

HELLO, CRUEL WORLD: ANTONIN ARTAUD'S PURSUIT OF  
PRIMAL THEATRE

A THESIS IN  
Theatre

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ABSTRACT

This thesis delves into the most volatile years of the notoriously volatile life of French poet and theatrical theorist Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). At the heart of the research is an examination of his voyages to Mexico and Ireland, as these seem to be relatively neglected in relation to understanding his body of work. The research encompasses biographies of Artaud, his own account of his Mexican excursion, as well as his essays, letters, plays, and poems in English translation. In addition, books and articles with varied interpretations of his work, and excerpts of the Irish Department of External Affairs file, “Enquiry from Antonin Artaud re: ‘Sources d’Antiques Traditions’ in Ireland” as published in the *Dublin Review*. The research shows a remarkable consistency in his artistic voice. It was also discovered that after returning from Mexico, he made peace with several figures he renounced early in his career. The significance of his correspondence with publisher Jacques Rivière is further noted.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Hello, Cruel World: Antonin Artaud’s Search for Primal Theatre,” presented by Andrew Hagerty, candidate for the Master of Arts Theatre degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## INTRODUCTION:

“The mystery deeper than souls”

Antonin Artaud is one of the greatest enigmas of theatre history. He began and ended his life as a poet, but he always chased the paragon of total art which he believed lay hidden in theatre. His attempts to capture this transformative art resulted in a fever dream he called the Theatre of Cruelty, but his standards were so high not even he could fully establish it. Artaud spent his entire life striving to find words for what was in his mind. This self-imposed quest would take him to the deserts of Mexico, the rolling hills of Ireland, and the confines of a French mental institution. The practical answer would remain a faint light in the fog of his mind. Even as a playwright, Artaud could not realize his own ideals. He had two plays which he called complete: the first, *Jet of Blood*, was but a few pages of glorious nightmare; the second, *The Cenci*, was a melodramatic fit of Romantic-era intrigue. But still he called them attempts at, not examples of, Theatre of Cruelty. His theoretical, philosophical, even theological output far outpaces his dramaturgical contributions. As theatre scholar Martin Esslin noted in his critical biography of Artaud “Artaud, I feel, is ... one of those masters whose impact arises not so much from what they have achieved and *done* in concrete, tangible terms, but rather from what they *are* and what they have *suffered*” (Esslin 10). Many playwrights would follow and try to synthesize what he slaved over. Some succeeded. More succumbed to the twists and turns of his particular logic, and became almost as lost in Artaud’s mind as he had been. Antonin Artaud’s artistic life was one long, continuous struggle with writer’s block, and through his meticulous and obsessive documentation of his inability to fully realize his art, others have vicariously, cathartically, realized their own. Artaud’s travels to Mexico and Ireland were inspired by his

fascination with the codified, silent movements of Balinese dance troupes—a foreign language that seemed innate. He wanted to find a primal language that could unify and invigorate the theatre. What his writings, digressive and harsh as they can often be, reveal are the essential, impactful elements that exist in theatre across cultures and history:

After romanticism, symbolism, dadaism, surrealism,  
lettrism, and marxism, i.e, a hundred schools of political,  
philosophical, or literary subversion, there is one word, one  
thing that remains standing ... that's kept its ancient  
pre-eminence through thick and thin, and that word and  
thing is spirit (*Anthology* 106).

This is Primal Theatre.

Regardless of spoken language, Primal Theatre communicates a message to audiences that can be universally felt. The notion is as old as Aristotle: *catharsis* is not a conscious thought, it is a feeling. How is Primal Theatre different from Theatre of Cruelty? The latter is a philosophy, with rules and dictated principles. The former is an occurrence, which can be found in any given culture, be it the Mayan Empire, medieval England, or 20th-century France. Ideas exist in times and places that transcend superficialities of communication, as Artaud put it, “Words decay at the unconscious command of the brain” (*Anthology* 29). The enemy of accessing the primal is rationalization. It is not about creating the future, it is about accessing the ancient. Contemporary is whatever exists now. Primal Theatre requires thought—and to an extent logic—but not reason: there is a monster under my bed; if I move, the monster will eat me, I will feel pain, I will cease to exist. There is feeling and logic in fearing the monster, but no reason to

