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**Remembering How to Fly:
An Exploration of Eugene Ionesco's *A Stroll in the Air*
as Understood through the TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION-SIDHI
Program and Yogic Flying**

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Abstract

*This paper uses the Transcendental Meditation-Sidhi program as a model for exploring a work of modern literature, Eugene Ionesco's *A Stroll in the Air*, a play whose depiction of human flight has puzzled generations of literary critics. The spontaneous ascent of its central character, Monsieur Bérenger, along with his insistence that flight is a natural, even essential, part of human life, have led scholars to interpret the play as either fantasy or parable. This paper aims to add a new dimension to the study of *A Stroll in the Air* by exploring Bérenger's flight as a literal phenomenon. Maharishi Vedic Science states that the ability to fly is inherent in human potential, and scientific research on the TM-Sidhi program indicates that Yogic Flying is a characteristic of a perfectly functioning nervous system. This paper will examine Ionesco's play by presenting an overview of the Theater of the Absurd, summarizing the TM-Sidhi program and Yogic Flying, and finally using this knowledge as a framework for understanding Ionesco's theatrical representations of his own experiences of inner bliss and physical lightness.*

Introduction

The twentieth century has witnessed enormous changes in the ways humans perceive existence. It has seen the birth of quantum physics with its challenge to the Newtonian world view, the rise and fall of new forms of government around the world, and the innovative, even shocking, experiments of artists like Picasso, Dali, and Magritte. It is not surprising, then, that the middle of this century also saw the rise of an entirely new form of theater. This Theater of the Absurd emerged as a direct assault on not only the traditional foundations of drama but of existence itself, creating a world in which anything could and did happen. Characters lived in waste bins, became rhinoceroses, and grew multiple noses. Serious ideas of the age dissolved into nonsequiturs while sheer nonsense took on the status of great importance. Audiences watched in states of vacillating alarm and amazement, never knowing what bizarre event would occur next.

Because absurdist plays present a world free from ordinary structure and logic, Theater of the Absurd is commonly seen as pessimistic, even bleak. There is, however, another facet of it deserving far more attention. In many cases, the surprising, boundary-

breaking world of absurdist theater is not criticism of life but a celebration, a liberation of both character and audience from the forces that restrict human behavior. This is often true in the work of Eugene Ionesco, the playwright who, along with Samuel Beckett, pioneered the absurdist theater movement.

In his essay “Why Do I Write?” Ionesco states that the basis of his unusual style is not futility but delight: “I wanted to communicate my dazzlement by the very fact of existence” (p. 18). In other personal writings, Ionesco indicates that he enjoyed moments of transfigured awareness, episodes characterized by such experiences as physical lightness, elevated perception, and a joyous “certainty of being.” Correspondingly, many of Ionesco’s plays feature characters who exhibit these same symptoms of heightened awareness. Perhaps the most striking of these occurs in *A Stroll in the Air* in which Monsieur Bérenger, a gentleman enjoying a Sunday stroll, becomes so flooded with elation that he rises from the ground. Ionesco portrays his character’s flight as a natural, even “healthy,” phenomenon and suggests that the ability to fly is inherent in every human being (p. 74).

Its events, compared to those of other Ionesco plays, are particularly noteworthy because of the uniquely personal nature of *A Stroll in the Air*. While the characters in other Ionesco plays tend to be either caricatures or everymen, the hero of *A Stroll in the Air* is a very human middle-aged playwright who enjoys, as Ionesco did, a close relationship with his wife and his young daughter. An early sequence, in which a journalist interviews Bérenger on his reluctance to write more plays, is so realistic as to have been called “uninspired and undramatic” (Hayman, p. 116). Yet Bérenger’s ascent into the air, arguably the most inspired and dramatic moment in Ionesco’s theater, reveals more of Ionesco’s inner life than do his commentaries on his writing. In Bérenger’s flight, we see a vivid reflection of the lightness and joy that Ionesco called his “most authentic consciousness” (1964, p. 170).

