

Reading Neurocognitive Disorder

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Abstract: *The multiple uses of Humanities in teaching Medicine need hardly detailing; suffice to say that a number of top Medical Schools have included Medical Humanities in their curricula. In this context we will consider the way Eugène Ionesco can be put to good use when it comes to teaching neurocognitive disorder; his theatre, come to think of “The Bald Soprano,” focuses on non-sequiturs, dislocated language and distorted logic – all of these being unfailing expressions of a cognitive impairment or even demise.*

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Introduction

Neurocognitive disorder (NCD), whether mild (formerly “mild cognitive impairment”) or major (formerly “dementia”), involves a significant decline in one or more cognitive domains, whether complex attention, executive function, learning and memory, language, perceptual-motor, or social cognition – such deficits interfering with independence in everyday activities. (DSM-5, 2013, pp. 593-595; Black and Andreasen, 2014)

This tableau is there, to be seen in Eugène Ionesco’s “The Bald Soprano,” whose people have “no hunger, no conscious desires”; they are “bored stiff” and, “unconsciously alienated” as they are, “they don’t even know they are bored.” They feel it “vaguely,” and finally explode – “which is quite useless, as the characters and situations are both static and interchangeable, and everything else where it started” (Ionesco, 1958). There is “no action” in actual fact, “simply theatrical machinery functioning, as it were, in a void,” crudely displaying “a hollow automatism being taken to pieces and put together in the wrong order, as well as automatic men speaking and behaving automatically,” illustrating “comically” the emptiness of “a world without metaphysics and a humanity without problems.” (Ionesco, 1958)

1. Complex attention

Whether sustained, divided or selective, MCD attention is abolished, and so is processing speed. At a certain moment, unexpected and unexplainable, words are no longer under control. Objects-in-themselves (Coe, 1971), as they are, they run loose, at great speed, and we are asked to see no meaning whatsoever in the overwhelming “un-meaning”:

Coming from Mr. Smith it’s: “Cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos, cockatoos” ... “dogs have fleas, dogs have fleas” ... “crocodile!” ... “I’m going to live in my cabana among my cacao trees” ... “groom the goose, don’t goose the groom” ... “seducer seduced!” ... “I’ve been goosed” ... “Browning!” ... “The pope elopes! The pope’s got no horoscope. The horoscope’s bespoke” ... “A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, i!” ... “It’s!” ... “It’s!” *Coming from Mrs. Smith it’s:* “Such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca, such caca” ... “Incasker, you incask us” ... “Mice have lice, lice haven’t mice” ... “Groom your tooth” ... “Sainte-Nitouche!” ... “Who’d stoop to blame?... and I never choose to stoop” ... “Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti!” ...

“[imitating a train]: Choo, choo, chao, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo!” ... “Way!” ... “Here!” *Coming from Mr. Martin it's*: “Such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas, such cascades of cacas” ... “I'd rather lay an egg in a box than go and steal an ox” ... “Let's go and slap Ulysses” ... “Don't smooch the brooch!” ... “Groom the bridegroom, groom the bridegroom” ... “Go take a douche” ... “Robert!” ... “Marietta, spot the pot!” ... “Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassières!” ... “From sage to stooge, from stage to serge!” ... “That!” ... “Ver!” *Coming from Mrs. Martin it's*: “Cactus, coccyx! crocus! cockaded! cockroach!” ... “[opening her mouth very wide]: Ah! oh! ah! oh! Let me gnash my teeth” ... “Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa” ... “Don't ruche my brooch!” ... “The goose grooms” ... “Scaramouche!” ... “Sainte-Nitouche stoops to my cartouche” ... “Silly gobblegobblers, silly gobblegobblers” ... “Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka!” ... “B, c, d, f, g, 1, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z!” ... “Not!” (Ionesco, 1960)

At first, people are “silent for a moment, stupefied,” with “a certain nervous irritation” in the air. Objects, who at this stage are indistinguishable from humans, participate fully in the *mélange*, the strokes of the clock being more nervous too. As “the hostility and the nervousness increase,” the speeches, initially “glacial” and hardly “hostile,” change into “screams,” people standing “completely infuriated, screaming in each other's ears,” being “very close to each other, raising their fists, ready to throw themselves upon each other” (Ionesco, 1960). Illogical, contradicting themselves and the others, NCD people are actually dehumanized and are simply unaware of the boundary between human and non-human. They have exactly as much independence as the “English” clock that strikes the hours at will, freely.

