely unnerve the audience as they suddenly enter and exit the stage through multiple hallucinatory doors and engage in conversations about death, immersed in the oblivion of deluded memories of trauma all the while. They barely remember the names of the deceased and there is a kind of comic accusation against a doctor named Mackenzie since he did not die along with his patient:

MR. SMITH: A conscientious doctor must die with his patient if they can't get well together. The captain of a ship goes down with his ship into the briny deep, he does not survive alone.

MRS. SMITH: One cannot compare a patient with a ship. (11)

The juxtaposition of two apparently contradictory material entities, one sentient, the other non-sentient, such as a ship and a patient, indicates both verbal as also visual humour by bringing to the fore the inconceivably bizarre, surreal images of impossible contraries. These contraries in the theatre of Ionesco often take the form of alchemical transitions as the dramatist projects a series of disparate images like a cock that desires to play the dog or the dog that is under the impression that it is an elephant. The couple, doctor, patient, and other animals seem to imply that they are possibly the scarred survivors of war who do not just grope helplessly in the face of annihilation but rather attempt to reduce to insignificance with the aid of human defiance or imagination the assertions made by reason. Ionesco's humour exudes a certain sense of objectivity since it is not overwhelmed by an excesses of comic sentimentality. Hence, Ionesco's humour can be associated with that of Andre Breton who referred to surrealist humour as "the black sphinx of objective humour" in his seminal book *Anthologie de l'humour Noir* (13). Breton equates humour with a radical force of revolt that can transcend the fetters of violence and misery. Ionesco also has similarities with Rene Magritte who engages in a humorous negation of identities that are imposed upon objects by external reality in his painting "La Clef des Songes" or "The Key of Dreams" (*Selected Writings* 65) where the painter calls a horse, a clock, a jug and a suitcase the door, the wind, the bird and the valise respectively. Imagination becomes the inevitable political counter-category not only in the theatre of Ionesco but also in the realm of the surreal because it is one of

the most effective means of ensuring human emancipation from the brutal, capricious world of logic by completely disorienting human sensibility. Ionesco's stage also corresponds with Rene Magritte's celebrated surreal painting called "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" or "This is not a Pipe" (1929) which deludes the onlookers and radically challenges any definitive assertion of rationality, such that even Michel Foucault is provoked to call the painting a "pipe dream" (16) that evokes a sense of "vague uneasiness" (20) thereby shattering the predictable boundaries of categorisation.

One of the most important traits of surrealism is the spontaneous and irrational projection of the innermost self of the artist as a work of art which is evident in the disintegrated selves of the Smiths, the surrogate dreamers of Ionesco incessantly engaged in the act of role-playing or assuming different identities. The couple substitutes for their guests Mr. and Mrs. Martin whose conversations are disorienting because they remind each other that they sleep on the same bed, live in the same house and eventually realize that they are perhaps married. (*The Bald Soprano* 18). The Martins are surprised to know that they "have a little girl. She is two years old, has a white eye and a red eye, she is very pretty, and her name is Alice," which, for the couple, is a "bizarre coincidence!" (18). It is only in a surreal theatre of dreams that Ionesco's characters gain access to their original selves and come across those "memories which are inaccessible in waking life" (Freud *The Interpretation of Dreams* 46). In the post-War society human existence may find its primal roots only in the realm of surreal dreams. In his *Manifestoes of Surrealism* Breton questions: "Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?" (12). Such a surreal echo is also found in an interview published in *Diacritics* in 1973, where Ionesco reflects, "Dreams are very important to me, they reveal some sort of truth, they make you more aware of certain problems." (47).

