

Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* and the Menippean Tradition

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Mikhail Bakhtin believed that although carnival laughter has diminished and degenerated steadily since the time of Rabelais, the carnivalesque element in Western literature is inexhaustible because the feast itself is an indestructible element of human civilization (*Rabelais and His World* 276). Bakhtin argues that Menippean satire, one of the two serio-comic genres of classical antiquity from which the carnivalesque strain derives, continues its development in modern times in the “fantastic story” and the “philosophical fairy tale.” This modern form of the menippea includes works by Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, and E.T.A. Hoffman, as well as Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Bobok” and “Dream of a Ridiculous Man.” It is characterized by the presence of the grotesque, the inversion of traditional hierarchies, the crowning of a (wise) fool or jester as carnival king, and “a sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (*Rabelais* 11) which informs all carnivalized literature. It is a genre of “ultimate questions of worldview” in which “a bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic ... is devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Politics* 114). It features internal dialogue, unfinalized characters, abrupt changes in the fates and appearances of people, the anacrisis or provocation of a word by others’ words, and a utopian vision. Its characteristic setting is the public square and the threshold, rather than habitable interior spaces where biographical life is lived in biographical time (*Dostoevsky* 169). I believe that Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinocéros* can profitably be read as a modern menippea, albeit one with important reversals in the traditional pattern.

An exploration of carnivalesque vestiges in modern drama may seem counterintuitive in light of Bakhtin’s apparent disdain for the

genre. Robert Cunliffe argues that “for Bakhtin, drama and carnival are radically opposite kinds of events. Indeed, Bakhtin’s positive account of carnival is founded largely upon a correspondingly negative valorization of fundamental features of theatrical representation” (48). Yet Bakhtin insists that “it is the medieval comic theatre which is most intimately related to carnival” and cites Adam de la Halle’s *The Play in the Bower* as “a remarkable example of a purely carnivalesque vision and conception of the world” (*Rabelais* 15). He speaks of the “close link” between the *commedia dell’arte* and the carnival tradition (*Rabelais* 34). And in surveying the major writers who have perpetuated the carnivalesque in twentieth century literature, Bakhtin cites playwrights Alfred Jarry and Bertolt Brecht.

The grotesque, which Bakhtin associates closely with the carnival tradition in literature, originally involved the fantastical combination of humans and animals or “the transformation of the human element into an animal one” (*Rabelais* 316). The Italian cave ornaments for which the form is named, says Bakhtin, “seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other.” In them, he continues, “the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleting character of being” (*Rabelais* 32). Admittedly, the transformation of humans into animals in *Rhinocéros* lacks the intimations of reversibility Bakhtin finds in the Italian *grotesca*, as well as its “extreme lightness and freedom of artistic fantasy, a gay, almost laughing, libertinage” (*Rabelais* 32). Yet the metamorphoses that constitute the central action of *Rhinocéros* are certainly reminiscent of this ancient tradition. In the case of Jean, in particular, we watch the process of transformation unfold in considerable detail throughout the entire second tableau of Act 2, during which Jean appears and reappears exhibiting a constantly shifting combination of human and animal traits.

Rhinocéros roughly conforms to Bakhtin’s description of the symposium, a form intimately related to the menippea and often absorbed into it. The play’s main characters are ideologists, characters “organically combined with an idea” (*Dostoevsky* 111), whose views on a specific object—the transformation of humans into beasts—are dialogically juxtaposed. Like the “wise man” or seeker of truth of the menippea, the protagonist of the play is roused—both by the fantastic event itself and by others’ reactions to it—to the discovery of an

idea. When the second appearance of a rhinoceros galloping down the sidewalk precipitates an argument over whether the second animal was the same as the first, an argument which quickly degenerates into a debate over the number of horns of African versus Asian rhinoceroses, Bérenger realizes that “la seule chose qui compte ... c'est l'existence du rhinocéros en soi” (142) ‘The important thing, as I see it, is the fact that they’re there at all’ (Prouse 60). Later, in his dialogues with Jean, Dudard, and Daisy, he is provoked to a defense of humanity and human civilization by the others’ deprecation of them.

