

Feyerabend, Ionesco, And The Philosophy Of The Drama

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In 'The Theatre as an Instrument of the Criticism of Ideologies', Feyerabend argues that 'the arts of the twentieth century have gone much further in the criticism of customary modes of thought than have ... the various critical philosophies which exist today', and that modern artists 'have not only developed an abstract principle of criticism, they have also studied the *psychological conditions* under which criticism can be expected to become effective' (NI, p.298; see list of abbreviations at end). While modern artists have brought our most fundamental assumptions into question, 'it is still common in philosophy to seek for *fundamental principles* of human knowledge and behaviour, and in this the world and the language of everyday affairs are taken for granted.' As a consequence, epistemologists, and in particular, critical rationalists, should study the work of these artists to make themselves more critical and to learn techniques for making others more critical (NI, pp.306-307).

The artist he uses to illustrate and defend his claims is Ionesco, who, according to Feyerabend, has developed both a theory and a practice for criticising 'ideological constituents of our existence which have become so petrified they elude our thinking' (NI, p.299). He admits that 'there are limits to Ionesco's criticism' because 'Ionesco tries to expose ideologies by measuring them against an allegedly eternal basis of human existence', but he adds that 'but for this qualification Ionesco is a critical rationalist, and but for it his art would indeed represent that "liberation" which he claims for art ...'(NI, p.299).

I argue that Ionesco is not a critical rationalist because he is as much a foundationalist as the philosophers Feyerabend complains of. His theory tells us how to construct works which put the view that there is an

unchangeable human essence and a fundamentally human way in which we should behave while rendering us unable to criticise that view. The point of my paper, however is not merely to show that using radical modern techniques does not make one a philosophically critical writer, but also to show how a writer who intends to make us critical can end up writing works that resign us to the status quo because he presupposes a false, but tenacious, philosophical theory about the nature of the drama.

Ionesco's Theory of the Drama

According to Ionesco, the dramatist should not seek to put forward theories, but to involve us emotionally, because theoretical issues cannot be dealt with in dramatic works in sufficient depth and because didactic drama reduces the emotional involvement and excitement which are the most important elements in theatre (C, p.22-23). The works of the great dramatists are still relevant not because they contain important theoretical insights, but because they communicate feelings particularly well (C, p.21).

Since drama's essential function is to generate feelings in us, the dramatist should not try to write subtle or intellectual plays but to present a distorted version of the real world which evokes intense emotions (C, p.25). In the cause of communicating these intense feelings, the dramatist can use all sorts of techniques; indeed, 'nothing is barred from the theatre' (C, p.28). *Rhinoceros* illustrates Ionesco's point by showing us the rise of fascism not by presenting us with a new historical analysis of the origins of fascism, but with an analogy of its rise so constructed that we experience something of what it feels like to be in a society that is becoming fascist. All the characters in the play but one inexplicably turn into rhinoceroses. We empathise with the character who does not change and *feel*, as he does, that the world has gone crazy. In this way Ionesco makes us *aware* of the rise of fascism in a way different from that in which history books make us aware of it, namely, through its causes and the important stages of its development.

However, if a capacity for evoking intense emotions were sufficient to make great drama, then Shakespeare's plays would not be as great as the telecasts of the World Cup. Ionesco is aware of this problem, for he says that while good drama must convey intense feelings, this is in fact only a remark about the technique and idiom that good drama uses. The essential element of good drama is that it conveys certain universal or timeless intuitions to the audience through conveying intense feelings. As an example of a play which

conveys a timeless intuition he uses Shakespeare's *Richard II* which, he claims, shows us the significance of the fact that we will all die because:

When Richard II dies, it is really the death of all I hold most dear that I am watching; it is I who die with Richard II. So it is not history after all that Shakespeare is writing, although he makes use of history; it is not history but *my* story and *our* story - *my* truth, which independent of my times and in the spectrum of time that transcends time, repeats a universal and inexorable truth (C, p.30)

Richard II is a great tragedy because through it

I learn or reconsider something that has passed from my mind ...by an emotional participation that is not distorted by mystification and has burst through the paper dams of ideology and of a narrowly critical or 'scientific spirit'.(C, p.31)

It is important for a dramatist to convey such elementary truths to us in dramatic form for two reasons. The first is that 'Elementary truth is precisely what one loses sight of, what one forgets. And that is why we breed confusion, we fail in mutual understanding' (C, p.33). The second is that we are made aware of the fact that, faced with the same type of situation, we would react in the same way because we are all the same sorts of beings fundamentally.