In another interview with *The Paris Review*, Ionesco observes on the surrealist imprint, "I was bowled over [by Tristan Tzara] ... Then I read all the other surrealists – Andre Breton, Robert Desnos." (93). In his *Notes on My Theatre* published in 1963, Ionesco opines that the "surreal is real" (151) because the uncharted regions of the subconscious can incorporate truths emanating from memories buried within the deepest realms of the self. Breton opines: "Memory alone arrogates to itself the right to excerpt from dreams, to ignore the transitions, and to depict for us rather a series of dreams than the dream itself." (Breton 11). The traumatic memories of his past perhaps inspired Ionesco to create characters like Mr. and Mrs. Martin whose delusions hark back to Ionesco's personal memoir *Past Present/Present Past* where the writer, terrified by his father, experiences an inexplicable crisis and hovers between oblivion and remembrance: "Was it the same day, around noon? We are in the house... There is the same light and the same shadow as in the preceding image. There is the same heat, the same coolness as before this is what makes me think that it must be the same day." (7). Ionesco deftly uses the elements of the surreal to tap into the psyche of man which for the surrealists provided "an inexhaustible supply of wonders." (Sandrow 40). His characters remain in an "incomplete, partial waking state", to quote Freud, (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 103) and they can conjure a strange, irregular image of their daughter only in their dream-like mental space. It has to be noted that both Andre Breton and Sigmund Freud believed in the intense power of dreams or images conjured in a dream-like state of existence. A student of neurotic psychiatry, Breton was deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud's most celebrated work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He believed that Freud's theories on dreams enlightened his epoch and in 1948 he remarked that Freud had "pierced the night of ideas in the region where it was thickest" (71). According to Breton, Freud's "exploration of the unconscious life furnishes the only worthwhile basis for appreciation of the motives which make the human being act" (76). In the year 1900 Freud had asserted:

The products of fatigue which have accumulated in the albumen of the brain gradually diminish...or [are] eliminated by the unceasing flow of the blood-stream. Here and there separate groups of cells begin to emerge into wakefulness...The isolated work of the

separate groups now appears before our clouded consciousness, unchecked by other portions of the brain which govern the process of association. For that reason the images produced, which correspond for the most part to material impressions of the more recent past, are strung together in a wild and irregular manner.” (103).

The Bald Soprano ends with distorted expressions of death in a world torn apart by violence:

MR. SMITH: A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, i!

MRS. MARTIN: B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z! (41)

Such an automatic babble of incoherent utterances establishes an undeniable connection with Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which the author explores distorted dreams that can become the medium of expressing certain incomprehensible wishes “of individual human beings by the operation of two psychical forces ... and that one of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish and, by the use of that censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish.” (Freud 168). Ionesco perhaps attempts to hint at the idea that the Martins/Smiths, having seen only horrible images of death, are intoxicated with the desire or wish of self-annihilation which can be conveyed only on a surreal stage where the specificities of time are dissolved so that the clock sometimes “strikes seven times” sometimes “three times” or “doesn’t strike” at all (*The Bald Soprano* 11). The performance of the play by Arthalia Theatre Company in 2018 explores a surreal space with an enigmatic interplay of light and shadow. It reduces the concepts of time and space to fluid entities and the characters do not seem to inhabit the space of reality. The performance challenges the notion of time in a surrealist spirit as there is, on the stage, a sketch of a clock with four hands and various objects and numbers like “IV”, “42” or “8” painted on it. It is indeed an instance of black humour to watch such a painted clock on stage which “always give the age of deceased persons but never the age of the newly born.” (*The Bald Soprano* 00:05:43-54). Shattering the conventional notion of time, the surrealists referred to the terrible years following the World Wars either with the help of melting clocks (as in Salvador Dali’s “Persistence of Memory” (1931)) or the puzzling image of a steam engine emerging from the fireplace beneath a transfixed clock (as in Rene Magritte’s “Time Transfixed” (1938)). Such surrealist representations seep into the stage renderings of Ionesco. Thrust in the whirlwinds of traumatic suffering, Ionesco’s characters are indeed “in terrible shape when it comes to time.” (Breton x). The sudden appearance of the Fire Chief is also intriguingly surreal because it seems to be an illusory projection from Ionesco’s own psyche who comes to assert that the stage is a dreamscape that can threaten, dissolve and laugh at the rationalistic interpretations of human existence and may subsume within oblivion and humour the unmitigable miseries of man. As the irrational hours are whiling away in the “unsparing” landscape of imagination (Breton 4), the Fire Chief reveals his “conception of the world, that is, “dream”, (*The Bald Soprano* 37) which echoes Ionesco’s own notion of the very existence of man as an “obsessive dream” (*Notes on my Theatre* 156).

