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# Resistance as Belatedness: The Mechanism of Assimilation in *Rhinoceros*

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**Abstract:** Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* is commonly regarded as an allegorical critique of fascism and collective assimilation. Yet in the play, those who first undergo "rhinocerization" are characters who pride themselves on rationality and emphasize logic and order, while the indolent and hesitant Bérenger remains the only figure who resists assimilation. Grounded in Ionesco's anti-fascist position, this article reexamines the differentiation of forms of rationality within the play and argues that the mechanism of assimilation operates through the appropriation of formalized rational discourse that has lost its capacity for judgment. Bérenger's resistance is not heroic in nature; rather, it takes the form of a belated stance that remains out of sync with the rhythm of assimilation.

**Keywords:** Eugène Ionesco; Theatre of the Absurd; *Rhinoceros*; Resistance.

## 1. Introduction

*Rhinoceros*, written in 1959 by the French-Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco, is a representative work of the Theatre of the Absurd. The play originates from Ionesco's reflection on the intense fascistization of European society before and after the Second World War, particularly the rapid ideological transformation of intellectuals and ordinary citizens amid political fanaticism. Since its publication, it has frequently been interpreted as an allegorical representation of collective assimilation in modern society. In discussing the play's composition, Ionesco stated: "The intention of the play is to depict the process of the Nazification of a country, and the disorder caused by the pathological reaction to this contagion and the collective mental mutation it produces" [1].

The play consists of three acts and recounts how the inhabitants of a small town gradually transform into rhinoceroses, leaving the protagonist Bérenger as the only human who refuses assimilation and remains in isolation. At the beginning, Bérenger converses with his friend Jean in a café. Bérenger is indolent, drinks excessively, and lacks clear direction, whereas Jean presents himself as a representative of rationality and order, repeatedly criticizing Bérenger's tardiness and slovenliness while emphasizing discipline, civility, and norms. In the midst of their dispute, a rhinoceros suddenly charges through the street, provoking surprise and confusion. Instead of reflecting on the phenomenon at the level of reality, the townspeople immediately engage in debates over details such as whether the rhinoceros is Asian or African, or whether it has one horn or two. The Logician and the Old Man are especially eager to interpret the event through logical deduction and classification, even when their reasoning is absurd.

As the plot develops, more and more residents transform into rhinoceroses. Jean, who initially insists upon a rational posture, gradually shifts his position during his debate with Bérenger and ultimately justifies his transformation. Those who once employed logical language, empirical judgment, or conceptual analysis to discuss the rhinoceros phenomenon likewise fall silent or convert. By contrast, Bérenger remains in a state of confusion and hesitation. He cannot provide a clear logical explanation for the phenomenon, nor can he normalize it as a social condition. Confronted with the transformation of those around him, he displays shock, anxiety, and vacillation, yet never completes the act of "classification" or identification in a meaningful sense. At the end of the play, nearly everyone has become a rhinoceros; Bérenger alone remains on stage, declaring his refusal to transform amid isolation and uncertainty.

Thus, beneath the explicit anti-fascist theme lies a paradox that merits further examination. Those who first—and at times voluntarily—complete their "rhinocerization" are not emotional or blindly conformist figures, but rather those who pride themselves on rationality and emphasize order, logic, and interpretive competence. In contrast, Bérenger, characterized by indolence, slowness, and lack of initiative, remains outside the process of assimilation and ends the play in visible hesitation and uncertainty. From the perspective of conventional narratives of resistance, such a non-heroic figure appears ill-suited to bear the meaning of anti-fascist subjectivity.

This article argues that resistance in *Rhinoceros* does not manifest as an explicit political choice or heroic action. Instead, it appears as a state of belatedness that is out of sync with the rhythm of assimilation. Those who are assimilated in the play are not genuinely rational subjects, but self-proclaimed rational subjects already caught in discursive disorder. Bérenger remains unassimilated precisely because he never completes the formalization of rational judgment. By distinguishing among different states of rationality within the play and drawing on relevant political philosophy, this article analyzes the internal logic of the mechanism of assimilation and its corresponding form of resistance.

## 2. Literature Review

Since its premiere, *Rhinoceros* has been predominantly interpreted as a political allegory of totalitarianism and ideological conformity. Early criticism, particularly within post-war European discourse, framed the play as a symbolic representation of fascism and collective ideological contagion. Martin Esslin's concept of the "Theatre of the Absurd"

positioned Ionesco's work as a systematic destabilization of logic, rationality, and coherent meaning [2].

Later scholarship deepened this political dimension by situating the play within Ionesco's historical experience. Quinney connects the phenomenon of "rhinoceritis" to the rise of the Iron Guard in Romania, arguing that the play reflects the rapid ideological conversion of intellectuals and ordinary citizens. More recent analyses, such as Atasoy, emphasize the gradual and normalized nature of transformation, showing how ideological assimilation unfolds incrementally rather than through immediate coercion. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, Abdelfattah highlights the suspension of judgment as a key mechanism in collective conformity.

