SPECTACLE OF DISINTEGRATION:

IONESCO'S *THE CHAIRS*

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With Much Appreciation to

Dr. Susan Willis, my teacher, colleague, and friend

For Kim Moody

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

First staged in 1952, *The Chairs* by Eugène Ionesco represents the ultimate vision of what twentieth-century critics eventually labelled the Theatre of the Absurd. It deftly balances utter inanity with tragic import, and in so doing, unites the two interests of absurdist plays. If the absurdist school was about anything, it was about the insurmountable, accumulating incurred through the act of being, and the uneasy chuckles that attend it. Almost forty years ago, Leonard C. Pronko described the movement forever associated with Ionesco in these terms:

> **Ionesco's theater, like that of the other experimental dramatists writing in France today, the so-called theater of the absurd, constantly mixes the tragic and the comic, and in such a way that there is no clear distinction, for we are meant to shudder at some of the comedy, and to laugh at the tragedy of man's situation, which is treated in derisory terms. This laughter at our own tragic situation gives us a certain objectivity, and is perhaps the only reaction possible in a world that has destroyed our faith in absolutes. (*Eugène Ionesco* 11)**

Through the mystical experience of the stage, the laughable impossibilities of human life become flesh-and-blood agonies for audiences all too aware of being too close to something too human, too disturbing. Such is the impact of Ionesco's little play.

Ionesco himself commented once that he and the absurdists were trying to "put man on the stage to face himself" (Plimpton 141). Ionesco knew that the theatre allows humans to watch themselves and laugh and cry at what they are watching. Even in their most exaggerated form, absurdist characters wear the dress of the comically-suffering human. Deborah B. Gaensbauer describes these characters as "somnambulists: vulnerable, confused, interchangeable, Everyman figures not destined to complete their journeys" (54). No other absurdist play features such pathetic grotesques, groping blindly to some illusory destiny, as does Ionesco's *The Chairs.*

The play is very much about the human condition and all its attendant losses; however, it is always on the edge of something more than just that. Beyond the walls of the tower is a supernatural world that may very well lie shattered and useless, but one whose memory at least reminds the Old Couple of what was or what might have been. Every moment in *The Chairs* is a moment on the verge of the extraordinary, and in its ability to present the ordinary alongside the fantastic, the play is quintessentially absurdist. But so is *Macbeth*, Ionesco was always quick to remind. Ionesco himself was never comfortable with the notion of the Theatre of the Absurd. For him, the term was imprecise at best and clichéd at worst. Here, in an interview, Ionesco distanced himself from Martin Esslin's famous catch-phrase for post-World War II writers of tragicomedy:

> At first I rejected it, because I thought that everything was absurd, and that the notion of the absurd had become prominent only because

> of existentialism, because of Sartre and Camus. But then I found ancestors, like Shakespeare, who said, in *Macbeth*, that the world is full of sound and fury, a tale told by an idiot, *signifying nothing*. (Plimpton 135)

Nothing new exists under the literary sun, and for Ionesco, the notion of theatrical absurdity was hardly novel. Depictions of ill-fated, suffering beings with no succor for their misery had long proliferated in world literature, from the works of Sophocles to those of Shakespeare. In his reaction to Esslin's label, Ionesco continued by contrasting the absurdity that characters like Macbeth and Oedipus share with that of his own newfangled sufferers:

> Macbeth is a victim of fate. So is Oedipus. But what happens to them is not absurd in the eyes of destiny, because destiny, or fate, has its own norms, its own morality, its own laws, which cannot be flouted with impunity. Oedipus sleeps with his mummy, kills his daddy, and breaks the laws of fate. He must pay for it by suffering. It is tragic and absurd, but at the same time it's reassuring and comforting, since the idea is that if we don't break destiny's laws, we should be all right. Not so with our characters. They have no metaphysics, no order, no law. They are miserable and they don't know why. They are puppets, undone. In short, they represent modern man. Their situation is not tragic, since it has no relation to a higher order. Instead, it's ridiculous, laughable, and derisory. (135-36)

For Ionesco, *derisory*, not *absurd*, better described the spectacle of nothingness his plays presented (*Notes* 27). Although there is indeed nothing new under the dramatic sun, Ionesco suggested that the angst which his characters suffer comes from a new place: a broken sky littered with the memory of divine order. The disintegration, then, begins from a sickened cosmos, churning for nothing, churned by nothing but invisible gyrations. With no apparent divinity smiling down from glory, *The Chairs* is a claustrophobic play; there is only the thick air coming off stagnant waters, trapped inside a tight place that gets tighter and more cramped during the course of the play. Any discussion of *The Chairs*, the present work included, must concern itself with spirituality, even if to analyze its terrifying absence. Perhaps the greatest question absurdist plays like *The Chairs* ask is how to exist if God is dead or at least missing. Fittingly, the answer may come in the form of what Rosette C. Lamont calls a "sob stifled in an outburst of mirth" (*Ionesco's Imperatives* 78).

Even if Ionesco preferred the term *Theatre of Derision* to describe this union of sobs and mirth, and this spectacular absence of God, he and his plays are synonymous with the Theatre of the Absurd. A part of the modern fascination with fragmentation and dissonance, the Theatre of the Absurd grew out of Dadaism, Surrealism, and whether Ionesco liked to admit it or not, Existentialism and its intense scrutiny of being and nothingness. Ionesco's brand of theatre was especially influenced by Alfred Jarry, the infamous creator of the *Ubu* plays. Jarry fashioned his Pa and Ma Ubu as grotesque marionettes who stretched and perverted language

at will, attacking the notion of naturalistic theatre in the process (Gaensbauer 55). The *Ubu* plays cast off decorum, finesse, and theatrical realism and take on instead boorishness, awkwardness, and buffoonery. In their refusal to aid in the suspension of disbelief, the plays heralded the eventual destruction of the fourth wall of twentieth-century drama, a destruction Ionesco and the absurdists would further inflict with their own picks and axes. An artistic iconoclast, Jarry encouraged the next generation of playwrights to celebrate the nothingness of life and theatre. For Ionesco, once a child who sat "open-mouthed" at the Punch and Judy shows (*Notes* 20), Jarry, along with his bizarre, exaggerated puppets, was his prophet who led the way *into* the absurdist wilderness.

The man who provided the machetes for hacking through that wilderness was Antonin Artaud, the French critic who skirted the edges of insanity and brilliance. Artaud despised conventional theatre because it rejected theatrical expression through spectacle and embraced flimsy, ineffectual language instead (Willison 11). Following World War II and Artaud's death, language became even more suspect, its ability to make real promises destroyed by the vague semantics of commercialized and political jargon (Gaensbauer 54). Language became a manufactured product, a mass-produced evader and prevaricator incapable of clear communication. At the core of absurdist disintegration is this brokenness of language. Inarticulate language is virtually its own character in many early Ionesco plays, most notably *The Chairs* and *The Bald Soprano*. Often, Ionesco and his fellow absurdists seem hellbent on destroying the very language they employ in writing the

very plays that try to destroy the language they are employing. Of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and his own *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco writes, "Beckett destroys language with silence. I do it with too much language, with characters talking at random, and by inventing words" (Plimpton 130). The absurdists attack one of the last ordering principles to which modernity can cling: language; in this attack, Ionesco is squarely beside his absurdist brethren. The irony of a writer who distrusts words but so masterfully uses them is not lost on Lynne Retford, who claims Ionesco distrusts language "because there is a duplicity inherent in [it]" and because it offers only a feeble promise of security (176). Words, the substance of spoken dialogue, are puffs of breath born from creative vision but whose meanings die on the unstable air of discourse. Words in absurdist plays like *The Chairs* never survive the leap from mind to expression; whatever incipient meaning they may have had atrophies during the exchange, leaving only vague suggestion in its place. Suffering under a shattered empyrean, Ionesco's characters, endowed with such feckless language, can cling to no security and have only limited power to express their tenuous position.

The Chairs presents a hobbling, vulnerable, inadequate language bumping meaningless word against meaningless word, desperate for understanding which never comes. The awful failure, the loss, the comic disintegration of everything must find its communication, ironically and fittingly, through this maddening form of expression. Elizabeth Klaver declares that Ionesco's play is an "act of language itself, an act of language at all levels from individual words to conversations to dramatic dialogue and discourse" (531). This "act of language" becomes *The Chairs'*

principal irony, one which this paper will discuss at length. Theatre is synonymous with irony because in the stage's confined space, characters can only scrape and achieve certain levels of knowledge, certain levels of expression; it is a shadowbox of paradoxes and half-truths, slight knowledge and misplaced trusts. A broken language which borders on gibberish affords the trapped, claustrophobic sufferers in *The Chairs* the opportunity to sink into irony on their last night. They are the actors, not the spectators, and must therefore whirl and fret in their shadowbox of misunderstanding, seeing only the present moment and not clearly seeing even that. For his play through which he hoped to force man to face himself, Ionesco envisioned a bleak, barren place where emptiness proliferated with every empty word that tried to express it: "To express the void by means of language, gesture, acting and props. To express absence. To express regret and remorse. The unreality of the real. Original chaos" (*Notes* 191). The play's ironic goal is simple: to express with supposedly meaningful language utter meaninglessness.

Ionesco creates a void where language is cogent in its irony, not its meaning, where nameless sufferers languish under a Godless reality, bereft of sense and any means of finding it. Pronko describes the building of the Ionesco landscape in this way:

> If our world is one in which people strike us as inhuman, then let us place robots on the stage. If we feel that the physical aspects of life deny us the full development of our spiritual potential, then by all means let that be reflected in a play whose décor or properties slowly

> dominate the characters. If language is worn out, then let us show the solidified forms of that language as cliché and slogan, or words reduced to pure agglomerates of sound. The result is metaphysics transformed for the theater, and a theater transformed by metaphysics but remaining theater: a source of experience and not of indoctrination. (*Eugène Ionesco* 13)

This passage could provide a preface for *The Chairs*, a program note to introduce the first-time viewer to the play's essential qualities. It is a tragicomedy of robot-humans stripped of spiritual potential fumbling with agglomerates of sound presenting unsettling metaphysics. It is a play whose chief image is nothingness (Hayman 43). It is an absurdist nightmare which Maurice Valency claims is presented with "appropriate anguish, the distressing reality of the unreal" (359). It is a raucously terrifying piece in which its author tries to "sink tragedy in comedy" (Ionesco *Notes* 27). As a theatrical experience, it is a spectacle of disintegration, offering Mr. and Mrs. Smith, dapper and demure, a disquieting image of their own mundane, absurd existence.

The present work pretends to do little more than offer trembling and fear at the theatrical feet of what has been described as a minor classic. From this point forward, the paper's concern will be primarily *The Chairs*, and not Ionesco or the Theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco is long dead, his ashes testifying to the very cogency of his subject matter. Theatre of the Absurd, like any academic discovery, has become passé and outmoded, now merely a reverie passing through the minds of

balding academics. The primary thing of lasting meaning this paper will address will be Ionesco's *tour-de-force* about meaninglessness.

The paper's approach is simple: a thorough analysis of Ionesco's *The Chairs* as a tragicomic spectacle of disintegration. To present this analysis, I thought it only sensible to build my chapters around the entities and non-entities that populate Ionesco's play.

Chapter 2, then, will study at close range the invited guests, those shadows that Ionesco goes to great pains to corporealize. If this paper's aim is to reveal the utter nothingness to which *The Chairs* aspires, then Ionescian proliferation must be discussed--in this case, the maddening accumulation of implacable furniture. Occupying those empty chairs are the guests, who this paper will suggest, are shadowy representations of what the Old Couple long to be, or perhaps what they once were and are no longer. In addition to the actual guests, other shadows haunt the Old Couple's world, including their son and the Old Man's mother. They, too, occupy an important place at the little gathering of nothingness.

As the best plays do, *The Chairs* compels its audience to follow it to a single, climatic destination. That destination is the all-important message upon which the Old Man bases all he is and will be. Bound up in the worth and delivery of this message are two messianic figures who ironically extend a flimsy reed to a drowning man: the Emperor and the Orator, the subjects of Chapter 3. One of the invisible guests, the Emperor is not only a messianic figure but also a father-figure to the Old Man. Desperate for the Emperor's infernally tacit approval, the Old Man dissolves

into an ego-deluded view of himself as victim and superior individual. Like a son pleading with his father, the Old Man seeks approval that comes only with the rustling of the wind and the glowing of the light. Distant and unapproachable, the Emperor is a symbol of an order already beyond the hopes of the Old Man.

Disappointing hope also breezes into the room on the Orator's coattails. Only the third "flesh-and-blood" character, the Orator represents the ultimate failure of language as a savior, as a maker and preserver of meaning. A nesting figure of ironies, the Orator speaks gibberish that only further underscores the extraordinary conversation skills of the "guests"; Ionesco suggests their chit-chat has more meaning than that of the Old Man's visible mouthpiece.