The Lesson (1951): Performing a Universe of Human Catastrophe

Ionesco’s play *The Lesson* is not merely about the failure of language but also a drama which addresses the pressing issue of the day, that is, violence, by taking into account the intense revolutionary fervour of surrealism so that Ionesco’s stage becomes a shocking, hallucinatory exposition of a shattering of the “dead truths” promoted by bourgeois ideology (Ionesco *Notes on my Theatre* 142). Surrealism was born to tear apart all forms of rational control and Ionesco’s depiction of the contradictory figure of the tyrannical Professor is an attempt to render ludicrous such obsolete ideological conventions encroaching upon the freedom of the individual. The stage setting of Ionesco explores a blurry, surreal landscape that incorporates within its radical corpus the enigmatic chance encounter between the Professor and his Pupil. The stage remains almost

“empty” with “three chairs around the table, and two more stand on each side of the window” (*The Lesson* 44). It must be noted that the entire play revolves around the idea of encounter which is a regular phenomenon in the quotidian life of the Professor. The surrealists believe that the unconscious desires, pain, trauma or the inner conflicts of man reach a point of shattering revelation only with the aid of “objective chance” in everyday existence, that is, objects, individuals or places that one encounters in day-to-day life. It is through such surreal encounters that the psychic complexities and the most unpredictable sources of human violence are unravelled. Ionesco’s play can be viewed as a venture into what Breton claims to be the “almost unexplored region of objective chance...the region in which it is most worth our while to carry on our research” (Breton 268). Engaged in an objective encounter is the apparently comic and meek Professor who eventually becomes an arbitrary dictator and a Pupil, the very embodiment of the helpless victims of authority. At the beginning of the encounter the Pupil is confident and enthusiastic to learn while the unstable self of the Professor comes to the fore: “What a nice day it is today...or rather, not so nice...Oh! but then yes it is nice.” (*The Lesson* 48).

The tyrannous self of the Professor begins to show itself when he coerces his Pupil to learn the imperceptible differences between the French and Spanish pronunciations of the same sentence. The arbitrary imposition of meanings by the Professor begins to cripple the Pupil who develops an unbearable toothache when the Professor “seizes her wrist and twists it” (70). The Pupil is reduced to an inert puppet as she refuses to comply with the caprices of the Professor who “brandishes a knife under the Pupil’s eyes” (73). The pernicious degeneration of the Pupil reaches its climax as the Professor physically assaults her and kills her “with a very spectacular blow of the knife” so that the dead Pupil “falls flopping in an immodest position onto a chair” (75). Ionesco’s stage becomes a meeting ground of starkly opposite, contradictory selves. In her book *Surrealism at Play* (2019) Susan Laxton opines that the surrealist chance encounter is a practice “in which the strolling surrealist experiences the projection of his own psychic recollections as the shock of inexplicable attractions, an unnameable recognition thought to be jolted directly out of the unconscious by an unexpected encounter with a figure, place, or object” (83).

The figure of the Professor entails dual images of a little, anxious man as well as a despotic murderer which can be associated with Salvador Dali’s notion of the “paranoiac-critical activity” (Breton *Manifestoes* 274). Beneath the timid self of the Professor lurks an insane, paranoid self, unpredictably brutal, which embroils itself in delirious violence to invade the world of external reality: “The paranoid mechanism, through which the image with multiple figurations is born, supplies the understanding with the key to the birth and origin of the nature of simulacra, whose fury dominates the horizon beneath which the multiple aspects of the concrete are hidden” (Dali 117). The Professor has been killing his pupils since a very long time so that there are already forty coffins hidden in his house. Such an uncontrollable habit of killing can be related to Freud’s idea of “obsessional neurosis” (Freud 277) discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud recalls the case of one of his patients who was terrified of his father and had a repressed desire to kill him. The patient was so obsessed with his desire that he did not go out on the streets lest he should attempt to give vent to his wish by killing anyone he met (Freud 277-278). Ionesco’s Professor too suffers from a deep, psychotic desire to become significant and powerful due to which he has developed an obsession to kill his pupils as a gesture of bringing to the fore his dictatorial self. Freud claims: “Whether we are to attribute reality to unconscious wishes, I cannot say...If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that psychical reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality” (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 614).

