Theatre, in Ionescu’s Vision: “The Eternal Need for Miracle and Horror”

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Abstract: A subject the phenomenological modernity of which imposes itself, regardless of the time of the debate and the critic-literary orientation of the messmate, which burned in profile magazines pages and specialist meetings, and the conclusions of which are still expected, is represented by the dilemma: Eugen Ionescu or Eugene Ionesco? The Romanian by birth (and formation, some say) or Frenchman by adoption?

As it was already used to, according to the formula that opposites are attracted to cancel each other, Ionescu refused widely known theories about the purpose of theatre, annihilated them and replaced them with his own ideal concept of what theatre means to the public and, especially, what is the purpose of its mission. Theatre has, like any other art, a mission of knowledge. You don’t silly around to discover, but deepening, separating, purifying realities. (...) Theatre is a presence, Ionescu says.

Key words: phenomenological modernity, explanatory structures, metaphysical sense, existential assuming, aesthetics, critical spirit, un-authentic, Adamic, impossible duality, archetypal, changeless, credible, non-values, mechanization miracle, psychological necessity, convention, essential reality.

This subject, the phenomenological modernity of which imposes itself, regardless of the time in which it is debated or the orientation of the literary critics whose opinions have burned themselves into magazine profiles and in the framework of specialist meetings that have yet to reach their conclusions, poses the question: should we speak of a Eugen Ionescu, or a Eugene Ionesco? Romanian by birth (and by formation, some posit), or Frenchman by adoption? Many studies have been published on the subject, on the idea of recovery, sometimes tentative, at times forceful, of the origins of this “enfant terrible of

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literary critics”. But the most intuitive, consistent, broad and vivacious approach belongs to Eugen Simion, and is entitled *Young Ionescu*.

“In this study, which is as substantial as it is exciting, Simion tries to unlock the personality beneath the confusion of surfaces, the unpredictability in both attitudes and reactions. It is almost an impossibility for the critic to understand the author. This is because, in direct contradiction to Eugen Ionescu, Eugen Simion is a literary commentator for whom there exists truth/‘truth’. He is, furthermore, structural in his approach. Without mistrust towards certainties, the sixties’ critics have sought persistently to dissociate and extract themselves, with visible relief, from the thick of literature and life. He arranges these strands meticulously, combining them into tightly wound explanations. Whereas Eugen Ionescu set explosives to obliterate clichés, shaking a cultural scene driven by excessive capitalist ideals, Eugen Simion seeks to refashion the remaining shrapnel, using it to return to the creative spirit; the configuration behind the harlequinade and disfigurement”

as stated by Daniel Cristea-Enache, in the first critical review of *Young Ionescu* to appear, in 2008. This not only recovered, with an extraordinary literary cross-stitch, the open wounds of the “enfant terrible”, but transformed them into new modes of thinking for literary posterity. In the case of this “heretic” Ionescu, we should not aim to hunt and hang, with pride, the array of contradictions in his texts, be it his criticism, journals, or on the topic of drama. The elastic dissolution of human and social elements of nature in his texts, in practice, pattern the cultural and artistic life and experiences of Ionescu, including literary criticism. Eugen Simion writes:

“What can I tell you, now I have crossed the ionescian literary space on several occasions, the man writes in a more complex manner, spiritually speaking, than he speaks. The young Eugen Ionescu is not simply a calligrapher who performs tricks, as could be said of many of his contemporaries, and is not, however, only an essayist whose whimsy turns back to the editor’s office, destroying one negative article only to write another, essentially praising or vice versa, he is a genuine intellectual, in the metaphysical sense and serious literary culture, a troubled spirit of existence, finally, the young Ionescu does not feel content anywhere and, as reported in several occasions, (...) he thinks that to be French would be wonderful.”

This vehement tone that Ionescu takes often loses pitch, dissolving his essence, as a kind of reproach. He accuses Romania of being too Balkan, goes on to say that his voice is not heard enough in Europe, which is anyway too small for the few great writers that it has. I could have that here you can not say the true talent because of “nepotism” and it has too many intricate systems
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based around a culture of “do you know who I am?” In fact, he loves the people of Romania, as we shall see, according to his associates and friends. He points out proudly that, when the revolution of ‘89 occurred, he was ready to return and participate, along with other Romanians, in the profound social changes that required these voices to be heard. Eugen Simion notes, slightly amused, that Ionescu’s impression about the Romanian space changes very little throughout his memoirs.