2. Executive function

Planning and decision making are of no consequence, the time is “now,” the NCD tense is primarily the present. An exception is provided by the Fire Chief, but his “planning” is “quite unimportant” and grotesque. He must leave at a certain moment, because in “exactly three-quarters of an hour and sixteen minutes,” he's having “a fire at the other end of the city.” No, it's not “a little chimney fire,” just “a straw fire and a little heartburn.” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 37)

Working memory, to be seen everywhere and especially in “the Martin's episode,” is anything but reliable. Responding to feedback is

ludicrous and most often out of place, like in “The Dog and the Cow,” the “experimental” fable that the Fire Chief tells in “a voice shaken by emotion,” and only after the others promise they won’t listen: “Once upon a time another cow asked another dog: ‘Why have you not swallowed your trunk?’ ‘Pardon me,’ replied the dog, ‘it is because I thought that I was an elephant.’” (Ionesco, 1960)

Mental flexibility is never the point, like in “The Calf,” another “experimental” fable the Fire Chief tells,

A young calf had eaten too much ground glass. As a result, it was obliged to give birth. It brought forth a cow into the world. However, since the calf was male, the cow could not call him Mamma. Nor could she call him Papa, because the calf was too little. The calf was then obliged to get married and the registry office carried out all the details completely *à la mode*. (Ionesco, 1960)

whereupon Mrs. Smith comments “*à la mode de Caen*,” and Mr. Martin comments “like tripes.” (Ionesco, 1960)

The question, then, is that NCD people cannot be open-minded as long as they are not independent, but carried off on a tempestuous flood of words that have just gone mad.

3. Learning and memory

Memory, immediate and recent (including free recall, cued recall, and recognition memory), is fundamentally impaired in NCD. Mr. and Mrs. Martin enter, they sit “facing each other, without speaking,” smile timidly at each other, and after a while, “in voices that are drawling, monotonous, a little singsong, without nuances,” they keep up talking, a most bizarre talk. (Ionesco, 1960)

Mr. Martin makes a feeble, “English” excuse, and says that it seems to him, unless he’s mistaken, that he’s met her “somewhere before” – whereupon Mrs. Martin admits that it seems to her that she’s met him “somewhere before.” And then Mr. Martin goes on and says that, by chance, at Manchester he caught a glimpse of her – whereupon she admits that “it’s possible,” as she is “originally from the city of Manchester.” Mr. Martin admits that, however “curious” it may be, he too is “originally from the city of Manchester” – whereupon she exclaims that this is “curious,” indeed. He goes on and says that he left the city of Manchester “about five weeks ago” – whereupon she agrees that this coincidence is “curious and bizarre” because she, too, left the city of Manchester “about five weeks ago.” Mr.

Martin says he took “the 8:30 morning train which arrives in London at 4:45” – whereupon she exclaims that this coincidence is “curious and very bizarre”; she actually took “the same train.” Mr. Martin then presumes that it was “on the train” that he saw her – whereupon Mrs. Martin says that it is “indeed possible,” it is “not unlikely,” it is “even plausible” that, after all, they should have met “on the same train.” Mr. Martin goes on and says that he travelled “second class,” he always travels “second class,” although “there is no second class in England” – whereupon Mrs. Martin says again that this is “curious and very bizarre, what a coincidence!”, she too traveled “second class.” Mr. Martin then thinks that perhaps they did meet in “second class” – whereupon Mrs. Martin won’t exclude the possibility, it is “not at all unlikely,” although she does not remember “very well.” And then Mr. Martin remembers that his seat was in “coach No. 8, compartment 6” – whereupon Mrs. Martin remembers that, “curiously” so, her seat was also in “coach No. 8, compartment 6.” And then, Mr. Martin highlights the “curious and bizarre” coincidence and dares to presume that they met “in compartment 6” – whereupon Mrs. Martin admits that this is “indeed possible,” but she does not recall it. Mr. Martin does not remember it either, to tell the truth, but it is “possible” that they caught “a glimpse of each other there,” and as he thinks of it, it seems to him “even very likely” – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims “Oh! truly, of course, truly, sir!” And then Mr. Martin remembers that, “curiously” so, he had “seat No. 3 next to the window” – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims “Oh, good Lord, how curious and bizarre!”, she had “seat No. 6, next to the window,” across from him. Then Mr. Martin cannot but exclaim “Good God, how curious that is and what a coincidence!”, they were then seated “facing each other,” it is there that they must have seen each other – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims again: “How curious it is!”, it is “possible,” but she won’t recall it. Mr. Martin won’t remember it either, to tell the truth; however, it is “very possible” that they saw each other “on that occasion” – whereupon Mrs. Martin agrees that “it is true,” but she is “not at all sure” of it. And then, Mr. Martin wonders whether she was the lady who asked him to place her suitcase “in the luggage rack” and who thanked him and gave him permission to smoke – whereupon Mrs. Martin fully agrees that she must have been the lady in case, “how curious it is, how curious it is, and what a coincidence!” Mr. Martin agrees and exclaims “how curious it is, how bizarre, what a coincidence!”, it was “perhaps at that moment” that they came to know each other – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims again “how curious it is and what a coincidence! It is indeed possible!”, although she does not believe that she recalls it. Nor does Mr. Martin recall it and, after “a

