

A Centenary Foretold: the Reception of Eugène Ionesco in his 'Fatherland'

Eugène Ionesco was born in Romania in 1909, but he died in France in 1994. The name on his birth certificate was Eugen Ionescu, yet the name on his grave in the Montparnasse cemetery is Eugène Ionesco, as he is known across the world. In this article, Octavian Saiu explores these polarities of Ionesco's destiny from the perspective of his reception in Romania, where nationalistic claims are embroiled in contention over his identity. The paradoxes of this situation are clearly illustrated by the conflict surrounding the celebration of his centenary in 2009, when Marie-France Ionesco, the writer's daughter and the trustee of the estate, banned a series of Romanian performances of Ionesco's plays planned for the occasion. Her decision reflected the traumatizing relationship Ionesco had, even beyond his grave, with what he uncompromisingly called his 'fatherland'. Octavian Saiu is an Associate Professor at the National University of Theatre and Cinematography (NUTC) in Romania and a Guest Lecturer at the University of Otago in New Zealand. He is Vice-President of the Romanian Section of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) and Director of the Eugène Ionesco–Samuel Beckett Research Centre at NUTC.

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IN HIS NATIVE COUNTRY, Ionesco has been a vivid presence as well as an enduring absence. His plays have been published and performed many times, his merits are fully recognized, and his name is revered. Yet, despite all these accolades, it remains a fact that after his departure from Romania in 1942 he never revisited the land which he referred to as the 'country of the father'. Ionesco was born to a French mother and a Romanian father, and this duality, even more than physical relocation, affected his entire existence. He loved France and, although he thought living was constant exile, he considered Paris his only home. He loathed his Romanian roots and considered his exit from Romania a 'blessed runaway',¹ a second birth through which he gained freedom and the right to live in the eternally idealized country of his heart, in the city of lights, where, as a member of the Académie Française, he achieved the highest recognition.²

In the following pages I attempt to map Ionesco's presence in Romanian theatre and to assess the deeper meaning of his absence. These two facets of his Romanian reception constitute a distinctive paradox paralleled

only by Beckett's reception in Ireland. After the death of his mother (1948), the author of *Waiting for Godot* only once set foot in Ireland, where he has been cherished, nevertheless, as the prodigal son, a figure of great significance for Irish literature and theatre. The widely reported opinion that he preferred France at war over Ireland at peace and the fact that he wrote in both French and English matter less than the national and nationalistic claims of those in the field of Irish Studies who write about him with pride.³

The parallel between the two writers is more meaningful than it may first appear, as Ionesco in his country of birth is still considered to be a Romanian writer, whose name is often spelled Eugen Ionescu,⁴ the signature he abandoned even before he renounced his Romanian citizenship. Both writers inscribed, albeit in different ways, the feeling of alienation, and each redefined his cultural identity through language. Yet in their respective countries of origin they have been reintegrated into the literary traditions that they have, in fact, surpassed.

The differences between Beckett and Ionesco, however, are as remarkable as the

similarities, as the centennial celebrations of the two authors have demonstrated. Beckett's centenary in 2006 was marked by a series of events all over the world, particularly in Dublin, the city whose symbol he had become, and in Paris, where he had chosen to live and die. In 2009, Ionesco's centenary was almost completely overlooked. In Paris, little was done to honour the memory of a writer who, it is claimed, has become as central to the French canon as Molière.⁵ The global economic recession, which affected France too, had maybe reduced the appetite for celebrations and may account partially for this silence, but it came as an ironic post-mortem form of punishment for the author who always relished the limelight and who would have wished to be the centre of attention on such a special occasion.

In Bucharest, he was not celebrated as he deserves to have been, although for different reasons. This situation, the consequence of his ambiguous identity, epitomized all the contradictions of his reception in Romania: Marie-France Ionesco, the playwright's daughter and trustee of the estate, simply decided to ban a series of Romanian productions based on her father's works.

Marie-France Ionesco's radical and regrettable gesture triggered an avalanche of public reactions from Romanian theatre people, but nothing could deter her, and the decision remained binding.⁶ Her argument, implied rather than substantial, was simple: Eugène Ionesco, the author who made his theatrical debut in Paris and stubbornly wanted to be recognized as a leading figure in French culture, was not to be celebrated in Romania as Eugen Ionescu, the Romanian who had turned away from his former heritage.

Only a few events dedicated to Ionesco took place, and the awkward scenario of 2009 prompted a series of questions to which no easy answer can be given. They necessarily refer to his presence in, and absence from, Romania, and to his Romanian reception now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To attempt to answer such questions about the present, one must begin with the past, with the moment when Ionesco was still Ionescu, and – no less significant – when

his French plays were first translated, performed, and published in Romanian.

Ionesco on the Romanian Stage

In his homeland, the reception of Ionesco, the French playwright of Romanian extraction, is inseparably linked to the image of Ionescu, the Romanian intellectual of the 1930s and 1940s.⁷ Ionesco remains an epitome of Romanian exile as do E. M. Cioran and Mircea Eliade. Until the Romanian Revolution in 1989, the official attitude towards the exodus of the Romanian intelligentsia after the Second World War was clear – it was regarded as a form of betrayal. Nevertheless, a few names became known to the Romanian public. The major issue with the diaspora authors, among whom Ionesco was arguably the most famous, was not the content of their texts but their inconvenient status. This ambiguity, however, allowed some of them to be published in translation as foreign writers, otherwise publication would have been impossible.