The Orator's message pushes the Old Couple to their climax, to their blessed "apotheosis" of nothingness, and Chapter 4 cries and laughs in depth at their miserable sojourn in absurdity. What better symbol of the disintegration that is old age than this doddering pair clinging to imperfect memory? The pair suffer from a multitude of absurdist maladies, a ten-plagues torment only a vindictive god could envision. Broken communication, isolation, stasis, and mortality claim whatever love and understanding they may have shared. A major portion of this paper will focus on this old pair playing hosts to withering sorrow and loss. They are the presiders over expanding emptiness.

The paper's conclusion will return to the notion of language as ordering principle, as meaning-maker. Bound up with the disintegration of worth and meaning is the death of the frail words the Old Couple and Ionesco use to convey it.

The conclusion will also question the worth of literature and discuss the dismal legacy an artist like Ionesco must accept as his. The once sentient form who dictated his plays to a secretary, Ionesco suffered the slippery nature of language and the capricious assessments of critics, his place in theatre criticism often untenable. Like his Old Couple, Ionesco the author found very little solid foundation to set his feet upon--especially in his case, a solid critical foundation. In its final section, the paper will unite the ideas of language, spirituality, and emptiness as it casts a last look at one of modern dramas most enigmatic works, *The Chairs*.

The Old Man and Old Woman are already on the edge, tip-toeing around their own disintegration. Somewhere getting into an illusory carriage is the Orator, life-redeeming message in hand. Into that same steady procession step the grand Emperor and his retinue of order and authority. He will be one of the assembled--one of the guests occupying chairs as implacable as headstones.

All of space, time, and matter compress into a single lighthouse. For one theatrical moment the entire universe spirals around one old man and one old woman. They captivate and are held captive. Thus begins the spectacle of what they do with their moment and what it does to them.

CHAPTER 2

WELCOMING THE GUESTS

The play is entitled *The Chairs*, not *The Guests*, and with good reason: Ionesco's emphasis is on the inanimate objects and not the beings who use them. The world of *The Chairs* is a sterile one growing more lifeless, more wooden, and resolutely colder as the play dives toward its dénouement. Only Ionesco's metaphorical madness could conjure up a play in which the scenery, not the actors, take top billing; again, the play, railing against traditional tragedy, names itself after the objects, not the tragic sufferers whom they overwhelm.

Ironically, the chairs are all too visible; the guests are not. In the Ionesco universe, things proliferate; they accumulate and grow in nothingness and eventually overwhelm the shadow puppets on the stage. With his proliferating furniture, Ionesco suggests "spiritual absence" (Ionesco *Notes* 132). He commented in *Cahier des Quatre Saisons* that "matter fills everything, takes up all space, annihilates all liberty under its weight; the horizon shrinks, and the world becomes a stifling dungeon" (Pronko "Anti-Spiritual Victory" n. pag.). Martin Esslin describes this horrifying accumulation: "The horror of proliferation [. . . .] expresses the individual's horror at being confronted with the overwhelming task of coping with the world, his solitude in the face of its monstrous size and duration" (150). The space fills with all the wrong values, with all the wrong substance. What

proliferates in the Ionesco void is not life-affirming but life-denying. Too much material obfuscates and even stifles the life urge. The goal that Ionesco's proliferating furniture has is the subsuming of protoplasm, the substance which makes any life experience possible. The human becomes lost in the non-human. The individual's horror, as Esslin describes it, is at the prospect of being rendered so small by such overwhelming vastness which the non-human comes to appropriate. The proliferating stuff in Ionesco's world empties rather than fills the theatrical space, eventually conquering whatever life urge his characters possess. With every chair that comes to destroy this life urge, more evidence of nothingness spreads like a cancer.

In his preoccupation with absence and emptiness, Ionesco harks back to some notable figures in French literature. He mimics Artaud's reliance on "visual images" which appeal to the senses (Willison 10). The chairs are a sort of an Artaudian gesture redolent of meaning without relying on language. Ionesco commented to Rosette C. Lamont that the chairs become a "visual language, a language of the stage more direct, more shocking and stronger than that of words" (Wager 157). Ionesco's attempt to invest inanimate objects with their own reality, Willison suggests, grew from Artaud's own theatrical vision (13). Ionesco also shares the Symbolist preoccupation with the void--especially in the notion that emptiness can be portrayed on stage, a notion with which Cocteau had already experimented (Valency 358-59). The chairs come to represent not only this ontological void but also its growth (Klaver 525).

Chillingly, the play's final image is not of message or messenger but of lifeless objects mocking mortality with their every insensible splinter. Writes Steve Smith of this ultimate irony:

> **The chairs, whose threatening presence throughout the play has been (for the audience at least) their resistance to meaning, both undermine and confirm the play's message to this point, as both a surplus and a lack of signification. It is the chairs, rather than the Orator, that constitute the play's last word, but they do so without the detour of expression, refusing to signify by virtue of their perfect indifference, their infinite repetition. (141)**

Here are Artaudian objects which carry far more symbolic weight than the treacherous words Artaud railed against. As testaments to cold barrenness, the chairs serve as ultimate signs--the theatrical rather than linguistic means by which Ionesco communicates loss and mortality. Ionesco slaps immortal significance away with little more than the slats of his immotive chairs. He sought to create through a proliferation of objects an emptiness that "grows and devours everything" (Ionesco *Notes* 189). At play's end, the accumulating chairs push the human characters to their deaths, having seized their living space and rendered it lifeless. Unlike the physical characters, these objects are the play's only things of permanence, immutable like the sun over a withering paradise.

The Old Couple, primevally Edenic themselves, busily bring chair after chair onto the stage. Suddenly, the interior world they have known and suffered has a

breach--a flood of shadowy persons invades the breach, thus bringing the outside inside. These shadows are the infamous "guests" of Ionesco's play who will occupy the chairs. Every stage direction related to the guests aims at personifying in tangible ways these illusory figures. Problematic is the play's metaphysics: what is really real and what is not. Klaver implies that Ionesco keeps his audience "wavering" and "wondering" over which characters are to be taken as real and which ones are not (526). Is the Old Man any more real than the supposedly invisible Colonel? Ionesco commented on this strange relationship between real and unreal, the author himself attempting to parcel out reality and unreality to his characters:

> **The two or three characters you do see in *The Chairs* are in a way only what might be called the pivots of some mobile construction, largely invisible, evanescent, precarious, doomed to vanish like the world; for the characters themselves are unreal and yet the indispensable foundation of the whole structure. (*Notes* 192)**

The unreal provides the foundation for the real or what appears to be real. Resting on such a foundation, then, the play casually and confidently situates unreal character next to seemingly real character as if to suggest one is indistinguishable from the other. Ionesco in his planning notes for the play questions if the invisible characters are a "product of an exhausted mind" or an "expression of reality imperfectly imagined" (*Notes* 193).

One thing is for certain: the guests have no flesh and bone--be they sprung from exhausted minds or imperfect imaginations. They lack the physical body on which humans like to lay fingers; they are mere sounds and suggestions. In this strange world of tower existence, cut-off from the ground of reality, perhaps these figures represent humans who have already sloughed off existence like snakes discarding their skins. Perhaps they have already leapt from their own towers into the briny deep. What remains is the shadowy essence of nothingness--mocking souvenirs of lives surrendered to the abyss. As they sit primly in their chairs, they remind the Old Couple of what lies ahead: mere disintegration into airy nothingness. A single leap and the temporary flesh slinks away into the belly of the great fish. What is left is the garb of an invisible party guest, illusory head, transparent body, missing feet.

Ironically divested of form, the guests symbolize a physical form always with one toe in the realm of non-reality; all things in nature hanker for chaos, the human body included. To be a human is to be always in danger of becoming a shadow, and the guests remind their audience of this sobering reality every time the guests invisibly shift in their chairs. The chairs have physical form; the guests occupying them do not--hence, one of the play's most apparent ironies, and like most of them, a sardonic one. If reality is bound up in flesh and bone, then this play suggests that one's hold on reality is tenuous: a body one minute, a shadow the next, if the guests and their fleshless shapes are any proof.

With such doffing of flesh at its thematic core, *The Chairs* is a vision of hell, a

macabrely funny hell perhaps, but a hell no less. In *King Lear*-fashion, the play insists on twisting knife after knife into any pleasant reality its flesh-and-blood characters might enjoy. The very transparent nature of their guests mocks the Old Couple's own questionable substance. Although the Old Couple can still cast a shadow of sorts, the visiting shadows themselves have more tangible presence in many ways than they do. The conversations the Old Couple have with the invisible guests, for instance, often make more sense than the conversations they have with each other (Klaver 524). The invisible characters, offers Valency, seem more real because the "real" characters seem so unreal (357).

Ionesco goes to great dramatic pains to flesh-out his invisible characters, attempting to make the unreal seem very real. Nancy Lane remarks on Ionesco's success in performing this metaphysical magic trick:

> It is clear from the outset that the many guests are not the product of the old couple's senile hallucinations. They are present onstage, performed by the sound effects accompanying their entrance, the conversations that the old couple have with them, the intensification of the light as more and more guests arrive, the large number of chairs, and finally the sounds of the end of the play. (53)

Not unlike Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, *The Chairs* attempts to render the invisible visible--through suggestion, gesturing, and stagecraft. Ionesco twists Wilder's experiment by giving physical substance to props and not to characters. Uneasiness surrounds a play like *Our Town* in which characters inhabit largely

empty spaces; something hellishly disquieting, however, surrounds a play like *The Chairs* in which empty characters inhabit full spaces. Ionesco is intent on challenging his audiences' perceptions of the real and the unreal, refusing them an easy solution to his guests' ontological mystery. His manipulation of his invisible guests verges on sinister and uproariously funny: to mock the Old Couple's meaningless suicide even further, he insists that the silent guests be given physical voice at play's end, a twist only the gate-keeper of hell would find laughable in its perversity:

> *We hear for the first time the human noises of the invisible crowd; these are bursts of laughter, murmurs, shh's, ironical coughs; weak at the beginning, these noises grow louder, then, again, progressively they become weaker. All this should last long enough for the audience--the real and visible audience--to leave with this ending firmly impressed on its mind. The curtain falls very slowly.* (*The Chairs* 160)

In a play that questions what is real and what is not, Ionesco feels compelled to remind the audience that they have substance, that they are indeed real--at least for the time being. Valency, like Lane, asserts that this noisy conclusion dispels any suggestion that what has transpired on stage has been a senile hallucination (357). Ionesco as well declares that dispelling such a notion was his aim:

> Thus the audience will not be tempted into giving the easiest explanation of the play, the wrong one. They must not be able to say, for example, that the old couple are mad or senile and suffering from

> hallucinations; neither must they be able to say that the invisible characters are only the old couple's remorse and memories. This may perhaps be true up to a point, but it has absolutely no importance; the interest lies elsewhere. (*Notes* 189-90)

Had the guests been mere products of failing minds, then the audience with its strong, assertive minds would not have heard the Colonel cough, the Photo-engraver laugh, and the Emperor snore at the play's conclusion. Ionesco insists they do, for he must inflict one last wickedly funny damnation on his old pair; those airy nothings have more substance and permanence than they do.

With every word they suffer, then, the Old Couple lose more of what they were as their listeners become more immutable. If these are indeed exhausted minds or imperfect imaginations at work, then they are projecting into their last view of the world imperfect images of what the Old Couple might have been or were. Although Ionesco claims such a notion has "absolutely no importance," one can clearly see the possibility of such a projection. For his named guests, Ionesco makes some intriguing choices. A randy, masculine colonel confronts the impotent, mediocre Old Man with an image of everything the puny "General Factotum" wanted to be. The Old Man, appalled at the Colonel's bawdy manner with the invisible young woman, lacks such aggressiveness himself and finds its presence a disturbing reminder of his own sexual inadequacy. He claims to have killed 209 men (*The Chairs* 129)--but that little fact, stated through language as insubstantial and unreliable as the Colonel's invisible elbow, is simply a wish for manhood and daring

that the Old Man expresses on the brink of his disintegration. Unlike the masculine Colonel, the Old Man of Ionesco's tragicomedy is not a killer but the perennially killed.

A loss of sexual identity and power is but one of the many losses the Old Couple have suffered. Back in the lost winters of their youth, perhaps the Old Man and Semiramis possessed the sexual energy with which they invest their invisible guests. The first guest is a lady, obviously still sexually desirable enough to enflame the Colonel's lust. She represents, however, a sexual decorum to which the Old Couple may have bowed during their entire lives, in spite of the sexual possibilities that may have lain before them in youth; she, after all, is married to a man who "may arrive at any moment" and set the randy Colonel to rights (*The Chairs* 128). She, like Semiramis, is a helpmeet to some man hastening toward his own dive into the abyss. Bereft of his own sexual youth, the Old Man laments to the invisible lady: "Old age is a heavy burden. I can only wish you an eternal youth" (*The Chairs* 125). If she is an imagined projection of what the Old Man and Semiramis have lost, then she will indeed never fade, age, or change.

