

PERFORMING IRONY: EUGÈNE IONESCO'S BATTLES WITH HIS CRITICS

After Aristotle's first definition of irony as duality: blame-by-praise or praise-by-blame¹, and Cicero's first use of "ironia", attested by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, irony has been defined as "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt", or as a "condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected"².

D.C. Muecke's comprehensive *The Compass of Irony* which analyses the formal qualities of irony and offers a survey of its various forms, functions and cultural significance started on an astute comment pointing to the impossibility of formally defining irony: "Since [...] Erich Heller, in his *Ironic German*, has already quite adequately not defined irony, there would be little point in not defining it all over again"³. Muecke's next book, *Irony and the Ironic*, devised 15 descriptive types of irony that the English literary-educated person would recognize⁴, traced the evolution of the concept, and investigated its anatomy.

Wayne Booth asserted that "[r]eading irony *is* in some ways like translating, like decoding, like deciphering and like peering behind a mask"⁵ and devised four "marks of irony": irony is always intended, not unconscious; it is covert ("intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface"); it is stable or fixed ("in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions"); finally, it is "finite in application", since "[t]he reconstructed meanings are in some sense local, limited"⁶. Booth explained that these marks do not suffice to distinguish irony from other verbal devices saying something and intending another (metaphor, simile, allegory, apologue, metonymy, synecdoche, asteismus, micticismus, charientismus, preterition, banter raillery, burlesque, and paronomasia)⁷. This is not the only limitation of fully comprehending irony, and

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. Translated by J.E.C. Welldon, London, Macmillan, 1886.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (CD-ROM, version 4.0.0.2, 2009), s.v. "irony".

³ D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, London and New York, Methuen, 1980 [1969], p. 14.

⁴ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, London and New York, Methuen, 1982, pp. 8-13.

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

we can add, as Stanley Fish pointed out in his critique of Booth's theory, that "not everyone is certain in the same way"⁸.

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson limited irony to opposition, placing it within the larger category of humour based on incongruity, incompatibility or contradiction, among others⁹. Looking back at the three main theories of humour (superiority¹⁰, incongruity¹¹ and relief)¹², one can find many similarities with irony, especially in the case of incongruity which is reached through a multitude of devices, including irony, "bathos, puns, wordplay, ambiguity, incongruity, deviation, black humour, misunderstandings, iconoclasm, grotesquerie, out-of-placeness, doubling, absurdity, nonsense, blunders, defamiliarization, quick changes and hyperbole"¹³.

Attempting to go beyond the "axiological" or evaluative assessment of irony, Linda Hutcheon focused on the interpreter of irony rather than on the ironist's intentions. In her view, irony "happens" within a pre-existing "discursive" community and that the task of the interpreter in "making irony happen" is to determine the "circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment of the passage in question"¹⁴.

In her comprehensive survey of the history and structure of irony from Socrates to the present, Claire Colebrook defined irony as a trope that "allows the speaker to remain 'above' what he says, allowing those members of his audience who share his urbanity to perceive the true sense of what is really meant"¹⁵,

⁸ Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1989, p. 182.

⁹ Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

¹⁰ The superiority theory, put forward by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, G.W.F. Hegel, Henri Bergson and Charles Baudelaire, identified comic amusement with "vain glory and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmities of another, sufficient matter for his triumph." (Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 55).

¹¹ The incongruity theory, conceived by Francis Hutcheson, John Locke, Blaise Pascal, Immanuel Kant, William Hazlitt, Arthur Schopenhauer, regards humour in terms of transgression or deviation.

¹² The relief theory, defined by Alexander Bain, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Herbert Spencer, John Dewey and Sigmund Freud, investigates the relation of laughter to the nervous system (John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Foreword by Robert Mankoff, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 15-16) and starts from the assumption that humour is not "resigned" but "rebellious" (Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*. Translated by James Strachey, edited by Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990 [1927], p. 429). Its origins can be traced in a debate between Spencer and Bain (Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005, p. 86).

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019, p. 88.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 137.

¹⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 19.

pointing to its elitist features: “to say one thing and mean another, or to say something contrary to what is understood, relies on the possibility that those who are not enlightened or privy to the context will be excluded”¹⁶.

In the light of these theories, this article “reads” irony in two critical disputes involving playwright Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994). French criticism associated his work with the avant-garde theatre in the 1950s, and Martin Esslin included in “the Theatre of the Absurd” in his eponymous book which investigates the plays of Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and a few other avant-garde writers from Europe and The United States, starting from a definition of the absurd given by Ionesco himself in an essay on Kafka: (“that which is devoid of purpose”)¹⁷.

My reading of irony will go progressively from the presentation of some biographical details that are essential for understanding the context of Ionesco’s irony, which was clearly addressed to the elites, to Ionesco’s first exercise of style in irony, a book of criticism, and eventually to the analysis of two main debates around his theatre: one (both critical and creative) in Paris and one in London.

Theatrical Irony in Criticism: Ionesco’s Nu

Born in Romania of a Romanian father, Eugen Ionescu, and presumably a French (in reality, Jewish-Romanian) mother, Thérèse Ipcar¹⁸, Ionesco lived between two languages and cultures. As a child he was raised by his mother in France and as an adolescent and a young man in Romania he lived with his father.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Eugène Ionesco, “Dans les Armes de la Ville”, *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault*, 20 (Octobre 1957), quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. xix. According to Michael Y. Bennett, Esslin mistranslated “but” from Ionesco’s “Est absurde ce qui n’a pas de but [...]” as “purpose” instead of “goal”, “target” or “end”, ignoring that Ionesco might have formulated a different definition that was closer to Camus and did not actually relate the absurd as lacking purpose. (Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2011, pp. 9-10).

¹⁸ Ana-Maria Stan’s archival work proves that although Ionesco always invoked the French origin of his mother, she was actually born in Craiova, where Ipcar was a common Sephardic name. (*Relațiile franco-române în timpul regimului de la Vichy 1940–1944 [Franco-Romanian Relations During the Vichy Regime 1940–1941]*, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2006, pp. 485-486). For Ionesco’s biography, see also Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco. L’oubli du fascisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2002; André Le Gall, *Eugène Ionesco. Mise en scène d’un existant spécial en son œuvre et en son temps*, Paris, Flammarion, 2008; Julia Elsky, “Eugène Ionesco, 1942–1944: Political and Cultural Transfers between Romania and France”, *Diasporas*, 23-24, 2014, pp. 200-214.

