

Laura Pavel

## The Gothic-Absurd Hybrid and the Limits of Representation

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**Abstract:** The construction and the almost concurrent deconstruction of Ionesco's often self-reflexive dramatic texts occur through a parodic undermining of various intertextual references and contradictory aesthetic conventions. Structured as thematic palimpsests that rest on a poetics of cruelty and macabre sensationalism, Ionesco's plays amount, at the same time, to uninterrupted essays, or to meta-theatrical essayistic journals. Ionesco's self-referential and self-parodic frame-play undergoes a deconstruction at the level of dramatic plot and of the characters, in the sense that it conceals a textual trap. The second play, of *mise-en-abyme* type, is meant to expose the non-representability and, often, the non-interpretability of the first play.

**Keywords:** Eugène Ionesco; Melodramatic vs. neo-Gothic; Parody; Non-representable; Implausibility; Textual Ghosts.

**LAURA PAVEL**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
laura.pav12@yahoo.com

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### Meaning – a Corpse Inside the Text

An emblematic play in Ionesco's creation, from which the playwright admitted he could never mentally detach himself, is *Amédée ou Comment s'en débarrasser/ Amédée, Or How to Get Rid of It*. This text appears to incorporate a subversive discourse, or a subversive play, concealed indiscreetly and somewhat brutally from the first, obvious play, or from the overt plot. The title itself is subversive, as the protagonist *par excellence*, the only one that is truly *alive* and that transforms the two spouses into pitiful victims resigned to their own condition, or into living-dead individuals tormented by guilt is... the corpse. We would have expected the latter to be the character bearing the name of Amédée, which is featured, in a privileged position, in the play's title. The various interpretation keys can work, at best, as mere speculations, as long as the so-called Amédée Buccinioni, Madeleine's husband, a failed playwright and a possible murderer – in whom critics have predictably detected a caricature of Ionesco himself – has no reality as a character. His possible identity and reality are undermined

by the Other, perhaps the real Amédée, the corpse that grows “in geometric progression” and invades the space of the *first* Amédée, the playwright-character, as a part of the latter’s split self, which is extrojected and, thus, objectified; it is, in fact, a living, unfathomable stage object, a possible metaphor for the *non-representable*, for the *monstrous*, which Ionesco’s dramaturgy utopically aspires to represent.

I would metaphorically describe Ionesco’s stance towards his own texts as an attempt to *disavow* and *dispose* of himself as of a “corpse” and to embrace of the Other in the self. An Other as a fictional self, after the model of the parable of the shepherd who, in Ionesco’s *L’impromptu de l’Alma ou le caméléon du berger/Improvisation, or The shepherd’s chameleon*, embraces a chameleon. On the one hand, in *Improvisation*, we discover Ionesco – the meta-character, who has illicitly entered the realm of fiction, just like Cervantes’s protagonist in *Don Quixote*. On the other hand, the reader and the critic of Ionesco’s work may find themselves in a situation that is somewhat similar to that of Joyce’s in *Finnegan’s Wake*. In the opinion of the analytical philosopher Donald Davidson,<sup>1</sup> Joyce takes us back to the bases and the origin of communication. He seems to aim to put us into the shoes of the linguist who has come in the middle of the jungle in order to get into contact with a new language and with a unique culture, to assume the perspective of a “radical interpreter”, of a stranger, of an exile. And we, his listeners or readers, become acquainted gradually with the methods he has conveyed to us and, at the same time, we discover that we are distanced, placed at a certain remove from our own language, from our ordinary selves and our society.

We become readers who follow him into his fictional world as exiles, or as marginalized individuals. Ionesco is also situated in an ex-centric, alienated position in relation to his own fictional universe, which is haunted by *foreigners*, by the “*English*” (like those in *The Bald Soprano* or *Killing Game*).

The meaning of Ionesco’s texts can be retrieved, beyond the already clichéd interpretation that is limited to pointing out the absurd, in a paradoxical manner: the meaning is there, it is a *corpse* which forces the limits of representation (imaginary, scenic) and of critical interpretation, but is undecipherable and is often enclosed in a cryptogram of words, images, theatrical signs, false leads, false plots and deceptive keys of access to the characters. The *mystery* is preserved both by the text and by our own resignation or cognitive self-limitation in relation to the text. The mystery accommodates and perpetuates the existence of *meaning*, even when the meaning is, as in *Amédée ...*, embedded in a “corpse” with uncertain identity. Whether a hermeneut or an ingenuous reader, one must *discard* the obsession of unraveling its meaning, because one simply *can do nothing with it*. Like the corpse from *Amédée ...*, the meaning comes out of the *stage*, i.e. it comes outside, or to the surface of Ionesco’s text, becoming *imponderable*. The mysterious Mallot from *Victims of Duty* will also never be found, just like the “unpaid” Killer will never confess to Bérenger.

Unlike most critics, David Bradby polemically claims, for instance, that the living-dead in *Amédée* is an insistent “actual presence”, and all attempts to rationalize it as a symbol of something else are destined to be obstructed<sup>2</sup> from the outset, as is their excessive exegetic intention. Accepting the opinion of David Bradby, MaryBeth

Inverso, who detects a *NeoGothic* impuse in the plays of Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard or Sam Shepard<sup>3</sup>, likens the corpse in *Amédée ...* with the gigantic ghost of Horace Walpole's *Otranto*. Like in the famous *Castle of Otranto*, the corpse in Ionesco's text is simply *there* – a Gothic invader. If we accept that we can speak of a certain Gothic quality of Ionesco's vision, it necessarily entails a strong lack of *verisimilitude* of the imaginary and of the confrontation with theatrical convention, with the limits of scenic representability. The two are willingly imprisoned in their room-tomb, together with the fruit – imaginary and the real, at the same time – of their guilt as murderers (real or, again, imaginary). The corpse invades their vital space, as well as their nightmarish psychic, inner space. The enormous body is a “palpable” proof of the unreality of the real. What amplifies the imaginary guilt and the anguish of the two is the altogether strange, unwonted *event* which breaks through the domestic cell of their mundane existence. Thus, its presence not only causes them suffering in a life fraught with frustrations and self-censorship, but also an obvious and hardly repressible fascination. For example, take the bizarrely beautiful light that Amédée glimpses in the eyes of the one who died fifteen years ago is reminiscent of a similar vision of the aquatic corpse in the memorable short story *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* by Gabriel García Márquez, in which the motif of death is also retrieved aesthetically in the sphere of the fantastic. Still, the corpse in Ionesco's play is not only the Gothic invader who causes horror, or only a paradoxically aestheticized object, but also a moral object. It represents, in fact, the only

accomplishment – through suffering and guilt; it is the sole non-mediocre, exceptional event, which exerts the force of *destiny* upon the two. Amédée and Madeleine vie for it and, thus, the guilt they feel is no longer, ultimately, towards the innocuous and in-existent police authorities, but especially towards one another, in their shared love for the dead man.