In parallel, scholars have examined the tension between the individual and the mass. TÜRKYILMAZ shifts attention toward the problem of failed resistance, while Chinese scholarship has increasingly focused on subjectivity, often interpreting Bérenger as a moral hero whose perseverance affirms human dignity. Even when his hesitation is acknowledged, it is typically absorbed into a teleological narrative of ultimate resistance.

However, existing studies rarely differentiate between distinct forms of rationality within the play. Although critics frequently describe the collapse of reason, fewer have analyzed how rational discourse itself becomes instrumentalized in the process of assimilation. The characters who first transform are not explicitly irrational but self-proclaimed rational figures who rely on logic and order. Moreover, Bérenger's resistance has seldom been theorized in temporal terms. His hesitation and delay are usually treated as weakness rather than as structurally significant features.

This gap invites a reconsideration of *Rhinoceros* as a drama of differentiated rational states. By examining how formalized, judgment-free rationality facilitates assimilation, and how Bérenger's incomplete and belated rational stance interrupts that process, the present study seeks to illuminate the internal logic of conformity and resistance.

# 3. Self-Proclaimed Rational Subjects

In *Rhinoceros*, the appearance of the rhinoceros does not immediately provoke collective panic or violent reaction. Instead, it is first absorbed into a series of explanatory and normative discourses. Xue suggests that Rhinoceros reflects the existential dilemma of modern humanity, in which individuals confront an absurd social reality that threatens the stability of human values and rational judgment [3]. The characters solemnly discuss fantastical matters and cautiously argue over trivial points. This produces an atmosphere of absurdity: they consider themselves normal while behaving irrationally, and regard themselves as rational while failing to exercise genuine rationality.

## 3.1. Jean: Obedient Rationality

From the opening dialogue in the café, Jean and Bérenger embody contrasting postures of rationality. Jean repeatedly reproaches Bérenger for his laziness, drinking, and lateness, emphasizing discipline and willpower. His language is overtly normative and didactic, positioning him as a spokesperson for rationality and modern order.

When the first rhinoceros charges through the street, Jean quickly moves from surprise to acceptance. He shows little concern for why a rhinoceros has appeared; instead, he focuses on its species and classification. He instinctively seeks to categorize the rhinoceros, just as he categorizes his attire and schedule. By dividing a phenomenon into increasingly technical components, the problem itself recedes from view. In Act II, as Jean undergoes physical transformation, he does not experience a prolonged rational struggle. Rather, he rapidly reconstructs his value system, declaring nature more authentic than human civilization, denouncing humanism as hypocrisy, and affirming strength as essence. This sudden shift of value position reveals the inactivity of rationality: it neither argues nor judges but merely justifies an accomplished transformation.

Jean's rationality may therefore be understood as obedience. He adheres to etiquette in human society without questioning its foundation; he adapts equally smoothly to rhinoceros society. His obedient rationality serves survival, lacking principle and remaining superficial.

## 3.2. The Logician: Escapist Rationality

The Logician functions as the play's most explicit symbol of rationality. In Act I, he demonstrates syllogistic reasoning to the Old Man, presenting arguments concerning whether cats are animals or whether Socrates is a cat. These arguments conform formally to logical structure, yet their premises are absurd and detached from reality; logic becomes a purely formal exercise.

When the rhinoceros phenomenon occurs, the Logician remains preoccupied with classification and numerical calculation, pondering whether two rhinoceroses equal one rhinoceros appearing twice. He does not render a value judgment about the event itself. His rationality preserves logical coherence while evading responsibility for reality.

This is not substantive rational judgment but formalized rationality. Whereas Jean adjusts his rationality to accommodate social survival, the Logician rigidly adheres to his syllogisms. Detached from reality, however, such rationality becomes meaningless. Through syllogism he constructs an invulnerable intellectual enclave, excluding the world's disorder and retreating into verbal games that evade the surrounding absurdity.

## 3.3. The Old Man: Mediating Rationality

The Old Man appears composed and experienced, representing common sense. He tends to interpret the rhinoceros phenomenon through historical analogy or habitual expressions. The world is complex; therefore, the appearance of a rhinoceros is not abnormal. By invoking such generalities, he diminishes the shock of the event and continuously searches for acceptable explanations. Experience here functions to dissolve conflict rather than confront it.

He listens attentively to the Logician's arguments and attempts to understand them. His attitude after the rhinoceros appears is conciliatory and moderate. While seeming to explain the present situation, he in fact normalizes the abnormal. His openness to all viewpoints appears impartial but conceals a fear of conflict. He prefers prolonged mutation to immediate confrontation, mediating between opposing sides in a manner that reflects a short-sighted, almost cynical rationality.