After the arrival of the Lady and the Colonel, the Old Couple welcome Belle and the Photo-engraver (*The Chairs* 131-36), the first a shadow from the Old Man's sexual past and the second a symbol of the sexual liberty the Old Woman may have had but lost or may have never had but wanted. They both offer mirror images of what the old pair have been forced to leave behind on their journey to disintegration. With Belle and the Old Man, every possibility became lost

irredeemably in the conditional: "We could have had the pleasure of sharing, joy, beauty, eternity . . . an eternity . . . Why didn't we dare? We weren't brave enough . . . Everything is lost, lost, lost!" (133). His lack of sexual aggressiveness to which his Colonel is the antithesis has plagued the Old Man throughout his uninspiring, unfulfilled life. "We could have" becomes his melancholy refrain, one he chants in the face of a dead past, an absurd present, and a meaningless future. A famous François Villon poem, "Ballade des dames du temps jadis," becomes his broken-hearted anthem: "Where are the snows of yester year?" (132). In the French the line reads, "*Où sont les neiges d'antan?*" (*Les Chaises* 43) -- a poetic question which only despair can answer. The guests offer the Old Couple only more agonizing, unanswerable questions; little in what the guests represent is declarative, only hints here, suggestions there.

During the course of his conversation with Belle--one with much more sense and logic than the ones he has with his devoted helpmeet--the Old Man further understands the miserable destination to which his journey of accumulating loss has led him. Whatever he was or wasn't, the hope of reclaiming that image of himself is an impossible one: "Ah! no, no, it is no longer possible. Those days have flown away as fast as a train. Time has left the marks of his wheels on our skin" (*The Chairs* 132). Belle represents to him that illusory erotic season when he was young, the forces of pure nature compelling him, as they still do the Colonel; more troubling is the prospect that no Belle ever existed, that the Old Man's life has been lived in a

cramped tower with a doddering old woman he often fails to recognize as his own wife.

Nancy Lane suggests that Belle and the Photo-engraver are necessary guests because of the Old Couple's perverted, unsatisfying sex life: "Guilt effectively blocks open expression of sexual desire between the old couple. Because sexual relations between mother and son are taboo, the old couple's desires are deflected onto Belle and the Photo-engraver" (62). The Old Woman's lewd burlesque that occurs during her conversation with the Photo-engraver becomes as clear a reminder as her red stockings that she has at least desired to be a sexually voracious woman. Fittingly, she performs this dance in front of a shadow whose business is to capture shadows in locked, visual form; his depiction of her gyrating hips will forever mock the dust into which they crumble. The Photo-engraver's work is a study of permanence, the Old Woman's a study of horrifying decrepitude. Her exposed breasts, obscene, dried-out dugs--the inevitable products of such decrepitude--provide lascivious evidence of how far removed she is from genuine lasciviousness.

For her, sexual vitality and fertility are long past, lost in the many winters her husband sorrows over with Belle. When she questions what gift the Photo-engraver has brought her, the Old Woman condemns her own infertility and embraces her loss of sexual womanhood: "Is it a flower, sir? or a cradle? a pear tree? or a crow?" (*The Chairs* 131). Each of these symbols provide proof of her sterility. She is no longer a flowering thing, a bearer of fruit, or a filler of cradles; instead, she is in league with carrion, the scent of death, the inexorable process of

decay that will claim her exhausted womb. The Photo-engraver gives her, instead, a painting--in its permanence a hellish mirror reflecting the Old Woman's mortality. In his youth and sexual attractiveness, painted, unchanging things themselves, the Photo-engraver reminds Semiramis that she has slipped and is slipping further into some other realm where sexual urges are dissolving memories. Even though she relishes his sexual innuendoes, the Old Woman must finally accept the truth of her condition: "For me the branch of the apple tree is broken. Try to find someone else. I no longer want to gather rosebuds" (134). Like her mate, the Old Woman has failed to seize her day and now must confront the image of sexual potential she can never attain or regain. Her young guest still breathes and will always breathe the air of *carpe diem*, she the stagnant waters beckoning her to plunge.

In addition to the real/unreal guests of *The Chairs*, the memories of two other invisible characters further clutter the cramped tower: the Old Couple's son and the Old Man's mother. In their accounts of son and mother, the Old Couple project their lifelong guilt and regret onto these two figures from their pasts; both stories also include the theme of desertion and flight from familial obligation, a wish to escape beyond the grasp of those who might smother and control.

If the other guests are projections of what the Old Couple wish they still were, the two have provided them with faces, assigned them roles, and fleshed out their stories exceedingly well. Only with their own son does their myth-making ability fail them. Did they have a son? If so, did he desert them? Was he a good son or bad son? The Old Man denies even the existence of a son: "Alas, no . . . no, we've

never had a child . . . I'd hoped for a son . . . Semiramis, too . . . we did everything . . . and my poor Semiramis is so maternal, too" (*The Chairs* 134). Juxtaposed against the sexual possibilities that Belle and the Photo-engraver offer is this account of infertility; it is to Belle, the image of his lost or never-realized sexual youth, that the Old Man confesses his fatherless state. All the while, however, Semiramis insists to her own sexual metaphor, the Photo-engraver, that she and the Old Man did indeed have a son. During these simultaneous conversations with Old Man and Old Woman back-to-back, one comes to understand that the shadows filling the tower may indeed, despite Ionesco's seeming denial, represent everything hoped for and lost during a lifetime of disappointment, including the wish to procreate.

The Old Couple have plenty of empty chairs and the shadowy guests to fill them, but they do not possess their own son. As a memory he is ill-defined at best, non-existent at worst. His memory, nevertheless, is there in the tower, attending his parents' final slide into oblivion. According to Semiramis, her son, the nebulous memory that he is, abandoned her and the Old Man because they "kill birds" (*The Chairs* 134). When Semiramis reassured him that they did not kill birds and that the birds' song continued, her son refused to be comforted, insisting that what she heard was their *gémissements*, or death rattles (135; *Les Chaises* 47), a word the Old Man will use as a verb in describing his mother's death agony. Their son detests them for their wing-snapping ability, their insistence that things with wings embrace the earth rather than the sky. So he left them and their imprisoning nest.

If they did have a flesh-and-blood child, he escaped them, slipped through their fingers as their youth, their vitality, and their possibilities did. He is as shadowy as the guests, but with one important difference: he is elsewhere, beyond any seat of honor or imprisonment his parents might prepare for him. His last indictment mystified his parents: "'It's you who are responsible'" (135). An oblivious Semiramis can only ask the Photo-engraver: "What does that mean, 'responsible'?" (135). Without offering his shrivelling parents any answers, the son, if only through their shadowy memory of him, offers them instead another imponderable to mull over during their confinement.

Interestingly, one story of a deserting son collides with another. As the Old Woman confesses her failure as a mother to the Photo-engraver, the Old Man shares with Belle his own miserable account of maternal betrayal. He let his mother "die all alone in a ditch" in order to skip away to a dance (135). By the time he returned, she was already dead and buried. He flew away while she became land-locked, just as his own son, if Semiramis is to be believed, did to him. Both father and son abandoned stasis in favor of motion: the fluttering bird's wings, the dancing feet at the ball.

When the Old Man found his mother already buried, hidden away in her own underground tower of sorts, he insisted on some sort of recovery: "I broke open the grave, I searched for her . . . I couldn't find her . . . I know, I know, sons always abandon their mothers, and they more or less kill their fathers . . . Life is like that . . . but I suffer from it . . . and the others, they don't . . ." (135). His failure

here, to recover something lost, is only one of many accumulating failures throughout the play; his accumulated successes are apparently as vacuous as the empty chairs themselves. In his declaration that he suffers more than others, he sets out on a course of egoism that will find its pathetic culmination when the Emperor, the ultimate party guest, arrives. The Old Man's declaration also suggests that, unlike his absent son, he never really escaped the hold his mother had on him. He flew away, but her memory and his guilt kept a firm grasp on his wings. When Semiramis offers yet another contradiction to one of his stories--that he was indeed a good son who never left his parents--one cannot help but wonder if her statement shares more truth with his story than might first appear. Apparently, he has never fully left his parents, and his confession about his shadowy mother, lost in a ditch and in his everlasting regret, indicates his imprisonment to her memory. He, after all, still plays the game of mother and son with Semiramis, even if reluctantly so.

Are son and mother just another myth-making game these two old people play? Before George and Martha of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the Old Man and Woman of Ionesco's *The Chairs* whiled away their lives with their own games of fantasy and fiction. The entire play itself might very well be viewed as a game of shadows and make believe. The guests: have they attended this little party every night for the ages of nights before? Chapter 4 will present Eli Rozik's opinion on that very possibility. The Old Couple play at imitating February, so what would prevent them from playing "Invent a Guest" or "Concoct Your Own Child-Betrayal Story"? If their guests are simply the invented characters of a childish game, they

are well-crafted, so much so that the Old Woman can recognize none of them. She asks another troubling question: "But who are they?" (139). So thorough a game is it that the guests proliferate and overwhelm with their numbers as much as the visible chairs do with theirs. Objects become separating forces, and Chapter 4 will return to this notion of separation in more detail. Under the threat of such separation, the Old Woman, expert game-player she might very well be, can trouble her husband with what sounds like a genuine worry: "My dear, I'm frightened, there are too many people . . . we are very far from each other . . . at our age we have to be careful . . . we might get lost . . . We must stay close together, one never knows" (144). Masters of fake realism, the couple, if one believes their guests are little more than a child's invisible playmates, have so successfully used their failing imaginations that they become lost in their own created nothingness.

The play's metaphysics frustrate anyone attempting to confine its verity, its stance on reality, in a tower of precise meaning. Grasping at penultimate meaning in this play is like trying to grab hold of one of its shadowy guests; such meaning will elude with as much ease as the coattails of the invisible Colonel. The first time I read this play I was sitting outside, during a summer's day, in full sunlight. When I think about that first reading, I can almost imagine myself as something as shadowy as the play's guests, invited for a moment into this strange world of the unreal, this theatrical world where meaning shines and flickers out like house lights. Sitting in that sunlight, was I as much an imitation, ghost, or shadow as the guests I followed to every empty chair? I was in full sunlight, reading the play for the first time, but

how tangible a being was I, how much substance did I myself really have?

Because it compels audiences to question their own being, *The Chairs* is a horror story, but witnessing an old couple pulling out chair after chair to invisible guests renders it an absurdly humorous one. So pathetic an image it is that we have to laugh to keep from sobbing. It invigorates and oppresses like the full heat of sunlight on a summer's day.

CHAPTER 3

IRONIC MESSIAHS: THE EMPEROR AND THE ORATOR

Most notable among the visiting guests are two would-be messiahs who invade the Old Couple's tower, bringing suspect hope and meaning. Ionesco's very own *roi soleil*, a shadow who enters the room bathed in emperial light, the Emperor becomes the controlling hub of nothingness, the centerpiece of emptiness, while the only other flesh-and-blood character in the play, the Orator, offers a grand message of gibberish. Both characters extend a mocking half-light of promise and significance to the Old Man in particular. If they are messiahs, they enter the room unbloodied, impotent, and hellish in their false gift of salvation. Each represents impossible order, authority, and validation for the Old Man. Once the two shadows enter promising everything but delivering nothing, the Old Man wallows in unchecked egoism and the foolhardy belief that his life actually matters.

Both characters are indeed ironic messiahs who simply possess no saving power. Their promises seem to dangle in front of the Old Man's wishes far more than they do the Old Woman's. What exactly do they promise the Old Man and then fail to deliver? It is a masculine wish-list they bring in, tear to pieces, and hurl in the air much like the macabre confetti at play's end. The Emperor is an ordering figure--a fixed entity around which the rest of society, and indeed the metaphysical universe, seems to revolve. As messianic emblem, he provides the God in Ionesco's

godless realm. If God is anything, He is an ordering principle; remove Him from the universal structure and the universal structure becomes the wild being of pure nature, lacking definition and boundary, always pushing toward disintegration and formlessness. A prophetic Ionesco predicts doom for a world that has divorced itself from the safety of divine order:

> **There is a higher order, but man can separate himself from it because he is free--which is what we have done. We have lost the sense of this higher order, and things will get worse and worse, culminating perhaps in a nuclear holocaust--the destruction predicted in the apocalyptic texts. Only our Apocalypse will be absurd and ridiculous because it will not be related to any transcendence. (Plimpton 137)**

The state of absurdity stems in part from this lack of metaphysical order--a place to go for transcendence and eternal reassurance; such is the plight of the Old Man in *The Chairs*. On a smaller scale, and a biblically metaphorical one, the Emperor here represents a father-figure that the Old Man is desperate to impress. The Old Man's odd story about being forty years old and sitting on his father's knee indicates that on this last night of existence, the Old Man is contemplating fatherhood and masculinity:

> **Your Majesty, hear me, a long time ago I had the revelation . . . I was forty years old . . . I say this also to you, ladies and gentlemen . . . one evening, after supper, as was our custom, before going to bed, I seated myself on my father's knees . . . my mustaches were longer**

> than his and more pointed . . . I had more hair on my chest . . . my hair was graying already, but his was still brown . . . There were some guests, grownups, sitting at table, who began to laugh, laugh. (*The Chairs* 153)

His next lines suggest that a simple word substitution thrust him into manhood forever: "I'm not joking, I told them, I love my papa very much. Someone replied: It is midnight, a child shouldn't stay up so late. If you don't go beddy-bye, then you're no longer a kid. But I'd still not have believed them if they hadn't addressed me as an adult" (153). In the original French, these mysterious auditors in the Old Man's story referred to him with *vous* (translated as *adult* in the English text) and not *tu* (translated as *child* in the English text), and the moment they did, he became something more distant, more serious, less playful. With a single word, they banished him from his father's knees forever; he was then no longer a "kid" but now a man, at least according to semantics.