My plays were never meant to express anything else: just that man is not simply a social animal, a prisoner of his time, but above all, at all times, different in his historical context, identical in his essence (C, p.80).¹

To discover these universal intuitions, the dramatist should not look at people's behaviour in social situations because their social lives are full of lies about what they feel most fundamentally. Instead, he should look within himself.

To discover the fundamental problems common to all mankind, I must ask myself what *my*

fundamental problem is, what my most ineradicable fear is. I am certain, then, to find the problems and fears of literally everyone.(C, p.95)

As the fundamental nature of human beings is asocial, the social features of everyday language make it an inadequate means of communication, and using it does damage to people's thinking and behaviour. This is because (1) it lacks the capacity to transmit the precise 'feel' of a particular person's emotions; (2) it tends to lose the capacity to evoke deep feelings through overuse (i.e. it is full of clichés); and, (3) because we continually talk in clichés we begin to behave and think in a cliché-ridden way so that we become machine-like beings who think very little and only have the most superficial feelings.

To reveal the superficiality of the clichés and dogmas that pervade our ordinary ways of talking about ourselves and the world, Ionesco asserts that it is necessary to carry out an artistic criticism of what he calls 'ideologies' (C, p.95). He sees this function of the drama as so important that some of his plays are intended to be simply criticisms of clichés. An example is *The Bald Prima Donna*, which is intended to show us the 'tragedy of language' (C, p.186) that occurs when people become conformist puppets who are so unaware of what they are saying that they do not realise that what they are saying is gobbledygook. It is in this aspect of his theory that Ionesco seems closest to Feyerabend, who wants to develop techniques for making us critical of our most deeply entrenched prejudices. Ionesco does not clearly explain what he means by 'ideology', but he picks out some features that many ideologies have in common and gives some examples of ideologies.

(1)An ideology is a kind of theory that is used to explain the features of a work of art, a political and economic system, or the human condition which is largely internally consistent and claims to explain all the significant features of its object of explanation. Ideologies are merely points of view because they are all equally supported by the evidence (C, p.69), so that:

I could take almost any work of art, any play, and guarantee to give it in turn a Marxist, a Buddhist, a Christian, an Existentialist, a psycho-analytical interpretation and 'prove' that the work subjected to each interpretation is a perfect and exclusive illustration of each creed.(C, p.69)

(2)An ideology consists of words with obscure meanings which are applied mechanically to describe and explain items in the world. The very vagueness of these words endows them with apparent descriptive and explanatory power instead of making people suspicious about whether they really denote the items in the world they are used to describe. Each of these words has been used for a long period of time in the context of a vocabulary of such words, a vocabulary that has become so loose that everything can be re-described in its terms and every position can be justified in terms of such a re-description.

Feyerabend sums up Ionesco's account of how ideologies work rather well:

An ideology is all-embracing, its slogans and stock phrases enable one to portray every event from its particular point of view. Whatever happens, the truth of the ideology is guaranteed. Ideologies therefore, do not enjoy the benefit of being true by accident; they are necessarily and absolutely true. (NI, .301)

He adds that an ideology is 'necessarily and absolutely true' in an insidious way because the advocates of the ideology do not realise that it is because the ideology is vague and contains stock devices that can be used to interpret any evidence in its terms that it is 'successful'. Because the advocate of the ideology finds himself at the end of a historical process, it looks to him as if the ideology's ability to describe and explain all the significant features of some object of inquiry is due to the fact that the ideology was produced by paying close attention to reality itself. He has learnt to describe reality and to reason according to the standards of the ideology, and so he finds it difficult to imagine any alternative theory that could plausibly describe or explain what he perceives.