show the monster's actual existence. Primal Theatre allows thoughts happen to the audience, and forces the use of instinctual, animal logic. This is what Artaud sought in Mexico and Ireland, this is what his writings touch upon, but this is not what he achieved in his plays. His poetry would achieve it. To explore the idea of Primal Theatre as inspired by Artaud, one must travel with him to Mexico and Ireland. Theatre of Cruelty was conceived in France, but it was born elsewhere. From Artaud's early days as a burgeoning poet and actor to his late years as a mad poet and sage, Theatre of Cruelty was consciously and unconsciously developed and hindered by language and danger. This was Artaud's battle with the unseen.



## CHAPTER I

“My lucid unreason is not afraid of chaos.”

Artaud was an infamously obsessive diary-keeper and essayist and a large portion of his personal writings are his attempts to rationalize and pinpoint his ideas into something tangible. He lamented, “Under this crust of bone and skin which is my head, there is a constant anguish ... Impotence to crystallize unconsciously the broken point of automatism to any degree whatsoever,” and he placed the blame for this impotence squarely on the weaknesses of his words: “I’m the man who’s best felt the astounding disorder of his language in relation to his thought” (Artaud, *Anthology* 35-36). The inability to organize thoughts was a recurring motif in Artaud’s creative endeavors as well; his silent film treatment *Les dix-huit secondes* portrayed a young artist suffering from a “strange disease” that prevented him from externalizing his thoughts. Artaud “remained convinced that his difficulty in formulating the positive content of his inner world was real and that ‘thought’ could exist in an unformulated, pre-verbal state” (Esslin 66). Artaud’s greatest struggle in his early writings, and indeed the impetus for creating his Theatre of Cruelty, was trying to express how his mind worked and how he saw true theatrical art playing out. This directly caused his fascination with the Balinese dance troupe he witnessed in 1931, of which he wrote “In a word, the Balinese have realized, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theatre, where everything, conception and realization alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification *on the stage*” (Artaud, *Double* 53). Story and subject matter are of distant importance compared to the fact that they had performed something that could be understood not only by the Balinese, but even an unindoctrinated foreigner like Artaud. He admired the mathematical precision of the codified movement which

characterized their technique (Artaud, *Double* 55), and to his untameable mind, this was the greatest triumph.

*The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) was Artaud's inspired call for that level of organization, that ability to speak to an audience on a primal level, in Western theatre. It was a collection of essays, manifestos, lectures, and conceptual outlines he wrote and assembled over several years, detailing his ideal Theatre of Cruelty. He wrote: "A kind of terror seizes us at the thought of these mechanized beings, whose joys and griefs seem not their own but that the service of age-old rites, as if they were dictated by superior intelligences" (Artaud, *Double* 58). The organized "vocabulary of gesture and mime" (Artaud, *Double* 55) of the Balinese dancers was (and is) an age-old ritual. Artaud had his taste of newer rituals as a student of Charles Dullin at Théâtre Antoine, formerly the revolutionary Théâtre Libre, where Dullin ran an acting school. Dullin's acting training combined studies on Eastern theatrical traditions with techniques of melodrama and surrealism (Deák 351), seeking "The forced depersonalization of the actor [and] the introduction of the sacred and mystical" to performance, while rejecting psychological realism (Deák 348). Dullin forced his actors to reconcile the *Voix du Monde* (Voice of the World) and the *Voix de Soi-Même* (Voice of Oneself) through embodiment of physical forms. One such exercise which scholars have recorded as having a lasting effect on Artaud was:

You must cross a mountain stream. You fight against the current. You have overestimated your strength, the stream carries you away. You fight desperately, you are out of your depth. You drown. (Deák 348).