Ionesco remained almost unknown in his home country until 1964, when *Rhinoceros* was staged by the Comedy Theatre in Bucharest. The specific political references in the play became the centre of audience attention, and the production was an absolute success.⁸ The Comedy Theatre premiere was followed by a limited number of productions all over the country. Between 1964 and 1968, six plays were performed in Romania: *Rhinoceros* (1964), *The Bald Prima Donna* (1965), *Exit the King* (1965), *The Chairs* (1965), *The Victims of Duty* (1968), and *Killer without Reward* (1968). When his plays were finally translated and published in a volume, some were already familiar to Romanian readers thanks to these theatre productions.

Ionesco, as a Romanian-French writer, needed no introduction. This explains only partially why the 1968 volume of Ionesco's plays in Romanian contains no references to his place of birth, and no biography.⁹ Accompanied by an impeccable study by B. Elvin, the plays seemed to have arrived at a moment when recognition of Ionesco's fame was assured. Yet previously there had been

very few situations in Romania in which his name had been known. This paradox may have two different explanations. On the one hand, there was already an awareness of Ionesco's works largely due to performances of them. On the other hand, by omitting any allusion to his life abroad, the editors circumvented complications, at least as far as censorship was concerned. Ionesco was, after all, a Romanian living in Paris, and the Communist authorities did not need to be reminded of this fact.¹⁰

The awkward situation concerning Ionesco raises many questions about his presence/absence in Romania. The historical circumstances explain this awkwardness only to a certain extent and, beyond that, there is the sheer absurdity of a phenomenon that involves Ionesco only in a vicarious way. He was not entirely absent from the Romanian theatre, since at least one production of his works enjoyed international recognition.¹¹ Yet his presence was constantly observed, challenged, and misinterpreted by vigilant Communist authorities, and, inevitably, such political surveillance turned him into a semi-fictitious character.

While reading his plays or watching them performed, Romanian audiences were not completely aware of the real identity of their author. His name was invariably given as Eugen Ionescu, a forced appropriation, with no further clarification available. What was omitted from the public appraisal was the fact that Ionesco had abandoned Romanian almost completely as soon as he started writing in French, in France.¹² Despite the many debts to his Romanian precursors and to his own Romanian *oeuvre*, this makes him a French playwright by status, while remaining a Romanian by birth.

Ionesco as Ionescu

The history of Ionesco's publication in Romania does not suggest continuity, but a long sequence of gaps that are not easily bridged. Furthermore, the key point of those asserting the unity Ionescu-Ionesco is highly contentious: that Ionesco's early works, written entirely in Romanian, are insepar-

able from his later texts published in France (and vice versa). Yet those early works were non-theatrical, so they cannot be seen as the initial sketches of Ionesco's major plays. Although he did not exactly reinvent himself when starting to write for the stage, Ionesco did reinvent theatrical language and, in doing so, he began a completely new phase of his creative path. If Beckett's theatre is in many ways an extension of his prose, Ionesco's plays differ radically in tone, structure, and subject matter from everything he had written in Romania.¹³

Before the war and his self-imposed exile in France, Ionesco's major publication was *Nu* (*No*, 1934), a famously polemical essay in which he attacked all the established cultural values of Romania. The caustic criticism in *No* is directed equally towards Ionesco's contemporaries and his predecessors with one clear aim, that of denying Romanian culture any claim to universality. His diatribes were expressions of intellectual frustration, due to the fact that he belonged to an isolatel culture; but they were also the result of his deep convictions about Romania's cultural establishment.¹⁴

After his first departure in 1938, Ionesco continued to publish in Bucharest, in a prestigious literary magazine, *Viata Romaneasca* (*Romanian Life*), a series of letters from Paris, the 'Lettres de Paris'. This aspect of his Romanian literary career was abruptly interrupted in 1946 when Ionesco was officially convicted as a traitor. He was judged and condemned *in absentia* to five years' correctional detention for his insults to the Romanian Army.¹⁵ These 'insults' were, in fact, remarks about the armed forces of Romania. Ionesco did not attack the army as an institution, but the pro-Nazi Romanian political regime that it served before 1944.

Ionesco's great Parisian success in the early 1950s failed to register in his native country. Not until 1963 was the author, who was famous in Europe, published again in Romania; and this was in arguably the most important cultural journal of the period, *Secolul 20* (*The Twentieth Century*, No. 9) in 1963. The play was *Rhinoceros*.¹⁶ In 1965 another play was included in the same

journal.¹⁷ This time the text was described as ‘the original version of *The Bald Prima Donna – Englezeste fara profesor (Teach Yourself English)*, which Ionesco wrote in Romanian in 1948. As Ionesco’s biographers confirm, *Teach Yourself English* is, indeed, an ur-version of *The Bald Prima Donna*, but this should not trigger any form of national pride because they are ultimately two different texts.¹⁸ Furthermore, their subtitles differ: *Teach Yourself English* is a ‘comedy’, whereas *The Bald Prima Donna* is an ‘anti-play’. This discrepancy marks a serious transition in Ionesco’s theatrical thinking.

Surprisingly, given Ionesco’s reputation abroad as a playwright, his first texts to be published after the 1989 Revolution were not plays, but poems – *Elegii pentru fiinte mici (Elegies for Tiny Things, 1990)* – and a collection of annotated theoretical writings *Eu (I)*.¹⁹ Was this a means of reasserting the Romanian identity of the author, which would have been compromised by a translation of his French theatre work? A long list of titles followed, drawing attention to Ionesco’s existence and his value and reputation as a Romanian-born writer.