In order to free us from the deadening influence of ideologies, Ionesco argues that the dramatist must make us renew our language by restoring to us the feeling a child has that what is most commonplace is really unusual and strange, and by making us aware of the propositional and emotional import of everything we say (C, p.25, 106). In *The Bald Prima Donna*, in a passage where he mixes up the clichés we use to describe the nature of men and women to prevent us from taking these clichés seriously, he provides a clear illustration of the kind of technique that he thinks the dramatist should use to put us in this psychological state:

Mrs. Smith: You men are all alike, there you sit all day long, with a cigarette in your mouth, making your face up with lipstick and powder fifty times a day, that is if you can take the time off from drinking.

Mr. Smith: I'd like to know what you'd say if men carried on as women do. Smoking all day long, stick powder and lipstick all over their faces and gulping down the whiskey. (*B*, p. 6-7)

The techniques are superficially similar to those that Brecht says the dramatist should use to produce A-effects. One difference between them is that rather than showing contradictions in character's attitudes to produce A-effects, Ionesco tends to exaggerate normal speech and behaviour, or to mix appropriate and inappropriate speech and behaviour, thereby making the stage world, and hence the real world appear absurd. Further, unlike Brecht, he argues that the dramatist should not use his alienation-producing techniques to transform the tragic theatre, but to restore it. The playwright should criticise clichés and exaggerate effects to prevent the audience from having a sentimental response, and to restore to them the ability to feel deeply. Also, the playwright should mix tragedy and comedy, not because comedy will prevent tragedy from having the effect traditional tragedians wanted it to have, but so that the comic elements in plays can be used to restore the tragic elements to their full power and significance.

Light makes shadows darker, shadows intensify light. For my part I have never understood the difference people make between the comic and the tragic. As the 'comic' is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the 'tragic'. The 'comic' offers no escape (*C*, p.25).

Rhinoceros illustrates how comic elements can be used to intensify tragedy. In it, the bumbler Berenger is confronted with a tragic situation with which he tries to cope with all his limited ability. His is a successful tragic character because of his comic inability to act as a proper tragic character.

Feyerabend says that Ionesco's own techniques are 'virtually indistinguishable' (*NI*, p.302) from the alienation producing techniques of

Brecht which Ionesco ridicules. But they are very different because Ionesco does not distance us from some characters to make us think about what they are doing or saying, but to produce empathy for other characters. For example, in *Rhinoceros*, the absurd way in which everyone talks and behaves does not serve to distance us from Berenger and his views, but to bring us closer to the poor man who is faced with such a world. This is because Berenger is not shown to behave in the absurd and threatening way in which the others do, but is shown as a pathetic bumbler so that we empathise with him rather than being alienated from him. The final part of the play in particular is structured to make us empathise completely with Berenger and to make us accept what he says. Everyone Berenger knows turns into a rhinoceros. He is completely isolated and surrounded by threatening rhinoceroses so that we see him as the only being left who stands for humane values. The rhinoceroses are more and more clearly heard and felt as a threatening force. Finally, Berenger gives a frenzied speech that is full of clichés that Ionesco has tried to render us unable to criticise, such as 'They won't get me ... I'm a human being. A human being' (R, p.122), and, 'I'll take on the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!' (R, p.124).²

Ionesco takes great pains to structure *Rhinoceros* so that we will empathise with Berenger and what he says to such an extent that criticism will become impossible. This means that he uses 'alienation' effects not to distance us from the speeches and characters in the play, but to make us despise the conformism which is represented by rhinoceroses. He thus differs from Brecht, not just in his belief in a universal asocial human nature, but also in the way he constructs his plays, which do anything but restore the strangeness of the world in Brecht's sense. He shows us the strangeness of the social world, but in a way that makes us despise it rather than seek to understand it. It must be admitted, however, that some of Ionesco's plays are closer to Brecht's than *Rhinoceros* is. In such plays, Ionesco uses techniques which prevent us from having empathy for any characters or taking anything they say seriously; but he structures such plays so that they fail to distance us in a way that would make us think about the correctness of our cliché-ridden descriptions of the world. I will discuss *The Bald Prima Donna* to bring out this point.