In the course of this anacrisis, Bérenger himself experiences an evolution or renewal typical of the Menippean hero, in whom, says Bakhtin, “the possibility of another person and another life are revealed” (*Dostoevsky* 117). At the beginning of the play, Bérenger is an apathetic drunkard, indifferent to his surroundings and alienated from his own existence and from human life in general. He complains to Jean that “je ne m’y fais pas, à la vie” (20) ‘I just can’t get used to life’ (Prouse 7) and that “[c]’est une chose anormale de vivre” (45) ‘Life is an abnormal business’ (Prouse 19). But by the time of his extended dialogues with Dudard and Daisy in the final act, he has become passionately engaged in the events occurring around him and is clinging desperately to his humanity: “Je me sens solidaire de tout ce qui arrive. Je prends part, je ne peux pas rester indifférent” (184) ‘I feel a solidarity with everything going on. I’m a part of it, I can’t be indifferent’ (Prouse 78); “Je suis un être humain. Un être humain” (243) ‘I’m a human being, a human being’ (Prouse 105). The protagonist’s evolution is underscored by a carnivalesque inversion of roles: at first, his apathy is counterpointed by Jean’s indignant excitement; at the end, his passionate engagement by Dudard’s intellectual detachment.

Like the protagonist of Varro’s menippea *Bimarcus* (“The two Marcuses”), Bérenger, especially in the latter part of the play, enters into a “dialogic relationship” (*Dostoevsky* 120) with himself, a relationship symbolized by his leitmotif gesture of looking in the mirror. (By the end of the play, of course, he literally has no one else to talk to). Bérenger’s internal dialogues, like Marcus’s, often take the form of an exchange between the character and his conscience. “Daisy a raison”(76) ‘Daisy is right,’ (Prouse 33) he says of his quar-

rel with Jean, “[J]e n’aurais pas dû le contredire” (76) ‘I should never have contradicted him’ (Prouse 33). And later: “Je n’aurais pas dû, je n’aurais pas dû me mettre en colère” (88) ‘I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t have quarrelled with Jean’ (Prouse 37). In his final soliloquy, we hear Bérenger again in conversation with his own conscience. In response to his attempt to justify his break with Daisy—“elle n’aurait pas dû me quitter sans s’expliquer” (243) ‘she shouldn’t have left me like that without an explanation’ (Prouse 105)—his conscience replies, “C’est ma faute, si elle est partie.... Qu’est-ce qu’elle va devenir?” (243) ‘It’s my fault she’s gone.... What will become of her?’ (Prouse 105).

Bérenger’s attitude toward rhinoceritis acquires its own dialogicality at the end, an inner debate in which it is difficult to say which side has the last word. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, Bérenger reflects, “Ce n’est tout de même pas si vilain que ça un homme” (243) ‘Men aren’t so bad looking, you know’ (Prouse 105). “Un homme n’est pas laid, un homme n’est pas laid!” (244) ‘A man’s not ugly to look at, not ugly at all!’ he insists (Prouse 106). But a moment later he reverses himself:

Ce sont eux qui sont beaux. J’ai eu tort! Oh! Comme je voudrais être comme eux. Je n’ai pas de corne, hélas! Que c’est laid un front plat.... J’ai la peau flasque. Ah, ce corps trop blanc, et poilu! Comme je voudrais avoir une peau dure et cette magnifique couleur d’un vert sombre, une nudité décente, sans poils, comme la leur! (245)

They’re the good-looking ones. I was wrong! Oh! How I wish I was like them. I haven’t got any horns, more’s the pity! A smooth brow looks so ugly.... My skin is so slack. I can’t stand this white, hairy body. Oh, I’d love to have a hard skin in that wonderful dark green colour—a skin that looks decent naked without any hair on it like theirs. (Prouse 107)

He concludes that “Je ne peux plus me voir. J’ai trop honte! Comme je suis laid!” (245) ‘I can’t look at myself any more. I’m too ashamed! How ugly I am!’ (Prouse 107). In the course of the same soliloquy he first denounces the rhinoceroses as monsters, then exclaims, “Hélas, je suis un monstre, je suis un monstre” (245) ‘Now I’m a monster, just a monster’ (Prouse 107).