The link between Bérenger’s levitation and Ionesco’s authentic life epiphanies tends to be overlooked by scholars who view his character’s flight as either metaphor or fantasy. Allan Lewis, for example, sees Bérenger as a post-World War II symbol, a man “flying into outer space to defy death and escape the anxiety of this world” (p. 73). Leonard Pronko offers the milder suggestion that “Bérenger’s flight represents his inspiration, his writing” (p. 38). Perhaps the most widely accepted view is that of Bérenger as a metaphor for the creative mind or, as Patricia Rigg states, “an embodiment of the Romantic imaginative impulse” (p. 543).

While each of these interpretations is supportable, not one embraces the literal implications of Bérenger’s flight. In *A Stroll in the Air*, Bérenger emphasizes that his buoyancy is not, as his wife suggests, abstract or fanciful: “On the contrary, it’s all very concrete. This happiness is something physical. I can feel it here” (p. 60). Like Bérenger’s statement, Ionesco’s autobiographical writings are filled with experiences of physical lightness that surpass mere metaphor. Ionesco hardly knew how to describe these buoyant episodes; it is of little surprise, therefore, that scholars have often misunderstood or overlooked their influence on his work. Maharishi Vedic ScienceSM, fortunately, can help us verify Ionesco’s vision of human flight in its most literal sense through its elucidation of the characteristics of higher states of consciousness.

In his autobiography *Present Past Past Present*, Ionesco notes that some individuals in every time have experienced moments of pure existence when awareness is liberated

from all boundaries and the mind “finds its center again” (p. 154). Drawing upon his own experiences, Ionesco says,

Once, long ago, I was sometimes overcome by a sort of grace, a euphoria. It was as if, first of all, every motion, every reality was emptied of its content. After this, it was as if I found myself suddenly at the center of pure ineffable existence. I became one with the essential reality when along with an immense serene joy, I was overcome by what I might call the stupefaction of being, the certainty of being. (pp. 150–151)

The similarity between Ionesco’s immersion in pure ineffable existence and the transcendental experiences recorded in various world traditions has captured the attention of Drama’s most perceptive scholars. Rosette Lamont, for example, likens Ionesco to certain mystical rabbis who, according to Kabbalistic scholar Gershom Scholem, saw the structures of nature dissolve, revealing a state of “ultimate formlessness” (p. 17). Richard Coe compares the playwright’s “certainty of being” to the Buddhists’ “nirvana.” Unlike those who see Ionesco as a nihilist, Coe believes that Ionesco’s experience of inner being is the source of his finest work: “In the final analysis, it is the transmitting of this experience . . . which has given Ionesco the status of one of the most influential dramatists of the present century” (p. 2). While Coe recognizes the value of the experience that Ionesco “transmitted,” he is unable to articulate that experience and, therefore, prevented from a more thorough exploration of its role in Ionesco’s work. It is in order to avoid such limitations that this paper utilizes the lucid and systematic framework provided by Maharishi Vedic Science. By looking at this longest and most detailed tradition of transcendence, we will gain a clearer understanding of Ionesco’s inspiration and how it gave rise to *A Stroll in the Air*.

The TM-Sidhi® Program

In his Vedic ScienceSM, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi elucidates the earliest accounts of Transcendental Consciousness, those found in the Vedic Literature of India. These ancient texts describe pure Being or Pure Consciousness as an unbounded field that gives rise to and maintains all existence, as a field revealed through the experiences of innumerable *rishis* throughout the ages. More importantly, the Vedic Tradition has preserved the technologies used by these ancient seers to access Transcendental Consciousness. This science of transcending, as revived by Maharishi, has immense practical value for the full unfoldment of human potential. In his *Science of Being and Art of Living*, Maharishi corrects a long held inaccuracy that the experience of Being is rare and mystical, available only to privileged individuals such as poets and saints. He explains that Being, the source of all creation, can be located by any individual at the subtlest level of awareness. Without regular experience of this level of pure existence, the human nervous system loses the ability to continuously renew and refine itself:

Those whose hearts and minds are not cultured, whose vision is held by what is gross, see only the surface value of life. They only find qualities of matter and energy. They do not find the innocent, ever-present, omnipresent Being. (pp. 29–30)

In order to rectify this loss of experience, Maharishi began teaching a simple, effortless mental technology for enlivening pure consciousness and dissolving stress. Through the regular practice of his Transcendental Meditation® technique, Pure Consciousness is not only experienced twice daily but, over time, is integrated into every area of life. Thus, Maharishi explains, “The regular practice of Transcendental Meditation, together with natural, unstrained activity in life, is a short cut to the creation of a state of consciousness where absolute Being and the relative field of life are lived simultaneously and the one is not a barrier to the other” (p. 62).