As I have already pointed out, *The Bald Prima Donna* is a farcical architecture of clichés in which Ionesco brilliantly mixes up the cliché-ridden descriptions we use to describe the nature of men and women. The effect of this mixing up of clichés might be to make us think about whether the

people that we describe in clichéd ways are really like that, or to make us examine our own behaviour and notice how we inadvertently adopt roles. But Ionesco's plays do not give us a chance to think about the significance of what happens on stage because they are structured to intensify our emotional tension through the accumulation of effects. As Esslin puts it,

The pattern of Ionesco's plays is one of proliferation, acceleration, accumulation, proliferation to the point of paroxysm, when psychological tension reaches the unbearable - the pattern of orgasm (*E*, pp.191-2).

Ionesco himself tells us that in plays, words should be made 'more theatrical by working them up to such a pitch that they reveal the true temper of the drama, which lies in frenzy' (*C*, p.27). Thus, the passage from *The Bald Prima Donna* I quoted earlier in this paper is soon followed by an extremely funny recognition scene between Mr. and Mrs. Martin which rather than building on the effect created by the Smith's attack on each other, prevents it from having its full impact. Indeed, *The Bald Prima Donna* reaches its climax in a long scene where cliché after cliché is produced in such a rapid succession that we have no time to do anything but gape at the confused mess (*B*, p.35). Feyerabend's description of Weiss' *Marat/Sade* is just as apt a description of what happens in much of *The Bald Prima Donna*.

The mechanism of the theatre assumes independence, becomes part of the show fooling the spectator. Instead of clearing dim reality; instead of being guided towards a critical analysis of a lucidly depicted reality, the spectator gapes at a life beset by lunacy (*NI*, p.305).

It may well be true, as Esslin says, that 'The technical inventiveness Ionesco shows in trying to achieve his end is truly astonishing' (*E*, p.195), but it is often not clear what end he has achieved except a display of technical inventiveness worthy of Spike Milligan. *The Bald Prima Donna* is supposed to be a kind of tragedy of language which shows us how clichéd and mechanical our lives have become; but we would not come out of a performance of it with the critical attitude that we need to have to make our responses less mechanical.

Feyerabend says that Ionesco's plays often fail to make us critical because they have a secondary function which is that

They are intended to set forth 'eternal fundamental truths'. This second element which is initially introduced just as an aid to criticism, frequently assumes a life of its own, directing the attention of the spectator away from the void spaces of his own life to the richness and coherence of what is happening on stage; and with this it *brings him back to indirect justification of his own life* (NI, p.305).

This is neither a correct description of Ionesco's intentions, nor of how his plays actually work as the following considerations show.

First, as my sketch of Ionesco's theory and practice makes clear, he intends primarily not to make us think critically, but to make us perceive the full force of fundamental truths. That is, he wants theatre to criticise clichés because he believes that we must be cleansed of our cliché-ridden ways of thinking and feeling before we can be made to perceive the tragic truths he thinks the theatre should convey to us.

Second, many of Ionesco's plays *do not* present us with a stage world that can plausibly be described as coherent, although they bring us back to an acceptance - the word 'justification' is too strong - of our own way of life. They do this, *not* by presenting us with a coherent stage world which contrasts with our void life, but by a cathartic process which first heightens our perception of the repellent absurdities of our way of life, and then dissipates the impact of this perception through an extreme intensification of effects, leaving us ready to accept that the world must continue in the same old absurd way. Like Jacques, who finally submits to bourgeois conformity because he sees that it is rooted in nature, we are made to perceive our way of life as natural and unchangeable. In *The Bald Prima Donna*, the message that our superficial and conformist way of life is inevitable is underscored by the last scene in the play, which shows us that nothing has changed after the cathartic mad show and that the Smiths and the Martins are interchangeable (i.e. that all of us are like the Smiths).³