During his account of deserting his mother, he comments that sons "more or less kill their fathers" (*The Chairs* 135), a killing necessary to gain full independence and manhood. With the death of the father, however, comes the need to fill the order-vacuum his killing leaves. In his woeful mediocrity, a condition the next chapter will examine at length, the Old Man is incapable of filling this void by himself. Not surprisingly, then, he seeks the epitome of masculine power and authority to do the filling for him. Steve Smith suggests that the Emperor is indeed a father-substitute (139), whom the Old Man hopes will fill this terrible void. Part of

this void is his own miserable self-concept as a man. For this reason the Old Man--if one is to believe that the Emperor, like the rest of the shadowy guests, is mere invention--invests his royal father with all the qualities he himself so sadly lacks: commanding presence, authoritative demeanor, and assertive power. Lane states that this father-figure also holds in his hands supposed approval that the Old Man is desperate to gain (62).

To garner this approval, the Old Man dissolves into a syrupy, pathetic egoism which creates nothing but more delusions, even though his tower is already full of them. Lane remarks that the "rhetoric of the Old Man's speeches to the Colonel, the Emperor, and the Orator parodies the pompous discourse of public speakers" (59). His egomania leads him on a self-important quest for meaning and significance, especially pathetic because he wastes it on thin air. He declares to the Emperor, "I'm the most faithful of all your subjects" (*The Chairs* 148). He even suggests that his life and now his message have messianic, saving qualities all their own; he, in a sense, could be the Emperor himself, a progeny to please royal papa: "We'll save the world!" he boasts (146). His words becoming self-inflicted ironies, he proclaims that he is not an "egotist" but in the very same breath adds that "humanity must profit" by what he has learned (146). Then again, he pompously asserts, "I alone could have saved humanity, who is so sick" (151). Once more, the conditional tense takes on the tone of a death sentence since the hour for bringing about this salvation has long past. Just prior to their suicide, the Old Man reassures Semiramis: "The eternal Emperor will remember us, always" (158). To help him

attain the distant air of majesty, the Old Woman orders her husband to "speak in third person" (150), to separate himself from his own self, and dwell in ephemeral delusions of grandeur. Such a separation, however, places the Old Man more in the midst of the rabble than of the Emperor. In the presence of royalty, divinely anointed as it usually is, the Old Man experiences not the elevation of dignity and majesty but the further destruction of his own first-person identity, his sense of "I" being swallowed by generic pronouns that the poor and nondescript must languish behind.

He, nevertheless, attempts to align himself with the powerful being the Emperor supposedly is, but as is the case in every other part of his life, the Old Man suffers extreme separation, the distance between royalty and rabble keenly palpable. The distance that inevitably exists between the kingdoms of plenty and the villages of need may always be palpable, but the Emperor before whom the Old Man debases himself is anything but real. He is, after all, an illusory messiah, one robed in derisive irony. He is a God beyond prayer, a father beyond emulation, a king beyond audience. He is a trick of light and darkness, as flimsy a being as every other invisible guest. When he makes his entrance, the Emperor enters with a royal flourish of theatrics, suggesting even among shadows a class system is at work:

> ***The noises increase, then the main door opens wide, with a great crash; through the open door we see nothing but a very powerful light which floods onto the stage through the main door and the***

windows, which at the entrance of the emperor are brightly lighted.

(*The Chairs* 147)

From the moment he enters the play, the Emperor appears dream-like to the Old Couple. Declares the Old Man, "Your majesty! . . . Oh! Your Majesty! . . . Your little, Your great Majesty! . . . Oh! what a sublime honor . . . it's all a marvelous dream" (147). As a messiah the Emperor certainly lacks definition; he is, according to Alfred Bermel, merely a "vision of God" ("Anything but Absurd" 417). If he is such a vision, as Bermel asserts he is, the Emperor must be considered a mocking representation of the King of Kings, a symbolic association that Ionesco himself wanted audiences to acknowledge (Lamont *Ionesco's Imperatives* 76). He is the King of Kings of nothingness, a pseudo-majestic figure with as much power as Wallace Stevens's "Emperor of Ice Cream." Such emperors in this mortal realm lord over nothing but dominions that melt and disappear.

Yet into the hands of this would-be King of Kings, Ionesco places the granting of dignity that the suffering Old Man seeks (Lamont *Ionesco's Imperatives* 79). The Old Man, however, cannot even attract the Emperor's attention, his Majesty locked away in the excess and comfort of power the Old Man has never and will never enjoy. The Old Man is the beggar at the gates, and in his utter deprivation, he will perennially be so. Desperate, he tries to subdue the Emperor's notice: "Sir . . . Your Majesty . . . look . . . I am here . . . here" (*The Chairs* 152). Ironically, the Old Man cannot observe all the features of his shadowy king, only fragments of his royal person: "Can you see me? . . . Answer, Sire! . . . Ah, I can see

you, I've just caught sight of Your Majesty's august face . . . your divine forehead . . . I've seen you, yes, in spite of the screen of courtiers" (148). A few moments later, the Old Man urges the Emperor not to hide his nose from him (152). A manufactured messiah, a self-created lord, but one whose features are forever obscured--such is the divine ruler the Old Man is desperate to please and serve.

If the Old Man is seeking the dignity this Emperor can bestow, he does so ignobly, reducing himself to a miserable caricature of servility. Jubilant and grossly fawning, he refers to himself as "servant," "slave," and "dog," then sets about barking to prove it (*The Chairs* 148). Then in abject submission, the Old Man hurls his absurd existence at invisible knees:

> If Your Majesty has deigned to come to our miserable home, it is because you have condescended to take into consideration my wretched self. What an extraordinary reward. Your Majesty, if corporeally I raise myself on my toes, this is not through pride, this is only in order to gaze upon you! . . . morally, I throw myself at your knees. (152)

The Emperor is that intercessor to whom the Old Man confesses his awful inabilities. He cannot express himself, he confides to his royal guest (150). Here, though, is no messiah seated at the right hand of the Father. Instead, he is a distant figure which no priesthood of the believer can ever beckon. Not only do royalty and social status separate emperor from commoner but also the gulf of shadows coming between them. The Emperor's retinue and the Old Couple's guests come between

them and their would-be savior. In fact, as Pronko writes in *Eugène Ionesco*, a major concern of *The Chairs* revolves around the hindrances that separate people from each other and from their own "Emperor" (17). Even if no such hindrances existed, the Emperor would offer the Old Man none of the reassurance, meaning, and consequently the salvation he must have if his disintegrating life is to matter eternally. After all, both the Old Man and the Emperor are "trembling equally on the verge of the void" (Hayman 50). They are both fading shadows the crouching darkness is ravenous to devour. Both savior and the unsaved must suffer utter damnation.

* * *

That darkness will lick the unreal bones of the Orator, too, for though he is "flesh-and-blood," he is as flimsy a reality as the Emperor's diadem. The salvation he supposedly embodies is even flimsier. So important a presence in the play is this less-than-eloquent public speaker that Ionesco originally entitled his drama *The Orator* (Lamont *Ionesco's Imperatives* 72). Perhaps Ionesco thought lending the Orator's name to the play would emphasize its irony, for in his every garbled word, the Orator undermines every supposition, every hope on which the Old Couple have built their very existence. He is, in effect, the ultimate surprise ending, the shocking, impossibly laughable dénouement to which the play compels its audience.

Like the Emperor, the Orator, though corporeal--at least visually so--tests the Old Man's ability to discern dream from reality. Upon the Orator's arrival, the Old Man declares, "This is not a dream!" (*The Chairs* 154). Interestingly, that word

dream attends both the Emperor's and the Orator's arrival. Ironically, Ionesco would rather an audience view the Emperor as less dream-like and more real than they might view the Orator. The Orator, demands Ionesco, must appear "unreal" (154), but at the same time, he insists in his stage directions that the Orator be a real person. The further descriptions he includes for his messenger, however, suggest a bizarre character who appears as enigmatic as the message he will later deliver. Ionesco writes of his Orator: "*He's a typical painter or poet of the nineteenth century; he wears a large black felt hat with a wide brim, loosely tied bow tie, artist's blouse, mustache and goatee, very histrionic in manner, conceited*" (154). So strange is this apparition that the Old Woman, Ionesco declares, must touch him in order to prove to herself he is genuine (154)--a kind of "Doubting Thomas" confirmation of faith. Only after touching his body can she then declare that her messiah really exists "in flesh and blood" (154).

One cannot but imagine the author chuckling at this bit of macabre irony--a visible actor who must seem less real than invisible ones. The Orator is one of three flesh-and-blood characters, yet he is to be more transparent than the Colonel's left ear. With a sleight of his dramatic hand, Ionesco turns reality topsy-turvy, insisting that the invisible guests have more substance than the visible ones, especially the Orator.

Once he has delivered his infamous message, the Orator, rather than human messenger, looks like an odd phantasm created in a nightmare:

> *Again, the Orator turns around to face the crowd; he smiles, questions, with an air of hoping that he's been understood, of having said something; he indicates to the empty chairs what he's just written. He remains immobile for a few seconds, rather satisfied and a little solemn; but then, faced with the absence of the hoped for reaction, little by little his smile disappears, his face darkens; he waits another moment; suddenly he bows petulantly, brusquely, descends from the dais; he goes toward the main door upstage center, gliding like a ghost; before exiting through this door, he bows ceremoniously again to the rows of empty chairs, to the invisible Emperor.* (160)

This ridiculous charade is rollicking fun, for this dapper fellow with the penchant for non-communication is more a surreal horror conjured up in some murky sub-conscious than is the invisible Emperor to whom he bows--a surreal horror that nevertheless elicits a stifled laugh.

The Orator's patent unreality has led some productions to alter Ionesco's original conception of this odd spokesman for the absurd. In a production by Boutté, the Orator appeared via television screen like a "presidential candidate delivering his Message of salvation" (Whitton 150). Viewing the Orator as redundant, Yerushalmi's 1990 Tel Aviv staging omitted the character and his scene altogether (Rozik 155). Although Boutté's production creatively underscored the Orator's unreality, both his and Yerushalmi's interpretation of *The Chairs* negated the painfully humorous irony of the play's conclusion. Ionesco's goal, it would seem,

was to heap absurdity upon absurdity until the audience almost desires the same plunge the old pair take--a plunge resulting in loud splashes mingled with mad laughs. Nancy Lane understands the play's dramatic mission when she declares that the physically "real" Orator draws more attention to the message because he follows a long procession of invisible characters (53). Any production which eliminates the Orator, or alters his physicality, fails to understand his ironic import. He, after all, should garner the play's biggest mad cackle, even though as Bermel writes, many audiences, the one attending the first New York production included, have had difficulty knowing how to react to this bizarre figure's inarticulation ("Anything but Absurd" 415).

He is a failed messiah like the Emperor, and in his bungling attempt to communicate the grand message, he indeed invites a disturbing laughter, since audiences carry within themselves their own messages they hope are not meaningless. The Old Man's ridiculous posturing and egoism render the failure of his message oddly funny; it is still a failure, however, one that disturbs audiences who themselves teeter on the edge of miscommunication with every word they try to express. Ionesco, like any master dramatist, enlarges his theatrical experiences to encompass the lives of not only characters but also audiences. So it is with *The Chairs*. Writes Eli Rozik of Ionesco's own message to his audiences: "The deeply rooted human longing for salvation is thus revealed as a human archetype, an empty structure of experience, without real bearing on the world. On a thematic level, Ionesco conveys the idea that redemption is a figment of human imagination, a

ludicrous fantasy in which the human mind indulges" (153). Salvation is every mortal's wish; it is any old man's last defense against dissolution. In his Orator Ionesco unites his audiences' wishes with his Old Man's; both are in need of some articulation of truth that will ensure they avoid oblivion and achieve immortality.

In much the same way that the Emperor does, and indeed all the shadowy guests do, the Orator represents for the Old Man all the finer qualities that never materialized within him (Bermel "Anything but Absurd" 416). The Orator's very presence occurs out of necessity: the Old Man cannot clearly express himself. What eloquence, what charisma the Old Man lacks, the Orator supposedly possesses. His prescribed conceitedness also makes the Orator the perfect choice to offer the last words of a megalomaniac. Only a histrionic figure enamoured with his own expressiveness could convey such a grossly overblown message as the Old Man's. Trapped in their abject isolation and in their utter stasis, which the next chapter will examine, how and where did the Old Couple find this flamboyant messenger? How did he materialize into something apparently tangible when every other person in the tower is intangible? Neither Ionesco nor his old sufferers care to answer these questions. The Orator simply floats in like a whisper in a bad dream. He signs a few autographs, offers the message, and then hastily exits--his manifestation as baffling as the message he attempts to utter. His origin and his story a mystery, the Orator takes on the air of unreality that Ionesco demanded he take. He is godlike in his having no beginning and no ending. At least the other guests have stories to

complement their missing faces; this particular visitant has a face to complement a missing story.

