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'SOULS IN TORMENT': IONESCO AND BERENGER OF *RHINOCEROS*

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Abstract

This paper takes a close look at Berenger, the protagonist of Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* and examines his temperamental affinities with Ionesco himself who is not only critical of ideological imperatives and indoctrination, but also believes in unsystematic individual assertion and resistance inherently present in the language and the form/structure of his plays defying a certain definitive purpose or meaning. Berenger's trajectory from a disinterested onlooker to a much more '(reluctant) heroic figure' is surveyed from an ideological vantage point to understand the motivations driving his decision to fight against the rhinoceroses. This apolitical, instinctive and transformative decision is backed by a genuine concern for safeguarding the cause of humanity. The paper specifically analyses the ending of the play at the backdrop of political indeterminacy, herd mentality and ideological conformism to determine Berenger's position as an absurd hero - the 'poor little thing left all alone in this world of monsters'. In a world devoid of all meaning, Ionesco's Berenger still finds a palpable cause for resistance. This position reaffirms Ionesco's own views on ideology and ideological systems as 'unreal' and 'artificial' images which are far 'removed from reality'. Propelled by his own Jewish ancestry, Ionesco unravels the fears of extremist ideology as it turns humans into subhuman or animal-like creatures who become shadows of their former selves. Both Ionesco and his alter ego Berenger are 'rebels' and 'nonconformists' who oppose the forces of the universe stacked against them. Berenger's representative position as a mouthpiece for the playwright is looked into and scrutinized to unearth the latent impulses behind the writing of the text.

Keywords

Fascism, Rhinocerotitis, Metamorphosis, Evolution, Intellectuals, Ideology, Hero, Individuality.

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Eugene Ionesco penned his play *Rhinoceros* at a time when he witnessed the gradual transformation of everyone around him in Romania. The late 20s saw the emergence of the anti-Semitic fascist organization—‘The Legion of the Archangel’ founded by a handful of university students led by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, who later developed its military wing—The Iron Guard in 1930. The organization believed that Jews were the principle cause of the anguish of Romanians and perpetrated several incidents of violence against them. Though Ionesco didn’t openly acknowledge his Jewish ancestry (his mother was a French-Jew), his identity as part Jewish in fascist Romania was a source of great uncertainty for him as he struggled to cope with his position in a country embracing an ideology which could prove perilous to his life and future. Growing out of the universities, fascism in Romania was also a highly ideological movement that appealed to a large number of intellectuals. As part of this class of intellectuals, Ionesco observed first-hand how his friends turned strangers and converted to fascism. Recording these observations in his memoir, he states it was as if ‘another soul, another mind’ had ‘germinated’ in them (*Present Past* 116). They suddenly turned distant and withdrawn with different opinions and understanding. Their old personality was substituted by a new one. Their ‘gloves became paws, shoes became hoofs’ (Lamont 37-38) and they became beasts. This process of mental and physical mutation is represented metaphorically through the symbol of the rhinoceros. Ionesco’s real-life experiences are mirrored through his principal character Berenger in *Rhinoceros*.

The character of Berenger appears in four of Ionesco’s plays: *Rhinoceros*, *The Killer*, *Exit the King* and *A Stroll in the Air*. In each of these plays, Berenger is “the man who stands up to the system” (O’ Neil 627). In *Rhinoceros*, he may not initially exhibit these qualities; he is certainly not a traditional hero with ‘heroic’ characteristics. When the play begins, he is depicted more as a foil to his friend Jean. While Jean is ‘fastidiously dressed’ (*Rhinoceros* 2) in a brown suit, tie and a hat; Berenger is unkempt and unshaven. In both temperament and deportment, it is Jean who appears at first glance to be the conventional hero. While Jean is active, concerned and disciplined; Berenger is indolent, passive and disinterested. When the first rhinoceros is sighted and everyone around him responds in a chorus- “oh, a rhinoceros” (6); Berenger remains apathetically seated. When the rhinoceros departs and people stare after him to try to collect their thoughts on what has happened, Berenger is the only one who doesn’t utter the platitude- “Well, of all things! (8)”. Berenger of Act I has to be provoked by Jean into an argument over the sighting of the rhinoceros. He doesn’t regard it

as a significant happening, for him ‘a wretched perissodactyle’ (14) passing by is no reason for a quarrel between him and Jean. Even in Act II, when the topic of rhinoceros becomes a raging controversy at his workplace, Berenger casually admits with an air of nonchalance, “Oh yes, I saw it all right.’ (41)