Ionesco's plays are anti-critical because what he calls 'the artistic criticism of Ideologies' is, in effect, the inculcation in us of an intense dislike for a particular way of life, a dislike which is not accompanied by a reasoned response to it. This dislike functions either to generate empathy for a rival way of life, or is later heightened to a point where it is dissipated. Either way

it does not provide a basis for the reasoned analysis and the rational emotional response which would be necessary to allow us to act against the way of life we are repelled by. Further, Ionesco tends to create a stage world that is so mad that it seems totally inexplicable and so cannot be analysed or thought about. Now, while this makes us aware of what it feels like to be confronted by a particular situation (e.g. the rise of fascism), it also inhibits our ability to cope with and fight such situations. *Rhinoceros* is so structured that at the end of it Berenger can only say 'I'm not capitulating' but *does* nothing, so that the fight against the Rhinoceroses has already been lost. In a world with causal laws where apparent madness or confusion is seen to be the result of a deeper causal process we can formulate a plan of action against it; but Ionesco's world is not such a world. Whereas Brecht at his best gives us the impression that the world is something that must be carefully thought about because it does not fit our simplistic models, Ionesco gives us the impression that the world is simply crazy, so that all we can do is empathise with the least crazy elements in it. Ionesco's drama can teach us nothing practical and is likely to induce in us the belief that nothing practical can be done about real world tragedies because the world is beyond understanding. It produces an effect in us similar to that of some classical drama. We feel that we can do nothing about the madness of the world except rather passively resist it. Just as some classical drama presents us with the inevitability of fate, his presents us with the inevitability of madness.⁴

In addition, the rising tide of emotion which characterises his plays prevents us from being critical because it reduces us to a completely unthinking level in which we can be easily brainwashed into accepting the message of the play. Thus, Ionesco's device of reducing a spectator to the state where he can only gape, prevents him from considering whether the message presented to him is correct and, more importantly, reduces the spectator's freedom of thought and action.

Ionesco's Assumptions about the Nature of the Drama

The faults in Ionesco's theory and practice can be traced to two assumptions, which are (1) that because drama should arouse emotions it cannot also put forward theories or present arguments; and (2) that the content of drama should be universal truths about our essential selves conveyed solely through an emotional experience. I will criticise both assumptions.

The first assumption rests on Ionesco's presupposition that didactic drama must present long-winded arguments on stage, so that Brecht must be

arguing for the view that the dramatist should present treatises on stage and thus should not try to arouse any emotion in the audience. This presupposition is mistaken because, like other didactic dramatists, Brecht does *not* argue that the dramatist should teach by presenting verbal debate on stage or by preventing the audience from emotionally responding. Rather, he argues that the dramatist should (a) self-consciously present theories through the way he structures his plays; (b) *implicitly* criticise ways of life by showing us the pragmatic contradictions that those ways of life give rise to; and, (c) show us the causes of those contradictions as located in a changeable social structure and so implicitly argue for political and social change. A dramatist who follows these prescriptions does not have to put long-winded arguments into character's mouths, or prevent the audience from being emotionally involved.

Ionesco has mistakenly taken Brecht's attack on dramatic works that make the audience empathise with the characters represented on stage to be an argument against all drama that evokes feelings. In fact, Brecht contrasts the attitude the dramatic theatre (which makes the audience empathise with characters) produces to human suffering to the attitude the epic theatre (which he approves of) produces to human suffering in the following way:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: 'I never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable. It's got to stop - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary - That's great art: nothing obvious in it. I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (*T*, p.71).

The point is not that the epic theatre is unemotional, but that it generates sympathy rather than empathy for suffering characters, and that this is an advantage because the person who has empathy for another's problem perceives the problem as inescapable and cannot explain how it is to be alleviated, whereas the sympathetic person perceives it as something that can and must be eliminated. A theatre that shows how a tragedy arises from changeable causes is thus not only compatible with, but actually produces

sympathetic emotions which in turn make us think further about how we can eliminate the tragedy. Elsewhere, Brecht also stresses that the theatre should enhance our delight in finding the origins of things and in changing the world (T, p.186).⁵

In any case, as we have seen, plays constructed according to Ionesco's own theory also teach a theory, that is the theory that there is an asocial human essence of a particular kind and that one's behaviour should be in accordance with the dictates of this essence. Ionesco thus differs from Brecht not because his plays do not put forward theories, but because he assumes his theories to be indubitably true.⁶