It is not the sheer existential absurdity that is revealed here, but the tension toward the *event* that could have happened, or that has already taken place. The murder – possible, rather than real – by Amédée of a guest who visited the Buccinioni 15 years ago and whose identity is ambiguous and uncertain, much like the identity of his assassin (who might or not have been Amédée) triggers a pseudo-plot, typical of a parodied detective narrative. This parody highlights the artifice of Ionesco's poetics, most visible everywhere: the arbitrariness and non-causal concatenation of incidents on the stage, or the presence of several unnatural fictional constructs, devoid of humanity and yet animated, akin to the Golem, Frankenstein's creature, Urmuz's monsters, part people, part plants, animals or simple mechanisms, like Ismail, Turnavitu, Algazy sau Grummer.

Ionesco's characters – Madeleine and Amédée, or the Old Man and the Old Woman from *The Chairs* – find themselves disposed of their selves in their own house, stripped bare of a protecting *at-homeness*, suffering a state of rupture, of inner fragmentation. When this ontological crisis is no longer associated with the melodramatic solution of moral salvation, translated into the glib cliché of happy endings, Ionesco's plays – particularly those from his last period of creation, such as *Killing Game*,

*Man with Bags, Journeys Among the Dead* – lay bare, more and more, the quasi-Gothic canvas underneath their intertextual and parodic fabric. Madeleine’s lamentations and persecution phantasms in *Amédée...*, like those of the Old Woman in *The Chairs*, evince the imprint of the melodramatic ethos at a rhetorical level, but typologically they belong to the literary paradigm of the Gothic.<sup>4</sup> Giving way to his own fears of an occult origin, and no longer being destined to undergo any final transfiguration, the pseudo-hero of Ionesco’s theater will turn from the agent and patient of the melodramatic moral into an alienated inhabitant of the revived Gothic universe.

Eugène Ionesco claimed to be the victim of a fundamentally hostile – immanent or transcendent – authority as early as the publication of the volume *Nu* (*No*, translated from Romanian into French as *Non*): “I’m scared to look at the black holes through my window. That’s why I close my eyes. I ask you humbly, please, don’t open my eyes unto the void! Everything is falling down! Everything is falling down! My roar is weak, like a sigh”<sup>5</sup>. This strange complacency in the position of a predestined victim is emphasized by his regressing to a quasi-infantile emotional age: “We are some droll children, abandoned in this world, in this huge house that is coming down. We’re playing, by the abyss, with dolls”<sup>6</sup>. The pure, unconscious game appears here to be a premonition of tragedy, because the man-child lies close to the brink of the ontological precipice once invoked by Nietzsche.

Critics have noted, more than once, the structural romanticism beyond the surrealist or expressionist penchants of the author of *The Chairs*. But Ionesco’s work

most often discards the complexity of romanticism’s contrasts, preferring binary schemes such as good-bad, beautiful-atrocious or bright-dark of the pre-romantic literary paradigm, a paradigm permeated by a seemingly naïve, crude romanticism, that of the Gothic. Much like the two old people in *The Chairs*, like Bérenger in *The Killer* or in *Rhinoceros*, or like the enigmatic pilgrim or occult philosopher Jean from the modern mystery *Hunger and Thirst*, the narrating self in *Présent passé, passé présent/ Present past, past present* is placed in a position that is typical of the protagonists of Gothic romances from the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the next – that of the innocent victim of an essentially hostile universe, governed by a mysterious negative, persecutory transcendence: “Beauty makes only a part of the world appear, ‘in which I am not’, forsaking the rest of the world and myself in the shadows. I look, from nearby, at a treasure which sparkles in the obscurity of a cave”<sup>7</sup>.

The concern for the Gothic lineage – both in terms of theme and atmosphere, and as regards the often intertextual quality – of Ionesco’s plays has not been addressed in studies devoted to this author so far. However, despite some unjust accusations targeted at Ionesco, the critic Kenneth Tynan sensed that Ionesco’s theater is not so much absurd as “pungent and exciting”. In the context of his polemic with Ionesco concerning the necessity of realistic theater (supported by the English critic and rejected by the playwright), Tynan defines Ionesco’s drama through a new metaphorical formula: through his theater, Ionesco provides readers with an escape from realism, proposing them “a funfair ride on a ghost train, all skulls and hooting waxworks”<sup>8</sup>.

A mapping of the Gothic impulse in contemporary theater is achieved by MaryBeth Inverso, the critic noting the affinity between the Gothic and today's alternative theater movement. The type of drama the critic calls "New Gothic" or "NeoGothic" would largely feature the stylistic features, themes and structures of Gothic narratives translated into a dramatic idiom. Despite appearances, therefore, it is not the Gothic melodramas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that dramatize the authentic Gothic imagination, because didacticism and melodramatic sentimentality are at odds with the 'fundamental atavism' and with the moral ambiguity of the literature produced by Ann Radcliffe, George Eliot, the Brontë sisters or Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The resurgence of Gothic sensibility is reported in the twentieth century, when it is mostly located in the dramatic genre (*Marat-Sade*, by Peter Weiss, for example, is declared by the critic to be the most paradigmatic Gothic play ever produced on stage). MaryBeth Inverso supports her argument concerning the re-emergence of the Gothic perspective in contemporary theater through references both to symptomatic texts by Wedekind, O'Neill, Pinter, Stoppard, Ionesco (in the latter's case, only *Rhinoceros*, *Amédée*, *Or How to Get Rid of It* and *The New Tenant* are representative for the Gothic imaginary), as well as the directorial conception of Antonin Artaud. As regards Artaud, the stage of the theater of cruelty is a more Gothic topos than the one who wrote *Le Théâtre et son double* would have wanted it - a playwright who already sat on the devil's side without realizing it, Inverso concludes. The metaphor of the plague, the imagery of whirlpools, of submersions and convulsive gestures Artaud recurrently

resorted to seem taken from the pages of Charles Robert Maturin (with his *Melmoth the Wanderer*) or of E. A. Poe.