In this way, the practice of the Transcendental Meditation program provides a basis for the development of what Maharishi Vedic Science calls “higher states of consciousness.” By alternating activity with the experience of Transcendental Consciousness, a fourth state distinct from waking, dreaming, and sleeping, the Transcendental Meditation practitioner grows into Cosmic Consciousness, a fifth state in which Pure Consciousness always exists along with each of the three phenomenal states of consciousness. On this foundation of Cosmic Consciousness, an individual develops God consciousness, a sixth state in which pure consciousness not only characterizes inner experience but glorifies all values of sensory perception. The two distinct fields of life—subjective and objective—finally and irrevocably become unified in the seventh state of consciousness, Unity Consciousness, a state in which every point in creation is experienced as the expression of one’s own unbounded Self. In this way, the practice of the Transcendental Meditation technique enables individuals to unfold their full potential and experience the total range of life (see Alexander & Boyer).

In 1977, Maharishi introduced the TM-Sidhi program. This advancement on the Transcendental Meditation technique allowed practitioners to accelerate the development of consciousness by utilizing the most advanced technologies of human evolution based on the knowledge recorded in Maharishi Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. The Sanskrit word *Sidhi* literally translates as “perfection,” and the TM-Sidhi program is designed to establish the perfect integration of mind and body that characterizes the highest state of consciousness. When both are established in pure consciousness, the result is a state of perfect coordination of mind and body from which any desire can be instantly fulfilled.

While the Transcendental Meditation technique allows every individual to regularly experience the field of Pure Consciousness, the TM-Sidhi program adds another dimension: the potential to cultivate a range of defined abilities predicted by Maharishi Patanjali. Among these abilities are perfected human virtues, refined sensory perception, knowledge of the cosmos, and Yogic Flying, the ability to move unassisted through the air (Gelderloos, p. 376).

Yogic Flying

Since earliest recorded history, and consistently throughout the ages, cultures around the world have reported instances of human flight. Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and many African tribes view human flight as an accepted phenomenon. The Catholic Church in its long history has recorded the names of more than two hundred saints whose bodies lifted into the air. While some reports are difficult to verify, others contain enough substantiating evidence to have gained the acceptance of historians. The claims in support of St. Joseph’s levitations are thought to be the most con-

vincing. On more than one hundred occasions his flights were witnessed by some of the most reputable figures in Europe: a princess, an admiral, two physicians, three cardinals, and the Pope himself (Thurston).

In spite of these and other records, human flight and its mechanics are no longer accepted by mainstream western society. Unassisted flight is believed to be impossible, relegated to the realms of fantasy and science fiction. When Maharishi revived the knowledge of Yogic Flying in the late 1970s, he confronted this prevailing disbelief by correcting misconceptions about flying and other so-called supernatural abilities:

The performance of the Sidhis, which in the days of ignorance were termed supernatural powers, is not something superhuman. Everything is within the normal range of man's ability—to handle the whole of cosmic life is within the range of everyone's own nature, because it is the same nature. The gardener who handles the sap handles not only the pink of the flower, but the green of the leaf, and the stem and all parts of the flower. So it is by handling our own nature that we handle the nature of anything, of everything. By handling our own nature, we handle almighty nature. (1977, p. 385)

Because the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi programs cultivate perfect mind-body coordination, no physical capability lies outside the practitioner's ability. As an individual's nervous system is freed from stress, the mind gains increasing mastery of its own mechanics and all obstacles to mind-body coordination dissolve accordingly. This growth of coordination is reflected through the three distinct stages of Yogic Flying described in the Yogatattva Upanishad. In the first, the practitioner lifts from the ground only for a moment in short hops: "Just as the frog moves, continually hopping, so does the Yogi, sitting in lotus, move along the ground." With further perfection of mind-body coordination, the practitioner remains in the air, or "floats," for a longer time. Finally, when perfect connection between mind and body is fully established, a person "leaving the ground, departs," actually flying through the air (p. 195).