The performance of the play in 2015 in the AGNI Acting Studio, Pearse Theatre, Dublin begins with the projection of dream-like space with only two chairs and a table. The stage remains submerged in darkness while brutal sounds of preparing tools of murder and nailing of a coffin

continue to indicate the inevitable cruelty that can be the only truth of human existence in the post-war era. ("The Lesson" 00:01:13-00:02:34). The laughter of the audience at the insane Professor and the Pupil benumbed with extreme pain repeating incessantly "Knife, knife, knife, knife...It must be now Spanish?" ("The Lesson" 00:51:44-00:52:31) turns to a disorienting shock as the Professor stabs the Pupil. The violent exploitation and murder of the Pupil on stage may be related to the ideas of Antonin Artaud, one of the most prominent practitioners of surrealism in theatre. Artaud was an active member of the surrealist group till he had a major fallout with Andre Breton in 1926. However, despite the fallout Artaud's drama continues to bear the traits of surrealism. Just like the catastrophic violence that lies at the heart of surrealism, Artaud's stage has, at its apex, the idea of cruelty that "aims to exalt, to numb, to bewitch, to arrest" the senses of the audience (Artaud Vol. 4, 69). In his seminal book *Theatre and its Double*, published in 1938, Artaud writes, "In the same way as our dreams react on us and reality acts on our dreams, so we believe ourselves able to associate mental pictures with dreams, effective in so far as they are projected with the required violence." (Vol. 4, 65). The hallucinatory and shocking sight of the violated and tortured body of the Pupil resonates with *The Spurt of Blood* (1925) where the surreal stage of Artaud is plundered with a sudden hailstorm of dismembered body parts as the disoriented lovers converse with each other. (Artaud Vol. 1, 63). Ionesco's tendency to stage scenes of extreme violence is bold and revolutionary like the surrealists. The Professor can be related to Artaud's violent dictator Cenci, who, unable to "resist the forces burning with violence" (Artaud Vol. 4, 123) within him, rapes his own daughter and brutally murders his sons which culminate in a celebration or a grand feast. Cenci, the surreal projection of the artist himself, believes that "The difference between crimes committed in life and those on stage, is that in life we do more and say less, while on stage we talk and talk and do very little. But I, I will restore the balance at the expense of life" (Artaud Vol. 4, 124).

The Chairs (1952): Exploring the Delusional Mindscape of a Dreamer on Stage

Breton's "inveterate dreamer" (3) finds a very relevant justification in the deluded figure of the Old Man in *The Chairs*. The dream-like surreal universe of Ionesco attempts to fathom or sink deeper into the fatigued monotony of the life of a man conscripted to the War and is eventually victimised by oppressive ideologies. Owing to the invariable stasis caused after the First World War, the Old Man and his wife resort to the surreal world of imagination where they hope to come face to face with their primordial selves long buried within the concealed recesses of the subconscious:

OLD WOMAN: ... Let's amuse ourselves by making believe, the way you did the other evening.

OLD MAN: Make believe yourself, it's your turn (114).

Ionesco's figures reinvent a subjective world of imagination that subsists in a delirious interface between dream and reality. Sandrow in her book opines that "reality is the material of authentic surrealist dream plays, only as the day's waking life is material for the night's dream" (43). Wretched and helpless in their degenerated island, abandoned in the cold showers of rain amidst the war "soaked through, frozen to the bone, for hours, for days, for nights, for weeks..." (115), the old couple tries to submerge in the surreal world of their own creation. Ionesco does not want his characters to submit to the absurdity of human existence but believes that the surreal stage can be a very effective medium of art to accord freedom to man. Ionesco's play echoes Breton's words that "everything depends on the freedom with which this imagination manages to express and assert itself and to portray only itself ... In that way alone will it conform to the primordial necessity of being totally human" (220).

The Old Man subsists in the precarious space between life and death, insanity and artificial respectability sometimes behaving like “a general factotum” (*The Chairs* 114), sometimes like a deluded figure lost in a state of “dreaming” (*The Chairs* 116):

OLD MAN [dreaming, lost]: The song? ... the rain? ... (Ionesco 116).