Feyerabend criticises Ionesco's second assumption by rhetorically asking:

who ... can guarantee that in jettisoning existing ideologies we are not falling victim to an even more exalted ideology which, since it is attached to the *universally human*, not merely to a given epoch, has far deeper, more tenacious roots than all the local aberrations which Ionesco wants to expose and pulverise by his methods ... [NI, pp.309-310],

adding that if we did what Ionesco suggests we should do, which is to follow our primal intuitions, we would return to a way of life that is more mechanical than the way of life of the ideologies he criticises. He says that the complete removal of every ideology would return us to the 'condition of the amoeba' (NI, p.310). This criticism of Ionesco, however, is too brief. Perhaps Ionesco cannot absolutely guarantee that what he thinks is an intuitive perception of the human essence is not in fact a more deeply rooted ideology, but it is necessary to argue not only that this *may* be the case but that (1) the procedure he says the dramatist should use to discover the asocial human essence is defective; and, in any case (2) there is *no* human asocial essence of the kind Ionesco describes. I will argue for both of these claims.

The Cartesian procedure which Ionesco says will allow us to have infallible knowledge of the essential human problems, will not give us such knowledge because inside us exist many emotions and fears that are socially created. For example, the fear of death which Ionesco thinks is universal and fundamental is partially induced in many of us through our Christian upbringing (for some of Ionesco's remarks on death, see C, pp.57-8). We are

taught that hell-fire will consume us if we do wrong things in this world, and this makes death itself seem a very dangerous thing to us. In societies where people are taught that the honour of the clan is all-important, men are ready to sacrifice themselves for their clan because they do not fear the loss of their own life nearly as much as the loss of the honour of their clan (e.g. medieval Japan). We can see that this was true in early Classical Greece by noting that death itself was not considered tragic by Greek tragedians. To these Greeks, someone did not die tragically if he lived to a ripe old age leaving behind him an *oikos* that was prosperous and held in high esteem, but he did die tragically if he involuntarily disgraced his *oikos* and caused its fall from prosperity (which is the subject of Sophocles' Theban trilogy). That is, someone could die happy or miserable.⁷

As Raymond Williams points out, Ionesco's mistake is a common one. The reason is that:

Death is universal, and the meaning tied to it quickly claims universality, as it were in its shadow. Other readings of life, other interpretations of suffering and disorder, can be assimilated to it with great apparent conviction. The burden of proof shifts continually from the controversial meaning to the inescapable experience ... *W*, pp.56-7).

Because Ionesco knows that it is a universal fact that we all die, he is misled into believing that death has the same meaning for other people that it has for him. Further, Ionesco shows that he really knows that death itself is not necessarily tragic in his remarks on *Richard II* when he emphasises that we feel deeply for Richard because we see the death of all our beliefs and values in his disgrace and death. He is admitting, in effect, that Richard is a tragic figure because he is disgraced and his most central values have been abandoned in the world he lived in, not because he simply dies. In the sense that his values have been abandoned, Richard is already dead before his body is killed, and the tragedy has already occurred before his body dies.

Ionesco's view that death is the fundamental fear of all men is thus wrong. Nevertheless, he is correct in believing that fear of death is a fundamental fear for many people in our society. It is a fundamental fear because they feel alienated from one other and from their working lives, and so do not identify with anything outside their own bodies sufficiently to feel that its survival is more important than that of their bodies.

In addition, we can see that Ionesco's claim that drama which he thinks is good always deals with timeless and fundamental human problems is wrong by examining some of his own plays and comparing them to some of the ancient tragedies he admires. His plays often deal with the anguish of people who feel unable to communicate with anyone about anything important, and his central characters, like Berenger in *Rhinoceros*, seek to communicate but are unable to do so because others do not share their values. The characters of Aeschylus and Sophocles do not grapple with any problem like this. Antigone is not isolated from others in her beliefs, and has no doubt about what her social obligations are. Her tragedy is that she, the last representative of her house, must be ignobly destroyed in trying to meet her social obligations. Berenger's tragedy is that he feels isolated because he cannot adhere to the values of the unthinking brutes around him, but does not know quite what values he holds or whether he is right or not in doing what he does. He can not behave as a proper heroic figure such as Antigone would, but only in a rather pathetic way. What causes such differences is a matter of some debate, but it is clear that they are there. (Another problem that much modern drama deals with that is not dealt with in ancient drama is the anguish of people who fail to find their own existence meaningful. This is a central problem in Beckett's plays.)