What would then be, based on the theoretical elements inventoried by Inverso, the Gothic features of Ionesco's theater, features that may also be found in other so-called playwrights of the absurd?

### Ruins and Ghosts of the Text

The transcendence that is frequently capable of arbitrary decisions in classical tragedy is replaced, in twentieth-century Gothic drama, by a universe of *evil*, a metaphysical evil materialized not only in human vice, but also in the hostility of nature or, more often (as in the case of Ionesco and Beckett), in an artificial setting, external to the human. The directorial and scenographic conception of a Gothic play seems to belong to a power - whether transcendent or immanent - whose nature is deeply theatrical. The protagonist of such plays of horror and sensationalism is playing a predestined *role*, that of a victim or an executioner. That character who is prescribed, for instance, the role of victim is subjected through language (a coercive, tyrannical and even criminal tool, like in *The Lesson* by Ionesco, where "la philologie mène au crime") to a rhetoric of intimidation, of threats, a rhetoric inherited in contemporary theater from the Gothic narrative texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

On the other hand, the Gothic universe cancels any possibility of functioning for social morality and justice. The innocents perish together with the bastards, or rather in their stead. In Ionesco's play *Journeys Among the Dead*, a character - who

is a persecuting paternal figure – trenchantly states: “Une canaille vaut un génie”, or “L'éternité nivelle tout”/“A rascal equals genius”, or “In eternity everything gets leveled.” The quasi-autobiographic protagonist Jean from the play with the same title (just like Bérenger from *The Killer*, or the First Man from *Man with Bags*) has the revelation of the strange, the unnatural which suddenly arises from beyond the thin layer of the apparently protective domestic, bourgeois universe: “There were various shapes, various objects in space, which, all of a sudden, took some monstrous shapes, reminding me that there was no doubt: I was not at home. Then where I was? The chair was becoming a dragon with two heads, and the glossy surface of the wardrobe resembled a lake. A bizarre: where had it sprung from?”<sup>9</sup>

What is specific to the Gothic novel, but also to contemporary neo-Gothic drama is precisely this undermining of the closed, domestic space, of family habits, through the intrusion, from outside, of the unexpected, the strange and the unfamiliar. These categories are relevant for the poetics of dread and macabre sensationalism in *The Bald Soprano*, *Victims of Duty* and *Amédée* ... The destruction of the clichéd existence of the bourgeois family cell, the debunking of a false domestic romance as in *Jack, or the Submission*, confirms the statement of the critic David Punter, according to whom Gothic literature is a literature written *for* the bourgeoisie and also *against* the bourgeoisie<sup>10</sup>. Bourgeois interiors, apparently secure, are present in most of Ionesco's plays, starting with the room of the Smiths in *The Bald Soprano*, which is not once metamorphosed into a thanatic space – for example, the

tomb-like chamber in *The New Tenant*. On the other hand, in *Journeys Among the Dead*, several characters without precise ontological identity – oneiric apparitions or living-dead, revenants – hark back to the recurrent Gothic topos of cemeteries, of graves, associating them with the grotesque-eschatological vision of mankind's catastrophic future:

Mrs. Simpson: (...) From child to child we'll reach the end of the world, after which the graves will open.

Arlette: (...) The tails of comets can blow up all the graves. Pits can explode with all they have inside them. (...) When the earth is filled entirely with cemeteries, where will we put the dead? We'll have to burn the others. But that will create mountains of ash. Where will we put the ashes?

In turn, the protagonist Jean describes to the Old Woman – probably his dead mother – a menacing, labyrinthine structure, consisting of high walls, dead alleys and roundabout streets, which he had to walk down on his way to her. Melodramatic sentimentality is continually parodied and is naturally replaced in such a universe by the overwhelming, relentless sense of danger, of imminent threat, of a forthcoming universal apocalypse: “I expect every moment there'll be a catastrophe”, says Arlette in *Journeys Among the Dead*, “and I wonder how the center still holds? What if the earth cracks down?”

In *Killing Game*, the Old Man pathetically confesses his fear, which he recognized in all those who are hypnotized, like puppets, by the fatality of the thanatic evil game:

But how can you put up with all this anguish? Around us, everyone's terrified with fear. Everyone is frozen with pain. (...) The others' terrors do not necessarily press down on me. My own fears are enough. And today I can see this fear of mine multiplying and twinkling in everyone's eyes.

The Gothic emotional atmosphere in Ionesco's plays is largely the effect of the characters' ambivalent attitude – of fascination and horror at the same time – in the face of death. The paradoxical, amoral, evil attraction to the assassin's figure is shown not only in Bérenger's pathetic attempt at dialogue with his killer in *The Killer*, but also in the sympathetic rather than critical construction of some characters like the Professor in *The Lesson*, rapist of virgins and serial killer (like the legendary protagonist of Ghelderode's *Sire Halewyn*), or the failed playwright in *Amédée ou How to Get Rid of It*, the almost ingenuous and irresponsible author of a passionate crime. Even in Ionesco's first text of absurd drama, written in Romanian in 1943, *Englezește fără profesor*, where Mary the maid pretended to be Sherlock Holmes, such a literary reference is made to the universe of detective novels or *mysteries*, derived from narratives that used to feed on the romantic fascination with death, mystery and terror (that fascination created a fashion and, sometimes, led to aesthetic kitsch). The propensity for the morbid and the theme of the living-dead (from Bobby Watson, such a happy "véritable cadavre vivant", as Mr Smith called him in *The Bald Soprano*, to the speaking dead in *Journeys Among the Dead*), reminiscent of the famous novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, can also be

encountered in Ghelderode's plays *Made-moiselle Jaïre*, *Fastes d'Enfer* and *La mort regardée à la fenêtre*, as well as in Hugo Claus's *La Vie et les oeuvres de Léopold II (Het leven en de werken van Leopold II)*. While in the case of Ghelderode, the resurrection of the dead reminds one of the macabre in Poe, Claus and for Ionesco treat the motif of the dead person who wakes up temporarily or only apparently to life (for instance, Aunt Adelaide in *Hunger and Thirst*) with the parodic distancing of an *opera buffa* or a tragicomedy.