The most important Ionesco translation is the complete set of his plays in two editions, sponsored by Univers and Humanitas, two of the most highly esteemed national publishing houses. The Univers edition was a solitary journey, started in 1994 and completed in 1998 by Dan C. Mihailescu, a critic who was able to provide extensive annotations of the texts. The Humanitas editions are a selection of Ionesco’s most frequently performed plays, translated into Romanian with commentaries by Vlad Russo and Vlad Zografii, the latter being a dramatist. As a publishing house, Humanitas has done the most for Ionesco’s reputation in Romania. No fewer than twenty-five translated volumes of Ionesco’s texts (an undisputed record) have seen the light of day under its auspices since 1990.

Translation is part of a larger venture. As a mark of its editorial policy, Humanitas has dedicated an entire series to cultural figures who left the country soon after the Second World War, thus restoring exiled authors such

as Cioran, Eliade, and Ionesco to their homeland. Humanitas was created immediately after the 1989 political revolutions, as a response to a cultural desire to reintegrate the Romanian diaspora in Romania’s cultural heritage, but with a difference. The publishing house did not attempt to reclaim the exiles – Ionesco, in particular – as Romania’s own authors, but, rather, to assure their presence in the Romanian cultural space, without any exhibition of nationalistic pride.²⁰

Pride and Prejudice

Nationalistic pride is the sentiment that sustains a different enterprise, which is the persistent investigation of Ionesco’s early works and his biography by Romanian scholars. Many articles and books are dedicated entirely to this, the vast majority motivated by an obvious desire to prove that Ionesco is Ionescu, and that everything he wrote or did in his native country before leaving it for ever, was the foundation for his *oeuvre* created in France.

Behind this desire was a latent fear that Ionesco would remain separated from his Romanian background. Yet the reality is that Ionesco’s international reception, not least his reception in France, unquestionably recognizes his Romanian roots. Ionesco himself embraced the Romanian side of his writing when he published French versions of two of his first works, *No* and *Hugoliade*, in Paris in the 1980s. This gesture should not be mistaken for a demonstrative acknowledgement of his Romanian identity: the French editions of these texts were simply translations of the Romanian originals and, although signed ‘Ionesco’, they belonged to Ionescu. This was the author’s way of showing his French readers that he was once an ‘angry teenager’ whose nihilistic urge would be transferred to the language of his theatre.²¹

These two French publications thus represent a counterpoint to the fear that Ionescu, the Romanian, was not sufficiently known in France, so that a constant reaffirmation of his Romanian identity was necessary. Such a feeling partially accounts for the conflict surrounding the centenary in 2009.

Equally substantial was the series of critical works produced in French about Ionesco's literary beginnings. At least three key studies were clearly concerned with the reevaluation of Ionesco's Romanian literary past. In 1989, Gelu Ionescu published *Les Débuts littéraires roumains d'Eugène Ionesco (1926–1940)*, a book first written in Romanian but whose publication in Bucharest was blocked by censorship. This profound study gives French readers an insight into Ionesco's works before his resounding French debut. Gelu Ionescu is the undisputed authority on this topic, and his book addresses every detail of Ionesco's Romanian writings.

Two more books were published in France in 1993 on the topic of how Eugen Ionescu, the rebellious author, would become Eugène Ionesco in 1951. The first, Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev's *La Jeunesse littéraire d'Eugène Ionesco*, was a significant endeavour to present *No*, Ionesco's 1934 essay, in terms of the cultural background that it challenged and the critical responses it triggered in that decade. The articles published about it in the literary journals of the 1930s were not merely described, but translated into French by Cleynen-Serghiev and included in an addendum to her study.

The 'Generation of 1927'

This vast critical assemblage, comprising reviews and articles published in various Romanian journals of the 1930s, offered an understanding of the period in which Ionesco lived and wrote his first works. With its publication, the subject of Ionesco's Romanian origin and formation was done complete justice. Another book appearing in France in 1993 simply confirmed that the subject had been exhausted. Alexandra Hamdan's *Ionesco avant Ionesco: Portrait de l'artiste en jeune homme*, is a reworked doctoral thesis that traces Ionesco's trajectory as a young Romanian author who was terrified by the prospect of living and creating in an isolated culture.

The French renditions of Ionesco's early Romanian texts together with these critical studies constitute clear proof that his origin, his roots, his first language, and his cultural

formation are not matters of dispute in Ionesco's adopted country. Any fear, on the part of some of his Romanian commentators, that all these aspects had not been sufficiently clarified should have been resolved. Yet this was not the case.

In Romania, Ionesco's early literary youth is one of the more intensely explored and debated aspects of his biography. The reasons for the huge attention that it has provoked are not exclusively cultural, and their ramifications need further study. The 'Romanian reminiscences' of the period 1927–1940 in Ionesco's life and work are crucial for any determination of his Romanian identity.²² Despite his ingenuously and famously negative attitude towards that period, many interpretations of it by post-1989 Romanian exegetes display a perplexing ambivalence.²³

Unlike Beckett's early writings, which have been largely discussed by scholars (even though he himself rejected them), Ionesco's early literary output is either ignored or restricted to *No*.²⁴ This has been partly to his advantage, for not all these early texts are rewarding. Yet the example of Beckett proves that a great writer's prentice pieces can be read through the lens created by his major works, and the curiosity about Ionesco's Romanian years is, of course, justified by the recognition accorded to him as a playwright.

From a contemporary viewpoint, Ionesco is inevitably regarded as part of the generation of 1927, which sought to make a major cultural difference in Romania through a modern, European orientation.²⁵ The profuse interest in his early works is inseparable from the current idealization of this generation, to which Cioran and Eliade also belong. It was a generation influenced by Nae Ionescu, a professor of philosophy at the University of Bucharest, whose lectures about the classics greatly inspired his students, but whose right-wing political ideas also made their impact on some of them. Ionesco resisted this dangerous temptation, which cannot be said of Eliade, Cioran, and so many of his friends and colleagues who would turn into 'rhinoceroses', as he would later bitterly imply.