In sum, what is termed "rationality" in the play no longer fulfills the function of judgment and critique; it becomes a tool for maintaining order or accommodating change. For this reason, it may be described as self-proclaimed rationality.

## 4. The Belated Subject of Unfinished Rationality

The forms of "obedient rationality," "escapist rationality," and "mediating rationality" share a common feature: rational form remains in operation, but the function of judgment is absent. The characters continue to explain, deduce, and reconcile, yet they do not confront the value questions posed by reality. This is chaotic rationality.

As Hannah Arendt states, "judging is the specifically political ability" [4]. In the face of totalitarianism, the danger does not lie in the complete disappearance of rationality, but in the cessation of thinking and judging—that is, the relinquishment of one's capacity to take a position in concrete situations. Rationality endowed with thought and judgment constitutes genuine rationality.

In contrast to the figures discussed above, Bérenger occupies a different state. Kang and Zhao argue that "Bérenger does not embody the traditional heroic figure; rather, he represents a fragmented subject struggling to maintain self-identity in a society increasingly dominated by collective irrationality" [5]. At the beginning of the play, he lacks strong normative consciousness and appears indolent and hesitant. Yet as the rhinoceros phenomenon spreads, he repeatedly expresses confusion and unease rather than incorporating the event into an existing framework. When Jean transforms, Bérenger reacts with shock and resistance, attempting to dissuade him. Though immature and lacking systematic argumentation, this response indicates that judgment has not been relinquished. In Act III, as the sole remaining human, he undergoes wavering and self-doubt. He questions whether he himself is the "monster" and momentarily admires the rhinoceroses' strength. Yet this wavering does not culminate in immediate conversion; instead, hesitation leads to a final refusal.

It is therefore necessary to address the belatedness of Bérenger's resistance. Unlike Jean, who rapidly reorganizes his values during transformation, Bérenger remains slow. He cannot promptly formulate a firm theoretical stance nor quickly integrate into the new order. Whether in his confusion during debates about the rhinoceros's species or in his shock at Jean's metamorphosis, his reactions lag behind those of others. This slowness constitutes a condition of his resistance.

First, belatedness means that he fails to integrate reality into a stable explanatory framework. Others resort to logic, experience, or value transformation to neutralize shock. Bérenger cannot complete such integration. His speech is fragmented and repetitive, often confined to expressions such as "What is happening?" or "This should not occur." His inability to articulate a coherent explanation prevents him from easily accepting the new order.

Second, belatedness keeps him in an indeterminate state of judgment. In Act III, he does not immediately declare victory or adopt a heroic posture. He repeatedly questions whether he is mistaken and is briefly attracted to the rhinoceroses' power. His rejection is therefore uncertain. His decision forms slowly, and precisely because of this slowness it acquires self-consciousness.

Third, belatedness interrupts the rhythm of assimilation. Assimilation in the play proceeds through gradual adjustment of language and ideas. The more swiftly characters complete explanation, the more readily they enter the collective structure. Bérenger's delay disrupts this process. Unable to synchronize with the group's rhythm, he remains structurally outside it. Belatedness thus becomes a passive resistance to the mechanism of assimilation.

From this perspective, *Rhinoceros* does not present a simple opposition between rationality and irrationality, but a differentiation within rationality itself. Like lonesco said himself, "Rhinoceros is certainly an anti-Nazi play, but it is also against all forms of collective hysteria" [6]. Three interrelated yet distinct forms may be identified. The first is chaotic rationality: not the absence of logic, but a rupture between logical form and real judgment, exemplified by Jean, the Logician, and the Old Man. The second is unfinished rationality: Bérenger's attempt to understand events without completing the integration of meaning or the stabilization of judgment, preserving a rational potential not yet assimilated. The third is abandoned rationality: at the moment of rhinocerization, subjects cease to assume responsibility for judgment and surrender themselves to a collective explanatory structure—manifested within the text as transformation into rhinoceroses and beyond the text as fascistization.

As Arendt writes, "The aim of thinking, and its result, is contemplation; and contemplation is not action". Bérenger's rationality thus remains unfinished; he inhabits a state of contemplation. Unable to integrate reality swiftly and lacking theoretical language, he nevertheless persists in judgment. His resistance is distinctly non-heroic. Within this hesitation, rationality has not yet been suspended.

## 5. Conclusion

"The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach to existence". In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco represents the fascistization of a nation through the process of rhinocerization, exploring how individuals relinquish resistance under evidently unreasonable conditions. This article argues that such relinquishment stems from the absence and disorder of rationality. The characters firmly believe in their own rationality, yet what they uphold is only its surface form. Internally, they construct seemingly reasonable frameworks to confront unreasonable reality, choosing obedience, evasion, or mediation. Bérenger, by contrast, remains belated. Believing himself not yet fully rational, he refrains from premature judgment and thereby accomplishes a hesitant form of resistance.

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