Distancing is the effect, in Ionesco's works, of a somewhat distorted, anamorphic, false authorial perspective. The apocalyptic setting from *Journeys Among the Dead*, for instance, seems like a parody of the Gothic atmosphere of ghost-ridden castles. The implicit literary reference might be to the famous *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. The imposing castle becomes, in the parodic reading of the character Jean, a film setting, with artificial lakes and fields. Ruins are, of course, not absent, much like in the palimpsest of a Gothic novel that has received a successful film adaptation: "There are also ruins there, but don't be afraid, they must not to be touched, because they have been ruined on purpose. You understand, so let's sign the contract." In *Stroll in the Air*, Bérenger, who formulates the theory of the fantastic Anti-World, does not hesitate to use the recurrent Gothic topos of ruins. According to his crazy pataphysical thesis, these desolate ruins could be reconstructed on the other realm, in the negative ("à l'envers"), becoming the stately castles of yesteryear. The character who roams this dramatic palimpsest of revived Gothic narratives, parodically resuscitated, is altogether

theatrical. He is an actor distanced from his own existence, like Jean from *Journeys Among the Dead*, an individual who performs, successively or simultaneously, the roles of victim and executioner. In an arbitrary, anarchic world-as-a-stage, or in a world trapped in a tyrannical process of rhinocerotization and of deadly plague dissemination (as in *Killing Game*), Ionesco's anti-heroes – from Bobby Watson or the interchangeable Smith and Martin, to the autobiographical protagonists from *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead* – are defined by a fluid, uncertain identity, reminiscent of the Gothic novel's preference for doubles and continuous metamorphosis. In *Victims of Duty*, the poet Nicolas d'Eu theorizes upon irrationalist, non-Aristotelic theater, a theater which relinquishes the principle of identity and of the unities. It can be read as a parodied analytical play<sup>11</sup> and also as a detective drama, just like *The Killer* and *Amédée* seem to be *mysteries* or *thrillers* that contain their own parody. The genre of detective or *mystery* narrative is nothing but an heir of the Gothic novel of the eighteenth century, but the mystery remains impenetrable, like in the so-called absurd neo-Gothic dramas of Ionesco, Pinter or Tom Stoppard, fuelling a sense of ontological insecurity and taking the place of destiny from the ancient tragedy. The detective solution is parodied by either diverting the detective or the criminal from their purpose, from their pre-determined role, as in *The Killer* and *Amédée*, or exaggerating, to the point of absurd sadism, the executioner's role, as in *Victims of Duty* or in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

According to Patrick Day, another theorist of the Gothic literary paradigm,

the only means of survival in the Gothic world, filled with persecutions and disorienting in the extreme, would be a kind of “alert passivity”<sup>12</sup>. Survival is important, I think, not only for the character, as Day contends, but also for the spectator. The spectator and the reader are actually captivated by what David Punter called, referring to the “literature of terror”, the paranoid structure of discourse. Ionesco's theater confirms, from the very beginning, Punter's claim. At the end of *Englezește fără profesor/L'Anglais sans peine*, in the Pirandellian happening, several spectators are shot with the consent of the Author and the theater's Manager. The motif of murder reappears, moreover, in *The Lesson*, *Victims of Duty* and *The Killer*, the reader being subjected to a negative catharsis, through detachment, like in psychodrama (plays like *Exit the King*, *Stroll in the Air* and *Journeys Among the Dead* also appear to be psychodramas). Like Artaud, Ionesco defends the theater that exerts an aesthetic *violence* with a purifying effect on language and, equally, on reality. His plays are haunted by the menacing suggestion that spectators themselves – whether those outside the stage, as in *L'Anglais sans peine*, or those inside the fictional space, like the invisible visitors in *The Chairs*, the English in *Stroll in the Air* or the puppet-like bourgeois from *Killing Game* – should forget the theatrical convention and transform themselves into a murderous Gothic horde, similar to the Pirandellian “giants” of the mountains.

### Gothic vs. Melodramatic

The fictional universe proposed by melodrama, also present, through a parodic metamorphosis, in Ionesco's plays,



is structured just like the Gothic universe, according to some mysterious laws, of occult origin. In addition, melodramatic literature is no less haunted by its obsessive concern with evil. When operating as a principle of the ontology of the Gothic, evil manifests itself relentlessly, fatalistically, as it happens in *The Lesson*, *The Killer* and *Killing Game*. The evil element in melodrama appears to be a dramatic agent, an antinomic term in an ethical sense, a pretext for the contrapuntal occurrence of good. The possibility of moral salvation by opting for *good* is absent, however, from Ionesco's Gothic-inspired play, as are positive characters – in general female, innocent victims, whose purity magnetically attracts the persecution of opposite, evil forces. Such a play will be devoid of the parodic didacticism – more exactly, the pseudo-didacticism – of absurd melodramas such as *The Chairs*, *Jack*, or *The Submission*, *Amédée* and *Stroll in the Air*.

Feeding on contrary trends, manicheistically oriented towards shadow and light at the same time, Ionesco's anti-world alternatively gives in to one or the other of two imaginary, paradoxically complementary impulses: the melodramatic one, accompanied by the cheerful intimation that the moral conflict will be solved, and the Gothic one, accompanied by the catastrophic phantasms of implacable failure, moral and spiritual alike.