To the classical physicist, this phenomenon of Yogic Flying contradicts the laws of gravity as postulated by Isaac Newton. The Newtonian paradigm, however, does not include the knowledge of quantum mechanics discovered at the beginning of this century. John Hagelin, a renowned quantum field theorist and expert in Maharish Vedic Science, proposes that the TM-Sidhi program works because all phenomena in the universe have their origin in one unified field. This field, which gives rise to all forms of energy and matter, can be located at the source of human awareness (Hagelin, 1987). Thus, during the practice of the TM-Sidhi program, an individual's conscious mind is able to act from this unified field, this subtlest, most influential level of creation:

Classical theories of gravitation, theories such as Newtonian gravity and Einstein's general relativity, cannot explain "yogic flying." However, quantum gravity can. . . . At this level, space-time geometry is dynamically generated. It is possible, through the generation of a sustained coherent influence at the level of the unified field, to modify the local curvature of space-time geometry described in general relativity in such a way that the body flies up, or to the left, or forward, or in any possible direction. On the basis of currently conceivable ideas in physics, it is only through a technology of the unified field that "yogic flying" is possible. (Hagelin, p.18)

Physiological Effects of the TM-Sidhi Program and Yogic Flying

Three decades of research on the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi programs have allowed scientists to chart practitioners' development of mind-body coordination towards higher states of consciousness. Since 1970, when Dr. Robert Keith Wallace published the first study on the Transcendental Meditation technique, physiologists have known that Transcendental Consciousness has distinct physiological correlates (Wallace, 1972). During the practice of the Transcendental Meditation technique, the entire metabolism is found to quiet down, resulting in, among other factors, the slowing or total suspension of breath that occurs periodically throughout the practice (Allison, 1970). This change in breathing demonstrates that the Transcendental Meditation practitioner uses oxygen supply more efficiently. Researcher John Farrow points out the significance of this outcome: "Remarkably, at the end of each breath stoppage, there was no compensatory overbreathing. The breath would simply stop at the end of an expiration, and then after a period resume again at the same level. This was a strong indication that the breath stoppage . . . did not involve any oxygen deprivation for the physiology" (p. 170).

Later studies revealed a change in total brain functioning as reflected through electro-encephalograph (EEG) technology. During the Transcendental Meditation technique, the practitioner's brain wave patterns were found to be distinct from and significantly more coherent than the patterns found in waking, sleeping, or dreaming (Banquet). With the regular practice of the Transcendental Meditation technique over time, these coherent patterns become increasingly evident during all levels of activity, even during sleep and dreaming (Travis, 1990). For the TM-Sidhi practitioner, this increase in coherence takes place even more rapidly. EEG technology also reflects the unique brain wave synchrony that occur during Yogic Flying. Throughout the Yogic Flying session, brain wave coherence strikingly increases each time the body lifts from the ground (Orme-Johnson & Gelderloos, 1988). What these EEG and other findings demonstrate is that the Transcendental Meditation technique and the more advanced TM-Sidhi program lead to a distinct improvement in mind-body coordination. Coherent brain waves, like the coherent light waves of a laser beam, correspond to greater degrees of energy and efficiency. When all the various impulses of the brain and nervous system function together in a unified, orderly pattern, an individual's intentions are effortlessly fulfilled.

Research also suggests that, as brain wave coherence grows, an individual's subjective experiences correspondingly improve. As pure consciousness is integrated into activity through Yogic Flying, many practitioners describe a phenomenon Maharishi calls "bubbling bliss," a sense of physical lightness that enlivens the entire physiology. They notice a growth of stable inner joyfulness, a happiness unshakable in the changes of day-to-day life. This fulfillment, unlike a transitory mood of happiness, is not connected to objects or events. Rather, it is the natural product of a nervous system in which obstacles are dissolving and coherence is increasing. As the system is refined even further, the sensory organs become unclouded by stress and capable of detecting subtler qualities of the environment. Subjective experiences as these, supported by such objective findings of science as metabolic efficiency and brain wave coherence, testify

that Yogic Flying cultivates a perfectly functioning nervous system and higher states of consciousness. Establishing Yogic Flying as a viable human possibility serves as an aid to reading Ionesco in a way not previously existent. Knowing that human flight can and does exist allows us to avoid the necessity of metaphor and accept Ionesco's statements and Monsieur Bérenger's experiences at their face value.