Ionesco started a doctoral degree in France in 1938, which he never finished, returning to Romania in 1940, and departing to France again in 1942 as one of the press secretaries for the National Ministry of Propaganda. In the 1940s, the Romanian fascist movement had become too dangerous for Ionesco, who finally confessed his secret to his Jewish friend Mihail Sebastian. Sebastian's diary (26 March 1941) reveals that Ionesco had become aware that "not even the name 'Ionescu', nor an indisputable Romanian father, nor the fact that he was born Christian – nothing at all can hide the curse of having Jewish blood in his veins"¹⁹. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* captures the moment when his character Bérenger witnesses bewilderingly the "rhinocerization" of most of his close friends, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Mircea Vulcănescu, who admired the Iron Guard, the infamous far-right ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist movement led by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu²⁰. However, "rhinocerization", the disease tied to the rise of fascism that many of his friends and even his own father caught, can be actually seen as a more extended metaphor of his rejection of any form of totalitarianism. As this article will demonstrate, Ionesco's critics were equally associated with the totalitarianism of any ideology, which Ionesco regarded as a collective disease²¹ and permanently ironized throughout his entire work.

By the time Ionesco left Romania, he had written only one book, *Nu* [*No*, 1934], situated "somewhere between literary criticism, essay and intimate diary", "aimed at ridiculing the institution of literary criticism from the perspective of a relativism of values"²². Although often neglected by criticism, *Nu* is essential for understanding Ionesco's irony, since it represents what Hutcheon calls the pre-existing element where irony "happened"²³. Following Hutcheon, I will determine the "circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment"²⁴ of Ionesco's irony in *Nu* which was characterized by many scholars as "theatrical", hence, for instance, Șerban Cioculescu's recommendations to Ionesco to try the dramatic genre rather than write books on criticism²⁵.

¹⁹ Mihail Sebastian, *Journal 1935–1944*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Introduction and notes by Radu Ioanid, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2000, p. 335.

²⁰ For a detailed history of this episode in his life, see Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²¹ See Eugène Ionesco, "Preface to *Rhinoceros*", November 1960, in *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*. Translated by Donald Watson, New York, Grove Press, 1964, p. 198.

²² Paul Cernat, "The Young Eugen Ionescu between Dada Existentialism and the Balkan Tradition of the Absurd", *World Literature Studies*, 2, 2015, 7, p. 38.

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 137.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Șerban Cioculescu, "Operele premiate ale scriitorilor tineri needitați (Eugen Ionescu, *Nu*)" ["The Award-Winning Works of the Unpublished Young Romanian Writers (Eugen Ionescu, *No*)"], *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, 1, 1934, 9, pp. 653-655. All translations from Romanian and French are mine, unless otherwise stated. For Ionesco's Romanian career, see, among others, Gelu Ionescu's *Anatomia unei negații. Scrierile lui Eugen Ionescu în limba română. 1927–1940* [*The Anatomy of a Negation*]:

According to Jeanine Teodorescu, “Ionesco assailed norms, received ideas, political trends, literary fashions and tradition itself” in *Nu*, which was, in short, “as scandalous as his debut as a playwright: everyone felt insulted”²⁶, since he demolished in grand style practically all his contemporaries’ works²⁷. Ionesco ironized the highly acclaimed poet Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967) whom he found a rather artificial poet and Baudelaire’s imitator: “we should keep him in this literary empyrean, on this throne at whose foot the adoring and ecstatic Romanian critics come in succession to prostrate themselves and to deposit offerings, myrrh and incense”²⁸. For Teodorescu, “[m]yth’, ‘literary empyrean’, Arghezi on a ‘throne’ and Romanian critics as a ‘myrrh-and-incense-offering crowd’ in a temple honouring the poet-God describe the Ionescian theatrical picture of the state of poetry and criticism in his native country”²⁹. Ionesco’s verbal irony is addressed mostly to Arghezi’s admirers. As Muecke showed, “[t]he simplest form of ‘high-relief’ verbal irony is the antiphrastic praise for blame”³⁰, which is precisely the focus of this fragment which congratulates Arghezi and his adulators, while meaning exactly the opposite. The hyperbole is, to follow Muecke’s theory, “the most obvious device of setting up what is being attacked”³¹. In addition, the sentence “we should keep him”, in which Ionesco playfully identifies himself with the critics he ironizes by using the first-person pronoun in plural (we), follows the trend of what Muecke called preterition, by which rhetoricians meant either “the ironic pretence either not to mention something (‘Far be it from me to say anything here of your...’) or that it is not worth mentioning”³².

Nu goes on tearing down other writers: the “narcissist” poet Ion Barbu (1895–1961), the Balkan “Monsieur Teste”, prose writer Camil Petrescu (1894–1957), whose borrowings from Proust turned into “recipes, clichés”, critics Pompiliu

Eugen Ionescu's Works in Romanian. 1927–1940], București, Minerva, 1991; Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev, *La Jeunesse littéraire d'Eugène Ionesco*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993; Marie France Ionesco, *Portrait de l'écrivain dans le siècle Eugène Ionesco, 1909–1994*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004; Marta Petreu, *Ionescu în țara tatălui [Ionescu in His Father's Land]*, Iași, Polirom, 2012.

²⁶ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’: Ionesco’s ‘No!’ to Romanian Literature and Politics”, *Journal of European Studies*, 34, 2004, 3, p. 268.

²⁷ To this, we can add Ionesco’s articles in literary journals which were later on collected in Eugène Ionesco, *Război cu toată lumea: publicistica românească [At War with Everybody: The Romanian Journalistic Writings]*, I. Edited and bibliography by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu, București, Humanitas, 1992.

²⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*. Translated by Marie-France Ionesco, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 60. The Romanian text appeared in *Vremea* (1934) and was republished by Humanitas (1991 and 2011). I am using Jeanine Teodorescu’s translations from “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 271.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 56.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 61.

Constantinescu (1901–1946), who limited himself to exegesis, E. Lovinescu (1881–1943) who was too lyrical, Perpessicius (1891–1971), who was influenced by Thibaudet’s stereotyped ideas, Șerban Cioculescu (1902–1988), who was a “myopic” sceptic, Petru Comarnescu (1905–1970), who was excessive, and Paul Sterian (1904–1984), whose criticism Ionesco associated to that of “an elephant in a China shop”³³.

My contention is that beyond the criticism addressed to writers, Ionesco would have already fought against another category of scholars who made writers famous and whom he was to despise for all his life – the literary critics. As Rosette C. Lamont asserted, in Ionesco’s opinion, “[t]he critics who sing the praises of [...] inferior writers do so in loosely impressionistic prose, utterly devoid of any objective standards of judgment.”³⁴ In order to demonstrate that “the work itself does not have an absolute value” and that we do not know where the truth actually lies³⁵, Ionesco produced two companion antithetical critical pieces on his friend Mircea Eliade’s novel *Maitreyi*.

To follow Teodorescu’s thought-provoking reading, the first sample of Ionesco’s work proves to what extent “theatricality was a tool of the critic Ionesco as well”³⁶. In Muecke’s acceptance, irony in criticism is connected to the “intaglio method”, which “isolates the butt or object of the irony”³⁷. This is exactly how Ionesco structured *Nu*, where we find latent motives that will be used repeatedly in his later plays and theoretical texts.

One of the motives Ionesco often used in his *Nu* was the “caricatured self-portraiture” that will actually represent the core of dramatic irony in the play about his French critics, *L’Impromptu de l’Alma ou Le Caméléon du Berger* [*Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*]. In *Nu* we also find a Romanian Ionesco of Caragiale descent³⁸, whose humour, condescension, sarcasm and irony are typically Eastern European, and an avant-garde writer who plays with the absurd similarly to Urmuz, whose admirer he was, hailing him, as I mentioned elsewhere, “as a precursor of European modernism”³⁹.

³³ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*, pp. 90-91; 75-76; 117.

³⁴ Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco’s Imperatives: The Politics of Culture*, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 268.

³⁷ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 57.

³⁸ Ionesco not only loved Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912), the most important Romanian playwright, but he also translated (with Monica Lovinescu) *O scrisoare pierdută* [*A Lost Letter*] into French for *L’Arche* (1994). The translation is perhaps one of Ionesco’s failures, because of its normalization that does not work with the “untranslatables” of this play. For one of the best translations of Caragiale, see Ion Luca Caragiale, *Œuvres*. Préface et notes de Silviu Iosifesco. Textes traduits sous la direction de Simone Roland et de Valentin Lipatti, București, Meridiane, 1962.

³⁹ Arleen Ionescu, *Romanian Joyce: From Hostility to Hospitality*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2014, p. 34.

Ionesco can also be compared to his compatriot and friend, philosopher-essayist Emil Cioran (1911–1995), who had changed his name into E.M. Cioran once he exiled himself in Paris and started to write in French, and who could not give up completely his Romanian identity either. Like Cioran, Ionesco refused to be a marginal, whose “aggrandized ego shifts the limelight from other critics to his own self-righteousness, which [...] adds to his bag of tricks and to the playful touch of his criticism”⁴⁰.

Dumitru Tucan also finds an affinity between Cioran and Ionesco in what he calls an authenticity based on “a negation of culture from the perspective of the need of an unusual existence which became ad-hoc at the level of discourse a mystic of difference.”⁴¹ It is not only this authenticity that brings them together but also the way in which they shaped their career. Their main Romanian books (Cioran’s *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Heights of Despair*] and Ionesco’s *Nu*) were to haunt all the other French works. Many scholars have asserted that Cioran’s *On the Heights of Despair*, which the philosopher himself considered the quintessence of his work, includes *in nuce* the themes of all his subsequent writings: the decadence of Western liberal thought, the non-believer’s religious hopelessness, contempt for history, the enchantment of music, solitude, decay, decomposition, renunciation, suffering, insomnia and the temptation of suicide⁴². My contention is that not unlike Cioran’s *On the Heights of Despair*, Ionesco’s *Nu*

⁴⁰ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 276.

⁴¹ Dumitru Tucan, “Eugen Ionescu, *NU*: un binom paradoxal: cultură – existență (I)” [“Eugen Ionescu, *NO*: A Paradoxical Bynom: Culture–Existence”], *Transilvania*, 2006, 2, p. 38; see also “Eugen Ionescu, *NU*: un binom paradoxal: cultură – existență (II)”, *Transilvania*, 2006, 3, pp. 66–69.

⁴² I come back here to one of my ideas from “The Essay as Brinkmanship: Cioran’s Fragment, Aphorism and Autobiography”, in Mario Aquilina, Nicole Wallack and Bob Cowser Jr (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 344 and from “‘Channels of Interference’: Maurice Blanchot and Emil Cioran”, *Primerjalna književnost*, 45, 2022, 1, pp. 189–208. See, among the many commentators on these themes, Emil Stan, *Cioran. Vitalitatea renunțării* [*Cioran: The Vitality of Renunciation*], Iași, Institutul European, 2005; Sylvain David, *Cioran: Un héroïsme à rebours*, Montreal, Presses Universitaires de Montréal, 2006; Nicolae Turcan, *Cioran sau excesul ca filosofie* [*Cioran or The Excess as Philosophy*]. Preface by Liviu Antonesei, Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2008; Vincent Piednoir, *Cioran avant Cioran. Histoire d’une transfiguration*. Préface de Jacques Le Rider suivi d’un entretien inédit d’Emil Cioran avec Ben-Ami Fihman, Marseille, Éditions Gaussens, 2013; Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy*, New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015; Gina Puică et Vincent Piednoir, “Preface”, in E.M. Cioran, *Apologie de la barbarie. Berlin – Bucarest (1932–1941)*. Traductions du roumain par Liliana Nicorescu, Alain Paruit, Vincent Piednoir, Gina Puică. Preface par Gina Puică et Vincent Piednoir, Paris, Éditions de L’Herne, 2015, pp. 11–19; Ștefan Bolea, “Toward the ‘Never-Born’: Mainländer and Cioran”, *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, 65, 2021, 1, pp. 145–155. For Cioran’s irony, see also Marius Nica, “The Irony and Obsessions of Cioran’s Philosophy”, in Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean (eds.), *Multicultural Representations: Literature and Discourse as Forms of Dialogue*, Târgu Mureș, Arhipelag XXI Press, 2016, pp. 118–124, and Ștefan Bolea, *Existențialismul astăzi* [*Existentialism Today*], București, Eikon, 2019, pp. 394–396.

