

Andrei Plesu / OPEN LETTER TO EUGÈNE IONESCO

“...pratiquement, il est, certes, plus naturel de chercher une issue, même en espérant un miracle, que de ne pas bouger en désespérant.”

P. Florensky, *La colonne et le fondement de la vérité*.

I have recently had the pleasure, Mr. Ionesco, to watch the interview that you gave to Gabriel Liiceanu last year. I didn't know that it had been scheduled, so the fact that I watched it seems a little miracle to me. I roused with a start from a heavy afternoon nap and, in a quasi-somnambulistic state, I happened to switch on the TV set. The interview had just started and I watched in an atemporal state of mind, perplexed to witness a real drama, in a moment when I was suffocated by a wreckless extravagance of conjectural drama. From “death to the intellectuals” to “death to the president,” almost everything one can imagine was shouted in Romania. But about *death*, about death pure and simple, no one's had time to think of any more. Just the same, the church ritual has become with us an overabundant presence, but this has not yet determined a real revival of faith. And you spoke about death, about faith. The effect — as far as I am concerned — has been terrible and it has translated into the need to write to you and thank you; for an hour you pulled me away from the penumbra of the administration and of immediate history in order to awaken in me the sleeping reflex of what I had been before circumstances plunged me into the government merry-go-round...

But you did more than that: you challenged my inner wish *to participate*, to enter into conversation, to rethink a problem which, intermittently, maybe capriciously, had, however, been the central problem of my life until the other day. More precisely, it is the effort to find, in the relentless fluency of the intellect, the fissure, the discontinuity, the void that may allow one to catch a glimpse of God's

unintelligible gesture. Of course, I do not have solutions and I am not so foolish as to imagine that I can tell you something definitive, or at least enlightening, at such a subtle level as this. But I feel, even from my beginner's level, an active involvement with your questions, and I feel urged to expand them, to add to them my own *confession*. In the matter of faith (because it is about the matter of faith that we must speak, and not, vaguely, about its "spirit") the confession of each and everyone may have an unforeseeable impact on the destiny of all those engaged on the same course.

Your central theme is the classical theme of all apostasies: how to reconcile the existence of God (in particular the faith in Him) with the existence of evil in the world (in particular with suffering, aging, and death). Naturally, it seems unacceptable to you that, in a world governed by the spirit of good, there should be room for so much moral and physical decrepitude; your own death, the death of those close to you, the general precariousness of a world, where, after all, nothing *exists* in a full sense. Compared to this "order" of the good Lord, Armand Salacrou's "order" seems more just to you: to be born old, dying, eaten by cancer, and then to live *à rebours*, to gradually regain your maturity and to end up in a quasi unconscious way, as a suckling on the brink of a uterine reabsorption. You must admit that this "project" of Salacrou's is not lacking in a certain monstrosity. By a very strange twist of criteria, it appears easier to accept, sentimentally and metaphysically, the death of an innocent child rather than that of a decrepit old man. All this would only make sense in a symbolic variant. But this is recommended in the very text of the *Gospels*: aren't we actually recommended to be "like babes"? To save ourselves by a means that, at first glance, seems an involution? The drama of death would be suspended if we were to appear before it with the innocence of childhood and with its belief in angels, dragons, and fairies. Not the direction of our life is wrong, but rather the fact that the biological direction that we are following is not doubled by an opposite, balanced direction of the inner evolution.

As far as the *scandal of the existence of evil* is concerned, who will contest it? Only that this is half of the world's scandal. The other half

is the scandal of good. Gabriel, at a certain point, suggested that in one of his questions. He said something like: if the world is so gloomy, if creation actually belongs to a *mauvais démiurge*, why are there still on this earth impersonations of good? I emphasize: we do not have a plausible explanation for evil (with the exception of that concerning the problem of freedom and original sin). But do we have a plausible explanation of good? Why is it that we can feel joy, purity, hope? Why is it that we can be creators? What about beauty, generosity, sacrifice? How could humanity be, so many times, so noble? Therefore, the problem is not only how the existence of God can be reconciled with the existence of evil, but also how can the splendour of the world be reconciled with the absence of God? And allow me a rather brutal *racourci*: how can one believe in the kindness and mission of one's wife and daughter, in the good fortune to have them around and not believe in God's kindness and mission? And then, if there are so many things that sadden us, because of their degradation, because of their lapse into evil, how shall we interpret these great shifts to good, repentance, the conversions?

It is clear that we are not faced with *evidence*, but with *choice*: we must choose between deploring the world's evil and crediting its good. And this choice cannot be an act of *discernment*, but one of faith. Faith as a credit granted to the good existing in the created world — here is a possible start.