A Real Life "Stroll in the Air"

From the opening moments of *A Stroll in the Air*, anyone familiar with Ionesco's personal history will recognize the play's autobiographical origins. The mise en scène of the play, with its simulated bright sunlight, gleaming white houses, and "very pure" sky recalls a moment from *Present Past Past Present*. In this memoir, Ionesco relates an incident that transformed his view of existence. He recalls walking through a small provincial village, "beneath a deep, dense sky":

It was a little street, bordered with little white houses whose immaculate walls shone so brightly that they seemed to want to disappear, to melt together in the intensity of a burning, pervasive, total light that was trying to escape from the forms that contained it. . . . Suddenly I felt as if I had received a blow right in the heart, in the center of my being. . . . "Nothing is true," I said, "outside of this" — a this that I was, of course, unable to define, since the this itself was what escaped definition, because it itself was the beyond, that which went beyond definitions. Perhaps I could translate this feeling and this by "a certainty of being." (pp. 154–155)

With his awareness encompassed by this essential, invincible reality, Ionesco felt "lifted up" by "a joy, something more than a joy." The simple act of raising his hand to his forehead filled him with wonder at his own control over his body: "What is astonishing is being able to want to or not to want to. I can give myself orders, and I can obey myself." This sense of awe increased moments later when he felt himself on the verge of lifting from the ground:

[The sky] enveloped me, enveloped all the objects, the walls, and was almost palpable, almost velvet, blue; the deeper and denser the blue of the sky became, the more it could be perceived through the sense of touch. . . . My euphoria became enormous, inhuman. I breathed the air and it was as if I were swallowing pieces of blue sky that replaced my lungs, my heart, my liver, my bones with this celestial substance, somewhere between water and air, and this made me so light, lighter and lighter, that I could no longer feel the effort of walking. It was as if I were not walking now, but leaping, dancing. I could have flown, this depended on just a few things; with a simple concentration of will, of energy, I could have risen from the earth as in a dream or as once upon a time. (p. 156)

This brief passage conveys several characteristics resembling those higher states of consciousness elucidated in Maharishi Vedic Science. One such characteristic is a heightened awareness exemplified in the foregrounding of such basic elements as space and light. Another experience, Ionesco's description of houses dissolving into an all-pervasive radiance, is matched by a practitioner of the TM-Sidhi program who sees the concreteness of trees and other objects similarly dissipating:

Generally, whenever I put my attention on an object, I become aware of the subtler qualities of the objects around me. For instance, when looking at a tree, I first become aware of the object as it is—a concrete form bound in space and time. But then I perceive finer aspects of the object coexisting along with its concrete expression. On this subtler level, objects are perceived as almost transparent structures of light (unlike harsher, normal daylight) through which the very essence of life appears to flow. (Alexander & Boyer, p. 358)

Like this joyous person, Ionesco's awareness changes from a duller, surface perception of objects to one dominated by lightness and luminosity. His shift in vision, along with his augmented sense of touch and unbounded joy, suggests a state of refined awareness not uncommon to practitioners of the Transcendental Meditation technique. His perceived change in breathing also corresponds with scientific research demonstrating a refinement of breath during the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi programs. As with practitioners of these techniques, Ionesco's whole metabolism seems to function more efficiently, transforming ordinary air into an ultra-nourishing "celestial substance."

A particularly striking feature of this passage is Ionesco's experience of mind-body coordination, his awareness that, as he put it, "I can give myself orders, and I can obey myself." Significantly this realization culminates in a feeling that he could with the right quality of will lift his body into the air. His intuition here parallels the mechanics of Yogic Flying. Although Ionesco did not possess the TM-Sidhi techniques that would allow him to rise from the ground, he intuited that this ability was possible. Moreover, he seemed to know that the technique of human flight had been available "once upon a time."