The obvious nods to zen mastery in that exercise clarify Artaud's attraction to Eastern theatrical practices, which he saw as spiritually connected to the Western theatre that also inspired him: "And there is in the truly terrifying look of their devil ... a striking similarity to the look of a certain puppet in our own remembrance ... which was the most beautiful ornament of one of the first plays performed by Alfred Jarry's theatre" (Artaud, *Double* 56). What Artaud admired in both the Balinese and Jarry was their ability to concretize abstractions. This is also what allowed him to throw himself so eagerly into Dullin's metaphorical mountain stream. The Balinese, Jarry, and Dullin were working with physical embodiment of emotions, the externalization of interior torment. Artaud's detestation of psychological realism, and of psychology in general, was based in the fact that he saw these as a process for suppressing thoughts rather than actualizing them. He saw many of the vaunted institutions of Europe—particularly science, medicine, and Christianity—as detrimental to true knowledge, which he defined as "a nervous muscular affair which doesn't say a word but, at a given point, makes the necessary gesture that saves those things which *never* had been in the hands of the initiated anyway," (Artaud, *Anthology* 196).

Because he viewed consciousness and the metaphysical as a tyrannical entity imposing itself on the body, Artaud was attracted to basic Eastern ideas of harmony, "Tibet is the only place on earth where this autocracy of the absolute mind has desired to impose itself and materially succeeded" (Artaud, *Anthology* 196). In 1925, Artaud wrote "Address to the Dalai Lama," wherein he implored "Teach us, O Lama, the physical levitation of matter and how we may no longer be earthbound" (Artaud, *Anthology* 65). The letter was not actually sent to the Dalai Lama, but was published in Surrealism founder André Breton's periodical *La Révolution surréaliste*. Even before seeing the performance of the Balinese dancers, Artaud was seeking

congruence of mind and body in Eastern thought, going so far as to call the Dalai Lama his “acceptable Pope” for he believed “It is inwardly that I am like you [Dalai Lama]: I, dust, idea, lip, levitation, dream, cry, renunciation of idea, suspended among all the forms and hoping for nothing but the wind” (Artaud, *Anthology* 65). Published alongside “Address to the Dalai Lama” was “Letter to the Buddhist Schools,” which begins with Artaud listing what he views as the prime attributes of those in Buddhist monasteries: “You who are not in the flesh, and who know at what point in its carnal trajectory ... the soul finds the absolute logos, the new word” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 104). Even in extolling the virtues of an Eastern religion, he uses Western Christian terminology, *logos* and *new word*. Esslin sees strong parallels between Artaud’s religious exploration and the beliefs of the Hellenistic Gnostics in their “bewildering variety of syntheses between Christianity, Greek philosophy and Eastern religious thought and myth” (Esslin 16). Most Gnostic sects sought a separation of mind from body, the former being a pure manifestation of the soul, the latter being a base, dirty slave to appetites. In writing to the Buddhists, Artaud pleads with them to free Europe from its enslavement to superficial progress, “Our writers, our thinkers, our doctors, our fools are conspiring to ruin life” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 105). Yet he does believe there are those who seek to “know how one can turn in one’s thinking” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 105). This was when Artaud was a rising star in the Surrealist movement, acting with Dullin, Breton, and others, and he saw hope in Surrealism’s openness to Eastern thought, which he indicates in a sort of rallying cry to the Buddhists, “The mind is greater than the mind, the metamorphoses of life are many. Like you we reject progress: come, tear down our houses” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 105) and definitively in his article

on “The Activity of the Surrealist Research Bureau”: “The fact of a Surrealist revolution is applicable to all states of mind” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 105). But it is in a throwaway line in the Buddhist letter which shows the final destination of Artaud’s runaway train of thought: “We [The West] suffer from a rottenness, from the rottenness of Reason” (Artaud, “Letter to the Buddhist Schools”; ed. Sontag 104).

While Artaud never explicitly expressed an attraction to Gnosticism, as he did with Buddhism, Hinduism, Maya, and even even fits and starts of Catholicism, the parallels are indeed strong. Gnostics believed, much like Buddhists, that the soul could and must consciously transcend the body. Gnosticism was based on the idea that complete knowledge was attainable, and once obtained, would provide salvation from the confines of matter. Artaud scholar Jane Goodall notes, “Artaud shares with the Gnostics a conviction that the world of forms is a false creation, that it continues to be governed and directed through the work of evil, and that he is trapped in it” (Goodall 17). Artaud’s personal writings frequently feature fantasies of non-existence, which he equates with freedom, understanding, and, most personally, separation from a society he believes is out to destroy him, “So, no longer existing, I see that which is” (Artaud, *Anthology* 86). If creation is cruel, the creations of created things are doubly cruel; words and institutions remained Artaud’s primary enemies. Susan Sontag, in her critique of Artaud prefacing her edited collection of his works, states “The problem of language, as Artaud poses it to himself, is identical with the problem of matter” and that art is the salvific means of transcending language (Sontag “Artaud” 1).