More inclined to admire their intellectual accomplishments than their political mistakes,

the Romanian commentators of that period prefer to focus on Cioran's essays, on Eliade's prose written in Bucharest, and on Ionesco's *No*. This broader context explains why, after 1989, some of those who wrote about Ionesco's early works connected them with the image of his youth, which they had personally witnessed. This is the case with Arshavir Aterian, author of 'Cite ceva din junetea bucuresteană a lui Eugen Ionescu' ('A Few Moments from the Bucharest Youth of Eugen Ionescu'), or with Barbu Brezianu, the Brancusi authority whose 'unknown portraits' were published in 1994.²⁶ Of the many Romanian articles and books on the Ionesco/Ionescu issue (only some of which share the perspective of Aterian and Brezianu), one is iconic. It is Marta Petreu's *Ionescu in țara tatălui (Ionescu in the Fatherland)*, which is built more around prejudice than pride, and is the exception that confirms the rule.²⁷

Affirming Individualism

Petreu's book appeared one year before Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine published in France her *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: Forgetting Fascism*, which aimed to prove, with the help of archival documents, that Cioran and Eliade shared the political beliefs of their teacher, Nae Ionescu, in their youth. Even so, she preferred to judge Ionesco in a different light. For her, Ionesco was not a fascist but simply someone who had to sign a pact with the fascist Romanian power by accepting a diplomatic position in Vichy.

Lavastine's book was a unique attempt to investigate the political past of these three authors, who all tried, in different ways, to avoid any open discussion about it. Petreu's study was dedicated exclusively to Ionesco, but it, too, represented a moment of change in that, for the first time, the author's Romanian years were not idealized in relation to his theatre, but discussed as the reason for his constant hatred of his 'fatherland'.²⁸

Marta Petreu is a respected name in Romanian scholarship in this particular area.²⁹ Before she published her study in 2001, she had often engaged with Ionesco's

youthful writings and political struggles and her articles in prestigious literary magazines and book chapters published from 1994 onwards anticipated the critical position that she would confirm and strengthen in her later book.

One chapter, which was included in a collective volume titled *Ionesco dupa/après Ionesco (Ionesco after Ionesco)* and which was published in Romania in 2000, is particularly significant. The volume was in French and offered a mosaic of perspectives united by the question of Ionesco's posterity.³⁰ Petreu's chapter is devoted to Ionesco's place in the 1927 generation, and her key point is that, unlike other members of the 1927 generation, who believed in the extreme right, Ionesco 'between the two wars . . . stayed faithful to the lessons of individualism, irony, relativism and sophisticated subjectivism, in his political direction'.³¹

References to the cultural life of the period abound – from Cioran to Eliade, and from the academic milieu to cultural periodicals. Petreu follows Ionesco to his first Parisian years, when he was working on his doctoral dissertation, and provides insight into his anti-fascist views. Her chapter also shows that Ionesco survived the temptation to accept that other dangerous doctrine, which is the extreme left, thanks to his trust in individualism.³²

Petreu quotes copiously from Ionesco's letters and books (some written in the same period, some published much later) in which he accuses Romania of radical nationalism. However, she does not omit the pact that Ionesco signed with the most nationalistic of all Romania's governments when he agreed to work for Romania's embassy in Vichy. In *Ionesco after Ionesco*, Petreu praises Ionesco's courage in accusing his country of being contaminated by extremism, as he had done in 1946 in the letter referred to above containing his infamous remarks about the army. However, she adds: 'Ionesco's dispute with Romania – in two roles often linked, that of the legionary Romania and that of the "fatherland" – could not have stopped here.'³³

Petreu's 'dispute' with Ionesco did not stop in *Ionesco after Ionesco*. It continued in

Ionesco in the Fatherland, her book on the thorny subject of Ionesco's youth in and outside Romania, which she does not idealize. This study employs a psychoanalytical framework (reflected in its title), and considers Ionesco's later dismissal of his early years in Romania as a form of exorcism, an attempt to purge the evil that he had embraced by accepting a diplomatic post in Vichy.³⁴ Like many other Romanian scholars, Petreu traces the indeterminacies of Ionesco's drama to that earlier period before his exile. 'The motives of his dramatic *oeuvre*' are to be identified as a subtle presence in the 1934 *No*: the desire to shock, to challenge the readers' expectations, to deny established values, and to search for a personal truth.³⁵

She reinforces the significance of the Romanian years for Ionesco's entire body of work and does so in a radical way by suggesting that Ionesco 'built his *oeuvre* on what he experienced in the "fatherland", during his childhood and youth'.³⁶ Furthermore, his 'making peace with Romania' was only possible when the two forms of extremism, the right and the left, were finally overcome.³⁷

The Sophist and his 'Fatherland'

Petreu makes use of a variety of philosophical references from Gorgias³⁸ to Camus, and from Pascal to Jaspers, only to conclude that the best metaphor to describe Ionesco's world is that of metaphysical comedy – the puppet manipulated by an invisible hand.³⁹ Unfortunately, Petreu tends to rely heavily on her explanatory framework and ends up speculating overmuch on the sophistic background of the 1927 generation, whose major figures supposedly were more attracted by the shape of certain political ideas than by their effective content.