There are ample indications that Ionesco’s theatre ascertains the significance of dreams to lead his audience to a surreal world that can establish the primitive vivacity of life against the absurdity of the human condition. The hallucinatory images produced by dreams can be a radical medium of rebellion for the surrealists. Ionesco’s play resembles a phantom world with the apparitions of the old couple moving about hesitatingly on the stage. Surrealism revolts against anything that imposes limitations upon the mind of man and empowers him to create, with absolute liberty, images that dare to threaten all preconceived notions about existence. These images cause extreme shock and disorientation because of which they are no longer seen as contrary to reason but rather viewed as the raw atoms of human existence:

The bugaboo of death, the simplistic theatrical portrayal of the beyond, the shipwreck of the most beautiful reason in sleep ... the impassable silver wall bespattered with brains – these are all too gripping images of the human catastrophe ... [which shatters conventional, predictable reasoning only to reach the realm of the surreal where] life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. (Breton *Manifestoes* 123).

The Old Man has suffered extreme torture at the hands of authorities and almost all his dreams hint at violence. He dreams of the collapse of the “city of light” (116) or of having been “robbed” and “assassinated” by “the collector of injustices, the lightening rod of catastrophes” (151). The Old Man’s dream images mirror Ionesco’s own visions of “hardness, vanity and anger, nothingness or hideous, useless hatred” (*Notes on my Theatre* 130). The disintegrated dreams of the Old Man can be associated with the explosive nature of images produced by dreams, as Freud posits in “the power of subjective sensory excitations to instigate dreams ... ‘hypnagogic hallucinations’ ... images, often very vivid and rapidly changing, which are apt to appear ... during the period of falling asleep ... visual images constitute the principal component of our dreams” (63).

Breton was a medical practitioner who tended to the severely wounded patients during the World War I. Thus, having witnessed the degenerated survivors of war, Breton tries to gain access to the human psyche with the aid of “a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue ... unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and ... akin to spoken thought.” (23). Ionesco’s Old Man too, like a victim of war, speaks in the form of dramatic monologues indicating an inevitable correspondence between dream and memory, one of the most important ideas promoted by surrealism, as evident in the words of Breton in his 1924 *Manifestoes*: “It is because man, when he ceases to sleep, is above all the plaything of his memory, and in its normal state memory takes pleasure in weakly retracing for him the circumstances of the dream ...” (11). The couple recreates an imaginary setting in which they try to enact their dream memories:

OLD WOMAN... [To the Invisible Lady:] Our family, what’s left of it, my husband’s friends, still came to see us, from time to time, ten years ago...

OLD MAN [to the Invisible Lady]: In the winter, a good book, beside the radiator, and the memories of a lifetime (Ionesco 126).

Ionesco's play explodes into a vividly uncanny dream world of the surreal as the Old Man and the Old Woman become indistinguishable from one another. The Old Man is "unsure of his true self" which, in a state of disorientation, gets "duplicated, divided and interchanged" (Freud *The Uncanny* 142) with the figure of the Old Woman. The couple pertains to Freud's idea of the "double" and creates a surreal space of the uncanny "by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes...what we would call telepathy – so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience." (141-142). The old couple accumulates more and more empty chairs on the stage in an attempt to receive their guests who remain invisible throughout the play. The overlapping voices and laughter on the stage might be the echoes of the fluid, disintegrated selves of the same person. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud posits the concept of "hypermnesic dreams" which "have at their command memories which are inaccessible in waking life" (46). Humiliated and wronged by dictatorial authorities, the Old Man suffers from an acute difficulty in expressing himself. One might therefore conclude that the sudden, uncanny appearance of the Orator is a surreal embodiment of those traumatic memories of the Old Man that stemmed from his torture and extreme autism. Ionesco's Old Man experiences a state of "hypermnesic dream" (46) as he comes face to face with the figure of the Orator only in a dream-like surreal stage. The Orator who has been given the responsibility to speak on behalf of the Old Man freezes to an impassive immobility as the couple commits suicide all on a sudden and the Orator is left with nothing but some humorous, incomprehensible utterances: "Mmm, Mmm, Gueue, Gou, Gu; Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm" (160). The sudden and unpredictable "double suicide" of the couple (159) causes the Orator to disappear "like a ghost" (160) and creates an atmosphere of the uncanny. The suicide of the old couple hints at the surrealist idea of death as articulated by Artaud and Breton. Artaud terms the unexpected suicide of Van Gogh as the scream of revolt against oppression while Breton claims that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd." (*Manifestoes* 125). A surrealist presentation of the sudden, unpredictable suicide of the old couple can be perceived in the Bergenstages Production of the play directed by Prof. Jared Saltzman in 2018. The stage seems to be a surreal canvas with multiple illusory doors and windows that create a fantastic universe of the uncanny. The characters become inseparable as they "have nothing left of life now but to withdraw immediately" (*The Chairs* 01:04:31) and hope to live together "within the selfsame skin" (*The Chairs* 01:05:05) after death.