In the mid-1920s, Artaud began fomenting within himself a messianic need for revolution, attacking the heart of the problem as he saw it: the entire metaphysical structure of

Western Europe. As Esslin comments, “[Artaud] is the true existential hero: what he did, what happened to him, what he suffered, what he *was* is infinitely more important than anything he said or wrote” (Esslin 13). Even the writings for which Artaud is most remembered, such as *Le Théâtre et son Double*, hold such sway because they are first and foremost *active*. One of Artaud’s most consistently held beliefs was in the supremacy of action over reason. In his *Manifesto in Clear Language*, dedicated to Surrealist playwright-poet Roger Vitrac, Artaud declares, “I destroy because for me everything that proceeds from reason is untrustworthy” (Artaud, “The Activity of the Surrealist Research Bureau”; ed. Sontag 108). He clarifies that this does not mean that he renounced anything of the Mind (Artaud, “Surrealist Research”; ed. Sontag 109). Good Surrealist that he was at the time, Artaud would have “judged his mind ... [and] despair[ed] of attaining his own mind,” (Artaud, “Surrealist Research”; ed. Sontag 106). Because “Surrealism is above all a state of mind, it does not advocate formulas” (Artaud, “Surrealist Research”; ed. Sontag 106). The point of Surrealism was to break from the tethers of logic and reason and give oneself over wholly to accepting the More-Than-Real and this is what drew Artaud to them: “It is as though, intoxicated by a view of the Surrealist revolution as the massing of forces with which his own wrathful energies could be joined, he saw the promise of a reprieve from the ontological crisis to which he was prey” (Goodall 39). One could argue, as Esslin, Sontag, and Goodall do, that Artaud was a kind of neo-Gnostic, seeking the separation of mind from body, but, with time, Artaud would get still more radical.

While 1925 was a relatively productive year for Artaud in which he completed some creative, if short, pieces of writing, he struggled to find an audience. And when a struggle arose, he never held onto a gospel for long. Towards the end of that year Artaud had become less

interested in the oppressor Reason and more a champion of the downtrodden Flesh: “I do not separate my thought from my life. With each vibration of my tongue I retrace all the pathways of my thought in my flesh” (Artaud, “Surrealist Research”; ed. Sontag 110). At this point, he no longer desired dissociation of mind and matter, but “a system in which all of man would participate, man with his physical flesh and the heights, the intellectual projection of his mind (Artaud, “Surrealist Research”; ed. Sontag 110). By 1927, Artaud had broken with the Surrealists, and they were glad to see the maniac actor who wrote *Jet du sang* leave. Father of Surrealism André Breton had begun to align his artistic movement with Marxist communism but “Artaud saw it [communism] as only another facet in the kaleidoscopic projection of the *heimarmene* [chain of destiny]” (Goodall 41), not as a true revolution, but as a rehashing of the old European social construct under new, still unenlightened, management. Whereas “Breton’s understanding of the operations of destiny gave him scope for embracing a political perspective without fear that he might just be succumbing to one of the all-pervading manifestations of a sinister master design” (Goodall 42), Sontag notes that Artaud saw no point in transferring power from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat because “The revolution to which Artaud subscribes has nothing to do with politics but is conceived explicitly as an effort to redirect culture” (Sontag xli). Artaud’s goal was to develop “a new type of human personality” (Sontag xli–xlii) which, Sontag argues, led him toward a “theology of culture– and a soteriology” (Sontag xlii). Breton had previously been a great mentor to Artaud, who honored him as one would a saint. Artaud felt betrayed that Breton would submit to politics, and Breton ridiculed Artaud as both naïvé and subversive.