This physical lightness and inner joyfulness was not a singular occurrence in Ionesco's life. Throughout his adolescence, he recalls being "often overwhelmed by an intense, luminous joy: it was an inexplicable, irrational happiness that mounted from the earth, from my feet, and went up to my knees, to my belly, to my heart, to lay hold of all of me." As this joy pervaded his entire body, Ionesco writes, "I felt I was in harmony with everything. . . . I had the impression that I was rising" (1971, p. 160).

While occurrences of Being were not uncommon in his early life, the above experience in this provincial village affected Ionesco profoundly. Starting around the age of fifty, he began to routinely refer to it in interviews, in memoirs, and in his creative work. In his 1960 play *The Killer*, the protagonist, also named Bérenger, actually retells the whole of Ionesco's memory as his own: his stroll through the country village, his sensation of inhaling sky with each breath. Bérenger concludes by reflecting, "I'm sure I could have flown away, I'd lost so much weight, I was lighter than the blue sky I was breathing" (p. 26). Two years later, *A Stroll in the Air* brought this experience one step further, for Bérenger does what his creator could not: he "remembers" how to fly.

A Stroll in the Air and Yogic Flying

While Ionesco's theater is characterized by the unexpected, Bérenger's ascent is one of the most surprising moments in all of Ionesco's work. Throughout the first half of the play, Bérenger enjoys a Sunday saunter with his family and engages in typical absurdist

activities: a neighbor girl entertains them by singing mechanical trills, a little boy pulls her braids to reveal a bald head underneath, and a visitor from the “anti-world” surfaces momentarily, walks topsy-turvy and smokes an upside-down pipe. In the midst of these oddities, Bérenger suddenly becomes overwhelmed with an inexplicable happiness. His elation is of such magnitude that he can hardly find words to express himself. He exclaims that his head is “reeling with conviction,” but this conviction is not localized to any thought or idea. As he explains to his dubious wife, “Once a conviction’s been limited by definition, it isn’t one anymore” (p. 61).

Although this statement at first appears nonsensical, the playwright’s real-life stroll in the air provides a clue to its meaning. The undefinable “this” Ionesco refers to in *Present Past Past Present* anticipates Bérenger’s “conviction” in *A Stroll in the Air*. Each of these experiences dissolves all boundaries and transcends all definitions. Ionesco could only describe his “this” as “the beyond, that which went beyond definitions.”

While Ionesco uses avant-garde language to describe Bérenger’s and his own experiences, his sentiments are not limited to absurdism. Rather, his inability to define the object of his overwhelming conviction recalls similar difficulties in describing the ineffable by writers across time. The Victorian Tennyson, in his own personal writings, attempts to describe the ultimate state where “individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest of the clear, the surest of the sure . . . utterly beyond words” (p. 268). In an earlier example, the medieval poet Dante, near the end of the “Paradiso,” laments that he cannot convey his experience of the ultimate Truth within the confines of words:

For my sight, growing pure, penetrated
 even deeper into the rays
 of the Light which is true in Itself.
 From then on, my vision was greater
 than our speech which fails at such a sight. (p. 478)

Walt Whitman, the great 19th-century American Transcendentalist, in “Song of Myself” struggles to define this same essential reality: “I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid, / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, syllable” (p. 84). And the Modernist poet and playwright T. S. Eliot, vacillating between assurance and frustration, describes this essential reality as a “still point . . . neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards,” adding, “I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where” (pp. 15–16). All of these poetic statements seem to exemplify Maharishi’s explanation that pure Being is “beyond the obvious phase of the forms and phenomena of matter and energy, mind and individuality” (1966, pp. 29–30).

Although Ionesco’s “certainty of being” and Bérenger’s “conviction” escape definition, they possess distinct physiological correlates. The most striking of these is Bérenger’s change in breathing: “The air that fills my lungs is more rarefied than air. It gives off vapors that are going to my head” (p. 60). The word “rarefied” indicates the degree of Bérenger’s physical refinement. Similarly, Maharishi Vedic Science states that refined breathing, as verified by research on Transcendental Meditation and the TM-Sidhi programs, is an indicator of development of higher states of consciousness. Physiological refinement in *A Stroll in the Air*, moreover, points to perceptual refine-

ment: with the onset of Bérenger's happiness, flowers become so full of life that one "can almost hear them breathe" (p. 58), and a silver bridge becomes a dazzling display of "those famous particles of light that scientists call 'photons'" (p. 64).