“In 1947, he wanted to return, however, to Bucharest and to find his raison d’etre. He didn’t succeed. He remained in France and was destined for literary success, which he managed to fulfil. At bottom, how can there be explained, I asked myself, his reflections, which were overwhelmingly negative about the Romanian world, beginning with literature and ending with officers, priests, and secondary school teachers? A motivation might be, testifies the writer repeatedly, the psychoanalytical link to Eugen N. Ionescu, father undesirable. The country of ‘do you know who I am?’ represents his father. A surprising fact: the diaries of his friends (Arsavir Acterian, Octav Siluțiu, etc.) show the young Eugen Ionescu as a relaxed bohemian, putting on farces, extended bacchic parties in his father’s country. However, he appears to be at ease here. He fell in love, married, took part in meetings organized by colleagues of his generation, wrote for magazines attacking the great writers without any repercussions, and made a name for being critically fearsome, finally developing friendships that were open and nourishing. All this takes place in the Romanian world where, we have reason to believe, Eugen Ionescu loved writing about it, as his friend, Cioran, relays, in impossible phrases. In December 1989, when he sees Romanians from Timisoara and Bucharest on TV, he wrote in a Parisian journal that he regained his feeling of being Romanian. Not only this, but in 1939 he stated that ‘hatred is only the second side of love; love is returned; unrealized love, not received, repressed, that revenge’.”

As a conclusion, simplified, of course, whether he feels timelessly Romanian and whether France, according to the wishes expressed in an imperative fashion by the descendants of the great playwright, Ionescu is the only one with the greatest grasp of the truth. Regardless of temporarily assumed nationality, Ionescu wrote in a letter sent from Paris on November 1939:

“[That] my pride lies in the certainty that I will never feel good on earth, and I will never leave life’s orbit and historical actuality; that I will never fit into history neatly, that I will never be counted in the amorphous mass that has pushed or drawn up more mechanical laws than biological cosmic streams. My freedom, therein lies: in
So Ionescu’s desire is to be French without being existentially owned throughout his creative life. The negation of being Romanian is not ubiquitous, but is specified periodically, depending probably on his experiences, disappointments, as well as his creative achievements. Eugen Simion only gives priority to “absences”, accusing Ionescu of reasons for not wanting to be Romanian:

“[…] his negation does not have a systematic character, as his moods fluctuate between a penetrating negationist discourse and spots of light, bracketing peace and reconciliation with the Romanian world. To present some evidence, we can begin by saying that, as is normal, this is seen in the work of a Romanian essayist through Romanian culture, in this case in a literature that comments and gives aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic, in this case, is also moral. If we again skim through the publications of Marin Diaconu, we find that Eugen Ionescu always has something to complain about, some scandal that has disappointed him so profoundly in his generation, among his colleagues, that he is willing, finally, to resign from Romania altogether. And this happens time and time again. Writing, for example, about literary criticism and history, he finds that Romanians do not have any critical spirit (Maiorescu, Middle Eastern, however, is to us a miracle) only a historical spiritor – on the other hand – in truth – a chronicler. This means that, by having a critical spirit, Romanians are asking only whether there is an existential problem, not a spiritual problem (inclusive of the problem of values). The consequence is that we can select and prioritize in the appropriate manner, despite not knowing how to review, we have learned to separate the wheat from the chaff in the arts... But, I wonder, are things as Eugen Ionescu has said? As if it could be any different. Literary criticism is, however, a spiritual force in Romanian literature; we have great criticism, perhaps too many writers who are too important for such a young literary scene. Even Eugen Ionescu announces himself as relentlessly critical, ready to review all... But, as seen in the sentence quoted above and seen better from the following evidence, the young Eugen Ionescu claimed the absence of a genuine critical spirit in Romanian literature. And, in his view, if critical thinking is not literature, this applies to other areas of the spirit and even other sections of Romanian society. A first conclusion: we’re sorry, gentlemen, we’re very sorry on this chapter.”

So, first we have criticism. Then, we have no tradition, so “I too have what we refer to when judging literature or other phenomena of the spirit.” If you do not have a tradition, that means we have no models on which to base future projects or direct cohesive action.
“This is because there was nothing stable here. Because everything here is inauthentic; because all our literature - why should one repeat so often this obvious axiom? - consists of heterogeneous groups of branches that have failed to merge into a real unit. That does not mean we refuse predecessors so that we all have a ‘terrible’ critical spirit. But values of the past are definitively dead; this inauthenticity could in no way be spiritually fruitful; we feel they are foreigners; and, finally, Romanian culture has not managed as of yet to express spiritual realities native to those who remain outside. Here’s why historical spirit cannot be more than a mere chronicler; he can not even integrate the phenomenon of the current literary tradition into it. Rough phrases, poor sentence construction, a total negative. There will be others that aim, as I mentioned, not only at culture, but at Romanian spirituality as a whole. Misfortunes are held here, chained: we have theatre, although we do not have the novel, we have poets of rhetoric (such as Arghezi) and false hermetics like Ion Barbu, we criticise politely and glossy (like photographers retouched, without artistry, with fashion) we have lost the sense of literary models and if we lose it totally, at dusk, we enter the night of our culture, the invasive nights, where barbarian critic Eugen Simion reviews, slightly amused, the entire list of ‘absences’ of existence that Ionescu is guilty of.”