Artaud lashed out against Breton and Surrealism, calling the movement a “grotesque parody” of its original purpose (Artaud, “In Total Darkness”; ed. Sontag 139). Surrealism became just another institution that had failed him in his quest for salvation, another creation of creatures to destroy. He dismissed it as “a new kind of magic” and prayed “May the thick walls of the occult collapse once and for all on these impotent thinkers ... on these revolutionaries who revolutionize nothing” (Artaud, “In Total Darkness”; ed. Sontag 142). Artaud was left without a savior, as the Surrealists dismissed him as a heretic. His next move was actually quite reasonable: he would begin the formation of his own movement, his own theatrical theology. He would try to save himself. An intense soul-searching period followed his expulsion from the Surrealists, and much of it he wrote down and began forming the as-yet-untitled book that would become *The Theatre and Its Double*. Within this soul-searching, Artaud was drawn back to the Eastern philosophies which influenced his interest in Surrealism from the start. The definitive inspiration for him was seeing the Balinese dance troupe. Perhaps no theatrical experience besides Alfred Jarry would hold such sway over Artaud’s idea of the perfect theatre. He believed that somewhere between the mystical, disciplined codification of the Balinese, and the gleeful, chaotic vulgarity of *Ubu Roi* were lurking the new *Mysteries of Eleusis*—the semi-legendary, secretive, ancient Greek ritual that supposedly unlocked the mysteries of the universe. Anything occult may as well have been fact to Artaud, and he took as much hope from the thought that “at least once in this world” (Artaud, *Double* 52) there existed some type of performance which could:

resolve by conjunctions unimaginably strange to our waking  
minds, to resolve or even annihilate every conflict produced by the



antagonism of matter and mind, idea and form, concrete and  
abstract, and to dissolve all appearances into one unique expression  
which must have been the equivalent of spiritualized gold  
(Artaud, *Double* 52).

It is this primal urge that sparked Artaud's love for the Balinese dancers, which then blossomed into the Theatre of Cruelty. And it was that love he sought to prove on his quests to Mexico and Ireland.

## CHAPTER II

“It is useless to give excuses for this precise delirium.”

*The Theatre and Its Double* was written primarily between 1931 and 1935, a time when Artaud was no longer looking to his Continental contemporaries for the genius and salvation that he maintained theatre could provide. Sontag posits that “Just as Nietzsche harked back to the Dionysiac ceremonies [Mysteries of Eleusis] that preceded the secularized, rationalized, verbal dramaturgy of Athens, Artaud found his models in non-Western religious or magical theatre” (Sontag xxxix). It is no coincidence that Artaud’s most influential and cohesive work began after he witnessed a true, ancient ritualistic performance by the Balinese troupe. Sontag also points out that “Artaud does not propose the Theatre of Cruelty as a new idea within Western theatre” and that rather than basing his writing exactly on the theatre of any specific culture, his goal was to promote “a synthesis of elements from past societies and from non-Western and primitive societies of the present” (Sontag xxxix). This naturally flows from Artaud’s belief that the problems of theatre were the problems of society. If one was sick, the other would catch it. Therefore, theatre had to be culturally all-encompassing.

The ritual performances of Ancient Greece, the Balinese, the Tarahumara tribe in Mexico, and others were born not from a literary movement or a rationalized, authoritarian system like the *Comédie-Française* in Paris. The theatre of these cultures— be it *Oedipus Rex* or a rain dance— came from a deep-seated need for unity and spiritual release. This is why Artaud resented Breton’s turn to Marxism so strongly: while Surrealism originally advocated a world where dreams were more real than policemen, it was now embracing a system focused on material power. If Marxism was moving forward, “Artaud’s call to cultural revolution suggests a

program of heroic regression similar to that formulated by every great *anti*-political moralist of our time” (Sontag xli). In the preface to *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud articulates his view that the words civilization and culture were losing their meaning:

[A] cultivated ‘civilized’ man is regarded as a person instructed in systems, a person who thinks in forms, signs, representations—a monster whose faculty of deriving thoughts from acts, instead of identifying acts with thoughts, is developed to an absurdity (Artaud, *Double* 8).