A further manifestation of the inner dialogicality of Bérenger's discourse—its continued awareness of the other's word—is the malaise he experiences when he realizes that no one else on earth shares his language. He reasons with himself that in order to communicate with the rhinoceroses, either he must learn their language or they his:

Mais quelle langue est-ce que je parle? Quelle est ma langue? Est-ce du français ça? Ce doit bien être du français? Mais qu'est-ce que du français? On peut appeler ça du français si on veut, personne ne peut le contester, je suis seul à le parler. Qu'est-ce que je dis? Est-ce que je me comprends, est-ce que je me comprends? (244)

But what language do I speak? What is my language? Am I talking French? Yes, it must be French. But what is French? I can call it French if I want, and nobody can say it isn't—I'm the only one who speaks it. What am I saying? Do I understand what I'm saying? (Prouse 106)

Bérenger's disorientation here in the absence of possible interlocutors reveals the dependency for its meaning of any discourse on interaction with other discourse—a principle at the heart of the Menippean tradition.

Rhinocéros also features the mental “sidewise glance at another person” Bakhtin describes as coloring the literature of the Menippean tradition. “Every thought of Dostoevsky's heroes,” he writes, “senses itself to be from the very beginning a *rejoinder* in an unfinalized dialogue” (*Dostoevsky* 32; author's emphasis). Graham Townsend points out that the conjunction at the beginning of Bérenger's question “Mais comment peut-on être rhinocéros?” “But how can one be a rhinoceros?” intimates “a rejoinder to implied criticisms of Bérenger by other characters for remaining human, and a response to the chorus's failure in Act 1 to question the meaning of the rhinoceroses” (17). According to Townsend, Bérenger's speech “also suggests a response to Montesquieu by Ionesco—a sidewise glance at the *philosophe's* relativism and faith in reason” (17).

The ambiance of *Rhinocéros* is precisely “that carnival-square atmosphere in which abrupt carnivalesque changes of the fates and appearances of people can occur” (*Dostoevsky* 145). Its setting, too, conforms remarkably to the “threshold and the square” typical of the

spaces of carnivalized literature. “In comfortably habitable interior space,” Bakhtin explains, “far from the threshold, people live a biographical life in biographical time: they are born, they pass through childhood and youth, they marry, give birth to children, die” (*Dostoevsky* 170). In contrast, on the threshold (including the foyer, the corridor, the landing, the stairway, the taverns, streets, and squares of the city itself) “the only time possible is *crisis* time, in which a *moment* is equal to years, decades, even to a ‘billion years’...” (169-70; author’s emphasis). The entire long first act of *Rhinocéros* is set on the terrace of a café on a public square, a scene imbued with the carnivalesque atmosphere of a Sunday afternoon in which people interact freely and familiarly with each other. The first tableau of the second act takes place in the office where Bérenger works, but the focal points of the scene are the *palier* ‘landing’ (hanging into space above the demolished staircase) from which Madame Boeuf leaps to straddle her rhinoceros husband, and the window, through which Bérenger and his colleagues escape from the building, aided by the fire department. The action of the second tableau takes place first in Jean’s apartment, where the focus is on the threshold between the bedroom and the bathroom to which Jean repeatedly retires to check the progress of his transformation. At the end of the tableau Bérenger flees the apartment into the hall, warns *Le Petit Vieux* ‘The Little Old Man’ of Jean’s metamorphosis, and runs downstairs to alert the concierge, who has also been transformed. After rushing back upstairs and discovering that the old couple, too, have become rhinoceroses, he tries to exit the building from a window. Repelled by the sight of herds of pachyderms in the street, he rushes frantically from exit to exit—always repulsed by the animals—until at last he escapes through the back wall into the street. In the final act, set in Bérenger’s apartment, the characters’ attention is ineluctably drawn toward the window and the streets beyond, or to the city outside through the voices on the radio and the telephone. *Rhinocéros* is literally and figuratively a play about life on the threshold. Its characters have no biographies, and the time of the play is the infinitely elastic moment of crisis time.