moment of silence” when “the clock strikes twice, then once,” he says that since coming to London, he has resided in Bromfield Street – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims again “how curious that is, how bizarre!” She, too, “since coming to London,” has resided in Bromfield Street. Mr. Martin goes on exclaiming “how curious that is!”, and presumes they “perhaps” have seen each other in Bromfield Street – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims “how curious that is, how bizarre!”, it is “indeed possible,” after all, but she does not recall it. Mr. Martin mentions that he resides at No. 19 – whereupon Mrs. Martin admits that, “curiously” so, she also resides at No. 19. Mr. Martin is of two minds for some time, “perhaps” they have seen each other in that house – whereupon Mrs. Martin agrees upon this possibility, but she does not recall it. Mr. Martin then says that his flat is on “the fifth floor, No. 8” – whereupon Mrs. Martin exclaims “How curious it is, good Lord, how bizarre! And what a coincidence!”, she too resides “on the fifth floor, in flat No. 8.” And then Mr. Martin muses “How curious it is, how curious it is, how curious it is, and what a coincidence!”, and is not late to say that in his bedroom “there is a bed, and it is covered with a green eiderdown,” this room, “with the bed and the green eiderdown” being “at the end of the corridor between the w.c. and the bookcase” – whereupon Mrs. Martin says “What a coincidence, good Lord, what a coincidence!”, her bedroom, too, has “a bed with a green eiderdown” and is “at the end of the corridor, between the w.c. and the bookcase.” And then Mr. Martin says “How bizarre, curious, strange!”, they live “in the same room” and they sleep “in the same bed,” it is “perhaps there” that they have met – whereupon Mrs. Martin says “How curious it is and what a coincidence!”, it is “indeed possible” that they have met there, and “perhaps” even the night before, even if she does not recall it. And then Mr. Martin remembers he has “a little girl,” his little daughter, who lives with him, she is “two years old,” she’s “blonde,” she has “a white eye and a red eye,” she is “very pretty,” her name is “Alice” – whereupon Mrs. Martin says “What a bizarre coincidence!”, she, too, has “a little girl,” she is “two years old,” has “a white eye and a red eye,” she is “very pretty,” and her name is “Alice.” Mr. Martin, “in the same drawling, monotonous voice,” says “How curious it is and what a coincidence! And bizarre!”, “perhaps” they are the same – whereupon Mrs. Martin, after “a long moment of silence” during which “the clock strikes 29 times,” says “How curious it is!”, it is “indeed possible.” And then Mr. Martin, after having reflected “at length,” while getting up “slowly and, unhurriedly,” moving toward Mrs. Martin, says “in the same flat, monotonous voice, slightly sing-song,” that he believes that there can be “no doubt about it,” they have seen each other before and she is his own wife –

whereupon Mrs. Martin, approaching Mr. Martin “without haste” and embracing him “without expression” while “the clock strikes once very loud,” thus making the audience jump, says oblivious of the clock’s stroke, “Donald, it’s you, darling!” (Ionesco, 1960, pp. 15-19)

With memory failure, language gets “dislocated” and finally “disintegrated”; the NCD people throw at each other “the most threadbare everyday clichés, so commonplace that banality acquires a certain strangeness.” (Ionesco, 1964, pp. 194-195)