Artaud argued that culture and civilization were in fact synonymous—any distinction in meaning was an artificial construct, another confusing trick of that hinderance, language. He did not see this problem in Eastern and primitive cultures. In fact, in comparing them to the culture of Europe, he saw the West as having lost its culture entirely,

What has lost us culture is our Occidental idea of art and the profits we seek to derive from it. ... True culture operates by exaltation and force, while the European ideal of art attempts to cast the mind in an attitude distinct from force but addicted to exaltation (Artaud, *Double* 10).

Artaud is essentially decrying the idea of using theatre as a political tool, while simultaneously critiquing the narrow mindset of art-for-art’s-sake. Artaud’s true belief about art and life stemmed from his conviction that “If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being compelled by their force” (Artaud, *Double* 8). Artaud saw a metaphysical

knowledge in other cultures' ritualistic theatre, and this compelled him beyond the confines of Surrealism, and eventually beyond France itself, in his search for the fiery magic that would transform the Western culture into one in tune with the forces of the universe.

Artaud scholar Kimberly Jannarone put forth what is perhaps the best summation of what Artaud wanted to happen after the publication of *The Theatre and Its Double*:

Artaud envisioned the Theatre of Cruelty as this: an epidemic event that would destroy the individual and overturn every human creation, including language and civilization; liberate itself from all logic, matter, and history; "assault and benumb" the individual; operate in the realm of myth and image; and impose the vision of an omnipotent director on a "hypnotized" and surrounded assembly (Jannarone, *Artaud and His Doubles* 1).

In short, Artaud was seeking to create a truly primal experience, with no place for concepts of politics or philosophy. This primalism is an echo of his Gnostic tendencies, as Goodall puts it, "Artaud equates creation with cruelty" (Goodall 17). Though it should be noted, he also sees it as necessary. The essence of art then is a cycle of creation and destruction, each precipitating the other. The flaw Artaud saw in his contemporaries was that they failed to realize and pay attention to this fact. In the preface to *Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud reiterates, "To our disinterested and inert idea of art an authentic culture opposes a violently egoistic and magical, i.e., *interested* idea" (Artaud, *Double* 11). He lauds the practice of totemism, a decidedly non-Gnostic practice, but valuable because of its magical possibilities. To Artaud, "totemism is an actor, for it moves, and has been created in behalf of actors" and its virtue is that it is "barbaric and primitive..."

savage, i.e., entirely spontaneous” (Artaud, *Double* 10). Theatre in Artaud’s mind is literally the rebelling of nothing against everything:

But the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way. The actor ... makes gestures, he moves; and although he brutalizes forms, nevertheless behind them and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation (Artaud, *Double* 12).

Artaud denounced a theatre that relies on material things, but returned again and again to words like *move* and *force*. He declares that “the fixation of the theater in one language—written words, music, lights, noises—betokens its imminent ruin, ... and the dessication [*sic*] of the language accompanies its limitation” (Artaud, *Double* 12). His forceful urge to destroy artifice continues apace. But Artaud was not calling for anything like realism or naturalism. His inspirations, the *Mysteries of Eleusis*, the Balinese dance drama, and (increasingly at this point of his process) the rituals of Mexican natives, are not derived from the “real” world. If they were, then he would again be subjected to material things. Instead, what Artaud was calling true theatre could also be called spiritual theatre, or more accurately, theatre of the spirit, for it is not a given spirituality that informs the theatre, but it is the theatre giving life to a primeval spirit. The actor, as Artaud saw it, exists in a primal state, and a conduit to a secret world, what he called shadows: “For the theater ... remains a question of naming and directing shadows: and the theater, not confined to a fixed language and form, not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life” (Artaud, *Double*

12). He applies this to culture as well, as culture is a means of keeping theatricality in life.

Artaud began to see life and theatre are mirrors of each other; indeed, the double of theatre is life.