is the source wherefrom both the playful irony of his plays and that of his responses to critical debates originate. In order to see how irony manifested itself, I will first give a short chronology of Ionesco's plays and the critical debates that they produced initially in France, and, after his plays were translated into English and performed in London, in England.

The French Debates

Ionesco's first play *La Cantatrice chauve* (finalized in 1947, with its first Romanian draft under the title *L'Anglais sans professeur* finished in 1941 or 1942)⁴³ was performed under the direction of Nicolas Bataille at Noctambules in 1950. From 1950 onwards, Ionesco was highly productive, writing *La leçon* (1951) *Les Chaises* (1952), and *L'avenir est dans les œufs* (1952). 1953 marked the first performance of Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot*, under Roger Blin's direction at the Theatre de Babylone, of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* packed into a single show directed by Marcel Cuvelier at Théâtre de la Huchette, and of the première Ionesco's most autobiographical plays, *Victimes du devoir*, followed by a series of seven sketches. *Amédée ou Comment s'en débarrasser* directed by Jean-Marie Serreau was staged by Théâtre de Babylone in 1954, also the year of the first publication of *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* at Gallimard, followed by *Théâtre I*.

By this time, like Beckett, Ionesco had become an important name of French avant-garde theatre. However, Ionesco was constantly attacked by both Marxist and conservative critics. Roland Barthes, who had returned from Romania where he worked as a librarian at l'Institut Français de Hautes Études in Bucharest between 1947 and 1949⁴⁴, and Bernard Dort set up the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire* in 1953. According to Yue Zhuo, for Barthes, "the merciless editorial pages and articles he published there were more violent in their denunciation of bourgeois culture than the 'petites mythologies' he was writing at the same time"⁴⁵. Oriented against Aristotelian and avant-garde theatre⁴⁶, the journal had identified the bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeoisie as an enemy, and reproached to

⁴³ See André Le Gall, *Eugène Ionesco*, passim. *L'Anglais sans professeur* alludes to Ionesco's unsuccessful attempt to learn English without a teacher, with the help of the Assimil-method book of exercises *L'Anglais sans peine*.

⁴⁴ For Barthes's sojourn in Romania, see Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, 2015, pp. 218-229; Alexandru Matei, "Barthes en Roumanie: Histoire et Amour, expériences pathétiques", *Romance Studies*, 34, 2016, 3-4, pp. 185-198, and Alexandru Matei, "Lire Barthes en Roumanie socialiste: les enjeux du pouvoir et leur neutralisation", *Littérature*, 2017, 186, pp. 66-81.

⁴⁵ Yue Zhuo, "The 'Political' Barthes: From Theater to Idiorrhymy", *French Forum*, 1, 2011, 36, p. 60.

⁴⁶ See Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes*, London, Reaktion Books, 2015, p. 55; Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes, de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 420.

Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov that their plays were not educative. Instead, they promoted Bertolt Brecht who had made his name in France once the touring company Berliner Ensemble staged *Mother Courage and Her Children* in 1954. Barthes lionized Brecht as the creator of “major theatre”⁴⁷, which became revolutionary, since its aim was to “intervene in history”⁴⁸.

Barthes’s articles on Brecht contained several ironic remarks about Ionesco, placed as if in passing. The very fact that Barthes never signed a review on any of Ionesco’s plays can be interpreted as a sign that he did not deem them worth writing on. In his subtly ironic review on Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, “Godot adulte”, Barthes commented: “what is remarkable in *Godot*, as in Adamov, as in Ionesco, is precisely that it provides only one language”⁴⁹. However, Barthes’s hyperbole may suggest that these playwrights lacked profundity and symbolism.

In 1955, when Ionesco’s *Maître* was published and *Jacques ou la Soumission* and *Tableau* were staged at la Huchette, *Théâtre Populaire* dedicated volume 11 entirely to Brecht; disagreeing with the controversial formula “Art can and must intervene in history” that this volume launched, Ionesco accused Barthes and Dort of “new leftist conformism”⁵⁰.

All these events are recalled in “My Critics and I”, where Ionesco ironically summarized his career as follows: *The Bald Soprano*, conceived as “the Tragedy of Language”, was welcomed with “a great deal of laughter”, which made the playwright “utterly amazed”; *La Leçon* where “one could see how a horrible, sadistic professor went about killing all his unfortunate pupils one by one”, was still welcomed by the public as “highly amusing”⁵¹. Finally, even when Ionesco transformed his “doubts”, “deepest despairs” and “inner conflicts” into dialogue in *Victims of Duty*, he was accused “of being a humbug, a practical joker” and then labelled as a writer of the avant-garde⁵². In these critical comments, Ionesco unfolds irony as a vent for frustration through self-referentiality, which is a characteristic of the ironic discourse itself. Practising “critical, deprecating observations of a self-referential nature” is a “constantly recurring technique” of

⁴⁷ See Roland Barthes, “Théâtre capital”, *France Observateur*, Juillet 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1: *Livres, Textes, Entretiens: 1942–1961*. Nouvelle édition revue, corrigée et présentée par Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, pp. 503-505.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Brechtian Revolution” (1955), in *Critical Essays*. Translated by Richard Howard, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1972 [1964], p. 38.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, “Godot adulte”, *France Observateur*, Juillet 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, p. 499.

⁵⁰ See Bernard Dort, *L'Écrivain périodique*, Paris, POL, 2001, p. 265.