“In the comic afterlife visions of Menippean satire,” Bakhtin observes, “real-life figures from various eras of the historic past ... and living contemporaries jostle one another in a most familiar way ...

—all in the service of the central goal of testing and exposing ideas and ideologies” (*Dialogic Imagination* 26). A curious variation on this motif occurs in *Rhinocéros*, as historic personalities are recognized among the metamorphosed pachyderms thronging the streets of the French provincial town:

DAISY. Mon cousin est devenu rhinocéros, et sa femme. Sans compter les personnalités: le cardinal de Retz ...

DUDARD. Un prélat!

DAISY. Mazarin.

DUDARD. Vous allez voir que ça va s'étendre dans d'autres pays.

BÉRENGER. Dire que le mal vient de chez nous.

DAISY. Et des aristocrates: le duc de Saint-Simon.

BÉRENGER, *bras au ciel*. Nos classiques! (208)

DAISY. My cousin's a rhinoceros now, and his wife. Not to mention leading personalities like the Cardinal of Retz ...

DUDARD. A prelate!

DAISY. Mazarin.

DUDARD. This is going to spread to other countries, you'll see...

BERENGER. And to think it all started with us!

DAISY.... and some of the aristocracy. The Duke of St. Simon.

BERENGER, *with uplifted arms*. All our great names! (Prouse 90)

Bakhtin believed that the carnival sense of the world embodied in the *menippea* includes a view of life as “one great communal performance” (*Dostoevsky* 160). It is a sense of the world, he says, which knows no footlights, no palpable distinction between actors and spectators. In *Rhinocéros*, Ionesco takes pains to extend the world of the play beyond the footlights into the auditorium. At the end of Act 2, the window through which Bérenger first tries to escape from Jean's apartment building “est indiquée par un simple encadrement, sur le devant de la scène, face au public” (165) ‘is

represented simply by the frame, facing the audience' (Prouse 70). Bérenger straddles this window, virtually stepping into the auditorium, before withdrawing at the sight of a line of rhinoceros horns traversing the orchestra pit (165). And in the final scene, in which the setting again features a window opening toward the audience, Bérenger—"montrant du doigt dans la salle" (213) 'pointing into the auditorium'(Prouse 92)—announces to Dudard that the rhinoceroses have demolished the fire station.

Even more striking is Ionesco's ambitious attempt to sweep the audience along in the wave of collective hysteria engulfing the characters of the play. In the final act, when Bérenger and Daisy are alone in the world, Bérenger looks out the window at herds of rhinoceroses thronging the streets. The stage directions indicate that "les bruits puissants de la course des rhinocéros ... se sont musicalisés cependant" (219) 'Powerful noises of moving rhinoceroses ... somehow [have] a musical sound' (Prouse 94). Later in the act, Ionesco again stipulates that the heavy breathing and galloping hoofbeats of the rampaging animals "sont cependant rythmés, musicalisés" (233) 'are nonetheless somehow rhythmical, making a kind of music' (Prouse 100). Finally, we are told of the human portraits Bérenger contemplates that "la laideur de ces portraits contraste avec les têtes de rhinocéros devenues très belles" (244-45) 'the ugliness of these pictures is in contrast to the rhinoceros heads, which have become very beautiful' (Prouse 106). An extraordinary effort is made in the play to extend the seductive appeal of the animals—and the collective hysteria of the characters—beyond the footlights into the auditorium to the spectators themselves.