It is not hard to explain why the issue of sophism plays such a central part in her account. Petreu wants to fuse her previous work with her new preoccupations and discovers that Ionesco as sophist fills the desired role. She describes his adamant disengagement from the politics of his generation in sophistic terms, but her endeavour to prove Ionesco's devotion to France as originating

in the troubled period before the Second World War is biographical.⁴⁰

Petreu's occasionally harsh tone and severe accusations could not have been accepted without some reaction.⁴¹ The most emphatic response came from Marie-France Ionesco, who published *Portretul scriitorului in Secol* (*The Portrait of the Writer in the Century*), which intended to question the arguments that both Petreu (in Romania) and Laignel-Lavastine (in France) had put forward independently of each other.⁴² Marie-France Ionesco's book – first published in Romania by Humanitas, then in France – is a personal, emotional expression of her father's thoughts, friendships, and 'self-interrogations'.⁴³

But her book is also a 'defence of the man and his work' – the author to whom she invariably refers as 'Ionesco' and never as 'Ionescu' – her avowed aim being to set the record straight, especially as she has found Petreu's vocabulary insulting. She disliked Petreu's emphasis on Ionesco's sophistry, the label of 'mannerist' that she had used, and the entire framework in which Petreu had put her father's early works.⁴⁴ She dismissed Petreu's research as 'mediocre'.⁴⁵ More than that, she rebuffed all of Petreu's political indictments in an accurate and clear way, aiming to demonstrate that Ionesco's fractious relationship with his fatherland, both of a personal and ideological nature, did not block his 'profound bonds' with it.⁴⁶ The most significant, intimate, and, indeed, enduring of these bonds, she claimed, was Ionesco's Orthodoxy, which had survived the temptations of Catholicism.⁴⁷

The last pages of Marie-France Ionesco's book are a touching portrait of Ionesco, and an intimate account of his friendship with Cioran and Eliade. No one would suspect, reading these pages, that there was ever more than affection, respect, and trust binding these figures together. No one would dare accuse them of covering each other's guilty past, as Laignel-Lavastine suggests.

Marie-France Ionesco's text is a personal portrait, which lacks objectivity, despite its large number of quotations and precise historical references. Yet, more significantly, it crystallizes the image of Ionesco as the

Romanian-born French author who left but never quite replaced his native country, a country which, as Marie-France Ionesco says clearly in a different text and in different circumstances, nevertheless 'ceased to be his'.⁴⁸

Chronicle of a Centenary Foretold

Given these historical facts, the incidents occasioned by the 2009 centenary may be reconsidered, if not definitively clarified. Was Ionesco truly suited to a Romanian celebration by virtue of birth and literary debut? Would such a celebration have done adequate justice to him?

In Romania, with a few notable exceptions, accounts of Ionesco's life and work are visibly biased, and an insistence on his connection with his homeland prevails over the realities of his biography. A long series of Romanian studies overemphasizes Ionesco's debt to Ion Luca Caragiale and Urmuz, two of his most prominent national predecessors. However, paradoxically, the most convincing proof of such affinities is to be found in the French scholarly works of Paul Vernois, Marie-Claude Hubert, and Emmanuel Jacquart.⁴⁹

In France, there is no anxiety about Ionesco's Romanian birth and development, and, indeed, they cannot be ignored. And yet, regardless of this and perhaps because the vast majority of French critical texts on Ionesco have not been translated into Romanian, the Romanian reception of Ionesco is dominated by a strong desire to retrieve him from the pantheon of French theatre – or to keep him there, but to attach a Romanian badge to his imposing profile. It was against this attitude that Marie-France Ionesco reacted in 2009, and not against the prospect of seeing Ionesco celebrated in his country of origin *per se*.

Ultimately, she reacted against something that is more than a mere detail and more than an irony of theatre history. When Ionesco is mentioned in Romania on a poster or in a review, his name is consistently spelled Ionescu – Eugen Ionescu. This change of vowels and accents is a way of asserting the author's Romanian identity, of reinforcing his *national* status. If, indeed, the Romanian

celebrations had been carried out in 2009, Ionesco would have been praised as Ionescu, and this alteration would have been more significant than any other gesture.

The young Ionesco rejected Romanian nationalism and all the triumphalist ambitions it triggered in a manner not entirely different from the negative one espoused by Cioran, who also made his stormy debut with *On the Heights of Despair* in 1934.⁵⁰ As Eugen Ionescu, the budding author rejected the notion of national culture and even the idea of the nation. This negative attitude, which was expressed in his youthful essay *No*, was heightened by his discontent with the extreme right movement, and would pursue Ionesco in his life and in his *oeuvre*, even beyond his grave.⁵¹

Although he had become a reputable Parisian author, he still looked back in anger at his Romanian years. His *Fragments of a Journal* contains few references to Romania, and, on several occasions, as in his *Past Present*, he described the opportunity to leave his fatherland as a 'miracle'.⁵² His aggressive repudiation of Romanian extremism in these late texts matches his disdain towards the 'minor' Romanian culture in *No*. This culture, he wrote resolutely in 1934, was blocking his access to international recognition.⁵³

Despite some later reconsiderations of tone and style, Ionesco never renounced the beliefs that he had expressed then.⁵⁴ Any attempt to frame discourse on Ionesco, the playwright, not to mention the essayist, within a simple nationalistic paradigm is, from the outset, problematic. One comment on this matter, although closely linked to the historical political context to which it refers, acts as a definitive verdict: 'The word "nation" ought to disappear from the dictionary.'⁵⁵

Notes and References

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1. In *Le Figaro littéraire* (1968). All translations from Romanian and French are mine unless otherwise stated.