But do we really want *to believe*? Don't we actually want *to know*, pure and simple, that is, to be in the possession of a *certainty*? So it seems, as long as we wish to solve our frustrations by asking *questions*, therefore expecting (from our intellect, from the intellect of the parish priest or of the Pope) illuminating *answers*. Yet faith does not comply with "question-answer mechanics" — such as positive knowledge — it is the solution of a quest. The difference is that the question puts the one asking in the position of the one waiting. It is the current way to miss faith. The quest, on the contrary, is an offensive act, a way of *undertaking* something. I have always been deeply disturbed by my, as well as other people's, inertia when it comes to the problem of faith; it is the inertia of those who say they

want to believe, but they *cannot*. Usually we stop here: *we want* to believe; we do not try to experiment with *anything* pertaining to the presuppositions of faith: we do not read the sacred texts, we do not read the texts of the patristic tradition, we do not pray, we do not go to church. We only *want* to believe. Because, if we do not believe, how can we do things that, for us, have no meaning? It is yet another proof that, in fact, we want *to know*. We conceptualize religious life as the putting into practice of a certainty when, actually, it is only a *canonized quest*. Quest, not possession. There is an instance when Florensky mentions a passage in Psalm XXXIII: "...they that seek the Lord (*inquirentes Dominum*) shall not want any good thing." Therefore, those that seek Him. Therefore no promise made to those who have found Him. Consequently, the reward is not meant for the answer that obstructs, but for the *approach* that hopes, that leaves the sky open. I was speaking about doing something in order to achieve faith. Something of a radical order, such as monachism (which you yourself mentioned as a missed chance) or of a more modest order, such as preparing the ground. But we want to be *straight away* Francis of Assisi or Seraphim of Sarov, without doing anything they had done before they were *smitten* with grace! We are waiting to be smitten and as this doesn't come to pass, we busy ourselves with laying the blame on God or with nursing our own private fears. At best we ask the "competent authorities": the priest, the Pope. And they, of course, answer disappointingly with that ready-made, "it's a mystery," beyond which the only thing left is resignation. Even the famous Zosima, in *The Karamazovs*, indulges, if you remember, in such silent truths. To a desperate woman, who had lost her three year old child while her husband Nikitiushka got addicted to drinking, the only thing he can say is that her child is sitting among angels at the foot of God's throne: so there is no reason for sorrow. And the woman answers with bitter humour, "That's just how Nikitiushka tried to comfort me, as though the two of you had agreed beforehand." At the answer level, even the great confessions unfortunately remain quite often at Nikitiushka's level. That's why you must not ask them to answer you, but only to accompany you in your quest.

I do not wish now to approach the problem of the *meaning* of suffering. As one raised and educated under the influence of a few great jailbirds (some of them well-known to you), I could see that almost all of them ended up by assimilating their terrible trauma as one full of meaning and that, consequently, we can invoke the meaning's lack of immediacy, its late, too laborious, too dearly paid emergence, but not its absence. In Islam "the angel" is nothing else but the meaning of a given reality. In this case, everything is full of angels; unfortunately, they are covered by eyes that can see, and not we...

But let us assume that what you wish with such moving intensity might happen: let us assume that you *have found* faith! After all, you have found so many things in your life. And generally you have been disappointed by all the things you have found: fame, the France of great values (Sartre — "the biggest fool". Right!) etcetera. Wouldn't there have been a risk for the *found* faith to be yet another disappointment, the last and heaviest? Not found, sought after, always perceived as vanishing — this is the image of true faith and its prestige. This image you have already touched, like Job, at the end of his wrestling. It seems that God justifies our stupefactions rather than our sufferings. The pride of the unenlightened Job is rewarded as the reasonableness (full of answers) of the theologians is not. That is why I look at you with envy and love, as you are one of the few great men of our century who do not know, cannot and do not want to find their peace.

I thank you once again and I apologize for the possible presumption of my theological remarks. They are, now, my only possible way of being close to you.

Yours,
Andrei Plesu

EUGÈNE IONESCO is one of this century's major playwrights. He was born in Romania in 1912 and was raised in France until the age of thirteen when his family returned to Bucharest. There, he continued his education and began publishing his first essays and poetry. He taught for one year (1937) at the Lycée in Bucharest but returned to France in 1938 and has since become a French citizen. *No*, his first major publication, is a form of meditation which focuses on the absurdity of modern existence and the pointlessness of language as a form of communication. Among his best known plays are *The Bald Soprano* (1949), *The Lesson* (1950), *The Chairs* (1951), and *Rhinoceros* (1958). In addition to his plays, Ionesco is known for the short story collection *The Colonel's Photo* and for the publication of his journals.

GABRIEL LIICEANU was born in 1942 and holds degrees in philosophy and classical languages from the University of Bucharest. His work focuses on problems related to the philosophy of culture and the history of philosophy. He has contributed to the publishing of Plato's complete works through extensive translations into Romanian, as well as through his commentaries and critical texts. His own books include *The Tragic: a Phenomenology of Limit and Surpassing* (1975), *The Paltinis Diary* (1981), and *Studies of Polytrophy of Culture* (1985). He is Editor-in-Chief of the Humanitas Publishing House and a member of the "Group for Social Dialogue."

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