It is only when he himself witnesses the metamorphosis of his friend Jean that the horrific reality of ‘rhinocerotitis’ as a phenomenon hits him. As he notices close hand the step by step changes in his friend; hoarse voice, growing headache, bump above the nose, heavy breath, hard and green skin; Berenger is forced to admit that the ‘important thing’ is that the rhinoceros ‘are there at all’ (*Rhinoceros*58). As he is on the verge of being trampled by his friend turned rhinoceros, Berenger cannot help but realize that it is impossible to ‘stay cool and detached’(77). Berenger of Act II is more concerned, more active and more determined to do something than the Berenger of Act I. Though he remains unsuccessful in putting a stop to his friend’s metamorphosis; his own metamorphosis is evident in his desire to take action such as calling the doctor or the police to salvage the situation. The transformation in his character can be gauged from his own words when he states later in Act III, “when you’re involved yourself, when you suddenly find yourself up against the brutal facts you can’t help feeling directly concerned.” (77).

By the time we reach Act III, Berenger has become a wholly different person. It is as if the character has turned leaps and bounds, there is immense growth from the person he was to the person he is: or as B. Mangalam remarks about the shift in his essay ‘Whos’s Afraid of Rhinoceros?’ ; ‘from ‘the alcoholic, shabbily dressed, weak-willed, apathetic social non-entity’ to a ‘heroic’, ‘tragic’, ‘romantic’, ‘superhuman figure’ (*Rhinoceros* 253). Berenger of Act III has reached a point of character evolution when he confesses that he ‘just can’t be indifferent’ anymore and feels ‘responsible for everything’ (77) that has happened. The difference between Berenger and rest of the characters in the play is that nobody except Berenger has bothered to ‘save the world’ (101). Berenger feels a Herculean responsibility to repopulate the world with more Daisys and Berengers in order to regenerate the human race. This objective however is not shared by his love interest Daisy as she refuses to be his sidekick in his ‘save the world’ enterprise and disavows any responsibility of forced motherhood.

Daisy: I don’t want to have children-it’s a bore

Berenger: How can we save the world, if you don’t?

Daisy: Why other to save it?

Berenger: What a thing to say! Do it for me, Daisy. Let’s save the world.

Daisy: After all, perhaps it’s we who need saving. Perhaps we’re the abnormal ones. (*Rhinoceros*101)

Left alone without moral, physical, and emotional support, Berenger still chooses to shoulder the responsibility of saving the world singlehandedly. Distraught after Daisy’s desertion, he inspects himself closely in the mirror and is not even sure of his identity anymore. He has to closely examine pictures of himself to believe that he is still a man, a human being. He is full of self-doubt. Is the language of the rhinoceroses better? Is their appearance better? He is on the verge of joining the fray like others before him. He listens to the trumpeting of the rhinoceros and tries to imitate them. But pushes himself back at the very point of lapse. “Now it’s too late!... I will never become a rhinoceros”. Berenger’s doubt in himself and his existence validates Descartes’ dictum of ‘I think therefore I am’. His individuality is the sole reason that he is the last man standing. ‘Left all alone in this world of monsters’ (*Rhinoceros* 104), he refuses to ‘capitulate’ (105). B. Mangalam lauds Berenger for being a hero superior to Adam, for he sticks to his position even when he is totally alone without any gendered support’ (254).

Berenger at the end of the play is in Ionesco's own words 'an irresolute character, 'a reluctant hero', 'allergic' to 'the epidemic of rhinocerotitis' (*Rhinoceros* 157). Numerous critics have questioned Berenger's stand towards the end of the play as unconvincing or implausible. Jean Paul Sartre for instance famously commented on the ending of the play- "Why is there one man who resists? At least we could learn why, but no, we learn not even that. He resists because he is there. He resists because he is Ionesco: he represents Ionesco, he says I resist, and there he remains in the midst of the rhinoceroses, the only one to defend man without our being very sure if it might not be better to be a rhinoceros. Nothing has been proved to the contrary" (6).