2. Ionesco's Romanian roots have always been recognized in France, even at that level. In 1996, in his speech given on the occasion of his acceptance to the French Academy on the seat vacated after Ionesco's death, Marc Fumaroli praised his predecessor, and spoke extensively about Ionesco's Romanian identity: *Réception de M. Marc Fumaroli: Discours prononcé dans la séance publique*, Archives of the French Academy, 25 January 1996.

3. As an example, Anthony Roche offers a rather surprising insight into the linguistic aspects of Beckett's theatre in his study of Irish drama. The co-existence of two slightly different versions of *Waiting for Godot* (of which the initial one was in French) is explained by the dual linguistic heritage of Irish culture. The beautifully phrased 'ghostly presence of French' in the English adaptation of the play is likened by Roche to the Gaelic elements in Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. See Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: from Beckett to McGuinness* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 43. For Roche, the fact that the plays share the same 'hybrid quality' is not idiosyncratic, but merely the consequence of the ambivalence of Ireland's language, which often comprises English and Gaelic at the same time. Responses to Beckett's apparent abandonment of the (native) language are related to more general concerns with Irish identity. Neil Corcoran tackles the issue from a perspective that emphasizes the history of the English language in Irish culture. Corcoran views the linguistic estrangement self-imposed by Beckett as 'the specific alienation from an "official English" of a writer who is not nationally English but who also, given the anti-nationalist orientations of his earlier work, wishes to avoid the suspect signals given out by the use of Hiberno-English'. See *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Contemporary Irish Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 27.

4. There is one instance in the Romanian reception of Ionesco when a critic, Florica Selmaru (the first Romanian translator of *Rhinoceros*), refers to him as Eugène Ionesco and Eugen Ionescu on the same page. Yet the paradox is that this critic does not write about the two different stages of Ionesco's life. She merely discusses the work of Eugène Ionesco, the author of *Notes and Counter-notes*, whom she never tires of calling Eugen Ionescu, but to whom, when quoting foreign sources, she has to refer as Eugène Ionesco. The absurdity reaches its peak when she mixes the two names in the very same sentence, although it is clear that she refers to the same author and at the same stage of his career. See Florica Selmaru, 'Dramaturgia lui Eugen Ionescu', *Secolul*, XX, 9 (1963), p. 160.

5. Jean Vallier observes: 'It is not exaggerated to say that after Molière's *oeuvre*, Ionesco's is the one that one thinks about immediately as iconic for French theatre.' See 'Dialogue sur le théâtre' (Dialogue with Eugène Ionesco, Jean-Louis Barrault), *The French Review*, LI, No. 4 (fiftieth anniversary issue, March 1978), p. 514.

6. The disputes between Marie-France Ionesco and a few Romanian directors and critics were carried out publicly in various newspapers. See, for example, *Cotidianul*, 25 February 2009, and *Evenimentul Zilei*, 2 April 2009.

7. For an extended account of the dilemma created by the name Ionescu/Ionesco, see my 'Eugène Ionesco or Eugen Ionescu: One Hundred Years of Ambiguity', *Otago French Notes: Eugène Ionesco hier, aujourd'hui, demain* (November 2009), p. 101–32.

8. It enjoyed very positive reviews such as the one in *Teatrul (The Theatre)*, 189 (Autumn 1964). Ionesco was invited to the premiere, but he refused, invoking the condemnation pronounced against him by a Romanian court in 1945. In 1967, the Artistic Director of the Comedy Theatre, Radu Beligan, invited him again, this time for the premiere of *Killer without Reward*. Ionesco refused again, but sent his daughter instead. Marie-France Ionesco presented her father's greetings to the Romanian public in the form of a tape of Ionesco's voice, which was played before each performance. This story was related by Radu Beligan, Romania's greatest and most respected actor, during the celebrations of his ninetyeth birthday. The event took place on 9 December 2008 at the Bucharest National Theatre. Beligan also wrote about it in 'Am descoperit figura lui celebra de clovn trist' (I discovered his famous sad clown face), *Apostrof*, 11–12 (December 2000), p. 14–15.

9. This also explains why, before 1989, there were virtually no Romanian translations or reviews of foreign commentaries on Ionesco. The exception is Paul Vernois, 'La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco', which was noted in *Romania Literara*, 39 (1973), p. 30.

10. The major difference between the 1968 volume of Ionesco's *Theatre* and the one from 1970 is that the latter contains a succinct chronological table of the most significant dates in Ionesco's life. What is intriguing in this table is the fact that it contains no reference to the two problematic times of that life: the Vichy period and the conviction for the insults regarding the Romanian army. As an expert on Ionesco's biography, Gelu Ionescu was well aware of both; yet he preferred to present Romanian readers with a romanticized image of that period in Ionesco's life by stating that, 'between 1940 and 1944' the playwright lived 'in the provinces' of France, reading Kafka, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky. See *Eugène Ionesco, Teatru* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1970), p. xxxix.

11. The Comedy Theatre won the Special Prize at the Théâtre des Nations festival for *Rhinoceros*. Ionesco himself praised the production in an interview with Romanian National Television.

12. Ionesco's last text written in Romanian was published in 1972. It was a portrait of Tudor Vianu, an important Romanian comparatist and literary historian. See Eugen Ionescu, 'Tudor Vianu, un spirit classic' ('Tudor Vianu, a Classical Spirit'), *Secolul*, XX, 5 (1972).

13. However, certain themes remain constant from the early works onwards. Ionesco stated in the preface to the French edition of his infamous Romanian essay, *No*, that he maintained the same beliefs throughout his entire life. See Ionesco, *Non* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 7.

14. One of the most shocking statements Ionesco made in *No* – he was only twenty-five at the time – is that he would die without having played any role on the 'European stage' because he belonged to a small culture. See Ionesco, *Non*, p. 84. His French destiny was to disprove that.