"In all genres of the serio-comic," writes Bakhtin, "there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism" (*Dostoevsky* 107). And in the *Rabelais* book he asserts that the carnivalesque is "opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (*Rabelais* 3). While Ionesco acknowledges that *Rhinocéros* is an anti-Nazi play, he insists that it is above all an attack on all ideologies (*Notes and Counter-Notes* 199). As Marie-Claude

Hubert explains, “Ce n’est pas le seul fascisme qui est condamné, mais toutes les formes du fanatisme.... Ionesco se méfie de toutes les idéologies” ‘It is not fascism alone which is condemned, but all forms of fanaticism.... Ionesco distrusts all ideologies’ (150). Fanaticism is of course the extreme form of monologism, the *bête noire* of the carnivalesque view of the world. The central theme of *Rhinocéros* is the repudiation of all monologic discourse as inherently inhuman and de-humanizing.

Each of the important characters in the play represents one or more identifiable ideologies, each of which finds its counterpart in the antithetical ideology of some other character. Dudard is an intellectual, Botard an anti-intellectual. Jean is a racist; Botard decries racism. Botard spouts the slogans of Marxism: “C’est comme la religion qui est l’opium des peuples” (106) ‘Just like religion—the opiate of the people’ (Prouse 45); “[O]n nous exploite jusqu’au sang” (132) ‘They’ll go on exploiting us till we drop, of course’ (Prouse 55). Jean propounds the rhetoric of fascism: “La morale est anti-naturelle” (159) ‘Morality’s against nature’ (Prouse 67); “Il faut retourner à l’intégrité primordiale” (159) ‘We must get back to primeval integrity’ (Prouse 67), etc. This careful balancing of antithetical dogmas all conducing to the same condition effects, as Eliza Ghil notes, “a powerful relativization of all established ideological dogmas” (46). And it is through this relativization of opposing dogmas that Ionesco most closely approaches the polyphonic representation of life in literature which Bakhtin considered the culmination and triumph of the Menippean tradition.

In *Rhinocéros*, the dogma of normative relativism itself is actually promulgated by Dudard. When Bérenger, speaking of the epidemic of rhinocercitis, claims that “Il faut couper le mal à la racine” (187) ‘We must attack the evil at the roots’ (Prouse 80), Dudard replies, “Le mal, le mal! Parole creuse! Peut-on savoir où est le mal, où est le bien? Nous avons des préférences, évidemment” (187) ‘The evil! That’s just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It’s just a question of personal preferences’ (Prouse 80). But Dudard’s assertion of the relativity of all judgments is itself relativized by the play’s structure as one of several ideologies all leading to the same place. The text itself—like the polyphonic novel—does not deny the possibility that some values are superior to others: it merely refrains

from privileging any particular ideology in the “great dialogue” of the work. As Bakhtin explains, “[T]he polyphonic approach has nothing to do with relativism.... [B]oth relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as an artistic method lies on an entirely different plane” (*Dostoevsky* 69).

Typical of the menippea, writes Bakhtin, from classical antiquity to Dostoevsky’s “Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” is “the image of the wise fool, ... of a person who is alone in his knowledge of the truth and is therefore ridiculed by everyone else as a madman” (*Dostoevsky* 150-51). The experience of Bérenger in *Rhinocéros* conforms at least approximately to this pattern. His apology for human civilization causes him to be scoffed at by Jean as “un vieux sentimental ridicule” (161) ‘a ridiculous old sentimentalist’ (Prouse 68) and to be treated with condescension by Dudard. When he insists to Daisy that the rhinoceroses are merely making noise, she retorts, “Tu es fou, ils chantent” (241) ‘You’re mad, they’re singing’ (Prouse 104). Whether Bérenger is in fact possessed of wisdom is debatable. Richard Danner calls his defense of humanity “dubious” (207). And Jean-Paul Sartre claims that nothing in the play proves it is better to be a human being than a rhinoceros (6). But such strictures are irrelevant to the play’s relationship to the Menippean tradition, one which “avoids conclusive conclusion” (*Dostoevsky* 165), any definitive triumph of any given point of view. As David Parcel has noted, “the loose ends [of the play] are not tied up but left hanging” (15).