The melodramatic propensity towards a happy ending, as a moral reward for uncompromised virtue or for converting wickedness into earnestness, is expressed among the reminisced experiences of childhood, in *Present past, past present*. Hope in a spiritual triumph is preceded by an eschatological imaginary projection, whose point is to

purge pity and fear, or rather anguish. The catharsis invoked by Ionesco is not – in most cases, however – one of tragic amplitude, but a domestic, melodramatic one. But the ontological scandal caused by the insurmountable nature of *evil*, by the specter of a universal disaster without solution, specific to the Gothic frame of Ionesco's plays and essays, seems to overwhelm the luminous projections, full of ethical connotations, of the melodramatic imaginary. A telling document for Ionesco's authentic Gothic sensitivity is an essay with a very revealing title, "Le monde est invivable", included in the volume *Un homme en question*. Recalling Rimbaud's grim prophecy that "Le temps des assassins viendra", Ionesco seems to be an adept of the gnostic doctrine, according to which the world was created by a malevolent demiurge. The ostensibly pathetic and somewhat excessive formulations, the exaggerated emotional reactions, combined with the expressionist overtones of the vision – in the line with Caragiale's poetics of "enormous sense" and "monstrous sight" – are also reminiscent of the moral polarities of the melodramatic aesthetics:

From one change to another, societies have become more horrible than the horrible itself, more hideous than the hideous itself. Those who wanted and still want, or those who claim that they want to make justice exact nothing but revenge and punishment. Those who claim they want freedom to reign allow nothing but dictatorship and terror to reign.<sup>13</sup>

The Gothic essence of Ionesco's essayistic prose consists in the Manichaean creative propensity that Vijay Mishra refers to

in his discussion of the sublime of Gothic literature, which, he states, dares to address the “necessity of evil”.<sup>14</sup> Humanity’s inclination to violence pertains to the mysterious and the occult. The pathetic rhetorical questions Ionesco asks in this regard reveal, once again, his epistemological and ontological skepticism:

What is to be done in the face of this conundrum that leaves us powerless? If I want to do something against violence, do I also cause violence? (...) Faced with this fundamental conundrum, what more can we say? What can we do? What can we write? There are already avalanches, billions of words. What chaos!<sup>15</sup>

The metaphysics of evil, coupled with the lack of solutions and with the ontological insecurity that is specific to the Gothic, is highly in tune with the skeptic perspective on existence, so “Gothic” plays such as *Killing Game*, *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead*, belonging to the last period in Ionesco’s creation, end, not coincidentally, on a note of utterly dismal skepticism. “Nous sommes pris au piège. Comme des rats”/ “We are caught in the trap. We’ll burn like rats” – this is the last line in *Killing Game*, and the endings of the autobiographical plays *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead* combine the perspective of gnoseological skepticism with a Gothic atmosphere full of dark premonitions. If wandering through the enigmatic area of the unconscious ends, for “the man with suitcases”, in a strange state of serenity, following the revelation that his life and that of others are no more than a dream-like illusion, the autobiographical protagonist

of *Journeys Among the Dead* allows himself, by contrast, to be overcome by despair and radical skepticism, translated into a sumptuous verbal delirium. Combined in arbitrary fashion, in the absence of any referential meaning, the character’s statements are becoming increasingly incoherent and, at the same time, full of surreal lyricism:

Now I don’t know anything. But I could have asked myself the question if something like that would have been useful for interpreting the meanings of existence. (...) Never, never, never, everything suddenly comes into my head, in my head gnawed by the myths of ignorance, the myths of ignorance, the myths of ignorance, the mythical myths of ignorance, which look and unlook, orient and disorient.

The enigmatic “myths of ignorance” and, corresponding to them, the cryptographic universes governed by occult forces, or the anti-worlds, ordered according to a pseudo-geometry of Urmezian inspiration – all these reveal the in-between category of the *strange*, associated with the fantastic. The strange always has, however, dual connotations: on the one hand, catastrophic, apocalyptic nuances, and, on the other hand, ideas that trigger unusual visions, feelings of fear, but also of exaltation in the face of cosmic and individual miracles. In 1931, in the programmatic article entitled *Despre melodramă* (*On melodrama*), the future playwright was condoning melodrama and its cathartic effect, produced through the “unencumbered growth of feelings triggered by the unexpected and by horror”.<sup>16</sup> Over almost half a century later, Ionesco confessed about his paradoxical

attraction to the terror aroused in him, for example, by cinematic fictions of the thriller type: “There is, no doubt, in me, like in each of us, a fear and a love of terror”.<sup>17</sup>

The melodramatic catharsis, which engenders moral sentiments, and the Gothic catharsis, which arises not out of pity and fear, but out of a mixture of horror and admiration, or out of the fascination with being terrorized, are provoked by laying bare the “strings” and exposing the theatrical mechanisms, throughout the duration of the plot or, more precisely, of its absence in the play. It makes sense, in this case, to define theater as “something terrible, which is revealed little by little”, or as “a sort of succession of states and situations, leading to an ever growing densification”.<sup>18</sup> It is not so much the fantastic, therefore, as the *strange*, but especially the *marvelous* or, in other words, the *miraculous*<sup>19</sup> that seems to be the aesthetic and affective category these plays highlight deliberately; that miraculous which, according to André Breton, is itself exclusively *beautiful*. Ionesco’s characteristic astonishment, stirred by retrospective contemplation, instantiates bright, marvelous visions, which cause the contrapuntal appearance of darkness or evil, in a Gothic and melodramatic vein. The tragic farce in Ionesco’s works hovers, therefore, between the Gothic supernatural and the surrealist miraculous.

### The Assassin’s Manuscripts: Texts that Prescribe Horror

Among the features of the Gothic that works, just like mannerism, as an anti-classical episteme in the literature of all times, we could mention the recurrent deployment of the methods of parody and

intentional pastiche. In postmodernity, they are also mainly forms “of acknowledging the history (and, through irony, the politics) of representation”, as demonstrated by the theorist Linda Hutcheon.<sup>20</sup> The ironic reconsideration of the canonical literature of the past is made through allusions or quotations from the first text, which is the object of parody, and sometimes the stakes of this text are overturned and replaced with others, polemically rewritten against the grain.