The most dramatic indication of Bérenger's improved physiological functioning, of course, is his ability to fly. While Ionesco himself did not possess the mind-body coordination to lift from the ground, the nervous system of his character magically snaps into a state of perfect functioning in which flying is not only possible but irresistible. The first stage of Bérenger's flight, like that of Yogic Flying, is a series of short hops. As Bérenger hops, the people around him unconsciously begin to do the same until everyone on stage is bouncing up and down. Berenger's influence on those around him corresponds to an actual phenomenon found during Yogic flying, a state of synchrony called the Maharishi Effect. In over forty research studies, the group practice of the TM-Sidhi program has been correlated with the rise of a broad coherence that produces positive effects throughout an environment. Violence, economic instability, accident fatalities, even natural disasters decrease during the Maharishi Effect in direct proportion to the number practicing the TM-Sidhi program:

When the individual mind identifies itself with that transcendental basis of all the laws of nature, this is nourishing the whole creation from its very basis. That unmanifest field is a field of all possibilities at the basis of nature's functioning, and if we enliven that field we enrich all the expressions of natural law everywhere in our environment. (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1977, p. 385)

While Bérenger's onlookers are not unmoved by his defiance of gravity, they are incapable of comprehending its purpose. It bothers them that neither Bérenger's happiness nor his ability to fly have any practical value. At best they see it as a circus entertainment, at worst a sheer waste of time: "Sitting's good enough for me," scoffs John Bull (p. 74). Bérenger insists that "man has a crying need to fly," to which a watching journalist replies, "Technology has adequately and brilliantly fulfilled that need already" (p. 75). Bérenger senses that flying does have a practical value, but he is unable to articulate it to the satisfaction of his listeners. Not flying, he says, is "like not getting enough exercise. If we don't fly, it's because we're not healthy enough" (p. 75). He sees the loss of this faculty as the downfall of society: "I expect that's why we all feel so unhappy" (p. 74).

In recent decades, scientific research has verified that Yogic Flying is the most advanced and practical human technology available. The ability to generate waves of coherence through the Maharishi Effect, to alleviate suffering, and to increase harmony and productivity, has been accomplished by no other means than the world's greatest marvel, the human nervous system:

The brain is a magnificent piece of electronic equipment, more complexly wired than the largest computer. . . . There are, by one estimate, more possible connections in the brain than there are atoms in the universe. But until recently, we have forgotten how to take this magnificent piece of equipment and connect it to its source. (Oates, 1990, p. 28)

On multiple occasions, in diverse locations around the world, when groups of Yogic Flyers have practiced in an area, researchers have documented a decrease in social misfortunes and an increase in favorable trends. In Israel and neighboring Lebanon, for instance, time series analysis revealed a correlation between the number of Yogic Flyers in group practice of the TM–Sidhi program and the reduction of war deaths and accident fatalities (Orme-Johnson et al, 1988). In Fairfield, Iowa, an assembly of over 7,000 Yogic Flyers corresponded with an increase in the World Stock Index, a decrease in traffic deaths, and a decrease in infectious diseases nationwide (Orme-Johnson, et al., 1984). In Manila, crime in the Philippines decreased significantly during a three-year stay of 1,500 Yogic Flyers and returned to its previous high when the group dispersed (Dillbeck et al.). These and many other studies demonstrate that, with the right technology, the human physiology can and has become the most powerful instrument the world has ever known.