⁵¹ Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, *Arts*, 22-28 February, 1956, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 83.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 84.

the ironic discourse⁵³. To this, Ionesco adds blame-by-praise: “[...] I wanted to make quite sure whether I should persevere or not; and if so, in what direction. Whom should I consult? My critics, obviously. They were the only people who could enlighten *me*. So I reread and studied with the greatest attention and the greatest respect what these critics had been kind enough to write about my plays”⁵⁴.

In this fragment, starting from hyperbole (characterized as “kind”, critics are supposed to “enlighten” him; they deserve Ionesco’s “greatest attention” and “respect”), he actually criticizes some unethical practices: following critics’ instructions, thus, benefitting from positive reviews. Ionesco dismissed such practices, as we can infer from one of his interviews, where he confessed that “a certain Monsieur Panigel” who used “a good deal of arrogance superciliousness” had called him to give him some ideas for his writing⁵⁵.

Pretending to not have understood the rules of the game (pretence irony)⁵⁶, Ionesco then juxtaposes his qualities versus flaws in a never-ending list, meant precisely to play on ironizing the unrelenting treatment he received from his critics. However, in order to understand the ironic innuendo of these incongruous remarks, the reader must be familiar with the critical debates around avant-garde theatre from France. For the savoury of Ionesco’s style, I will quote one fragment at full length:

And so I learned that I had talent: this time, next time, some time, never; that I had humour; that I was completely humourless; that I was a master of the strange and had the temperament of a mystic; that my plays had metaphysical implications: that – according to another – I was basically a realistic spirit, a psychologist, a good observer of the human heart, and that it was in this direction that I should lead my creative work; that I was rather vague; that I wrote clearly and precisely; that my gift of language *was* poor; that it was rich; that I was a violent critic of contemporary society: that the mysterious flaw in my drama consisted of my failure to denounce an unjust order of society, the established disorder; I was firmly blamed for being asocial; I learned too that I *was* in no way poetic and that I ought to be, for “there is no theatre without poetry”; that I *was* poetic, and that this was just what I should not be, for “what after all does poetry mean?”; that my drama was too self-conscious, too cold and cerebral; or on the contrary primitive, simple, elementary; that I was entirely lacking in imagination, dry and synoptic; that I had no idea how to organize my

⁵³ See Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1990 [1928], p. 112.

⁵⁴ Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 84.

⁵⁵ Eugène Ionesco and Gabriel Jacobs, “Ionesco and the Critics: Eugène Ionesco Interviewed by Gabriel Jacobs”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1, March 1975, 3, p. 646.

⁵⁶ See H.H. Clark and R. Gerrig, “On the Pretense Theory of Irony”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113, 1984, 1, pp. 113-126.

excessive and undisciplined imagination and that – instead of being dry and economical as I should be – I was verbose⁵⁷.

Humour, realism and good psychology, clearness, the gift of language, poetry are elements that a good playwright's CV should contain; however, Ionesco implies that he was both praised for and denied in turn all these qualities, catching his critics *in flagrante delicto* and suggesting that they relativized these attributes to the point of creating an endless contradiction. In this way, his thoughts about the lack of objective standards of judgment of Romanian critics from *Nu* are revived in a French context. The irony is that this time it is Ionesco himself who is criticized rather than the critic who had written both a positive and a negative review of *Maitreyi* to prove his point that criticism was futile.

The climax of these antithetical remarks is about props, which, otherwise were previously used by Brecht and praised by his critics. Ionesco executes a real *coup de théâtre* and opens in front of the readers' eyes a sort of Russian Matryoshka doll from which we extract critics' quotations containing contradictory remarks. By the end, words are reduced to mere interjections, affirmations and negations:

this was an interesting point in my favor, I would be one of the creators of the drama of objects: "there should be no props in the theatre," preached another, "they are no good, what counts in the text"; why yes, props, yes, they are very important, they make the theme of the play more visual, more theatrical; oh no they don't; oh yes they do: oh no...⁵⁸

After this maelstrom, the denouement is equally powerful, since Ionesco plays the self-ironic card in a diary style which originates from *Nu*; he apparently blames himself rather than his critics and offers himself one more chance to properly understand their wisdom:

I clasped my head in my hands. I told myself it was better to listen to one critic only. Choosing one at random, I read each of his reviews as they appeared: he blamed my drama for being too facile, for having no secrets; two months later, the same critic objected to an overloading of heavy and obscure symbols and defied anyone to understand what I was about⁵⁹.

All such irreconcilable differences were to become the plot of the play *Improvisation or the Shepherd's Chameleon*⁶⁰, expressing "the necessity to free theatre outside all external determinations"⁶¹. The play's title alludes to Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* and Giraudoux's *L'Impromptu de Paris*. Ionesco

⁵⁷ Eugène Ionesco, "My Critics and I", in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ *Improvisation* was staged by Maurice Jacquemont at Studio des Champs Élysées in 1956.

⁶¹ Jean-François Morissette, "Ionesco et la tragédie du langage", *Jeu. Revue de théâtre, Échos des années 50*, 107, 2003, 2, p. 156.

characterized it as “a rather wicked joke”, a “*montage* of quotations and complications” drawn from the “erudite studies” of three critics: two of them – Marxist critics, Barthes (featuring as Bartholomeus I) and Dort (Bartholomeus II), and Jean-Jacques Gautier (Bartholomeus III), who signed critical articles against Ionesco in the conservative daily *Le Figaro*⁶².

Esslin emphasized Molière’s touch (reminiscent of *Malade Imaginaire*), concluding that Ionesco used the 17th-century playwright’s trick of putting himself on stage in the act of writing a play, while being visited by three scholars “dressed in the gowns of the pompous doctors” of Molière’s play, “purveyors of a half-existentialist half-Brechtian farrago of dramatic theory, with allusions to Adamov, who discovered the Aristotelian principles before Aristotle, Sartre, and, of course, above all, Ionesco’s special *bête noire*, Brecht”⁶³.