Such a postmodern understanding of parody as the historicized representation of literary precedents seems, however, not to be fully relevant for the discussion of Ionesco’s drama. The author proves to be hostile to History more than once, refusing even the idea that the work should have to suffer any form of ideological and social determinism. When, for example, the theme of power – which implacably generates paranoid exaltations, totalitarianism and murder – in Ionesco’s play *Macbett*, transcribes parodically two other well-known dramatic texts, Shakespearian tragedy and Jarry’s farce *Ubu*, it is associated with an anachronistic aesthetic of the parable with generic human significance. Rhinocerotization, or, in a playful grid, “Ubu-ization” transcribes allegorically not so much the spreading of fascism and totalitarian aggression, as a dehistoricized, timeless, or downright archetypal phenomenon, as was the Kafkian *metamorphosis*. Thus, Ionesco’s pervasive parody, intertextual by nature, which is so evident in the plays that, in another context, I referred to as the *English* plays, tallies with the self-reflexive, and not the transgressive significance of the parodic mode: the apolitical and an-historical pastiche of the past literary.

This somewhat narcissistic type of parody, in which intertextuality occurs as a form of legitimization and consolidation of the textual or even textualist condition of the work, strongly resembles the parodic formula of the Gothic. Patrick Day, one of the ideologues of the Gothic paradigm in literature, seen parody not only as a method of subversive writing, for it not only represents a subversion of the original text, but also serves as a mirror of it. More than a stylistics option for writing à rebours, parody in Gothic literature reveals the ideology or even the ontology of the Gothic world as a whole. Emblematic for metatextual parodies of Gothic descent are the thoughts of Jean in *Journeys Among the Dead*. This autobiographical character is paradigmatic for Ionesco's skeptical-deconstructive propensities from his last period of creation: "How scared we were a mere century ago, weren't we? Only a century ago", Jean says, while at present it seems that "the abnormal has become normal", and fear seems to disappear by affective disinvestment, through distancing. In the same play, Arlette remarks on the universal repeatability of phenomena – which can refer, I would add, also to the phenomena of literature, through a *textualist* pastiche: "All the time the same moves, I return cyclically to the same moves!", Arlette whines. And Jean's deceased father invokes the typically Gothic motif – albeit through the lens of postmodern intertextuality – of the yellowed pages, of the mysterious unintelligible manuscripts taken out of drawers (like the esoteric notes from the briefcase of the assassin in *The Killer*). They are similar to those archetypal texts that the terrifying plots of Gothic romances once started from.

In the neo-Gothic play<sup>21</sup> *The Killer*, the manuscripts of the horrendous assassin in the City of Light lead Édouard to notice the bookish character of the latter's crimes. The killer could be, therefore, be Bovaric, a Don Quixote who turned evil due to a pathology of reading, or an intellectual-criminal like Raskolnikov, who schedules and theorizes his future criminal acts in a textualist spirit:

Édouard: The criminal sent me his private diary, his notes and index cards a very long time ago, asking me to publish them in a literary journal. That was before the murders were committed. (...) Something like a murder story, poetry or literature...

Bérenger: Literature can lead anywhere. Didn't you know that?<sup>22</sup>

Despite being "monstrous" and non-ethical at times, in that it "can lead anywhere", the literature that parodies itself also becomes reinvigorated thus through self-flagelating denunciations. Relapsing into intertextuality is not just a sign of aesthetic ageing and depletion, but also of a re-ontologization of fictional space, because through a parodic recognition of its inevitably repetitive character, through a deliberate positioning in the lineage of the great texts of humanity, this space gains the value of archetypal, exemplary representation. The intertextual parable of *Man with Bags* turns out to be altogether revealing. It parodically rewrites the myth of Oedipus. When the Sphinx asks the new modern Oedipus, archetypally called Premier Homme, to guess a "romancier connu, en trois lettres", the character replies: Sue, Eugène Sue. And Le Sphinx corrects him

promptly: "Non, c'est Poe, Edgar Poe". After all, Ionesco's dramaturgy often seems a parody not only of the Aristotelian aesthetic rigours of tragedy, but also of the so-called "frivolous" novel of adventures or mysteries, in the manner of Eugène Sue, and no less of the dark, terrifying-fantastic prose narratives of Poe.

And, just like in Poe, or in the Gothic novels of authors like Mary Shelley or Matthew Gregory Lewis, the subject of Ionesco's neo-Gothic plays is stripped of its own feeble, inner substance; the process of the subject's (self)construction is carried out, in fact, by undermining one of the ways in which the postmodern has challenged historical knowledge, namely that which operates in the field of private history, in this case of biography.<sup>23</sup> Ionesco, who in his youth wrote a sarcastic parody of critical biography, or, more exactly, a polemical anti-biography about the grotesque and tragic life of Victor Hugo, transposes into his fictional, tragic farses the false biographies of some characters without a clear identity. So are the First Man in *Man with Bags* and Jean in *Journeys Among the Dead*: anonymous wanderers whose ghostly existence finds only a semblance of reality in the delirious series of guilts, traumas and oneiric ghosts.