Yet the Old Man entrusts *his* story to this shadowy eccentric. In a stunning ironic contradiction, the Old man, a fumbling communicator by his own admission, describes his final plans for the Orator in dialogue as eloquent as a well-crafted eulogy:

> **What matters all that now when I am leaving to you, to you, my dear Orator and friend [. . .] the responsibility of radiating upon posterity the light of my mind . . . thus making known to the universe my philosophy. Neglect none of the details of my private life, some laughable, some painful or heartwarming, of my tastes, my amusing gluttony . . . tell everything . . . speak of my helpmeet. (*The Chairs* 157)**

His inability to trust his own skills--evidence again of his flimsy mettle--forces the Old Man to seek a mouthpiece, an articulate Aaron who will speak for a stuttering Moses. For the Old Man and his audience, the revelation of his message to end all messages is the culmination of his life and their patience. He declares, "I have a message, that's God's truth, I struggle, a mission, I have something to say, a message to communicate to humanity, to mankind" (119). In the original French, he declares "*j'ai quelque chose dans le ventre*," which literally translates, "I have something in the belly (or possibly *womb*)" (*Les Chaises* 23). The original phrase resonates more when one realizes that the Old Couple have already mentioned

another phrase "the idiotic bare belly" (*le drôle ventre nu)* a few lines earlier (*The Chairs* 117; *Les Chaises* 20). The great outpouring of his belly--the communicating of his message--will be absurd gibberish, a ridiculous birth of sorts yielding anonymity rather than posterity. What better spokesperson for such a message than the perfect emblem of absurdist babble, Ionesco's Orator.

If the Old Man's salvation resides in the contents of the Orator's words, then utter damnation awaits him. *Angelfood* may be a pretty word, but it does little in encompassing the worth of a man's life; however, it and *adieu* are the only understandable words of the Orator's cluttered message. It is an odd combination of the spiritual (angel) and the material (food), suggesting the Old Man's notions of divinity are hopelessly mired in the earthiness of mortality. Also implicit in the word is destruction--food, food for angels, food for fish, food for worms, food for total ingestion, digestion, and excretion. The Old Man is food, and regardless of the substance he may have had, he will pass into worthless detritus. That is the ludicrous message of the deaf-mute he has hired, and not the more hopeful, God-laced message that Willis D. Jacobs strains to see in the play's conclusion. With as much optimism as he can muster, Jacobs offers the following suspect reading of the play:

> In *The Chairs* [Ionesco] affirms that there is a consolation to even the meanest life, that even the humblest have something worthy to be heard by any and all of mankind, and that what they have to say is that God exists, the soul exists, immortality exists, heaven exists. We

> are of the stuff of Angels and we shall all be received within the love of God. God loves and rewards us. Not absurd, maybe; not pleasing to the cynical modern ear, no doubt; but there it is in Ionesco. We are angelfood, all of us, and we shall one day go to God. (n. pag.)

Such a reading is comparable to saying that Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a how-to guide for maintaining Gothic mansions. It really reveals no understanding of the play's extraordinary bleakness or its finer touches of absurd humor--both of which require the shattered empyrean which serves as the play's horizon. Jacobs bases his rosy assessment of Ionesco's play on the Orator's two understandable words: *angelfood* and *adieu*. According to Jacobs both words suggest divine destinations for the Old Couple. He reads *adieu* literally to mean "to God" (n. pag.). James L. Brown, however, rightly attacks this skewed notion. Brown argues that Jacobs fails to realize that *angepain* does not carry the same weight as the English *angelfood*, that it probably is simply the Orator's inserting *pain* for *vin* as in the word *angevin*. More disturbingly, the *adieu adieu* could be interpreted as "goodbye to God" (n. pag.).

Perhaps the Orator is the most inscrutable character in the play. Productions have certainly differed in their treatment of the role. In any production that stays true to Ionesco's original conception, what the Orator says becomes a symbol of ineffectual language. His utterances come to represent the failed language of modernity, the fragmented expression most human beings have come to share. Many critics, as the paper's conclusion will discuss, see this linguistic failure as one

of the play's chief preoccupations. David Bradby reminds audiences that Ionesco "returned again and again to the treachery of language, its apparently straightforward guarantee of meaningful communication, together with its disturbing ability to mean whatever we choose to make it mean" (n.pag.). The Old Man has transformed both Emperor and Orator into his own image of what he is not; similarly, he has transformed the Orator's message into what it could never be--a pithy communication of his eternal worth and significance. Adds Martin Esslin:

> **Of course [*The Chairs*] contains the theme of the incommunicability of a lifetime's experience; of course it dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence, made bearable only by self-delusion and the admiration of a doting, uncritical wife; of course it satirizes the emptiness of polite conversation, the mechanical exchange of platitudes that might as well be spoken into the wind. (151-52)**

If words are the bridges that connect human beings to each other, Ionesco suggests those bridges are strung together by mere threads of unavoidable confusion. Perhaps a humanity straining to be heard and understood sounds just like the Orator and his "Mmm, Mmm, Gueue, Gou, Gu. Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm" (*The Chairs* 160). In his appraisal of Rina Yerushalmi's 1990 production, Eli Rozik summarzies the powerful message the play leaves with audiences, even without the presence of the babbling Orator:

> **The message of the play can thus be paraphrased as follows: there is no message; there cannot be a message; the very quest for a message is futile and grotesque, a ridiculous game in the minds of intellectuals; the world to be redeemed is a figment of the imagination, and finally, only a seeker of messages might delude himself or herself into experiencing a sense of self-fulfillment in life. (155)**

Words and whatever meaning they may have disintegrate perhaps even in the mind, and once they leave the mouth, only the frayed husks of what they were in their incipient moment remain; they, like the mind that creates them, suffer a disintegration unwilling to allow any meaningful form to remain. Any message built from such unreliable, ill-formed things must, therefore, remain as much an enigma as saviors incapable of saving.

CHAPTER 4

LES PARATONNERRES DES CATASTROPHES:

THE OLD COUPLE

In a lighthouse, a pin prick of light threatened on every side by water, an old couple play hosts to a clutter of chairs. Cut off, they are, this old pair, with only the swelling silence to bear witness to the accumulation of their little lives. The vastness of water collects around their feet, the vastness of silence collects above their heads--and in between them only their muddled relationship offers any saving comfort. Cut off, they are, this old pair with little ability to communicate the anguish of their isolation. What they possess instead is brokenness and distortions, corrupted truths and feeble language. It is a painful groping for significance and meaning, their words like bony fingers clutching at shadows.

Such is the dismal odyssey of Ionesco's aged sufferers, the Old Man and Semiramis.

As a play featuring Every Man performing for Every Man, *The Chairs* is a universal, almost primeval theatre piece that presents the essential horrors of the human condition. It is a play about two *paratonnerres des catastrophes*, and in a sense, about all humankind which, too, acts as a "lightning rod of catastrophes." The mailing address of the Old Couple and the rest of humanity is East of Eden, that place of withering flowers and distintegrating identities. As a document on the

human condition, and all the ludicrous suffering it enfolds, *The Chairs* depicts the curse of mortality, the isolation and stasis that both separate and fix the Old Couple in their own pitiable realm, the broken communication that attends their marriage, and the failure of love to endure beyond inevitable, annihilating death. The Old Couple, bound each in each, twist on a cross of suffering fashioned by the woes that come from breathing mortal air. They have cracked open Pandora's box and now wear misery like sackcloth and ashes. They are indeed conspicuous targets at which the dark forces take aim.

For one, they are ancient, and their bones, so in the thralls of decay, slink closer and closer to the earth with every bit of mass they lose. The special miseries of old age fascinated their creator. Ionesco once commented he could not accept the prospect of "having to get older, being diminished" (Hayman 14). He also declared that "we should be immortal" and claimed that our desire to be immortal causes our fear of death (13). Steve Smith sees Ionesco as the Old Man in *The Chairs*, requiring a similar spokesman, in this case his own created character, to help him cope with mortality (141). Ionesco's first encounters with the specters of old age and death came early and vividly, for he was to remember these encounters for the rest of his days. A sibling's early death from meningitis and his mother's attempted suicide perhaps led to Ionesco's preoccupation with death and to his belief that happiness was impossible (Gaensbauer 4). In an interview with Rosette C. Lamont, he recounted another incident that taught him the miseries of being human:

> I was four years old, and I was with my mother in a room. We looked out the window, and there was a burial procession passing by. I asked my mother what it was, and she told me a man had died. Then I asked her how people came to die, and she said that it happened to them when they were old and sick. "And what does it mean to grow old?" I asked. "Does it mean that you hunch over more and more, and that you grow a white beard which gets longer and longer?" Yes, she said. "And does everyone grow old and die?" And she said yes again. Then I started to scream and cry. I must have cried for hours.
>
> (Wager 168)

His *The Chairs* presents the truth that everyone grows old and dies. This pivotal moment in his early development may very well have created within him the emblems of old age that his Old Couple represent. Having made the journey from old age to infinite decay, Ionesco himself now testifies to the verity of his play; he is mere dust rifling through the pages of his works. His Old Couple, garbed in the horrors of old age their author knew only too well, wear hideous masks only a Greek tragedian could fashion. The sun, an infernal timepiece, has withered them, their creator, and the weeds--all mortal things dying on the other side of Paradise.

The play's depiction of the everlasting horrors of mortality certainly seems primordial. The Old Man refers to a garden where he and Semiramis once arrived "soaked through, frozen to the bone"; someone, a mysterious "they," refused to open the gate for them, so they remained outside, their teeth chattering

(*The Chairs* 115-16). Was the invigorating sun of immortality beyond that garden fence? Nancy Lane certainly sees Edenesque possibilities in the allusion (56). Ionesco himself cherished *The Chairs* primarily for this slight reference to an unobtainable garden, a symbol of "lost paradise" (Plimpton 144). Such an allusion transcends the temporal, the play itself as cut-off from real time and its evanescence as the tower in which the Old Couple suffer.

To his Old Man, Ionesco affixes the title "General Factotum," an appellation a janitor or at best a lighthouse keeper might bear (Lamont *Ionesco's Imperatives* 77). Certainly, it is not a name that carries much power with it. The Old Man's title and the absence of any other personal name affixed to him are ironic signifiers in light of his wife's historically significant name. For his female protagonist, Ionesco again delved into the mythology of long-buried ages, hoping to capture a very human moment beyond dates and clocks. He gives the Old Woman the name Semiramis--the name of an infamous Babylonian queen. To early Church fathers, Semiramis became a notorious symbol of debauchery and licentiousness (Harty 172). For her carnality and incestuous relations with her own son, Harty adds, Semiramis finds herself in the second circle of Dante's *Inferno* (173); for Ionesco's Old Woman, as Chapter 2 discussed, such carnality and lewdness have become mere parody and empty gesturing. The subject of much controversy, the historical Semiramis later became associated with the building of not just the ziggurat but also the infamous Tower of Babel, an allusion that adds theatrical force to the Orator's incoherent message (176).

Lamont offers this additional evaluation of Ionesco's naming of his Old Woman:

> **The old hag is endowed with a grotesquely ill-suited name, that of the Assyrian princess who supposedly founded Babylon. The ancient name may go with her wrinkled face and mummylike body, but it emphasizes the passing of a glorious epoch. However, the Old Man and his wife have kept a sense of history, a desire to leave a trace of their passage on this earth. (*Ionesco's Imperatives* 73)**

Semiramis and her husband represent the awful consequences of passing time, that inexorable force that leaves Babylonian queens interred under the soot of decay; time levels ordinary men and women as well as kings and kingdoms. As sufferers, then, the Old Couple connect to every miserable soul, both royal and common, from the murky forgotten places of history to the artificially-lit suburbs of modernity.

Whether royal or commonplace, names in this play mean little considering they are attached to such flimsy identities. The sea that swallows the Old Couple at play's end will not remember their names, the fish will not remember their faces. The two old people are shadows of their former selves, powerless now as they may have once been empowered, sexually dead now as they may have once been alive. One of their earliest exchanges introduces the audience to the notion of shadows and flimsiness:

> **Old Man: Sweetheart, I'm tired of French history. I want to see -- the boats on the water making blots in the sunlight.**

> **Old Woman: You can't see them, there's no sunlight, it's nighttime, my darling.**
>
> **Old Man: There are still shadows. (*The Chairs* 113)**

The important word in the Old Man's last line is *still*. Little remains but the shadows their knotty bones make against the walls. As if he needs special reminding, the Old Woman later urges her husband not to "slink away into the shadows" (145), an ironic directive since they are already swamped by hordes of shadowy guests. The exchange also begins the manipulation of light and darkness that Ionesco will employ throughout the play--important concepts in a play replete with shadows. The setting is darkness, and what light Ionesco injects into the play always has a mocking, serpent-under-the-flower sense to it.