Although these “harsh sentences, heavy phrases” are a denial of Romanian cultural space, it is not the final word. Someone who is not at all interested in this issue, who is in fact disgusted, if we can say so, would not have made so much effort, there would be so many phrases and he could not find the time to answer all the polite polemics naturally aroused, after such a diatribe.

A hard decision was taken regarding the great writer’s belongings after his death by his daughter and next of kin, Marie France Ionesco. She decided:

“He was a French writer and nothing more. Romanians know, the small yield of crops will recover. It is impossible to understand how my father has harmed the fact of belonging and Romanian culture, but such questions will never get an honest answer from those who give such categorical judgments. Should a daughter be ashamed of her background, her father’s literary youth? What small culture they came from? I do not know the answer and frankly, I do not think it has much importance. Those interested in the work of Eugen Ionescu have constructed for themselves a viewpoint that they think is required to match that of his progeny. Unfortunately, all Romanians have a prominent place in European culture and civilization and the world as was said by other cultures, if we were to illustrate only names that are mentioned on a daily basis: from Cioran, Eliade, Brancusi, the surrealists’ oeuvre.”

In the already famous phrase “if I were French, I could be brilliant”, George Neagoe claims that the deciphered key specific to Ionescu must be
understood with irony because, in the shadow of irony, Ionescu was well aware of the reality that this hides the truth.

Critic Simion gives credit to Ionescu when he speaks of the Romanian Adamists, “that they had the fervor to start something, but not to finish. The myth of Komuves, therefore, or - with a little imagination - we can say that in these places circulates the Penelope myth that day destroys night. In layman’s terms, we can say that after the beginning, a feeling of futility sets in... About the Adamic culture, Cioran speaks of the Transfiguration of Romania. Among them is, of course, Romanian culture. As shown, Adamists are not moralists, even evil can exist among them. As well, the chance to start from scratch.”

Similar behaviour can be observed in the playwright. His famous journals begin when he is nine years old. But the beginnings were abandoned, as explained by the dialectical action: he does not like to talk about himself, but that is why he confessed. An Ionescian Adamist begins early, does he not? Confessions are repeated 60 years later because, according to Simon, “for Eugene Ionescu’s literature begins with memoirs, not fairy tales or poetry. He wants to confess, not to fantasise.” This disturbing need for confession, the coordinates of which are built throughout his entire existence, as the displeasure of speaking itself translates into an impossible duality of relations between the possible and the impossible. After considering a possibility, Ionescu then immediately seeks out its negative, exchanging them, as if comparing spectacular masks. This is the key to deciphering Ionescu, whether we are talking about texts of literary criticism, memoirs or his dramas. If we use this key in our decryption, there will appear words such as: contradictory, sophism, etc. Ionescu’s novel writing is not simply a game, but a continuous search for truth and its reversal, where its concentrated point may cause the entire world to crash down.

“In his logbook scraps, Ionesco writes: Just because the Greeks had immutable archetypal sense, they must have had a sense of non-immutability: Lupasco explains this very point.

‘In truth, nothing exists and nothing is thought of without its opposite and nothing is thought of in isolation, but in opposition to a contrary concept to refute it’ (Eugène Ionesco, Journal en miettes, Mercure de France, Paris, 1967, p. 62).”
For this is, in fact, Ionescu: he flips, without hesitation, the pillars of understanding, dusty in their stability, and turns them with a coordinated chaos and precision with control through force of imagination and human intelligence.

“Knowledge begins with a possibility of a finality, an acceptability, with verisimilitude. We could say that for Eugene Ionesco profound thinking is judged by the number of relationships that are assumed to be impossible. The drama of human intelligence is played out in a clash with the absurdity living a normal life. All of this is suggested in the writer’s theatre.”

Theatre is presence, drama is tension...
As we have seen already, according to the formula that opposites attract to cancel each other out, Ionescu denied widely accepted theories about purposive theatre, annihilating them with their own partitioning of ideas about what theatre means to the public and especially, what its intended purpose is.