4. Language

Language, to say the least of it, is highly problematic in MCD. If in normalcy the issue of which comes first, men or language, is something like a rhetorical question, the answer within, in MCD it’s the other way round: language is out of control, the words fly around and defy logic. Take “The Headcold,” the “experimental fable” the Fire Chief tells:

My brother-in-law had, on the paternal side, a first cousin whose maternal uncle had a father-in-law whose paternal grandfather had married as his second wife a young native whose brother he had met on one of his travels, a girl of whom he was enamoured and by whom he had a son who married an intrepid lady pharmacist who was none other than the niece of an unknown fourth-class petty officer of the Royal Navy and whose adopted father had an aunt who spoke Spanish fluently and who was, perhaps, one of the granddaughters of an engineer who died young, himself the grandson of the owner of a vineyard which produced mediocre wine, but who had a second cousin, a stay-at-home, a sergeant-major, whose son had married a very pretty young woman, a divorcée, whose first husband was the son of a loyal patriot who, in the hope of making his fortune, had managed to bring up one of his daughters so that she could marry a footman who had known Rothschild, and whose brother, after having changed his trade several times, married and had a daughter whose stunted great-grandfather wore spectacles which had been given him by a cousin of his, the brother-in-law of a man from Portugal, natural son of a miller, not too badly off, whose foster-brother had married the daughter of a former country doctor, who was himself a foster-brother of the son of a forrester, himself the natural son of another country doctor, married three times in a row, 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... had married another blonde schoolteacher, named Marie, too, whose brother was married to another Marie, also a blonde schoolteacher... and whose father had been reared in Canada by an old woman who was the niece of a priest whose grandmother, occasionally in the winter, like everyone else, caught a cold. (Ionesco, 1960, pp. 32-33)

Or take “The Bobby Watson case,” precipitated by the “English” paper that Mr. Smith is reading with a sense of duty and, of course, is never late in sharing the news to his “English” wife, Mrs. Smith: It says here that Bobby Watson died, “the poor man!” He’s been “dead these past two years,” and therefore they attended “his funeral a year and a half ago.” No surprise to see it in the paper – although it wasn’t in the paper. It’s been “three years since his death was announced,” as one could remember “through an association of ideas.” Well, “What a pity! He was so well preserved ... He was the handsomest corpse in Great Britain. He didn’t look his age. Poor Bobby, he’d been dead for four years and he was still warm. A veritable living corpse. And how cheerful he was! ... Poor Bobby” ... Actually, it is his wife that is in case. She is called Bobby too, Bobby Watson. “Since they both had the same name, you could never tell one from the other when you saw them together. It was only after his death that you could really tell which was which. And there are still people today who confuse her with the deceased and offer their condolences to him” ... “She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin. She’s a voice teacher” ... Those two plan to be married “next spring, at the latest.” They will get “a wedding present” ... “one of the seven silver salvers” that were given the Smiths for their wedding and which have “never been of any use” to them ... “How sad for her to be left a widow so young” ... But “fortunately, they had no children.” Children, after all, was all they needed! “Children! Poor woman, how could she have managed!” Well, “she’s still young, she might very well remarry, she looks so well in mourning.” As for the children, a boy and a girl, they are “Bobby and Bobby like their parents” ... “Bobby Watson’s uncle, old Bobby Watson, is a rich man and very fond of the boy. He might very well pay for Bobby’s education” ... and “Bobby Watson’s aunt, old Bobby Watson, might very well, in her turn, pay for the education of Bobby

Watson, Bobby Watson's daughter. That way Bobby, Bobby Watson's mother, could remarry" ... She actually has in mind "a cousin of Bobby Watson's," Bobby Watson, "the son of old Bobby Watson, the late Bobby Watson's other uncle" ... On second mind, "Bobby Watson, the son of old Bobby Watson, the late Bobby Watson's aunt" is the commercial traveller, because "all the Bobby Watsons are commercial travellers," and they do "well at their difficult trade" when there's no competition, "on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Tuesdays, three days a week," and if one wonders what Bobby Watson does on those days, "he rests, he sleeps," although there's "no competition those three days," as one, if not "idiotic," knows. (Ionesco, 1960, pp. 11-13)

Language, once "action as well," is now "paralysis," and words are anything but intense living; they "no longer demonstrate," they "clatter" and only serve for "literary" devices; they are "escape," and as such "stop silence from speaking." Words "wear out thought," they impair it. (Ionesco, 1968, p. 73)