Staring through an open window, the Old Man has witnessed his last sunlight; night spreads about the tower like the sea and will only deepen and consume everything the Old Couple are. The casualty list of all they have lost and will continue to lose on this night moves the Old Man to say he has "suffered enormously" (*The Chairs* 146). He laments that "grief, regret, remorse" are all that he and his companion have left (134). He certainly is only a hobbled, sickened image of what he once may have been, so his fingers cannot lay claim to his physical body. That is gone forever.

Living an incredibly long life has led him to questionable rewards, suggests Bermel, who offers the following observation on the Old Man's many sunsets: "He has had an abnormally long life--what every person yearns for; longevity is next to

immortality--but his ninety-five years have gone misused, squandered. He did not even get to be one hundred" ("Anything but Absurd" 417). Perhaps the Old Man and his wife are Tithonus-like creatures, plagued with seeming immortality that their bones are desperate to quit. Forced to endure decade after decade, they have witnessed the gradual chipping-away of their bodies, their minds, and their identities. Having suffered such an erosion of form and substance, the Old Woman can declare that she has "suddenly forgotten everything" as if her mind were a "clean slate every evening" (*The Chairs* 115). As their minds have decayed, so have their memories of each other's pasts. They do not even know each other's own stories, and as Gaensbauer points out, a bright light oddly begins to shine during their back-to-back flirtation scene with Belle and the Photo-engraver (73). Here is the mocking, hissing light Ionesco employs to enhance his already caustic depiction of proliferating inscrutability. Any knowledge in the play, even between these two lifemates, is as ironic and ill-defined as the shadowy visitors.

In their losses the Old Couple are indeed attached to the rest of humankind by the umbilical cord of mortality. The Old Man laments to the Emperor: "They've supplanted me, they've robbed me, they've assassinated me . . . I've been the collector of injustices, the lightning rod of catastrophes" (*The Chairs* 151). Part of his grand message is to be the theme of individuality--in spite of or perhaps because of his own glaring mediocrity. He insists that he is "not like other people," that some specialness separates him from the rest of humanity (119). As individual human being, he is being swallowed alive by forces that have no respect for his personhood.

Clearly unwilling to divest himself of his face and identity, the Old Man desperately seeks some salvation that will preserve his sense of himself as important, significant being. He tells his gallery of guests that he will explain to them that the "individual and the person are one and the same" (145). Frantic to preserve his own perceived uniqueness, the Old Man suggests here that each soul is not part of the mass of humanity, a busy hive of bees working futilely in order to die anonymously. Rather, each individual's frantic activity must lead to some singular, personally-significant end. The egoist, the sycophant who cowers in the Emperor's presence, the Old Man clamors for a destiny that will lead anywhere but to the disintegration that awaits every human being. Although his bones are the bones of every mortal who has stood outside the Garden, the Old Man wishes his mortality was as separate from him as his tower is from reality.

Though humanity's thanatopsis will always hover around a massive, anonymous grave, the individual seeks a prominent shrine in which to house his or her bones. Mortality and old age, however, are precisely individual tortures which lead individuals to awful commonality. The earth itself is a grand receptacle bulging with the accumulated remains of the great, the near great, the common, and the forgotten. Horrifically ironic, the human condition poses as a singular event for each individual that only leads to the massive sepulchre where bones are as indiscriminate as the specks of dirt covering them. At the same time it is personally extraordinary and horribly commonplace. Each man's death passion is uniquely his own, but in the sense of outcome and the inevitabilities of nature, no different from

his next-door neighbor's. The Old Couple, then, are unique sufferers who suffer quotidian miseries. At one and the same moment, their suffering isolates them from and unites them to humankind.

The forces of old age and mortality have certainly isolated the old pair from the real world thriving under their tower of unreality--a tower not unlike the Lady of Shalott's; these forces have also fixed them in a condition of stasis which the stagnant waters outside the tower reflect. To encompass this lonely, suffering pair, Ionesco builds for them an Ionescian "circle of hell" (Gaensbauer 71). Gaensbauer adds that their "Job-like isolation and incomprehension at having suffered so unjustly render them tragically human" (75). They suffer this isolation and incomprehension in a tower. Towers point away from the Earth and toward the heavens, away from the trivial to the transcendent. The irony here is the absence of any transcedence. As the Old Pair's abode, the tower itself is built on a foundation of symbolic connotations. Nancy Lane likens the Tower's circular design to the womb and its special security (54), while Bermel associates phallic imagery to the Tower's inherent design (412)--interpretations which coincide with the generational confusion and sexual undertones that occur in the play. Ionesco, as Harty reminds, already alludes to the Tower of Babel in the naming of his Old Woman, and as symbol of the over-reacher's ambition, it is a perfect mythological counterpart to the Old Man's tower inside of which his egoistic reach exceeds his mediocre grasp. With his tower he fails to pierce the underbelly of metaphysics, to locate the edge of God's certitude, or to establish his own worth as a man. Like the prototypical tower-

builders of Genesis 11, he only succeeds at ascending to a new level of perversity and confusion. Ionesco could very well have added the following verse as an epigram to his play: "Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:7). God curses the Tower's height and lets fall a hail storm of linguistic confusion upon it, so that isolation and impotency will be man's lot. The Old Man is certainly an inheritor of that isolation and impotency. Whether womb or tomb, or allusive metaphor for gross over-reaching, the tower is a solitary place where the Old Couple have dwelt beyond the real world--wherever that may be. Their habitation, their cell is a sort of body suspended in air--the flesh-and-blood feet failing to make crucial contact with the real earth.

If they thought they could escape the complications of the real world beyond their tower, they have foolishly thrown a Prince-Prospero party which death and disintegration nevertheless attend. Whatever safety this womb-like tower may have afforded the Old Couple eventually fails to protect them from the awful inevitabilities intent on seizing them. According to Lane the outside invades this secure realm, forcing the old pair into the terrifying world beyond:

> At the end of the play, the barrier that had both protected and imprisoned the old couple is effectively destroyed as the main double door and the two windows stand wide open. Like holes in a ship's hull, the doors and windows in the wall have allowed the old couple's

> secure, private interior space to be filled to overflowing, expelling them into the darkness outside. (55-56)

This hole-imagery occurs in the play itself, the Old Man realizing his sanctuary has breaches through which his peace will escape and his fears will enter. He observes, "Sometimes I awaken in the midst of absolute silence. It's a perfect circle. There's nothing lacking. But one must be careful, all the same. Its shape might disappear. There are holes through which it can escape" (*The Chairs* 145). He also describes this precious solitude as an emotional and intellectual salvation of sorts: "It's this alone that has saved me: the inner life, peace of mind, austerity, my scientific investigations, philosophy, my message . . ." (133). Here he suggests that his mind is as isolated and silent a place as the tower he inhabits, but in both cases, external reality strives to destroy that isolation and that silence.

One motivation for communicating his message is the hope of reaching out to the external world, the one beyond the isolation and silence that provide both solitude and imprisonment. The Old Man declares that he has suffered from a sort of suffocation that the sharing of his message will alleviate (*The Chairs* 133). For him, making this vital connection with outside reality will be akin to breaking open a window. Part of this suffocation comes from what Bermel aptly identifies as the Old Man's social maladjustment. Tower isolation is the appropriate dwelling for this old mixture of child and man incapable of existing in the real world of mature relationships ("Anything but Absurd" 419). Locked away to themselves, seeing the

same shadows, playing the same games, knowing the same half-truths, the Old Couple have languished in immaturity.

From the preposterous account of the Old Man at forty sitting on his father's knee to the puerile mother-son fantasy, the Old Couple suffer relationships with as little sense and substance as they themselves possess. Their relationships are very much the stick-figured things they are. Sunlight and the contact of other people would have given them the vital external influences to "grow them up" into sturdier beings. Instead, they have developed under shadows floating off stagnant waters, and their pale, spindly forms only mask even paler, more spindly spirits, sickly and incapable of withstanding the world of mature relationships. The Old Man's message, then, may be more about moving himself into maturity and thus into the external world than it is about attaining individual significance.

Perhaps he longs to make contact with something other than the shadows in the cave while he himself can still cast a shadow. He bemoans the fact that all he and his wife have is "an imitation" (*The Chairs* 145). In the very same section of dialogue, his wife mentions to one of her invisible listeners the words "ghosts," "phantoms," and "mere nothings" (145). Cut-off from the external world, they feed their emotional selves with fakery and delusions rather than the life-altering nourishment of human contact. They must breathe the air that flesh-and-blood people breathe, or else they will truly die of emotional and spiritual suffocation.

Interestingly, husband and wife differ over the nature of their isolation and the suffocation that attends it. Lane sees the Old Man suffering from internal

suffocation--from the need to find the breathable air beyond the tower walls; Semiramis, on the other hand, believes the water beyond the walls and not the stifling interior will suffocate them (55). In the play's opening lines, she warns him of the unpleasantness lurking outside: "Come my darling, close the window. There's a bad smell from that stagnant water, and besides the mosquitoes are coming in" (*The Chairs* 113). As provident mother she reminds him that he may very well "fall into the water" (113). The two sharing a peculiar mother-son bond, she rests in the security of the womb; he seeks the dangers beyond it. It is the Old Man, after all, who stares through the open window at play's beginning; it is the Old Woman who calls him from it.

The world of emptiness has moved inside; it now pushes the Old Couple to the exit where the foreign world beckons, the place from which their shadowy guests may have come. The Old Couple have been pushed out of their smallness, out of their oblivious disregard for the human condition and their place in it. Something large and swallowing will now claim them. In their isolation they have stayed put, rooted like old trees next to shattered temples. The only real movement comes from the outside, from the invasion of this inner sanctum of nothingness. Poignantly, in a surreal vision of somnambulists, the Old Couple move only in circles of mindless repetitions, bringing out chair after chair for missing people. All the hullabaloo on stage suggests Ionesco's vision of a "whirlwind of emptiness" (Gaensbauer 73). The play presents cluttered activities that lead to no significant purpose. After placing the chairs on stage, for what an audience must believe is a suspect if not absurd

reason, the Old Couple commit suicide; the chairs remain positioned as the two old people left them, but to what meaningful end?

Since the tower is a circle, it is a symbol of infinity, but in this case, a negative infinity of repetitiveness, motions that rats on wheels might make. There is indeed movement, but movement that leads to stasis rather than dynamism. Through their games and stories, one gets a sense that the Old Couple have ventured this way before, in fact many times, that the action within the play represents much-travelled territory. The Old Man bemoans the hellish monotony to which he and his wife are consigned: "For all of the seventy-five years that we've been married, every single evening, absolutely every blessed evening, you've made me tell the same story, you've made me imitate the same people, the same months . . . always the same" (*The Chairs* 115). Rozik questions if this particular evening is merely the ordinary pattern, and that even though a suicide takes place, if the same ritual game somehow will be played out the next day (149).

Revolving endlessly around this hellish circle, the Old Couple have only managed to waste their time and the best parts of their youth with little consequence to show for it. The only changes they have shared have been the physical ones, the slipping away of faces, the atrophy of muscles, the brittling of bones. Their emotional and spiritual development has known only stasis, not change. Suicide for the two, then, is anti climatic, since their stumbling movements have led them to every destination except genuine life.

At two points in the play, the Old Couple allude to their cut-off, stagnant existence by wistfully mentioning the movements of people living beyond their tower. First, the Old Woman, speaking to one of her invisible guests, offers the following observation: "There are people who are happy. In the morning they eat breakfast on the plane, at noon they lunch in the pullman, and in the evening they dine aboard the liner. At night they sleep in the trucks that roll, roll, roll" (*The Chairs* 145). All this motion, and its ability to bring people to new lands of experience, is a mystery to the Old Couple who have suffered stationary lives. When was the last time the Old Woman went to market? When did the Old Man last catch a fish? The modes of transportation the Old Woman ennumerates have failed to take the Old Couple beyond their tower, and more importantly, beyond themselves. Through their perennial stay in this dungeon, they have been forced to look at each other and witness the cycle of decay. Suggesting an odd inability to choose and move for himself, the Old Man later laments his own kinetic failures to the Emperor:

> In order to forget, Your Majesty, I wanted to go in for sports . . . for mountain climbing . . . they pulled my feet and made me slip . . . I wanted to climb stairways, they rotted the steps . . . I fell down . . . I wanted to travel, they refused me a passport . . . I wanted to cross the river, they burnt my bridges. (151)

Here, desire becomes failed intention; willing spirit submits to weakened flesh. These normal, easy movements--playing sports, climbing stairs, travelling--became bizarre impossibilities for the Old Man. Every step he made toward a world other

than the one in which he has suffered led to inaction; he is now staked to a pole--in this case, a tower--which allows him only a limited circumference of motion.