### **The Limits of Representation: the Negative and Non- Representable Sublime**

As the "victim" of textual constructions and parodic representations, which are deconstructive most of the times, the subject of Ionesco's plays evinces no consciousness of any particular identity. He finds himself disintegrated, dissipated, and

almost annihilated as he immerses himself in a state of paradoxical *astonishment*, negative at times, triggered by the *sublime*. It is a non-ethical *sublime*, descended from the awe-filled miraculous of Gothic literature, a sublime that no longer transfigures, no longer grants the human dignity and a sense of the superiority of his reason over nature, as in Kant's sense, but rather annihilates the subject, with his conscience, as in the conception of Schopenhauer, through a loss of oneself in the act of contemplating *something* occult that overwhelms deficient human subjectivity by sheer force and grandeur, or just by its unutterable monstrosity. In the case of Ionesco's drama, what is symptomatic is the Gothic-melodramatic ambivalence of the state of the sublime, combining the psycho-physical transfiguration, catharsis, the state of enlightened *astonishment*, and the inclination for terror and disaster. In the article *On melodrama*, the young Ionescu proclaimed the need for catastrophic experiences, which can be epiphanic or even therapeutic:

Only catastrophe can reveal our intimate nature. The waves of everyday life and the expected hide us from ourselves; they deceive us about ourselves: hence, the necessity of the tragic and the unexpected, of the catastrophe that can break, with dazzling force, those waves. Tragic life is an escape. But this psychological necessity and the cult of unexpected tragic occurrences legitimize melodrama and the pathological in art: the abnormal, rather than the normal, is true, essential, eternal.<sup>24</sup>

The contemporary theorist Catherine Spooner makes a somehow similar

plea for the necessity of facing and then freeing oneself from catastrophic anxieties, and for putting them into act (enactment). Thus, she argues for the need of the Gothic in art and in contemporary media representations:

While we should perhaps be careful of assuming that Gothic simply reflects social anxieties in a straightforward manner – as a genre deliberately intended to provoke horror and unease, it plays to audience expectations and therefore is rather too self-conscious to illuminate our most secret fears – it certainly engages with them on a variety of often quite sophisticated levels.<sup>25</sup>

Subject to the whims of an ambivalent fantasy, of ecstasy and horror alike, the fictional landscape of Ionesco's plays – serious, dark, contorted, but incorporating their own parody – has some of the main features of postmodernist literature. One of them is *indeterminacy*, which we also find, by the way, in Gothic literature. What is indeterminate is, on the one hand, the protagonists' past, as in the scene of the Martins' recognition in *The Bald Soprano*, in the psycho-dramatic play-within-a-play *Victims of Duty*, or in oneiric wanderings of the protagonists in *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead*, through unidentifiable realms – serving as metaphors, perhaps, of their own unconscious. Questioned about his genuine identity by the Consul of the unknown country he reaches, the First Man in *Man with Bags*, who is suffering from a strange amnesia, cannot utter anything but a few irrelevant details, meant to confound the authorities even further. On

the other hand, ontological indeterminacy appears also as an aesthetic necessity linked to the metaphysics of mystery and of the technique of suspense. These topoi of the Gothic paradigm permeate, as demonstrated above, the textualization of Ionesco's tragic farces. Indetermination at the level of the ontology of the character and of the narrative alike is, then, associated with a cult of the spectacular, of special effects (as in *Stroll in the Air*, replete with stage directions related to the mechanical ballet of the English, or to the enormous puppets invoked by the author, as a potential director who performs mentally, at first, the show). The emphasis on the *atmosphere*, at the expense of psychological consistency and verisimilitude, or of the causal behavior of the characters, suggests that Ionesco's neo-Gothic plays are often descended from an "aesthetics of the surface".<sup>26</sup>

Insisting on the prevalent representation of the spectacular *surfaces* of implausible gloomy incidents, which trigger horror and admiration, and not on the *depths* and subtleties of inner life, the Gothic shares with postmodernism an "aesthetic of anxiety and perplexity,"<sup>27</sup> emphasizing, at the same time, the category of the strange (as an anti-classical and anti-realistic radical aesthetics), the mysterious, the unnatural (the uncanny) and even the monstrous. All these constitute a complex literary (or theatrical) code, which catalyzes the emergence of other codes, or their metamorphosis. In fact, as Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith contend,<sup>28</sup> the Gothic, understood as a code of textual reiteration, realized through parody and even pastiche at times, is never pure; it is an alchemical melange of other codes, or rather a split between codes, a point of crisis in which

representation turns ambiguous, is deviated or risks becoming uncertain, diffuse; or, we might also say, the Gothic operates as a *zero-point* of representation, where the attempts to flesh out the *unpresentable* on stage and, before that, through texts become signs of the presence of the sublime.<sup>29</sup>

The Gothic abandonment of oneself when faced with a metaphysics of evil, a catastrophic state of negative sublimity, is also detectible in the visions of strange huge spaces (perhaps mental spaces, sheer emotional projections), undergoing ever clearer decomposition. It is not only the *self* that begins to dissolve its consistency, along with the spaces that configure it and then disfigure it metaphorically, but also the various overlapping textual levels. The sublime – understood as an anticode that renders ambiguous or makes subjective representation impossible – and the parodic intertext associated with it constitute together, in these plays, a second, metatextual dramatization of the relationship between the *character* (one, himself, autobiographical, in *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead*) and the *text*, as well as between the *author* and the *text*. The sublime of Ionesco's metatext, simultaneously upheld and deconstructed through parody, can also be found in the aesthetic pleasure–displeasure derived from the oscillation between ways to maintain the narrative consistency of the play and to let it unravel, in keeping with a seemingly oneiric poetics, in the *formidable tangle* of purely textual discontinuities.

There is, then, in Ionesco – the playwright, novelist, memoirist, and the critic and theorist of his own creation – a fundamental, intractable, aporetic tension, between a *sublime* of the unpresentable, in the sense granted to the word by Jean-François

Lyotard<sup>30</sup>, and the ostentatiously thematized and, hence, *parodic* representation. More than a Manichean literary formula (emphasizing the contrast between the grotesque of impersonal, mechanical death in *Killing Game*, and the artificial, deceptive sublime of the luminous citadel that conceals a murder in *The Killer*), the absurd Gothic – or neo-Gothic – highlights the Quixotic mechanism of non-realistic, non-verisimilar representation. Structured as thematic palimpsests that rest on a poetics of cruelty and macabre sensationalism, Ionesco's plays encompass not only intertextual references across time, but also a continuous essay, or a meta-theatrical essayistic journal. Many of Ionesco's dramatic are self-referential and self-parodic: the frame-play undergoes a deconstruction, at the level of dramatic plot and of the characters, in that it conceals a textual trap, a second play, a *mise-en-abyme*, which exposes the non-representability and often the non-interpretability of the first play. At the intersection of the various mutually deconstructive, aesthetic and theatrical conventions, the strange mixes with the banal, the improbable with the mundane, the melodramatic pathetic with playful triviality, the surrealist miraculous with the grotesque and with neo-Gothic gloominess, while Smith the eater of potatoes with bacon in *The Bald Soprano* coexists with the incredibly beautiful flying corpse in *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*. The continuous hybrid amalgamation of aesthetic codes and categories transcribes the aporia of what needs to be represented, while perpetually eschewing representation.

