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The Failure of Identity and Communication in the Absurdist Play *The Bald Soprano*

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Abstract: Eugène Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano* is one of the most frequently performed plays in the world, despite the fact that it lacks all of the traditional components of a play. Instead of advancing a clear or intelligible plotline, the play uses absurdity, nonsense, and self-contradiction to raise deeper philosophical questions about modern humans' certainty about their own systems of knowledge. This is accomplished through making a mockery of the metaphysical idea that the universe is an orderly cosmos, in which everything can be found in its proper place and every event occurs at the right time. Instead, the play takes place in an absurdist universe in which things lack identity with themselves, nothing happens when it is supposed to, and language fails to provide clear definitions or establish reliable channels of communication among the characters.

Keywords: Eugène Ionesco, Absurdist Theatre, Existentialism, Sartre, Heidegger

Since its debut in Paris in 1950, Eugène Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano* has baffled audiences by seeming to intentionally violate all of the rules of theatre, as they had been outlined in Aristotle's *The Poetics* (Aristotle 1455-65). Indeed, there is no plotline, character development, or resolution to any identifiable problem within the play. Instead, the play largely consists of absurd dialogues that might seem at first glance to be bits and pieces of nonsense sprinkled in random locations across the pages of the text by a group of chimpanzees. Nonetheless, *The Bald Soprano* remains "one of the most performed plays in the world" (Elsky 347), because *The Bald Soprano* actually *does* contain a meaningful philosophical message about the characters' failure to achieve identity and to establish communication with one another, but the play ironically proves this point through turning these criteria back on itself.

The play immediately opens with a dialogue that only serves to show the impossibility of intersubjective communication among the characters – even between the two people who are supposed to be the most intimately familiar with one another: a husband and wife. The first scene opens with the characters Mr. and Mrs. Smith (the most blandly stereotypical British names of all) introduced as "middle class British" folks, with every item in their house also introduced as "British" (8). In fact, even the clock strikes "17 British strokes". On one hand, it is suffocatingly clear what kind of people or things they are, because the audience is told over and over again that they are British. On the other hand, despite this excessive over-qualification, all of them still somehow fail to identify with themselves.

This failure of identity is brought to light even before the play formally begins, since the title page already introduces *The Bald Soprano* as an "anti-play". Even the play is not what it is

supposed to be, since it is not, in fact, a play. In addition, the play's text contains instructions for the actors and actresses that are intentionally impossible to follow. At one point, Mr. Martin is given the following self-contradictory instructions: "[He either kisses or does not kiss Mrs. Smith]" (32). This is shortly followed by the instructions that Mrs Smith "[falls on her knees sobbing, or else she does not do this]". Even the play's instructions cannot be instantiated in reality without violating their own definitions.

This idea of something that is not what it is supposed to be is, of course, eerily similar to Jean Paul Sartre's definition of Existentialism as the philosophy about a subject that "is not what it is and is what it is not" (Sartre 60). As Martin Heidegger noted in *Being and Time*, whereas a stone simply is what it is supposed to be and could never raise any questions about its own Being, a conscious human subject cannot help calling Being into question, because one is thrown to one's existence, before knowing what one is supposed to be or do (135-7). This dilemma is often condensed into the formula: "existence precedes essence". In Sartre's own interpretation of Existentialism, the subject *is* nothingness, but its lack of any fixed definition is exactly what makes it free to reinvent itself in totally new and unpredictable ways (Sartre 132). While it is well known that the Theatre of the Absurd deals with existentialist themes, the *Bald Soprano* shows that translating the philosophical themes of Existentialism into the form of a theatrical narrative does not serve the utilitarian purpose of making them any easier to understand, for it's actually much *more difficult* to interpret the play than a straightforward theoretical treatise like Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. This is the case, because whereas Sartre clearly states what he thinks, one has to read between the lines to guess what Ionesco is trying to say about the same themes, often through dialogues that are supposed to *not* make any sense.

Returning to the first scene of the play, the audience finds that as Mrs. Smith rambles about having "drunk British water" and eaten "British salad," Mr. Smith only responds with a weird tongue-clicking noise: a repetitive, pre-linguistic tic which lacks any semantic meaning whatsoever, since this noise cannot be found listed among any of the words in the dictionary (9). Despite the fact that he has technically filled the conversational placeholder of an interlocutor by providing a response to Mrs. Smith, this is only done to prove the absurdity of the situation twice as forcefully.

Mr. Smith dwells further on the failure of self-identity through showing language's inability to describe everything important about a person. He proves this point by asking why the newspaper always provides the age of the deceased, but never provides the age of the newly born (11). The answer is, of course, that the newly born have *no age*; yet somehow, it would also be incorrect to say that a newborn baby is "zero" years old. The newborn baby's age is therefore an impossible figure to represent with our usual age-counting conventions. The deeper point, though, is that *all* attempts to fully represent someone's identity in language or mathematics are just as unreliable, however bulletproof they might seem to be.

The limits of language are also put on display in the Smiths' discussion of a person named "Bobby Watson". Although Watson died two years ago, his obituary appeared in the newspaper three years ago, but when the Smith family attended his funeral a year and a half ago, he had

already been dead for four years, which caused them to marvel at how well preserved his corpse was at that time (11). There is, however, some confusion over which Bobby Watson is being discussed, because Bobby's wife had the same name, along with their son, daughter, uncles, aunts, and cousins (12-3). This outrageously absurd story is meant to show that even a proper name fails to help one identify a unique person with any level of certainty, since *everyone* in that family was named "Bobby Watson".