In any case, a dramatist who uses Ionesco's introspective method for producing knowledge of the human essence is likely to fail to discover what he or other human beings are really like, because the attitude one imagines one will have to a particular situation is often different from the attitude one actually has when one is faced with that situation. I might, for example, be convinced from introspection that I am unconcerned for my own safety, but find myself running away from a situation that requires courage; or, alternatively, I might believe that I am only concerned with my own survival and then find myself willing to give up my life for someone else. Also, Ionesco wrongly assumes that the playwright will be honest enough to face up to what he finds when he introspects despite extensive evidence that people often deceive themselves as to what they and the world are really like. It may well be, for example, that in arguing that we all have the same fundamental fears and problems despite clear evidence to the contrary, Ionesco is trying to deceive himself into believing that all human beings have the same fears and problems as he has in order to overcome his alienation from others.

Another problem is that even assuming that Ionesco can know what his own primary fears and problems are, he cannot plausibly hold that he has a reliable

method for discovering what the primary fears and problems of others are because he asserts that men's public pronouncements and behaviour are littered with clichés and falsities. In fact, the evidence provided by a cursory anthropological analysis indicates that others do not always have the primary fears and problems that I or Ionesco have. This is clearly brought out by Laura Bohannan's account of her attempt to tell the story of Hamlet to an African tribe. She found herself unable to get the people of that tribe to interpret Hamlet as dealing with the problems we believe it to deal with because their social life and beliefs are very different to ours. For example: they have no conception of an individual afterlife, so that Hamlet's soliloquy and much other material that deals with the after-life makes little sense to them. They have no conception of ghosts, but only of omens sent by witches or of zombies, neither of which is the 'spirit' of the dead person: so that Hamlet's fear that the 'ghost' might be his father makes little sense to them. They do not believe insanity is mentally caused, but that it is caused by witchcraft, so that both Hamlet's insanity and Ophelia's suicide take on a quite different significance, etc.⁸

Having argued that good drama does not present us with universal truths about our fundamental fears and problems, I want to stress that this does not necessarily mean that we have nothing in common with people who live in societies that are very different from ours. I suggest that one reason why literary works from a very different society can move us is that while we do not have the same deeply held values and fears as people in that society, we are beings who have values and fears. We can sympathise with Orestes, not because we have a fear that we will be placed in a situation where we have to avenge one of our parents by killing the other (or even because we think it likely that we will be placed in a situation in which our fundamental values come into conflict), but because we can be led to recognise how terrible it would be to be in such a situation.

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Abbreviations

- B Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Prima Donna* trans. D. Watson (London: John Calder, 1958)
C Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes* trans. D. Watson (London: John Calder, 1964)

- NI Paul Feyerabend, 'The Theatre as an Instrument of Criticism of Ideologies - Notes on Ionesco' *Inquiry* 10 (1967): 298-312
- E Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Penguin, 1968)
- P Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays Vol. 5*, ed. R. Mannheim and J. Willett (New York: Vintage Books, 1972)
- R Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson*, Penguin, 1962)
- T Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* ed. and trans. J. Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964)

Notes

1. Ionesco even claims that man is anto-social by nature and that the social world does violence to his nature:

A child has great difficulty in fitting into society, he struggles against it and finds it hard to adapt himself to it: those who work with children will know what I am talking about. And if a child finds it hard to adapt himself to society it is because there is in human nature something that has to escape the social order or be alienated by it (*C*, p.111)

2. Esslin argues that the end of *Rhinoceros* has a more complicated effect than I have indicated because it contains elements which distance us from Berenger and what he says.