The only reality this isolated, staid couple seem to possess is their marriage bond with each other. This bond--anything but a mature relationship--is the source for much of the play's absurdity. Having been a mirror for each other's perpetual slide into nothingness, they have lived eighty years together (or at least some span of time, since Ionesco confuses the play's chronology throughout it), yet in their final moments they at times seem a pair of old acquaintances bumping into each other, catching up on dead reminiscences and forgetting much of what has passed between them. Perhaps the most important theme of *The Chairs* is the need for individual salvation, a *deus-ex-machina* redemption from the quagmire of an unresolvable life. In the true spirit of the anti-play, Ionesco never shows what saves, only what doesn't. The shadowy guests and their housewarming gifts will not save; the Emperor tilting his diadem in approval will not save; the Orator's articulation or lack thereof will not save; and this marriage between clownish martyrs will not save. It will only provide each partner with an escort into inescapable oblivion.

In the rapid approach of night, and the dwindling of whatever light there ever was, the old couple in Ionesco's *The Chairs* struggle through sickly, ineffectual language to understand the emptiness threatening to sweep them away. One of the play's great ironies--and the play is arguably the most ironic theatrical spectacle one is likely to encounter--remains the broken communication between a man and a woman who have shared a lifetime together. Instead of eloquent discourse between

them, the Old Couple stumble through ineloquence verging on gibberish. Their attempts to express a life's accumulated experience become as convoluted and indecipherable as the chairs filling the stage. Words fill this play, swelling it to provide an evening's entertainment, but an undercurrent of babel runs through virtually every syllable. The language itself is a bloated dead thing proliferating its inane rhetoric as disturbingly as *Amédée's* mushrooms, or in this case, *The Chair's* malignant furniture.

Comfortable, familiar language between ardent lovers has degenerated here into delusions, forgotten history, and insensible language-play which serves as a futile solution for boredom like the game of chess in Eliot's *The Wasteland.* Critic Eli Rozik believes many of the exchanges between the Old Couple represent games, the "imitation of the month of February," the account of the "drowning of Paris," and the game of "I am an orphan," for example (148). Chapter 2 has already suggested that the assembly of invisible guests might be the fabrication of fantasy, an instance of absurd play-pretend, so Rozik's applying the notion of game to the pair's dialogue is no interpretive stretch. The games themselves, however, are feeble attempts to fill up gaps of empty time.

Inanity has replaced intimacy with these two, so what they have left in their relationship is an atrophied understanding. Nancy Lane offers an optimistic reading of the Old Couple's garbled communication. She claims that the Old Couple, in spite of sharing largely nonsensical language, understand each other thoroughly (59). The following passage, however, undermines Lane's assertion:

Old Man: Hi, hi, hi! My mamma! Where is my mamma? I don't have a mamma anymore.

Old Woman: I am your wife, I'm the one who is your mamma now.

Old Man [*giving in a little*]: That's not true, I'm an orphan, hi, hi.

Old Woman [*still rocking him*]: My pet, my orphan, dworfan, worfan, morphan, orphan.

Old Man [*still sulky, but giving in more and more*]: No . . . I don't want; I don't wa-a-a-ant.

Old Woman [*crooning*]: Orphan-ly, orhpan-lay [sic], orphan-lo, orphan-loo.

Old Man: No-o-o . . . No-o-o.

Old Woman [*same business*]: Li lon lala, li lon la lay, orphan-ly, orphan-lay, relee-relay, orphan-li-relee-rela . . . . (*The Chairs* 118)

What is to be understood here? This is not a fireside, cappuccino moment between impassioned lovers; it is more the puerile ramblings of clowns, and it is part of the last speeches that these two soulmates--as Lane suggests they are--will share this side of the abyss. Gaensbauer seizes upon more of the truth of this disintegrating relationship than Lane does. She remarks, "One thing is certain: this couple has gone on for a long time, sustained by endlessly repeated anecdotes, charades, and puns whose details and significance have been reduced to fragments of sense and sound accompanied by the refrains of 'if only'" (72). Fragments of bone, fragments

of mind, fragments of sense and sound are the legacies their relationship has engendered.

The two must claw out of the rubble of these fragments some remaining bond, some enduring understanding they can still share. Ionesco believed that it is "difficult to make oneself understood" and that *The Chairs* is a "plea, pathetic perhaps, for mutual understanding" (*Notes* 90). This recurrent theme of failed communication, suggests Gaensbauer, adds the dramatic energy to many of Ionesco's plays. She declares, "What makes Ionesco's writing compelling is that it is fundamentally about the difficulty of comprehending anyone, not least oneself, given an existence which, the more we learn about it physically, becomes more problematic metaphysically" (3). The Old Couple in *The Chairs* find little sense in themselves, their predicament, or their partnership. Like the rest of their existence, their mutual understanding, if it ever was, has died and only waits for the eternal silence to bury it.

Throughout the remainder of the play, this descent of language into nonsense continues and serves to foreshadow the shocking gibberish the Orator will provide. Through his old pair, Ionesco toys with French, the language of love, and comes up with rhyming lunacy: "*On a ri*" (we laughed), "*On arri . . . va*" (we arrived), and "*riz*" (rice) (Lane 58; *Les Chaises* 20; *The Chairs* 117). Broken dialogue occurs among the Old Couple and two of their guests, Belle and the Photo-engraver (*The Chairs* 136). From there, the Old Woman becomes a myna bird for her husband, herself an absurd messenger of sorts repeating whatever her other half says (146).

Eventually, her mimicry dissolves into fragments, her ability to be her husband's mouthpiece failing as much as her hold on mortality; at one point she can only offer her husband "miliated . . . miliated" and "ast recourse . . . ire . . . recourse" (150). She fails as an extension of her husband's self through language, and if she does so, Valency reminds, then her worth as a human being becomes negated (355).

Language becomes a barometer for disintegration in this play not only for the Old Woman but also for her husband. It is not the final bulwark against death, a wall of sense against the onslaught of senselessness. Rather, it is a thing of sand already under the shadow of the waves. Through ineffectual words, Smith declares, the Old Man tries "to capture and to keep at bay the real loss that motivates his quest" (140). His marriage provides a blackboard upon which he can inscribe his scribble, upon which he can formulate and calculate the extent of his massive losses, but such scribbling provides only garbled communication and not eternal salvation. Hayman, however, believes Semiramis as wife-mother fulfills a special role in the Old Man's message-quest: "The man needs his wife-mother to make him believe that he has something, a message that is worth passing on to other people, to make him believe that he is different from the others and has greatness within him" (45). She assists him in building his little wall against inevitable destruction. Rosette C. Lamont is less flattering in her appraisal of this marriage of needy sufferers:

> Ionesco draws for the audience a devastating picture of dependency. He does not spare any of the grim details that render marriage an association of two helpless, self-indulgent, egocentric individuals, who

> try to find in each other their own image and the comfort they lost in growing out of childhood. However, his protagonists are in the state of second childhood; they have come full circle. (*Ionesco's Imperatives* 72)

She adds later that the play calls into question the depth of any human relationship, marriage included (77). Since audiences can never know the past stories of this couple--because Ionesco begins his play at the edge of their dissolution and because they have failed to retain any clear memories--they can never fully appreciate how far this marriage and the partners in it have devolved. Lamont, though, asserts that the marriage appears "built on water, like the watchtower inhabited by the old spouses" (78). A thing built on water can provide no real foundation and consequently no real salvation. Things of sand and water, then, are their would-be redeemers--words and marriage--redeemers as unreliable and ineffective as the shadowy Emperor and Orator.

The most disturbing suggestion the play makes is this one: that love itself offers no defense against disintegration. If God lies dead on the floor of His shattered heaven, then His most splendid progeny, agape love, must sputter his last breath and perish as well. Love, the last light against the darkness, becomes a spiral of smoke. With this notion, the death of love as saving force, the play dives into its bleakest chasm. The proliferating chairs and guests eventually come between the two life-mates, negating whatever power their companionship may have offered them. Their bond cannot endure the smothering emptiness the chairs and shadows

examined in Chapter 2 represent. United in marriage, divided by nothingness--that is the fate the Old Woman realizes must be theirs. She warns her husband, "My dear, I'm frightened, there are too many people . . . we are very far from each other . . . at our age we have to be careful . . . we might get lost . . . We must stay close together, one never knows, my darling, my darling" (*The Chairs* 144). Clinging to each other's bones is the only security the Old Couple can hope for; Ionesco refuses to grant them that security. Their suicides bring them even more separation, not togetherness, as Bermel fails to realize when he insists that they must die "whole, united" ("Anything but Absurd" 416). They may share the experience of dying, but they will die in separate parts of the abyss where each will become cozy with a particular set of worms. Death, not love or eternal togetherness, is the only thing that will unite them.

Secure in their love, the Old Couple dive into the waters thinking they possess three treasures: permanence, understanding, and meaning. In reality, they possess none. The old pair, asserts Lane, "vanish from time as completely as from space, leaving no traces in either dimension" (58). In their deaths had been a wish for permanence, for imperishable legacies. "Yes, yes, let's die in full glory," urges the Old Woman, "let's die in order to become a legend . . . At least, they'll name a street after us" (*The Chairs* 158). If all they have is each other and the hope that something, perhaps even love, will endure, then they die with nothing. They leap from separate windows and will indeed die in separate chambers of the sea and not as the Old Man wishes in an oddly romantic poem:

Above all I had hoped

that together we might lie

with all our bones together

within the selfsame skin

within the same sepulchre

and that the same worms

might share our old flesh

that we might rot together. (158)

Since the Old Couple leave no legacies behind, their suicides manage to achieve nothing but a speedier destruction. Their deaths achieve no deepening of love, only a proliferating of rot. Critics like Barbra Malinowska consider the suicides the culminating absurdity that two clownish sufferers inflict on themselves: "The characters attempt to transcend absurdity by committing suicide, which is not the solution at all, for suicide is meant as a protest against the absurdity, the emptiness of life. By committing suicide, a person avoids facing the reality, prefers confronting the great Unknown to dealing with life problems" (57). Mary Ann Witt adds that the two die meaningless deaths that lead them to nothing but the great void of Ionesco's original vision (n. pag.). They must leave the notion of love, failed messiah that it inevitably must be, at the edge of the great darkness; love's frail light whimpers out.

So the darkness swallows the frailty of love--it bobs up then down and sinks into a sea of nevermore. With his every word condemning his failed life, the Old

Man ironically asserts to the Emperor: "Your Majesty, my wife and myself have nothing more to ask of life. Our existence can come to an end in this apotheosis . . . thanks be to heaven who has granted us such long and peaceful years . . . My life has been filled to overflowing. My mission is accomplished" (*The Chairs* 157). If the end of his life is any indication, the Old Man's days have been empty rather than overflowing, chaotic instead of peaceful. Whatever mission he was about remains a mystery by play's end. In his asking nothing more of life, he finally settles into his grave and pulls the waves over his bones, for nothing is what he has received and nothing is what he shall inherit. His and his wife's spectacular apotheosis has more to do with descent than ascent--a succumbing to the forces that will gnaw their bones and devour their fledgling bond. What is left is the absence of identity--the final victory of space and matter over flickering little wisps of life. Ionesco's stage directions focus again on lifeless objects, not living beings, the void now even more redolent of absence and emptiness than before:

> *The light coming through the main door and the windows has disappeared; there remains only a weak light as at the beginning of the play; the darkened windows remain wide open, their curtains floating on the wind.* (159)

What they were to themselves and to each other is no more. *Ils ont disparu.*

Separation from each other is their fate, a separation that acts as the culmination of a series of other separations: separation from society, from family, from communication, from memories, from self-worth, from understanding. With

the splash of the waters, the old couple sink into the great abyss that has been humming its siren song throughout the entire play. Lurking behind the windows and doors, in the chairs, through the broken words, amidst the awful nothingness of their lives has been the "realest" presence throughout the play: disintegration. Now it churns on, unimpeded by human wishes or the frail words that express them.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEATH OF LANGUAGE AND MEANING

> **My work has been essentially a dialogue with death, asking him, 'Why? Why?' So only death can silence me. Only death can close my lips. (Plimpton 146)**

The word *irony* and its variants have appeared several times throughout this paper in what may have been a mindrending frequency. Mortality makes irony possible; the human condition ensures that every man's life will elicit a wry chuckle from some corner of the universe. The blind stumble in the half-light of temporal knowledge takes each human being to one destination: irony. Whatever light we must find always seems a flicker away, just beyond the scope of our eyelids. What we must content ourselves with in the darkness is what we think we know, what we hope is sure, what we wish will be. In that ironic darkness, we indulge in our own conversation with shadows. For us, as for the Old Couple and for their creator, only death can silence the conversation. We reach the end of our conversation and find much to our surprise that the words have accumulated into a clutter of debris--our stage fills with only the shadows of our hopes seated in the chairs of our fears. Death comes and ends the conversation, wastes the nouns, bleeds the adjectives, and paralyzes the verbs. Death destroys language, and with it the mortal tongue, itself

becoming a dried, rotted thing from which forgotten words blow away in a swirling madness of dust.