Eugene Ionesco and the Place He Accords to Human Imagination.

Transfixed in a state of "primordial stupefaction" (Ionesco *Notes on my Theatre* 128), Ionesco's theatre is adamant to laugh at the so-called preconceived reality of existence through a blatant assertion of his unwillingness to view seriously the life dictated by social order, and social kitsch. Ionesco's stage is a surreal fulfilment of the inevitable needs of human imagination. In *Notes et Contre Notes*, Ionesco claims like the surrealists: "Humour...is liberty" that makes one "conscious with a free lucidity of the tragic or ridiculous condition of man...Fantasy is revelatory; all that is imaginary is true; nothing is true if it is not imaginary..." (121-122). Ionesco's humour becomes quintessentially surreal because most often it is expressed on the stage through disgruntled figures on the brink of insanity. Their incomprehensible gestures and cries humorously belittle the tragedy of human condition by creating fantastical experiences pertaining to the vision. Such projections of uncanny visions convert Ionesco's stage to a surreal galaxy of the marvellous which incorporates a sense of freedom and unique, subversive dreams or images of the uncanny so that a picturesque universe of the comic comes to the fore. For the disoriented Old Man in *The Chairs* "it's all a marvellous dream" (147). The dialogic expressions of the Smiths/Martins, the Old Man and Old Woman and the Professor hint at the juncture where language meets madness. Perhaps Ionesco, like Breton, wished to dedicate his artistic life "prying loose the secrets of the insane" (*Manifestoes* 5). These so-called insane characters of Ionesco echo Breton's madman who suffered from an acute sense of disintegration at being exploited like a guineapig in the theatrical spectacle of war.

Ionesco's stage has the potential to justify that various "forms of surrealist language adapt themselves best to dialogue" (Breton 34). The dialogic encounters in *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs* give way to surreal poems while *The Lesson* ushers in the idea of surrealist word games to flout "a limited reality" (Rapti 5) as the Professor and his Pupil continue: "Two/One/Two/One!" (56). While recording a conversation between a doctor and an insane war victim in his *Manifestoes*, Breton claims that such a man who believes his age to be "Forty-five houses" (34) is free from the pretentious shackles of "politeness" (35) and hence can create surrealist poetry.

In the dream universe of the Smiths/Martins, "Everything caught fire/ Caught fire, caught fire" (Ionesco *The Bald Soprano* 36) while the Old Man wishes to die with his inseparable counterpart "within the selfsame skin/ within the same sepulchre/...that we might rot together" (Ionesco *The Chairs* 158). It is this raging humour of Ionesco to burn to ashes the authoritarian institutions that most aligns his oeuvre to the surreal universe which is a "state of rage" (Bataille 15) against every restriction that attempts to predetermine human life. For Ionesco, theatre is a revolutionary site for myriad experiments and the way he utilizes the stage reveals his surrealist insight: "I personally would like to bring a tortoise onto the stage, turn it into a racehorse, then into a hat, a song, a dragoon and a fountain of water." ("The Avant-Garde Theatre" 48-49). Ionesco was thoroughly "dazzled" (Rapti 4) by surrealism and writes: "When he [Phillipe Soupault] and Breton and Benjamin Peret saw my plays in 1952 and '53 they did indeed say to me 'That's what we wanted to do!'" (120). Ionesco's plays explored in this paper not only render the potent performative dimensions of surrealism on stage, but reveal it to be the register capable of countering the contemporary cannibalistic realities in unravel today.

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