5. Perceptual motor ability

Construction and visual perception is barely consequential in NCD; "some sort of bourgeois interior" (Ionesco, 1972, p. 5), and that is all there is to it. We only need to know that the Smiths are "stuffy and class-conscious," quite "smug and self-satisfied" (Lane, 1994, p. 39) with their one hundred percent "English" existence:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small grey English moustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes. (Ionesco, 1960, p. 8)

This "mindless conformism" is never questioned, the Smiths and the Martins, "grotesque caricatures" actually, are nothing but "carriers" of slogans and received ideas. They are "characters without character, puppets, faceless creatures" (Ionesco, 1964, p. 181), mechanical puppets attuned to the "English clock" that strikes "English hours." No personality in them, either; they are quite anonymous, undifferentiated from each other and "indistinguishable from their surroundings, just traversed by language which

uses them, rather than the other way round.” They are “suffering marionettes” (Ionesco, 1970, p. 179) in “a world in which the mechanical has replaced the human and the personal, where there is nothing to say.” (Ionesco, 1964, p. 180)

There has been “a kind of collapse of reality,” words are “noisy shells without meaning”; the characters as well, they are “psychologically empty,” devoid of any depth. Everything appears in “an unfamiliar light,” NCD people are “the victims of words,” they are dragged along, carried away by the torrent of words,” they move in “a timeless time,” in “a spaceless space” (Ionesco, 1971, p. 169). What ultimately activates them is routine, fair and simple.

6. Social cognition

Recognition of emotions is at best ambiguous in NCD, “extinguished” as it is by overtones. In a “recognition scene” that is actually a caricature of Boulevard Melodrama, Mary throws herself on the neck of the Fire Chief and, when Mr. Smith says that “this is too much here” in the Smith home, “in the suburbs of London,” the Fire Chief reveals that it was she who extinguished his “first fires,” while Mary admits she’s his “little firehouse.” Isn’t that “improper”? But after all a maid is “never anything but a maid”... (Ionesco, 1960, p. 35)

Behavioural regulation can always be a therapeutical way out of distress and, ironically so, it is something like that in the opening “English scene,” with Mr. Smith in the forefront, “the Lord of the Castle,” so to say; the device is activated again in this recognition scene, Mary reciting a poem entitled “The Fire” in honour of her lost, and now regained lover, the Fire Chief:

The polypoids were burning in the wood
A stone caught fire
The castle caught fire
The forest caught fire
The men caught fire
The women caught fire
The birds caught fire
The fish caught fire
The water caught fire
The sky caught fire
The ashes caught fire
The smoke caught fire

The fire caught fire
Everything caught fire
Caught fire, caught fire.

(Ionesco, 1960, pp. 36-37)

The Smiths are pushing Mary off stage, while Mrs. Martin admits the poem has sent “chills” up her spine, Mr. Martin admits “there’s a certain warmth in those lines,” and the Fire Chief says it was “marvellous,” and recognizes it to be his own “conception of the world,” his world: “My world. My dream. My ideal...” (Ionesco, 1960, p. 37)

Whatever the reasons, the effects of such behavioural regulation are anything but beneficial. Reality sort of collapsed, the words turning into “sounding shells devoid of meaning” (Ionesco, 1964, p. 179). As a matter of fact, social cognition is on the rundown in a NCD universe, practically devoid of emotions.

Conclusions

Neurocognitive disorders (NCD) involve structural or functional disturbances of brain function leading to impairments in memory, abstract thinking, or judgement. If major, if progressed from a prodromal mild state, they specifically involve a significant cognitive decline from a previous level of performance in one or more cognitive domains: complex attention, executive function, learning and memory, language, perceptual-motor, or social cognition. Under such circumstances, the Theatre of the Absurd, with its major protagonists, Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco and Genet (see Esslin, 1970), is a good “terrain” to explore for a Medical Humanities “expedition,” interested in finding an adequate illustration of the above six cognitive domains. We focused for the moment on Eugène Ionesco’s debut anti-play, “The Bald Soprano” (written in 1948, première in 1950) and we have found a rich documentation for all of the six domains in case, covering the entire spectrum ranging from mild (the case of Mary and the Fire Chief) to major (the case of the Smiths and the Martins) in the early- to mid-stages.

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