What use, then, is literature, if every fine word from an author's mind is destined to become debris scattered through the ages? Not surprisingly, Ionesco, absurdist that he was, found such a question troubling. In an interview included in *Playwrights at Work*, Ionesco reflected on a premise from Pascal: "The basic problem is that if God exists, what is the point of literature? And if He *doesn't* exist, what is the point of literature? Either way, my writing, the only thing I have ever succeeded in doing, is invalidated" (145). Even if one believes that great literature will endure, such a thought has disturbing implications for the writer who must put pen to paper while the surety of becoming nothing stalks him.

One of life's greatest ironies is indeed the mortal artist who produces immortal art. Ionesco was an artist who wrote his every word in the valley of the shadow of death--and what's more--he knew it keenly. His plays now survive him--cold entities remaining stockstill like vultures studying a new carcass--remaining stockstill like lifeless furniture having, nevertheless, a life all their own. In a sense, then, Ionesco was himself a study in proliferation, desperately yanking out play after play, trying to fill up that huge, growing vacuum with something that would stand between him and death. In the Ionesco canon, *The Chairs* comes closest to ensuring its author a smack of immortality--a seat of honor in which his fading shadow can sit for awhile.

Anyone who dares to try something revolutionary will himself become not just a *paratonnerre des catastrophes*, but as in Ionesco's case, a *paratonnerre des critiques*. Like most truly unique works of art, *The Chairs* early on received little praise and scant attention. In fact, for many a performance during its 1952 run, the number of spectators matched the number of cast members: three. During many of those first performances, that trio of spectators consisted of Ionesco, his wife, and their eight-year-old daughter (Lamont *Ionesco's Imperatives* 70). Before its run ended, the play did manage to fill an average of ten seats per night (Wager 146). Ionesco's art had managed yet another level of irony in placing an empty stage full of empty chairs in front of an empty auditorium full of empty chairs.

Certainly, first-time viewers, when they did show up, were shocked by this sparse drama, full of often arcane gibberish and unsettling thematic implications. Ionesco relished one particular comment he heard in Lyons. Rosette C. Lamont recounts Ionesco's version of the quote: "These Parisians," the Lyons theatre-goers had groused, "take us for fools. They've sent us three out of their forty-three actors, and one of the three is mute" (*Ionesco's Imperatives* 69-70). Such misinterpretation of the play's staging was common during the play's initial run. Gaensbauer writes that several of the play's early critics focused too much on the play's "nonsense and guignolesque dimensions" instead of focusing on Ionesco's creation of an Artaudian stage: "a concrete physical place which asks to be filled and given its own concrete language to speak" (75). The hurling of his own words into the great void brought him the same misunderstanding, the same confusion his Old Couple suffer.

A 1956 revival of the play, however, brought Ionesco an odd sort of "overnight success." In his review of the play, Jean Anouilh offered this command to French audiences: "You must see *The Chairs*. I believe that it is better than Strindberg because it has black humor in the style of Molière, in a way which is insanely funny at times, and that it is frightful, witty, poignant and always real" (Wager 147). Matched with such praise, the opening-night applause caused a terrified Ionesco to flee the theatre (147), the prospect of success overwhelming him. Following the 1956 production of *The Chairs*, Ionesco would find himself at the forefront of the avant-garde and at the forefront of increasingly hostile criticism.

Ionesco's harshest critics came from the political left. The 1956 production of *The Chairs* had transformed Ionesco into the darling of the literary intelligentsia; almost overnight, however, his fortunes again shifted. Ionesco's attacks on many political, literary, and theatrical icons of his era did not help his cause. He was not fond of Sartre, Brecht, Miller, and Osbourne, writers whom he saw as "representatives of a left-wing conformism" he thought no better than the "right-wing sort" (Gaensbauer 14; *Notes* 91). The author of the anti-conformist play *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco was a fierce individualist, always wary of any political ideology that might pull him into a mindless herd. He was, therefore, no ally to the left or to the right, remaining, instead, to be true to his own personal convictions. Not surprisingly, Ionesco was indeed a lightning rod of criticism, suffering strikes from many quadrants of the literary and political sky. Gaensbauer writes that Ionesco's own prestige and work suffered withering attacks from these critics who at first

accused him of writing too poorly and destroying language and then later accused him of writing too well and not destroying it enough (14).

One such critic, an early Ionesco supporter who later became one of his most ardent detractors, was the British critic Kenneth Tynan. A few of Tynan's remarks concerning a London performance of *The Chairs* suggest just how much a detractor he had become:

> M. Ionesco certainly offers an 'escape from realism': but an escape into what? A blind alley [. . . .] 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 reality. (*Notes* 89)

Tynan continued his attack by dismissing Ionesco's work as a "diversion," theatre not "on the main road" (89). Concerning Ionesco's characters, Tynan was no less vitriolic: "Ionesco's is a world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes evocative, and quite often neither, on which occasions they become profoundly tiresome" (89).

Gaensbauer believes such criticism eventually hurt Ionesco's reputation as a serious playwright (13). She records the following lament Ionesco offered concerning his career and its many vicissitudes: "Now that I know what it means to have written, to have been understood, to have been misunderstood, to have been detested, I finally understand that it was not worth it to have done what I have

done, it was for nothing" (16). Sadly, in true Artaudian fashion, this prolific playwright eventually rejected the written word and pursued painting in hopes of filling the communication void language never could (16). Such is the despair of an old man for his misunderstood message--and such is Ionesco's connection to his main character in *The Chairs*. Both must accept the overwhelming loss into which every effort must sink--with only a frail, misunderstood word left to memorialize the sinking.

The notion of language's weakness, its inability to lay a bulwark against death, remains the play's most serious preoccupation, and its frequent mention throughout this paper testifies to its importance. When the eloquence of the writer fails, then what communication can ordinary people hope for? In proposing this chilling question, *The Chairs* metatheatrically turns on its creator, his own testament to gibberish becoming his own damnation. In writing a moving obituary for language, Ionesco, himself living and dying by the written word, is writing his own epitaph -- which, of course, will itself be ultimately meaningless. "In the beginning was the Word," declares Lamont, "in the end only a rebus" (81). On so many interpretative levels, *The Chairs* is very much a riddle, a word puzzle that defies solution but invites critical misinterpretations like Tynan's. It is a work whose characters fling words into a black hole; if anything returns to answer, it is only the empty shell of an echo. It is a play made up of words which attack the supposed power of words to create and mean.

In the play, then, is a struggle over what power, if any, words possess. Bermel comments on this thematic paradox:

> **His plays reveal how words *can be* used without regard for meaning, and often are, especially platitudes and misplaced proverbs. He demonstrates the power and powerlessness of words, their might and fragility, their incantatory and somniferent properties. They can defy sense, adapt their meanings to different settings, and even take on startling new identities. ("Anything but Absurd" 418)**

If the fantasy, play-pretend interpretation that Chapter 2 offers is correct, then Ionesco has invested language with a seeming power to re-configure external reality. The world can be just as we wish it to be, if we choose and arrange the right words. The Old Woman reassures her suffering mate: "It's easy once you begin, like life and death . . . it's enough to have your mind made up. It's in speaking that ideas come to us, words, and then we, in our own words, we find perhaps everything, the city too, the garden, and then we are orphans no longer" (*The Chairs* 120-21). She suggests an Edenesque naming of lifestock here: a cow is a cow if we hang the word on it. A cow becomes something identifiable only through language. A colonel is a colonel if we call him such; suddenly the letters forming his name give him substance. The Old Man has a message that matters only because his words say he does. The play really does call its "own world into being" (Lane 60), but it does so through flimsy, unreliable language. Such a world is akin to a child's sand castle as the hurricane approaches.

Whatever message, whatever meaning there is must only be ill-formed and incoherent. It is not the full dessimination of the Word; it is the offering of the rebus. Everything in the play is a suggestion of what was, or might have been, or never could be. Language creates illusions of fullness which mask the real presence of emptiness. Words represent the play's flesh-and-blood characters; their meanings represent the characters' nebulous substance. On the surface the play's words seem real and cogent; in their bellies, however, lurks barrenness and impotency. They, like every character in the play, are ultimately insubstantial. Barbara Malinowska hints at this connection between words and characters: "Emptying his characters of content, he does the same with words. In this way he depicts the failure of ordinary communication" (57). Adds Leonard Pronko: "Words suggest other words because of sound, regardless of meaning, and the absurd physical presence of the word is before us once again rather than any reality of which it is a symbol" ("Anti-Spiritual" n.pag.). Any message built from such language is destined for misunderstanding, incapable of conveying any other subject except emptiness.

So many critics attach the word *emptiness* to any assessment of Ionesco's language and theatrics in *The Chairs*, and this paper has certainly been no exception. Lane, for example, considers the play Ionesco's "finest dramatic work" because it "exploits the concrete language of the stage to express absence and emptiness" (51). For Smith, the play is about the inability of language to express the concept of emptiness (140-41). Pronko sees the Ionesco stage as an empty place where dead language provides the furnishings: "Ionesco's characters are dead, all of

them entombed within his restricting universe with walls closing in upon them, and buried also within their own solitude, each one separated from all others in a world where communication is absolutely impossible" ("Anti-spiritual" n. pag.). Ionesco himself likened the death of words to the emptying of the mind:

> **When words are worn out, the mind is worn out. The universe, encumbered with matter, is then empty of presence: 'too much' links up with 'not enough' and objects are the materialization of solitude, of the victory of the anti-spiritual forces, of everything we are struggling against. ("The Starting Point" 146)**

Existence, Ionesco seems to suggest, is dependent upon the mind's naming ability. Once the mind has fashioned its last syllable, then the shadowy reality it has built dissipates; the mind can create no new order, no new meaning, the writer's creative pen having run out of thought. When words die--assuming they were ever truly alive--solitude deepens and the material world appropriates any metaphysical one. The anti-spiritual forces do indeed defeat the spiritual ones.

As a result spectacle comes to have more resonance than language in *The Chairs*, and becomes the chief symbol of mourning for this defeat of transcendent meaning. The fluttering curtains at the empty window, the Orator's bizarre gesticulations, and the lingering sound of the splash communicate far more derisive tragedy than do the puny words the Old Couple exchange. Each spectacle serves as raised hands to heaven, a mad prayer to the absent gods. The play's empty gestures, its ironic spectacles in their cold materialism become suggestive of some sort of

spirituality; their physical presence, like the chairs themselves, suggests spiritual absence, but in suggesting the absence reminds audiences of at least the potential for spirituality--since nothing can be absent unless it once was present. Even though critics like Willis Jacobs hope too optimistically for a religious Ionesco, other critics like the present writer may very well enjoy wallowing in the agnostic one. This paper has languished in the dark side of Eugène Ionesco's vision because in his theatrical world, there is certainly far more darkness than light. Ionesco declared himself to be agnostic but at the same time "desperate at not having some faith or other" (Hayman 16). Gaensbauer also finds an intense quest for light in Ionesco's art--even in spite of its surface absurdity (10).

The Chairs as a portrait of Every Man's misery does seem desperate at times to look beyond the stage rafters and find a spiritual light not controlled by technicians. The Orator's message is the last hope for meaning, and in a sense, the last hope to build from language a metaphysical certainty that transcends mortality. Notions of heaven and paradise do appear in the play, so its characters at least occasionally are aware that something ethereal may exist beyond their tower. They seem, however, too lost in their own miserable condition to attain any transcendent notion. The play does not necessarily say God is dead, just somewhere far removed from the reality He culled from the Great Void. The play situates itself on the other side of a divine reality, if one exists; the play's world is a mirror image perhaps of some fuller existence. God may very well still walk His ethereal garden with prototypical Adam and Eve, while their progeny, shadowy with no spiritual flesh on

their bones, waste in the mortality beyond it.

Nothing can testify to God's existence more than a sufferer's raised fist. In much of this play, Ionesco seems to be doing a great deal of fist raising. The absence of God amidst the clutter of language that *The Chairs* presents may testify more to Ionesco's spiritual fight than to his despair. The play shows no lasting thing of meaning, simply the crowd's absurd noises at the end. No God, be it Emperor or Orator or Supreme Being, apparently hears and answers a single word the Old Couple fling into the air. Broken language is offered to the silence, and only the whisper of a shadow answers it. Ionesco, nevertheless, is intent on widening his eyes to see all that he cannot see; in *The Chairs* his Old Couple at least keep talking and struggling, even as mortality lures them to their destruction. Dismayed and terrified by the specter of death, Ionesco desired that our "cry for anguish [. . .] be heard by God and by our fellow men, so that they should know we have existed" (Gaensbauer 53). On many levels, *The Chairs* is Eugène Ionesco's spiritual autobiography, his "cry for anguish," which questions why we must lose and lose so catastrophically. It is his theatrical fist-raising to an opaque sky; it is his throwing words at the shadowy temple; it is his lonesome voice trying to build a message in a spectacular void.

Performing the ultimate spectacle, Ionesco has taken his own plunge into the abyss, his own words silenced in the splash. All that remains now is an old man's inscrutable message: the language of shadows, the permanence of lifeless things.

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