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## NOTES

1. "Joyce takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication; he puts us in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture, to assume the perspective of someone who is an alien or exile. As we, his listeners or readers, become familiar with the devices he has made us master, we find ourselves removed a certain distance from our own language, our usual selves, and our society. We join Joyce as outcasts, temporarily freed, or so it seems, from the nets of our language and our culture". See Donald Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty", in *Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 16, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, p. 11. See also Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, second edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001.



2. David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1980*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 64.
3. MaryBeth Inverso, *The Gothic Impulse in Contemporary Drama*, London, UMI, Research Press Ann Harbor, 1990.
4. I wrote an entire chapter about the melodramatic ethos typical of several of Ionesco's plays, titled *Il melodrammatico Bérenger sulle tracce di Ruy Blas*, in my book on Ionesco. See Laura Pavel, *Ionesco. L'Antimondo di uno scettico*, traduzione di Maria Luisa Lombardo, prefazione di Irina Petraș, Roma, Aracne Editrice, 2016, pp. 151-188.
5. Eugen Ionesco, *Nu*, București, Humanitas, 1991, pp. 58-59. Translated into English by Carmen Borbély.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
7. Eugène Ionesco, *Présent passé, passé présent*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1968, p. 272. Trans. by Carmen Borbély.
8. Kenneth Tynan, "Ionesco: Man of Destiny", in *Drama in the Modern World: Plays & Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Weiss, Lexington, Mass., Heath, 1964, p. 482.
9. Eugène Ionesco, *Journeys Among the Dead [Voyages chez les morts]*. The fragments from several of Ionesco's plays, such as *Jeux de massacre [Killing Game]* and *Journeys Among the Dead [Voyages chez les morts]*, quoted throughout the article, are translated into English by Carmen Borbély.
10. See David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, New York, Longmans, 1980, p. 423, where Gothic literature is defined as "a middle class and an anti-middle class literature".
11. See Ion Vartic, *Ibsen și „teatrul invizibil”. Preludii la o teorie a dramei*, București, Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1995, p. 81-88.
12. William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of the Gothic Fantasy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 45.
13. Eugène Ionesco, *Un Homme en question*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, pp. 199-200. Trans. Carmen Borbély.
14. Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 7.
15. Eugène Ionesco, *Un Homme en question*, p. 201.
16. See Eugen Ionesco, "Despre melodramă", in *Zodiac* (March 1931), p. 54. Trans. Carmen Borbély.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
18. Eugène Ionesco, *Entre la vie et le rêve. Entretiens avec Claude Bonnefoy*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 161.
19. In regards to this collapse of ontological boundaries between dream and reality, Gothic meets surrealism, which also influenced Ionesco's plays. It's not surprising therefore that André Breton – who saw in *La Cantatrice chauve* the aesthetic corollary of what the surrealists had intended to achieve 20 years before – commended, in the *First manifesto of surrealism*, probably the most successful Gothic romance, representative for this literature of occult terrors, *Le Moine (The Monk)*, by Matthew Gregory Lewis. See *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), in André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, p. 25.
20. See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London & New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 90, and the entire chapter entitled *The Politics of Parody*.
21. In *Un Homme en question (Under Question Mark)*, the Gothic or, more exactly, the neo-Gothic typology from *The Killer* is reaffirmed, the playwright comparing his play "un peu trop naïve et sentimentale" with *Richard III*, for both describe "la paralysie devant le mal et le pouvoir hypnotique qu'exerce le tueur". See *Un homme en question*, p. 41.
22. See Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King, The Killer, and Macbett*. Three Plays by Eugène Ionesco, translated from the French by Charles Marowitz and Donald Watson, New York, Grove Press, 1985, p. 71.
23. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 111.
24. Eugen Ionesco, "Despre melodramă", in *Zodiac* (March 1931), p. 54. Trans. Carmen Borbély.
25. Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006, p. 8.
26. Allan Lloyd Smith, "Postmodernism / Gothicism", in *Modern Gothic. A Reader*, edited by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 8.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

28. See Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, "Introduction", *Modern Gothic. A Reader*, pp. 1-2.

29. Among the theorists of the category of the sublime in the post-modern era, we may include Devendra Varma, Vijay Mishra and Allan Lloyd Smith, besides Fredric Jameson, Paul de Man, Frances Ferguson and Peter Schwenger. The latter are concerned not so much with a sublime in the line of subjectivism or of Kant's transcendental perspective, according to which subjectivity has access to the sentiment of the sublime through the inability to resolve the conflict between imagination and reason (this Kantian point of view is taken up by Lyotard, with the idea of the sublime *unprésentable*), but with a "cultural", "nuclear" sublime (Ferguson), in which postmodern subjectivity is overwhelmed, even reified by the impersonal dictatorship of the technological.

30. For Jean-François Lyotard, "l'esthétique moderne est une esthétique du sublime, mais nostalgique ; elle permet que l'imprésentable soit allégué seulement comme un contenu absent, mais la forme continue à offrir au lecteur ou au regardeur, grâce à sa consistance reconnaissable, matière à consolation et à plaisir", but "le postmoderne serait ce qui dans le moderne allègue l'imprésentable dans la présentation elle-même ; ce qui se refuse à la consolation des bonnes formes, au consensus d'un goût qui permettrait d'éprouver en commun la nostalgie de l'impossible ; ce qui s'enquiert de présentations nouvelles, non pas pour en jouir, mais pour mieux faire sentir qu'il y a de l'imprésentable". See *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants. Correspondance 1982-1985*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1988, pp. 30-31.