Asked to read his play, he explains that this is not yet ready but it develops around a “touching scene” of a shepherd embracing a chameleon: “You can say I *am* the shepherd if you like, and the theatre is the chameleon. Because I’ve embraced a theatrical career, and the theatre, of course, *changes*, for the theatre is life”⁶⁴. However, creation is less important to the three “philosophisters”, philosophers who like to practise “pure philosophistry”⁶⁵. Ionesco uses marks of irony invoked by Booth: asteismus, often punning his teachers’ retorts (“BART I: All about costumology? / IONESCO: All about costu...what?”⁶⁶), micticism (“IONESCO [*aside*]: What else do they want them to do? Hiccup, belch, click their tongues, whoop like Red Indians or break their wind?”)⁶⁷ as well as condensation, a typical device of the incongruity theory of humour, making up a new word that condenses philosophers and sophists to designate those who came to teach him theatricality”, “costumology”, “historicization, and decorology”, “audienco-psychology” or “audienco-psycho-sociology”⁶⁸. As I showed in “Anathematizing Barthes and Admiring Beckett with Eugène Ionesco”, these terms are direct allusions to terminology Barthes used in his articles in the 1950s: the remarks about costumology (“Your costume is very ill... It’s got to be cured”⁶⁹; “Your costume is suffering from faulty nutrition...”) ⁷⁰ allude to Barthes’s “The Diseases

⁶² Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 128.

⁶³ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*, in *The Killer and Other Plays*. Translated by Donald Watson, New York, Grove Press, 1960, pp. 113-114, original emphasis.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133, 147.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

of Costume" (1955)⁷¹, the "consciousness of unconsciousness" of the audience to Barthes's *Mother Courage Blind* (1955)⁷².

Ionesco plays on irony, suggesting that in spite of mastering dialectics and having long speeches about "the Being of not-Being and the Not-Being-of-Being in the Know"⁷³, in other words, engaging in an interminable "blathering about nothing in particular"⁷⁴, to allude to Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon, the three dogmatists are actually ignorant of basic knowledge of theatre history and theory and, for example, fail even to recognize the origin of the most important playwright of Great Britain, William Shakespeare, who is in turn Russian, then, Polish, according to Bartholomeus III's *Larousse*⁷⁵, or confuse Aristotle with Adamov and attribute Aristotle's definitions of tragedy from *Poetics* to the latter⁷⁶. The appearance of Adamov in the play is not at all coincidental. In his long interview with Gabriel Jacobs, Ionesco invoked a positive review by Dort on both Adamov and himself which saw their criticism as "valid, but negative", suggesting that they "should work positively, that is to say, produce works committed to Communist party", a suggestion Ionesco ignored but Adamov took on.⁷⁷

Ionesco ridicules the three characters, who not only congratulate one another on their wise solipsism but at times contradict one another gently in a permanent dialectics. His irony reminds us of his *Nu*, where he accused Romanian critics of "absence of lucidity", "juvenile enthusiasm", "a long tradition of blunders"⁷⁸ as well as the fragment on his critics arguing on theatre with or without poetry⁷⁹ that was previously analysed at length in this article:

IONESCO: I found that Shakespeare is... poetic!
 BART I: [*perplexed*] Poetic?
 BART II: Poetic, poetic?
 IONESCO: [*timidly*] Poetic.
 BART III: Poetic, poetic, poetic?
 IONESCO: Yes, by that I mean that there's poetry in it...
 BART III: Jargon! Another piece of jargon.
 BART I: But what *is* this poetry?

⁷¹ Barthes, "The Disease of the Costume" (1955), in *Critical Essays*, p. 41.

⁷² Arleen Ionescu, "Anathematizing Barthes and Admiring Beckett with Eugène Ionesco", *Paragraph*, 45, 2022, 2, pp. 187–202.

⁷³ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 61.

⁷⁵ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, pp. 120-122.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

⁷⁷ Eugène Ionesco and Gabriel Jacobs, "Ionesco and the Critics", p. 646.

⁷⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*, pp. 72-73, Teodorescu's translation, p. 274.

⁷⁹ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 85.

BART III: [to BART I and BART II] Good Lord... poetry!... [*Pursing his lips in scorn.*]

BART II: [to BART III] Be quiet! No poetry, please [To Bart I:] Poetry's an enemy of our science!

BART I: [to Ionesco] You're steeped in false knowledge.

BART III: He only likes wild and extravagant nonsense.

BART I: [to BART II and BART III, *indicating Ionesco*] His mind hasn't been properly trained...

BART II: It's been warped.

BART III: We must straighten it out.

BART II: If we can. [To BART III:] But not, my dear Bartholomeus, in the direction you want it to take. We disagree on several points, as you very well know⁸⁰.

According to G. G. Sedgewick, in drama, irony has a special status, which differentiates it from general irony that "is the property peculiar and essential to the illusion of the theatre"; it becomes "dramatic drama", "the sense of contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition"⁸¹. This is the case of the three Bartholomeus: I (Barthes), the main voice, II (Dort), who repeats his term twice, and III (Gautier), who echoes the same term three times. Barthes and Dort signed in leftist journals, while Gautier was writing for the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro*. After Gautier had attacked Ionesco and Brecht in a review in *Le Figaro* (July 1954), Barthes commented ironically that Gautier lacked talent. "We disagree on several points" is actually a warning to Gautier, with whom Barthes and Dort agreed on criticizing avant-garde theatre but disagreed on Brecht⁸², hence the "short, inaudible confabulation between the three"⁸³ that Ionesco does not forget to include in the stage directions. The three Bartholomeus reduce all theatre to Brecht's epic drama, a reason why, after Shakespeare was dismissed, it is Molière's turn, since he did not express the "social gestus of his age"⁸⁴. Although they seem to take hold of the playwright's mind who becomes a sort of monkey trained to recite what he was told, they do not seem to impress the common-sensical cleaning woman who once has finally been allowed to enter her master's studio, manages to push them away and also clean Ionesco's mind.

The London Controversy

⁸⁰ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 122, original italics.

⁸¹ G.G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony: Especially in Drama*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018 [1960], p. 49.

⁸² See Barthes's comments on Gautier in "Comment s'en passer", *France Observateur*, Octobre 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, pp. 517-519.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 121.