Shortly thereafter, the maid announced that two guests named Mr. and Mrs. Martin were waiting at the door (14). The Martins were supposed to eat dinner with the Smiths, but they had missed the appointment, since nothing could be found in its proper place or time in an absurdist universe. When the Martins and Smiths were finally able to sit together, though, only a long, uncomfortable silence occurred where there was supposed to be a lively conversation among close friends. Even when a new dialogue did begin, it largely consisted of semantically meaningless pause noises, such as "hm" and "oh" (20). On a very brute level, the characters were technically "talking to each other" with these pause noises, but nothing meaningful was conveyed by such sounds, because they are not really words. Worse still, when Mr. Martin finally did produce a meaningful sentence – "We all have colds" – Mr. Smith totally misunderstood what had been said and responded, "But it's not chilly". Although both characters were talking about the "cold", they meant it in two totally different senses of the word, with one referring to low temperature and the other referring to a sickness. Just as the name "Bobby Watson" failed to identify one specific person, the word "cold" was equally incapable of finding its target in an absurd universe without meaning.

The conversation between the Smiths and Martins was also inhibited by another Real obstacle (in Slavoj Zizek's sense of the term)(Zizek 511): the repeated ringing of the doorbell. The problem was that whenever someone got up to check who was there, it turned out to be no one at all. Still, the game went on, in a seemingly never-ending loop. Mrs. Smith repeatedly alternated between expressing faith that "[t]here must be somebody there" and accepting the disappointing reality that there was "[n]obody" there after all (22).

This exercise in futility provided an opportunity to question the philosophical theory of Empiricism: the idea that observation and experience are enough to lead Mankind to grasp the truth with full certainty. The Scientific Method, of course, is defined as the combination of empirical observation with logical consistency, but Mrs. Smith made a parody of this same Scientific Method by using her own empirical observations that "no one was there" to generate a blatantly illogical law: "Don't send me to open the door again. You've seen that it was useless. Experience teaches us that when one hears the doorbell ring, it is because there is never anyone there" (23). She could not be faulted for concluding that the sound of a doorbell is necessarily proof that no one is there, because her own experience had never yielded a different result.

Like so many other scientific theories, this one was disproved immediately after being declared absolutely true, since the next time when the doorbell rang, the Smiths and Martins found that there actually *was* a man at the door after all: the local Fire Chief. This unexpected finding only caused Mrs. Smith to double down on Empiricism, though, by asserting that this "has been

proved, not by theoretical demonstrations, but by facts" (25). Mrs. Martin objected, however, that this proved nothing, because the first three times there was no one at the door, and it was only on the fourth time that the Fire Chief appeared. By arguing that only the first three samples could be accepted because "the fourth time does not count", the characters drew a totally arbitrary line in the sand, which virtually no one in the audience would accept as logically sound. Yet how certain can we ourselves be that the lines which are drawn to construct our own systems of knowledge are any more secure? Indeed, for as long as human minds have existed, they have *always* used equally arbitrary criteria to build up systems of knowledge which seemed self-evidently true in one era but laughably irrational in another.

In response to Mr. Smith's question, "And what were you doing at the door?", the Fire Chief responded by admitting, "Nothing" (26). This is one of the few times in the play when the character actually does get it right, for *The Bald Soprano* is indeed a play about characters who are doing nothing, yet this is precisely because the characters are themselves "nothing", as Jean Paul Sartre might put it (Sartre 60). It is no coincidence that the character only answers this question correctly by providing an anti-answer: instead of positively stating what something is, one can only negatively say what something is *not*. This is the closest one can ever get to the truth in an absurdist universe.

Even when the Fire Chief did try to provide a straightforward, dictionary-style definition of a term, this only served to make a mockery of the traditional idea that one could clearly define one noun by providing a long chain of other nouns:

> [There was a person] whose third wife was the daughter of the best midwife in the region and who, early left a widow, had married a glazier who was full of life and who had had, by the daughter of a station master, a child who had burned his bridges and had married an oyster woman, whose father had a brother, mayor of a small town, who had taken as his wife a blonde schoolteacher whose cousin, a fly fisherman who had married another blonde schoolteacher named Marie too. . . (33-4)

In the play itself, this chain goes on much longer, diverging in many superficially new directions, without ever arriving at its destination.

A character named Mary then recites a poem called "The Fire", which uses recursion to recount that "fire caught fire", after which "Everything caught fire"; in fact, even the verb phrase "caught fire" caught fire (37). This bizarre poem raises the following question: if fire caught fire and even "caught fire" recursively "caught fire", does that prove that "everything caught fire" provides a totalizing account of the Truth about all of reality, since nothing had escaped the fire? Or does the very notion of absolute truth burn away in the fire of its own language games and logical absurdity once again?

Near the end of the play, the characters' discussion devolves into an intense, rapid-fire succession of one strange line after another. These nonsensical, trivial, or false snippets are mostly just shouted out loud, one after another, with no logical connection among them (39). At one point, Mr. Smith shouts out all the vowels: "A, e, i, o, u" (41). Mrs. Martin follows this up by shouting out the consonants: "B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z" (41). Just as Humpty Dumpty couldn't

be put back together again, despite having each of his pieces present, the play fails to reconstruct linguistic meaning, despite having all the elements of language present. Suddenly, the lights go out and the beginning of the play restarts again, but with Mr. and Mrs. Martin filling the role which Mr. and Mrs. Smith held before (42). For the first 100 performances of the play, it was actually Mr. and Mrs. Smith who re-started the play in a giant circle, but it was eventually realized that Mr. and Mr. Martin should replace them, since this slight difference reveals the play to lack self-identity, despite restarting all over again in an infinite loop. This proved the deeper philosophical truth that *nothing* has self-identity or coherence.

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