With all that can be said of Artaud being a neo-Gnostic, a Surrealist extremist, or a one-man movement of his own, the closest literary parallel for *The Theatre and Its Double* would be Romanticism. Jannarone highlights the many areas in which Artaud's thinking aligns with this counterculture of the early- to mid-19th century, "[Theatre of Cruelty] has an affinity with the dark, conflict-oriented, pessimistic, totalizing worldview of the counter-Enlightenment" (Jannarone 44). As stated, Artaud did not posit the Theatre of Cruelty as an entirely new movement, but a rebirth of old ideals that had once made theatre great: "it was appropriate to resuscitate an ancient Myth which pierces the heart of today's anxieties" (Artaud, Preface to *Cenci* xi). The movement was defined by French literary titan and playwright Victor Hugo in his 1827 preface to his drama *Cromwell* as the juxtaposition of the grotesque and the sublime for "it is of the fruitful union of the grotesque and the sublime types that modern genius is born" (Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* 35). Hugo goes on to state that these two states of being "dispute possession of man from the cradle to the tomb" (Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* 59). The combination of sublime and grotesque within every person is the defining characteristic of Romantic drama. It can also be strongly compared to the Gnostic notion of the mind's struggle for transcendence over the body. Hugo himself believed that beauty is most clearly known when one views its opposite (Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* 42), but that in "the idea of men of modern times, however, the grotesque plays an enormous part" (Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* 39). Certainly the grotesque played such a part in Artaud's day, and he blamed the cultural framework for distracting people

from sublimity, “It is idiotic to reproach the masses for having no sense of the sublime, when the sublime is confused with one or another of its formal manifestations” (Artaud, *Double* 74). He was referring again to the tyranny of language, specifically written language. It seemed to him that culture labeled masterpieces arbitrarily: “if for example a contemporary publisher does not understand *Oedipus Rex*, I shall make bold to say that it is the fault of *Oedipus Rex* and not of the public. Sophocles speaks grandly perhaps, but ... it is as if he speaking beside the point.” (Artaud, *Double* 75). Artaud, completely unawares, repeated Hugo almost verbatim (Artaud, *Double* 75). Hugo did not see himself as writing masterpieces, but only grand works of beauty to elevate the human spirit, for he believed, “The human intellect is always on the march, or, if you prefer, in movement, and languages with it. ... The day when they become *fixed*, they are dead” (Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* 114). Just so Artaud argued: “If the public does not frequent our literary masterpieces, it is because those masterpieces are literary, that is to say *fixed*; and fixed in forms which no longer respond to the needs of the time” (Artaud, *Double* 75; *emphasis added*). The fluidity of language is a hallmark of Romanticism, and one that Artaud was dedicated to expanding.

In the midst of writing what would become *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud attempted to start doing just that with his play *The Cenci* (1935), an adaptation of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1819 Romantic melodrama. This piece, Artaud declared, was not entirely a work of Theatre of Cruelty, but it was close. It was to be his first imposition of “the movements of nature, that kind of gravitation which moves the plants and moves human beings like plants” (Artaud, “Preface to *Cenci*” vii), the movements of the Balinese, onto Western theatre. He wanted the play to begin the process of replacing spoken language with a clearer, universal language of

action, “the gestures and movements in this production are just as important as the dialogue; the purpose of the dialogue is to act as a reagent to the other elements” (Artaud, Preface to *Cenci* vii–viii). Artaud did not think France was prepared for full-scale Theatre of Cruelty, so he decided to adapt Shelley’s dark, angst-ridden, melodrama. Artaud cites “romantic melodramas in which the improbability will become an active and concrete element of poetry” (Artaud, *Double* 99) as a part of the program for a real Theatre of Cruelty—though he does not contradict his call for no more masterpieces in that he names no specifics.

In an article laying out the differences between Artaud’s version of *The Cenci* and Shelley’s original, Jane Goodall points out that their approaches are distinguished by Shelley’s use of literary language and Artaud’s use of physical language: “[Artaud] scored Shelley’s work for performance by translating its central ideas from verbal exposition to a multiple coded arrangement involving complex interplay between different modes of expression” (Goodall, “Artaud’s Revision” 118). Shelley stated in his Romantic manifesto “Defense of Poetry” (1821), “language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone” (Shelley “Defense of Poetry” 5). Artaud, of course, was incensed by the arbitrariness of language, and in his search for a means to defeat it, he began to be fascinated by cultures with more ancient, unformalized languages, such as the Tarahumara, in whose communications he believed “It is the *act* which shapes the thought” (Artaud, *Anthology* 67; *emphasis added*). Artaud saw actions as the concrete progenitors of thoughts and the visible signs of imagination. This is what he called the “metaphysics” of theatre in *The Theatre and Its Double*, and why he found a transcendent moment in seeing the Balinese troupe, whom he would not have understood verbally, but understood perfectly in action. The Romantics also were enraptured by exotic