15. Ionesco found out very late about the unfortunate turn of events. A friend, Virgil Ierunca, brought him a printout of the court verdict, hidden in his own tie knot. See Virgil Ierunca, *Jurnal* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), p. 27. Ionesco's infamous text was reprinted in Romania in 1991, in the journal *Apostrof*. His reaction was quick and drastic – a letter sent to the editor, in French, in which he explained that he was displeased on account of the inopportune nature of the publication of his text. He insisted that his response be published in the

same journal, and it was. One of the sentences sounds prophetic: 'Je refuse toute récupération.' See *Apostrof*, 9 (1991), p. 3. Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine also gives a full account of the episode in her book: see *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: L'Oubli du fascisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), p. 397–400.

16. This was Ionesco's 'second birth' in Romania, as Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev puts it in her *La Jeunesse littéraire d'Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), p. 24. In fact, Cleynen-Serghiev was the only critic who drew attention to the event in France, even though it was seven years later. See Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev, 'Rhinocéros d'Eugène Ionesco en Roumanie', *Revue des sciences humaines*, XXXVI, 141 (January–March 1971).

17. Also in 1965, Ionesco sent a text from Paris to be published in *Viata Romaneasca* – ironically, the same journal in which he had published the article against the Romanian army. It was a portrait of an old friend, Mihai Ralea.

18. Alexandra Hamdan offers a scrupulous comparative analysis of *Englezeste fara profesor* and *The Bald Prima Donna*. From the difference in their subtitles to the use of theatrical space and from characters to dialogue, there are few elements that Hamdan fails to compare. What she conclusively demonstrates is that the play is a translation of *Englezeste fara profesor*. Ionesco's world famous debut was thus a translation of a Romanian original. See Alexandra Hamdan, *Ionesco avant Ionesco: Portrait de l'artiste en jeune homme* (Besne: Editions Scientifiques Européennes, 1993).

19. It was then that people in France became more acutely aware of Ionesco's Romanian background. He was solicited to give declarations about the fall of the Ceausescu regime in the French journals *Libération* (23 December 1989) and *Le Journal du Dimanche* (24 December 1989).

20. There has been constant discussion in Romania about the 'assimilation' of the country's exiled authors, renewing their Romanian identity. An example is N. Manda's opinion about Ionesco being made a compulsory author for pupils and students. See Liviu Malita and Victor Cublesan, ed., *Ionesco dupa/après Ionesco* (Cluj: Editura Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2000), p. 69.

21. Ionesco, *Non*, p. 7.

22. Gelu Ionescu, *Les débuts littéraires roumains d'Eugène Ionesco, 1926–1940* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, coll. Studia Romanica, 1989), p. 5.

23. Even Martin Esslin quotes Ionesco writing in anger about the moment of returning home. See Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 85.

24. Gelu Ionescu describes the situation in an ambivalent way: 'With very few exceptions, the studies dedicated to Ionesco nowadays ignore the literary beginnings of the writer, his activity in Romanian literature. . . . Surely, from an axiological perspective, such omissions are not grave; one could write an excellent book about Ionescian theatre without a profound knowledge of his formative years.' See Gelu Ionescu, *Les Débuts littéraires roumains d'Eugène Ionesco*, p. 118.

25. This formulation is borrowed from Matei Calinescu, 'The 1927 Generation in Romania: Friendships and Ideological Choices (Mihail Sebastian, Mircea Eliade, Nae Ionescu, Eugène Ionesco, E. M. Cioran)', *East European Politics and Societies*, XV, 3 (Fall 2001), p. 649.

26. This is not the only time Arshavir Aterian, a prominent figure of Romanian culture, mentions Ionesco

and his early years in Romania. He also does so in his journal, where he speaks extensively about Ionesco's passion for logic as a discipline – an ironical preoccupation for a writer who would later challenge all the patterns of logic in communication. Arshavir Aterian, *Jurnalul unui pseudo-filosof (The Journal of a Pseudo-philosopher)*, (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1992), p. 57.

27. The title is based on a sad pun, which Ionesco himself used. After the war, ranting against nationalism, he demanded that the word *patrie*/fatherland be changed into something that would sound more like motherland. He wrote this in his last letter to Romania, in 1946, to be published in *Viata Romaneasca*, XXXVIII, 3 (March 1946).

28. A literary critic would allege that the two books 'mutilated the posthumous image of Ionesco': Tudorel Urian, 'Ionesco dupa Ionesco', *Romania Literara*, 17 (2003). However catastrophic this statement sounds, it is none the less creditable.

29. Petreu's book won the 'Eugen Ionescu' Foundation Award in 2002 and also an award offered by the French Institute in Cluj, Romania.

30. In 2000, as if to celebrate the millennium, a Ionesco Colloquium was organized in Cluj, a city in the provinces of Romania which boasts a dynamic academic life. The theme was the writer's posterity, which the participants were invited to assess. An insistence on his Romanian side, in a biographical and a bibliographical sense, prevails – sometimes subtly, sometimes rather plainly. *Ionesco after Ionesco* is the volume of selected proceedings of this colloquium, 2–4 June 2000.

31. In Malita and Cublesan, ed., *Ionesco dupa/après Ionesco*, p. 9.

32. The young Ionesco owed a lot to France, particularly to one of its major thinkers, whose works he discovered soon after *No*. In 1936, Emmanuel Mournier published *Manifeste sur le service du personnalisme*, republished in Mournier, *Ecrits sur le personnalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). The essay had a huge impact on Ionesco's development as a writer, motivating him to reject any form of collective thinking, as his *Rhinoceros* suggests.