A “Crying” Need for a Technique

While Bérenger’s flight parallels Yogic Flying in several ways, there is a key difference between his experience and those of TM-Sidhi practitioners: Bérenger, like Ionesco, lacked a systematic procedure to regain his lightness at will. When he is actually in the air, the ability to fly seems so natural that Bérenger wonders, “How could I have forgotten how it’s done? It’s so simple, so childish!” (p. 74). Yet the text suggests that Bérenger has flown before and lost his ability directly afterwards. Because of this, he struggles to systematize his experience. “This time,” he resolves, “I really won’t forget. I’ll be careful, I’ll remember, I’ll jot down all my movements in a notebook, then I can reproduce them whenever I like” (p. 80). When Bérenger finally drifts down to earth, however, it is not due to any forgetfulness of physical movements. Rather, he is paralyzed when his “conviction” is deflated by a fear of annihilation. On one level, Bérenger’s plight reflects Ionesco’s despair at the presence of tyranny in the world. Ultimately, however, both Ionesco’s sadness and Bérenger’s heaviness stem from a loss of internal invincibility. As Ionesco wrote, pure being was a state “over which shadows or nothingness have no hold” (1971, p. 153). The threat of non-being returned to both Ionesco and his character only when this experience was lost.

The loss of Bérenger’s buoyancy reflects a tendency in Ionesco’s own life. In contrast to his episodes of physical lightness, the playwright’s body often felt painfully heavy. At such times, his life appeared to have no meaning and he perceived darkness everywhere as though “seeing night mingled with day” (1968, p. 97). Occasionally, however, his awareness became so clear that even a clothesline hanging with wet diapers filled him with delight. “It suddenly seemed to me that those nappies on the washing line had an unexpected beauty . . . [embodying] a brilliant, virgin world” (Bonney, 1970, p. 30). As Ionesco grew older, these glorious experiences came less and less frequently. He felt his body growing ever more tired, often becoming “a burden too heavy to bear. . . . I would get up, and after a few minutes, weariness, like a leaden cloak, weighed me down” (1968, p. 96).

Such periods of heaviness frustrated Ionesco all the more because he felt certain clarity and happiness were natural to human life. He saw his episodes of “supernormal wakefulness” as set off by an inner mechanism that could “function in the simplest,

most natural way. All one need do is press a button.” He lamented that “it is not always easy to find this button; we fumble about for it on the shadows on one of the walls of an enormous strange house” (1971, p. 157).

In Maharishi’s commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, he similarly uses the analogy of a dark room to represent an unfulfilled state of existence; however, he proposes a “second element” to gain relief from it: “Remove the darkness by introducing light. Take the mind to a field of happiness in order to relieve it of suffering” (p. 90). Unlike Ionesco, who spent his life pining for random moments of illumination, Yogic Flyers possess a technique to routinely experience Pure Consciousness, to dissolve obstacles that inhibit growth, and to develop coherence, peace, and happiness in their own lives and the world.

Conclusion

It is sadly ironic that Ionesco’s plays have become best known as expressions of despair. One of the most famous authorities on Ionesco’s theater, Ronald Hayman, summarizes Ionesco’s achievements, especially his “striking images of the postwar era”: the “lonely couple” of *The Chairs*, the “expanding corpse” of *Amadée*, the “invisible, chuckling killer” of *The Killer* and the “manic conformism that dehumanizes the entire population of a town” in *Rhinoceros* (p. 185). What Hayman and others fail to apprehend, however, is that Ionesco considered his experience of joy and lightness to be his “most authentic consciousness” (1964, p. 170). His intermittent glimpses of this unbounded, all-pervading being led him in “Why Do I Write?” to proclaim, “I feel certain I that I was born for eternity, that death does not exist, that all is miraculous. . . . It is to speak of my wonder that I write” (1978, p. 8). The gloom that alternately weighs upon his plays arises, as he often declared, from his characters’ inability to live their human birthright, to maintain the reality of existence at all times. “It is because they have not mapped out a road to follow,” he wrote, “that my characters wander in the dark, the absurd, in incomprehension and anguish” (1978, p. 7).

Because of this darker side, absurdist theater has often been called the most fragmented form of literature. However, as seen in the work of Ionesco, even this genre of chaos can contain a vision of harmony and elation. Like countless others, Ionesco witnessed the source of his own existence and knew, with absolute certainty, that it was life’s ultimate reality. Maharishi Vedic Science, providing a framework for understanding Ionesco’s experiences, allows him to finally be read in an empathetic way. Furthermore, Maharishi Vedic Science gives us the opportunity to live the freedom Ionesco intuited, to realize the capabilities his plays depict, and to fulfill his timeless vision of human perfection and unbounded joy.

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