While carnivalesque laughter is generally held to be fundamentally subversive and progressive, Ionesco has been condemned by Kenneth Tynan and others for his lack of any political “commitment” at all. But as Richard Coe has argued, Ionesco’s refusal to “harness his theatre to this party or that” hardly makes him, as some have claimed, a silent supporter of the Right or of the status quo. Coe explains that the only truly revolutionary writers are apolitical. Before it can be fashioned into a program, he insists, “an idea must already have been disseminated, popularized, diluted ... until its novelty is tarnished, its subversive violence tamed, its unfamiliarity made acceptable. But by this time, it is no longer revolutionary; it is no longer even alive” (141). He concludes that “for a writer to harness his art to the politics of a party is to ... chain his living language

to the senseless cadavers of words which have lost ... their meaning. And to accept a form of language, a way of thought which is already out-of-date and platitudinous is to betray the truth, to distort reality—in short, to propagate a lie” (141). This observation echoes Dostoevsky’s famous aphorism that the truth spoken is a lie. And it is for just this reason that the fixed and finalized formulation, whether of a character or an idea, is alien to the Menippean tradition.

The essence of the carnivalesque is the defeat of fear, guilt, and anxiety by laughter. Bakhtin points out that Rabelais’s Panurge at the end of the *Quart Livre* “rids himself of his terror and regains his cheerfulness” (*Rabelais* 175). And at the end of the apocryphal *Cinquiesme Livre*, he is of course even more fully and dramatically purged of his fears of cuckoldry. In *Rhinocéros*, fear, guilt, and anxiety are constants of Bérenger’s existence up to the very last instant of the play. In the opening scene he tells Jean, “C’est comme si j’avais peur, alors je bois pour ne plus avoir peur” (42) ‘It’s as if I’m frightened, and so I drink not to be frightened any longer’ (Prouse 17). At the beginning of Act 3, he is having nightmares about the rhinoceroses and, upon awakening, he anxiously examines his forehead for signs of an incipient horn. When Dudard arrives at his apartment, he confesses his fear of becoming “un autre” (174) ‘someone else’ (Prouse 73), and moments later he blurts out, “J’ai peur de la contagion” (177) ‘I’m frightened of catching it’ (Prouse 75). At the same time, he is tormented with feelings of guilt over his estrangements with Jean and Daisy. And finally, as we have seen, he comes in his final soliloquy to regard himself as a monster because of his inability to metamorphose into a rhinoceros. But in his sudden *sursaut* or reversal at the very end he appears, like Panurge, to have transcended his fears: “Contre tout le monde, je me défendrai! Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai jusqu’au bout! Je ne capitule pas!” (246) ‘I’ll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating!’ (Prouse 107).

In some significant ways, *Rhinocéros* alters or reverses the pattern of the menippea Bakhtin describes. In place of the utopian vision typical of the genre, the play offers a dystopia of the human race metamorphosed into beasts. And in place of the official seriousness mocked by gay carnival laughter, Ionesco satirizes in the

character of Dudard the representative of what might be described as an official intellectual frivolousness. The unflappable Dudard repeatedly chides Bérenger for his lack of a sense of humor in the face of the epidemic, exhorting him to “prendre les choses à la légère, avec détachement” (184) ‘be more detached, and see the funny side of things’ (Prouse 78). Dudard himself confesses that he finds the transformation of M. Papillon “assez drôle” (190) ‘rather funny’ (Prouse 81). In its manifestation of the grotesque, however, as well as its affinities with the Socratic dialogue and interior dialogue, its use of the fantastic for philosophical ends, its challenge to monologism and conventional wisdom through the depiction of a “wise fool,” its carnival setting and depiction of life on the “threshold,” and its attempt to transcend fear through laughter, *Rhinocéros* echoes the carnival sense of the world which Bakhtin traces back through Dostoevsky and Rabelais to the serio-comic literature of antiquity.

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