If we examine Berenger's final reasoning with his friend Dudard, we find that he defends his desire to remain human with the same recourse to *instinctive* feelings that he condemns in the rhinos, and when he notices this error, he merely corrects himself by replacing instinct with intuition. Moreover, at the very end, Berenger bitterly regrets that he seems unable to change into a rhinoceros! ...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 (*E*, p.183).

It is unlikely that Ionesco intended to expose the contradiction in Berenger's views, because his own views contain the same contradiction. He too unselfconsciously condemns mechanical behaviour at the same time as applauding intuitive responses. In any case, Berenger's confused thinking, his vacillation between wanting to change into a rhinoceros and being totally opposed to 'rhinoceritis', and his bumbling round out his character and make him seem more pathetic. His faults are not shown as signs of the 'expression of the fox's contempt for the grapes he could not have' (*E*, p.183), but of his humanity. Like his inability to dress correctly, the woolliness of his thinking

and his indecisiveness endear us to him and prevent us from carefully analysing what he says.

3. In writing plays which resign us to bourgeois conformity, Ionesco pragmatically contradicts himself. On the one hand, he tells us that human beings are fundamentally asocial, and on the other, he writes plays in which human beings are depicted as fundamentally conformist. The message that comes from *Jacques, Or Obedience* and *The Bald Prima Donna* is not consistent with many of his theoretical remarks. Even *Rhinoceros* which is supposed to be an anti-conformist play, shows us the last human being, who is himself far from immune to the attractions of the Rhinoceroses' way of life, unable to do anything but shout slogans as he watches everyone else succumbing to the attractions of 'rhinoceritis'.

4. I use the term 'classical', as Feyerabend does, not so much to describe drama constructed according to Aristotle's theories, but to describe the kind of drama that Brecht calls Aristotelian, which 'shows the structure of society ... as incapable of being influenced by society ... Oedipus, who offended against certain principles underlying the society of his time, is executed: the gods see to that; they are beyond criticism. Shakespeare's great solitary figures, bearing on their breast the star of their fate, carry through with irresistible force their futile and deadly outbursts; they prepare their own downfall; life, not death becomes obscene as they collapse; the catastrophe is beyond criticism' (T, p.189). For Feyerabend criticism of classical drama see the section on Lessing's theory of the drama in 'On the Improvement of the Sciences and the Arts', *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol.3, pp.387-415. His argument is discussed in detail in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Feyerabend's Critique of Foundationalism* (Sydney, University of New South Wales, 1985), Chapter 5.

5. Brecht criticises the view that reason and the emotions form a simple dichotomy in an argument against German acting where he says that German acting lacks sensuality and that:

to lack sensuality in art is certainly senseless, nor can any sense remain healthy if it is not sensual. Reason, for us (the Germans), immediately implies something cold, arbitrary, mechanical, presenting us with such alternatives as ideas and life, passion and thinking, pleasure and utility ... (P, pp.261-2).

His notes on Galileo (P, pp.213-264), amply bring out his interest in the physicality and emotional motivation for, as well as the emotional structuring of, reason both in its perverted and healthy forms.

For a discussion of a Brechtian critique of the pragmatic contradictions involved in the modern scientists' way of life see my 'Should Philosophers Become Playwrights?', *Inquiry* 29 (1986) pp. 451-7.

6. For a discussion of Brecht's 'Feyerabendian' argument that all plays present theories about the social world see my 'Feyerabend's Epistemology and

Brecht's Theory of the Drama', *Philosophy and Literature* II (1987), pp. 117-123.

7. Solon, in his reply to Croesus' question 'who is the happiest man you have ever seen?', expresses the view which Aeschylus and Sophocles presuppose when he says that Cleobis and Biton, who died after having brought the highest honour to themselves and their mother, were 'a heaven seen proof of how much better it is to be [honourably] dead than alive' (Herodotus, *The Histories*, Aubrey de Selincourt trans. (Penguin Books, 1972): p.52.)

8. Laura Bohannon, 'Miching Mallecho, That Means Witchcraft' in J. Middleton ed., *Magic Witchcraft and Curing* (Austin University of Texas Press, 1977) pp.43-54.