After the first American production of *Waiting for Godot* in Miami and its first in London (1956), in 1958 Ionesco published two volumes of theatre at London and two volumes at New York. The debates on avant-garde theatre moved into the British cultural space under the name of The London Controversy. The influential critic Kenneth Tynan had written a review of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where he had equated the play to "a dramatic vacuum" with "no plot, no climax, no *dénouement*; no beginning, no middle, and no end", a play that "frankly jettisons everything by which we recognise theatre" and "arrives at the custom-house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport, and nothing to declare; yet it gets through, as might a pilgrim from Mars"⁸⁵. Tynan had admitted that Beckett forced critics to "re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama"⁸⁶. The abrupt shift from being Ionesco's admirer to one of his fiercest critics originates from Tynan's change of preferences from avant-garde theatre to Brecht who had become a point of reference in his subsequent criticism⁸⁷. Thus, after the revival performance of *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* at the Royal Court (1958), Tynan wrote the polemical article "Ionesco: Man of Destiny?" in *The Observer*, where, in a parody of contrasts, he seemed to contradict everything he had previously found valuable in Beckett and Ionesco. The article started on high tones, considering their spectators "ostriches" who ruled Brecht "out of court" because "he was too real":

[...] they preferred Beckett's *Endgame*, in which the human element was minimal, to *Waiting for Godot*, which not only contained two tramps of mephitic reality but even seemed to regard them, as human beings, with love. [...] But it was only when M. Ionesco arrived, that they hailed a messiah. Here at last was a self-proclaimed advocate of *anti-theatre*: explicitly anti-realist, and by implication anti-reality as well⁸⁸.

He continued his tirade against Ionesco's plays in a style that bears a strange resemblance to Barthes's final evaluation of avant-garde theatre, and that proves that Barthes's ideas had crossed the border to London: "Here at last was a writer ready to declare that words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible"⁸⁹. Barthes had previously mentioned that the inability of Ionesco's mute character from *The Chairs* to speak was the proof of an

⁸⁵ Kenneth Tynan, in *The Observer*, 7 August, 1955, p. 11, quoted in L. Graver and R. Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 104.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

⁸⁷ See Kenneth Tynan, "Braw and Brecht", *The Observer*, 2 September, 1956, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Tynan, "Ionesco, Man of Destiny?", *The Observer*, June 22, 1958, in Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 88.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

“essentially precarious”, “faked” a theatrical act that “becomes true when it shuts up”⁹⁰.

Resorting to raw sarcasm, Tynan accused Ionesco of having created “a world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes evocative, and quite often neither, on which occasion, they become profoundly tiresome”⁹¹. On the joke level, Tynan claims to define Ionesco’s work, yet rather expresses direct contempt:

A blind alley, perhaps, adorned with *tachiste* murals. Or a self-imposed vacuum, wherein the author ominously bids us observe the absence of air. Or, best of all, a funfair ride on a ghost train, all skulls and hooting waxworks, from which we emerge into *the* far more intimidating clamor of diurnal reality⁹².

Taking irony and humour as a “source of consolation and of defence against the unknown and the inexplicable”⁹³, Tynan evaluates Ionesco’s theatre as “pungent and exciting”, but changes his mind, asserting that it is actually “a diversion”⁹⁴.

The next part is an in-depth analysis of the *tour-de-force* Ionesco’s reply which is as theatrical as *Nu* and *Improvisation*. As Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira rightly observed, the London Controversy progressed like a play, with stage directions that “take the form of a text printed in a special font, and do more than just introducing the subject of the text that follows it. Full of irony, stage directions give the reader [...] the context in which the controversy occurred, from an obviously biased point of view”⁹⁵.

Indeed, Tynan is introduced in a note as “one of the critics who fought most of battles that made Ionesco well known in England. When the battle was won, he, then, doubted himself and decided to talk about it in *The Observer*, giving an interrogative title to his article”⁹⁶. In this way, “Tynan’s weakness of judgment is made clear: not only has he changed his opinion about Ionesco but also he has *doubts* and talks about them using an *interrogative* title”⁹⁷. Moreover, Ionesco offers an apparently “gratuitous information”, “the title of the book in which one of Tynan’s articles was published in France, something like *Les jeunes gens en*

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Le théâtre français d’avant-garde”, *Le français dans le monde*, Juin-Juillet 1961, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, pp. 1097-1098.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁹³ Keith Cameron, “Humour and History”, in Keith Cameron Oxford (ed.), *Humour and History*, Oxford, Intellect Books, 1993, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Kenneth Tynan, “Ionesco, Man of Destiny?”, p. 89.

⁹⁵ Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira, “Stage Directions Beyond Theater: Eugène Ionesco’s Exercise in Theatricality”, *Revista Brasileira Estudos da Presença*, 6, 2016, 2, p. 339, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2237-266052382>. Accessed February 13, 2022.

⁹⁶ Eugène Ionesco, “The London Controversy”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 87.

⁹⁷ Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira, “Stage Directions Beyond Theater”, p. 339.

colère vous parlent”, which makes Tynan’s article lose “its authority from the start”⁹⁸. After setting the scene, Ionesco starts from a deferring attitude to the critic about whom he uses only positive words:

I was of course honoured by the article Mr Tynan devoted to my two plays [...] in spite of the strictures it contained, which a critic has a perfect right to make. However, since some of his objections seem to me to be based on premises that are not only false but, strictly speaking outside the domain of the theatre, I think I have the right to make certain comments⁹⁹.

In his reply, Ionesco assumed both the identity of Tynan’s reverential reader and that of his critic, skilfully playing one against the other, yet remaining “above” what he asserts¹⁰⁰. Declaring his dislike of messiahs, Ionesco confessed that an artist or a playwright should never consider such a direction, debunking ironically every single commentary from the most audacious one, which he dismissed from the beginning, claiming that it is rather his opponent “who is in search of messiahs”¹⁰¹. Then he proceeded methodically, from the general misunderstanding of the playwright’s role (“[a] playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message”) and of art’s meaning (“[a] work of art has nothing to do with doctrine”) to the allegations about his anti-realism, never forgetting to add the verb “to seem”, in a self-deprecating game of verbal irony, as if blaming himself for the misunderstanding of Tynan’s words:

Mr. Tynan seems to accuse me of being deliberately, explicitly anti-realist; of having declared that words have no meaning and that all language is incommunicable. That is only partly true, for the very fact of writing and presenting plays is surely incompatible with such a view. [...] As for the idea of reality, Mr. Tynan seems [...] to acknowledge only one place of reality: what is called the “social” plane, which seems to me to be the most external, in other words the most superficial¹⁰².