“To write English without a Teacher (The Bald Soprano - n.a.), Eugen Ionescu paid special attention to the dramatic genre. There are few references in his texts from the ’30s. In Zodiac (March 1931) he discusses, for example, the status of melodrama. He defends with curious genius the objective and justifies existence: no need to charge melodrama with not having value and that we should not suspect its mediocre aesthetic. Instead, he stated that the authors of melodramatic theatre, Bouchardy and Victor Hugo, of being the authentic followers of ancient tragedy: it is the modern expression of the need for eternal miracle and horror.”

Ionescu believes the miracle of receiving explanations to be too intense, that the inducing of conventional expectation in spectators waiting for that particular type of miracle, that its mechanisation, destroys. Thus, the miracle, so necessary in the formation and maintenance of a coherent and open human psyche and modern thought has created a “product of coincidences” that requires a specific type of waiting, swallowed the direction of the captive spectator.

“Mechanization clears the way to show the lack of metaphysical miracle of the age. He believes that melodrama will not disappear because modern man needs spontaneity and horror, in a single word: one needs the miraculous products of coincidence. Miracle - in this form and with these causalities – is not conceivable without addressing metaphysical aspects. It would add another element: ‘melodramatical inside’, which means the need, once again, of the spirit requiring an
imperative violence and an exacerbation, we could even say a pathology of attitudes...”

According to Ionescu, we must run the danger of a system to prepare this specific kind of sensitivity to the public onlooker. “The psychological need” of the miracle may be contained in the literature and, read, create an automatism that gradually would turn into an “exceptional mechanization” and the miracle would imply a “mechanical miracle, or cancellation of the miraculous...”

Also, in the “letters published in Romanian life and correspondence from the same period (1938 - 1945) Tudor Vianu indicates an important fact in the intellectual biography of Eugen Ionescu: the emergence of his major interest for theatre. The feeling that you have when reading his missives is that the essayist has really experienced a revelation of a kind opening a sea of creation.” Theatre opened Ionescu, according to the chroniclers and those after them, a wide realm where anything is possible, where imagination can be the first to reach the word and the word may become detrimental to the image, where the balance of these two entities must be perfect as a work of art to endure and where the playwright is the central pillar of this elusive and rare balance between the two.

“In a few years, Eugen Ionescu radicalized his position towards the theatre. An article in National Theatre (no. 37, June 24, 1934) is entitled ‘Against theatre’, and begins with the sentence I have quoted already: “theatre is a form of vulgar art.” Why? Because it is an art for the people, and because it uses too many tricks which are too visible; it has become full of artistic conventions, which kills any aesthetic convention. For these reasons, the theatre cannot create a spiritual atmosphere...”

It is possible that, in theory, a specific theatre creator agrees with Ionescu’s essays and radical vision eliminating these conventions. A serious disposal of conventions can only be carried out in a radical fashion. But this is a utopia. It is funny how, in advocating to waive the conventions, Ionescu himself... went to the theatre to see plays performed. And this approach is part of the specific type of decryption implied by the writings of this novelist, a total deconstruction in order to achieve a kind of perfect knowledge.
“If life is but an echo of reality, then his commentary remains a slave to reality and falls lower than them: does a play seem plausible? Where there is weak and a short amount of time, they will be plausible. Theatre is like any art, a quest for knowledge. You do not know ape, but deep separating, purifying realities. (...) theatre is a presence. (...) Drama, he says, is not a genre, but tension. It is poetry, an invention, really. Bottom line: I do not think it would be wrong to disrupt the patterns of the greasy old theatre in the name of truth... Ionescu’s conviction is that there is a non-human drama, but that humanity must be sought beyond things (in essential realities), i.e. metaphysics. Theatre’s quest is knowledge, after all, to gain knowledge of the essential realities.”

Therefore, the definition of the theatre could be translated into the ionescian language as the “presence of voltage” (“Theatre is a presence”, “Drama is a voltage”), a voltage to be felt directly in the cells of understanding and built on the roll patterns of a logical dramatic language. For that, Ionescu strives. In his plays, the characters seem drawn, cut out of different scenes or pictures and thrown into space simply by the good will of the author, a space that does not help them, but merely defines the physical.

Their discussions seem to be connected with wires woven long before they were known, and thus presented to the public. Spousal duality means nothing, maybe a great oblivion, often combined with disgust that in a ionescian happy ending getting to know, and recognising the quest. “Ionescu’s formal logic breaks down the behavior of each day to show off its irrational components and unconscious absurdity, the intrinsic lack of inner reasons for existence beyond mechanistic causality.”

All conventions of a dramatic type and their relations are really shattered by Ionescu, in a subjective effort to deconstruct, then fully rebuild, to destroy and recreate, to dilute fully and then concentrate from the end of that world to know the truth of this impossible duality in the relationship between the possible and the impossible. This assumption of the audience is required by author: Ionescu’s theatre is a theatre of knowledge of essential realities.