In a similar vein, G. Richard Danner in his essay 'Berenger's Dubious Defense of Humanity in *Rhinoceros*' finds Berenger an inadequate representative of mankind and an 'ineffectual debater' (212) who is not able to plead the cause of humanity. Danner erroneously states that 'Berenger has no knowledge of the struggles of the individual in society, he is unaware of 'martyred minorities' and 'the tyranny of technology and bureaucratization' (209). However, Danner's assertion ignores the fact that Berenger has witnessed the transformations of humans into beasts which has set him thinking about problems of humanity. He has experienced marginalization and discrimination in his own person when his friend Jean labelled him an 'Asiatic Mongol' (28). As for being conversant with the tyranny of bureaucratization, Berenger is a 9 to 5 worker who labours his hours mindlessly in a bureaucratic environment, thus fully aware of the mind numbing effect this has on a man's conscience.

B. Mangalam refers to Berenger's resistance as 'apolitical and intuitive' (251) while Nita N. Kumar calls out Ionesco for making Berenger's stance to be both apolitical and ahistorical. Ionesco shies away from specifying the particular social and historical context of Berenger's individual resistance; though as an astute reader of history, one can clearly join the dots and make all connections. Berenger's stand is not backed by any coherent politics since such was the playwright's intention. Ionesco himself stated in 'The Preface' to *Rhinoceros* that Berenger's resistance is 'genuine and profound' (149) precisely because he is not sure why he resists rhinocerotitis. L.A.C Dobrez lends weight to Ionesco's statement by pointing out in his essay 'Ionesco and Heidegger: Authenticity and the Collective' that Berenger's doubts and contradictions authenticate the sincerity of his stand; his lack of ideology is propelled by his 'naivete, 'his embryonic sense of wonder' and his 'angst' (161)

Instinctive reasoning precedes discursive logic as Ionesco wants to elevate instinct and emotion over fallacious logic and reasoning. His play is a critique of all pseudo intellectuals who use slogans and dogmas to hypnotize the masses. His play doesn't augment Berenger's stance with a powerful politics because he doesn't want to supplant one 'ready-made ideology' (*Rhinoceros* 159) with another. He is against the very idea of ideology and its seductive sway on the gullible masses. Different characters in the play- Jean, Dudard, Botard... all utter some slogans or philosophic words except Berenger. These characters echo Ionesco's vision of dangers of subscribing to a single philosophy or using 'philosophic justification' for 'waves of collective hysteria' sweeping 'whole nations' (159). Ionesco's opinion of all ideological systems as 'merely images' 'unreal' and 'artificial' and 'far removed from reality' (*Present Past* 45) voices Louis Althusser's later formalization of the theory of ideology as an 'individual's imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence' (181). Althusser further talks about how ideology 'acts or functions in such a way as to recruit subjects among individuals or transforms individuals into subjects through a process called 'interpellation' or 'hailing' (190). It is this process of subjection and repression wherein 'serious collective diseases' are 'passed off as ideologies' that Ionesco represents in his play *Rhinoceros*. (150)

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Berenger is not an ideologue nor will he ever be. He is an alter ego of Ionesco himself who believes that no one system 'expresses' or 'absorbs reality' (*Present Past* 45-46). He is someone who prefers the unordered unsystematic chaotic reality to the currents of 'the ideologies, the passions, and the fanaticisms of history' (46). He is the 'hero' of the play precisely because his decision to be the last man standing is endorsed more by instinct, emotion and gut feeling. He is the 'hero' of the play precisely because he becomes conscientiously aware of the goings on around him, and is motivated enough to make a choice in favour of mankind. Berenger is the hero of the play precisely because he is stimulated by the desire to do good for good's sake. He is human enough to realize his flaws and imperfections, yet is still content to remain who he is. He's the lone man at the end who has tried to 'hang on' to his individuality. He is what Ionesco had hoped to be- 'a sad, lonely survivor of my world', 'a soul in torment' and 'a melancholy phantom' (112).

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