Eugène Ionesco was born in Romania in 1909 to a French mother and a Romanian father who moved their family to France before Eugène’s first birthday. In 1916, his father returned to Romania and then lost contact with the family, who believed he had died during the war. In fact, he had remarried and started a new life. When Eugène was 13, his father demanded that both Eugène and his sister be sent to Romania to live with him and his new wife. Eugène lived in Romania for the next 16 years, returning to France in 1938. At the start of World War II, he went back to Romania and was unable to leave for the duration of the war, as he did not have the correct travel documents. Finally able to return to France in 1942, he resided there until his death in 1994. The circumstances of his youth—his father reappearing in his life as if back from the dead, his difficulties with his stepmother, and the ordeal he went through to escape Romania in the 1940s—haunted him throughout his life and profoundly shaped his view of himself in the world. Always the outsider, Ionesco felt neither fully accepted by the French cultural elite nor fully at home in his surroundings.

Ionesco began his career as a playwright with *The Bald Soprano*, which premiered in Paris in 1950. Along with Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett, Ionesco pioneered a new theatrical movement. This “theatre of the absurd,” which dealt
exclusively with the subjective experience of life in a world of absurdity and contingency, seemed to pick up the existentialist cause where Sartre left off. Yet the major dramatists of this group took existentialism in an explicitly antipolitical direction, abandoning didacticism and rational communication in favor of dramatic imagery that emerges from the subconscious and the mythic, and promoting the deconstruction rather than the reconstruction of social life.

Ionesco’s career offers a useful contrast with that of Sartre. For while the latter epitomized the engaged intellectual for whom literature was a means of political liberation, the former explicitly rejected this stance, regarding it as both a source of arrogance and an affront to the dignity of art. Ionesco’s plays depict a world without political hope, and his nondramatic writings—essays, journals, and responses to drama critics—consistently reject the political criteria on which many sought to judge him.

The horrors of war, the terror instilled by totalitarian regimes, the annihilation of the open public sphere, the destruction of language through doublespeak, the growth and flourishing of the culture industry and its co-option by battling ideologies—for writers such as Ionesco these developments signaled the absurdity of any conception of “authenticity” or “liberation.” In such a worldview, politics is to be distrusted and feared, and artistic creation is a means of self-expression and undiscriminating social commentary. Absurdist theatre pierces through the pretenses of all social values and aspirations. Adopting a posture of ironic detachment, it epitomizes a “post-ideological” and deeply antipolitical sensibility.

In this chapter, I will discuss Ionesco’s theatre and its antipolitical impulses, focusing on three of Ionesco’s most well-known plays: The Bald Soprano, The Chairs, and Rhinoceros. Despite some interesting differences between these plays, Ionesco’s work is consistently “absurdist” in ways that call into question meaningful political engagement. In the first part of the chapter, I will provide an overview of the theatre of the absurd, drawing heavily from Martin Esslin’s famous 1961 book that coined the phrase, and treating The Bald Soprano and The Chairs as exemplary absurdist plays in their social cynicism and antipolitics. I will then turn to the famous “London Controversy” between Ionesco and the critic Kenneth Tynan in the pages of the