33. Malita and Cublesan, ed., *Ionesco dupa/après Ionesco*, p. 16.

34. If Petreu had read Marie-Claude Hubert's book about Ionesco, she would have been spared the effort of investigating the biography of the author all over again. She would have seen her psychoanalytical framework successfully employed by a French scholar, who makes accurate use of the same references to Ionesco's Romanian life. Her long analysis of *Rhinoceros*'s roots in Ionesco's life before and during the Second World War is more detailed, and offers more names, than that of Hubert, but, essentially, is no different in its critique, and the theme of exorcizing a traumatized and traumatizing past is the same. See Marie-Claude Hubert, *Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Seuil, 1990). This richness of information in Hubert's text suggests that the Romanian critic Vladimir Streinu is wrong when he claims that, to a Western audience, the themes of *Rhinoceros* will always be obscure. See Vladimir Streinu, 'Rhinocera si dilema individualismului' (Rhinocerites of the Dilemma of Individualism), *Pagini de critica literara* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1976), p. 318–24.

35. Marta Petreu, *Ionescu in tara tatalui* (Cluj: Apostrof, 2001), p. 14.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

38. Petreu uses Gorgias as the epitome of sophism, but this is disputable, since Protagoras better fits the bill.

This is the theory formulated by Marie-France Ionesco in response to Petreu's argument, which she dismisses as faulty and tendentious. No verdict is easily reachable. In Plato's text, Gorgias is the great 'orator', as confirmed by A. E. Taylor, *Plato: the Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1937), p. 105. Robert Wardy, however, calls Gorgias the 'father of sophistry' in Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and Their Successors* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

39. Petreu, *Ionescu in tara tatalui*, p. 31–2.

40. Petreu tries to convince her readers that Ionesco was partly from a Jewish background, to account for his rejection of the Iron Guard, the pro-Nazi Romanian movement (Petreu, *Ionescu in tara tatalui*, p. 50–65). Marie-France Ionesco insists, however, that he refused the Iron Guard exclusively because of his humanistic moral principles. See her *Portrait de l'écrivain dans le siècle: Eugène Ionesco 1909–1994* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

41. Such as the one that Ionesco presents to the Western world – an image of Romania that emerges in his writing as a country that is 'guilty, because racist': Petreu, *Ionescu in tara tatalui*, p. 144.

42. In Petreu's book, there are not only accusations of Ionesco's collaboration with the extreme right, but also that he might have manifested sympathy towards Communism in the years immediately after the war. Such accusations are debunked, *avant la lettre*, by Monica Lovinescu, a famous figure in the anti-Communist Romanian diaspora. In two of her books published in Romania she defends Ionesco against charges of pro-Communist views. See Monica Lovinescu, *La apa Vavilonului* (*By the Rivers of Babylon*), (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999), p. 192–3, and *Intrevederi cu Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu, Stefan Lupascu, si Grigore Cugler* (*Meetings with Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu, Stefan Lupascu, and Grigore Cugler*), (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1992), p. 120. Gilles Plazy, Ionesco's biographer, explains that Monica Lovinescu's role in the writer's destiny was significant, as she convinced Nicolas Bataille, the first director of *The Bald Prima Donna*, to read the play: see *Eugène Ionesco: le rire et l'espérance: une biographie* (Paris: Julliard, 1994), p. 54.

43. Marie-France Ionesco, *Portretul scriitorului in Secol* (*The Portrait of the Writer in the Century*), (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003), p. 5.

44. Marie-France Ionesco pleads for the word 'baroque', against 'mannerism' as a label for Ionesco. Petreu would later clarify her sense of mannerism, saying it was meant to place Ionesco in the same family as Shakespeare: see *Adevarul literar si artistic* (p. 664).

45. Marie-France Ionesco, *Portretul scriitorului in Secol*, p. 83.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

48. Marie-France Ionesco, Gabriel Liiceanu, Norbert Dodille, ed., *Lectures de Ionesco* (Paris: L'Hamartan, 1996), p. 8.

49. Ion Lucas Caragiale (1852–1912) is Romania's national playwright; Urmuz (1883–1923) was the pen name for Demetru Dem, the Romanian precursor of Dadaism and absurdism. See Paul Vernois 'Ionesco et le surréalisme' in *Cent ans de littérature française 1850–1950* (Paris: SEDES, 1987), p. 298; Hubert, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 27–30; Emmanuel Jacquart, 'Rhinoceeros de Eugène Ionesco' (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 13.

50. This attitude was not a new one. Ionesco expressed similar thoughts before the publication of *No*. In 1933 he declared in a Romanian journal that all Romanian generations are bound to reinvent themselves, as if there are no valuable predecessors: see 'Azi ne vorbeste Eugen Ionescu', interview by C. Panaitescu, *Facla*, XII (1933), p. 813. One year after the publication of his debut volume, in a cultural retrospective of the year 1934, he would reiterate this position, ridiculing some of the great names of his own generation, among them Mircea Eliade. See Eugen Ionesco, 'Anul literar 1934 si cu ceilalti ani' (The Literary Year 1934 and the Other Years), in *Critica*, I (1935), p. 1.

51. See respectively the works by Laignel-Lavastine and Petreu.

52. Eugène Ionesco, *Present Past/Past Present: a Personal Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 1971), p. 192.

53. Ionesco, *Non*, p. 84.

54. Ionesco reiterated these beliefs in the preface to *Non* and in the interview with Marie-Claude Hubert, where he refers to the Nazified Romania, which he deeply hated. See Hubert, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 235.

55. Ionesco, *Present Past/Past Present: a Personal Memoir*, p. 181.