In his reply, Tynan further accused Ionesco of being stuck in “the groove of cubism” and “in danger of forgetting: of locking himself up in that ball of mirrors which in philosophy is known a solipsism”¹⁰³. Ionesco’s response letter to *The Observer* which remained unpublished appeared in a special issue of *Cahiers des Saisons* where he responded to his “courteous enemy”, nevertheless considering that to have his letter published in *The Observer* would be an abuse of hospitality

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 339.

⁹⁹ Eugène Ionesco, “The Playwright’s Role”, *The Observer*, June 29, 1958, in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 90

¹⁰⁰ See Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 19.

¹⁰¹ Eugène Ionesco, “The Playwright’s Role”, *The Observer*, June 29, 1958, in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 90.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Tynan, “Ionesco and the Phantom”, *The Observer*, 6 July 1958, in Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 95.

as well as “a waste of time, for we would only succeed in repeating ourselves”¹⁰⁴. Yet, who did Ionesco ironically designate by “we”, since he did not appear in the pages of the newspaper anymore? His critics, obviously. Making more or less the same tactfully ironical remarks, he stated simply that the playwright’s mission is to “offer only testimony, not a didactic message”¹⁰⁵. Finally invoking an episode from his military training in Romania, when his superior despised him because his boots were not well polished, he asked rhetorically: “How could I make him understand that there are other standards of judgment, apart from polishing boots? And that shining my boots did not entirely exhaust my possibilities *as a human being*?”¹⁰⁶ The superiority in the social order, Ionesco thought, could be surpassed only at his sergeant’s home where he could have shared the same fears of death as Ionesco: “It is in our solitude that we can all *be* reunited. And that is why true society transcends our social machinery”¹⁰⁷.

Concluding Remarks

This article proposed a thorough investigation of Ionesco’s irony, starting with his Romanian debut, *Nu*, a book of literary criticism in which he offended all his compatriots, and continuing with his dramatic career and his responses to his critics from France and England. I analysed Ionesco’s responses to Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort, the admirers of Brecht, who were running the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire*, to Jean-Jacques Gautier, who signed critical articles against Ionesco in *Le Figaro*, and to Kenneth Tynan who shifted from Ionesco’s admirer after his debut in London to one of his fiercest critics with whom he had highly ironical exchanges in *The Observer*. Ionesco’s verbal irony from *Nu* was later on transformed into dramatic irony and sarcasm in a play like *Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*, where Ionesco attempted to free theatre of all external theories that he considered fake. Juxtaposing incongruous remarks of his critics from Paris and London, Ionesco performed irony at its best, in a Romanian-recognisable style that was perhaps hard to digest by his critics, yet a mark of the playwright’s wisdom and indubitable literary talent.

¹⁰⁴ Eugène Ionesco, “Hearts Are Not Worn on the Sleeve”, published as “Le Cœur n’est pas sur la Main”, in *Cahiers des Saisons*, 15, 1959, Hiver, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

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PERFORMING IRONY: EUGÈNE IONESCO'S BATTLES WITH HIS CRITICS
(Abstract)

My article endeavours to investigate playwright Eugène Ionesco's irony, following two critical debates: the first was mainly conducted by Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort, in the pages of the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire*, which found Ionesco's ironic response not only in numerous interviews and theoretical texts, but also in the play *Improvisation or The Shepherd's Chameleon*, where Barthes and Dort feature as characters. The second, known as the London Controversy, consisted of a series of articles written by Kenneth Tynan and Ionesco in *The Observer* and *Cahiers des Saisons*. The rationale behind these two analyses is to prove that, like his compatriot Emil Cioran's *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Heights of Despair*], which was the stylistic matrix of his French texts, Ionesco's first book, *Nu* [*No*] can be traced back as the origin of Ionesco's irony. Ionesco's irony has an Eastern European descent, and perhaps this is why Barthes, Dort and Tynan could not relate properly to Ionesco's playful remarks.

Keywords: Eugène Ionesco, Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, Kenneth Tynan, the critical debates from *Théâtre Populaire* (1953–1964).

ÎNSCENAREA IRONIEI. CONFRUNTAREA DINTRE EUGÈNE IONESCO ȘI
CRITICII SĂI
(Rezumat)

Articolul meu încearcă să analizeze ironia dramaturgului Eugène Ionesco, urmărind două dezbateri critice: prima s-a desfășurat în principal în articolele sub semnătura lui Roland Barthes și a lui Bernard Dort în paginile revistei polemice *Théâtre Populaire*, care și-au găsit răspunsul ironic din partea lui Ionesco în numeroase interviuri și texte teoretice, dar și în piesa de teatru *Improvițiație sau Cameleonul păstorului*, în care Barthes and Dort sunt *dramatis personae*; cea de-a doua, cunoscută sub denumirea de „Controversa din Londra”, a constat într-o serie de articole publicate de Kenneth Tynan și Ionesco în *The Observer* și *Cahiers des Saisons*. Motivația principală a celor două analize este de a demonstra faptul că, similar volumului *Pe culmile disperării* al lui Emil Cioran, care a reprezentat o matrice stilistică a textelor sale franceze, prima carte a lui Ionesco, *Nu*, poate fi considerată drept originea ironiei lui Ionesco. Ironia lui Ionesco este de sorginte est-europeană și probabil de aceea Barthes, Dort și Tynan au avut dificultăți de a răspunde remarcilor jucăușe ale lui Ionesco.

Cuvinte-cheie: Eugène Ionesco, Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, Kenneth Tynan, dezbateri critice din revista *Théâtre Populaire* (1953–1964).