cultures, and Shelley saw poetic value in ancient ritual movement, “In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order” (Shelley, “In Defense of Poetry” 3). Artaud expressed a Romantic value twice yet again when he stated the nobility of Balinese theatre was in that it was “based upon age-old traditions which have preserved intact the secrets of using gestures, intonations, and harmonies in relation to the senses and on all possible levels” (Artaud, *Double* 47). The Romantics thought that true heroism was in chasing the unseen, not necessarily in a religious context, but in a humanist ideal of manifesting the self. Shelley, an atheist like Artaud, openly longed for a transcendence—humanity could bring about by its own power. Jannarone provides a list of areas in which Artaud and the Romantics, or counter-Enlightenment, coincide. Not every view was shared by Shelley or Hugo, but were tenets of those who saw the Age of Enlightenment as the zenith of man:

Counter-Enlightenment thinkers counter empirical science with vitalism, rationalism with irrationalism, putting belief not in man’s powers but in forces either more sublime (God) or more primitive (organic energies). Such thinkers oppose individual psychology with an extreme de-individualization, an emphasis on annihilation of self and union with a primitive, universal, or national spirit. History is countered by Myth ... as discrete historical events, political negotiations, and the like, fall into insignificance compared to another order—fate, destiny, divinity—that reveals the true nature of events. Materialism is countered by mystery so that

magic, religion, or essential forces can reclaim their primary places  
in the experience of the world (Jannarone 51).

This equally sums up Romanticism and Theatre of Cruelty. In a lecture he gave while at the University of Mexico, Artaud said much the same thing as those Counter-Enlightenment thinkers in a critique of Surrealism, “God, nature, man, life, death, and destiny are merely forms which life assumes when it is regarded by the thinking process of reason” (Artaud, *Destiny*; ed. Sontag 359). Reason, the architect of language, crushes destiny and “Europe has dismembered nature with her separate sciences” (Artaud, *Destiny*; ed. Sontag 359). Only the total, primal, theatre can stand against the forces of the Enlightenment.

Why should it matter to identify Artaud with Romanticism? He would surely have balked at the idea, as he did with finding allegiance to any Western worldview after falling out with the Surrealists. It is helpful to recognize this profound connection as a means of clarifying Artaud’s ideas. Artaud believed in a continuous cycle of creativity and destruction, and he fits perfectly in it. Romanticism develops, falls, Artaud revitalizes its core, falls, the theatrical counterculture of the 1960s rediscovers Theatre of Cruelty, puts it into practice, falls, and so forth. Of his few completed dramatic works, the only full-length is an adaptation of a Romantic-era melodrama. While Romanticism is commonly thought of as an elevated, flowery, poetic movement, the interests of its influencers were fundamentally primal. Even the most seemingly innocent Romantic genre, the pastoral, is based on the ideal of living in and as a part of the natural world. The Romantics were dedicated to naming and directing shadows, and Artaud was indeed a new generation of shadow, defying the scientific ideal of categorizing everything, bringing everything to light, and giving movement once again to destiny. “The theatre ... is in *no thing*, but makes

use of everything” (Artaud, *Double* 12). More than anything, Artaud’s primal quests to Mexico and Ireland mark him soundly as a bona fide Romantic hero whom Hugo and Shelley may have admired as he traveled to far-off lands, not knowing the languages, knowing only that somewhere in the distance dwelt the repletion of his passion.

### CHAPTER III

“No one knows how to scream any more in Europe.”

Clearly, Primal Theatre, what Artaud called Total Theatre, is not wholly original to him. Nor is it original to the Romantics. It is original only to the idea of theatre itself, the embodiment of important—or mythical—characters by mortals in a genuine attempt to connect with, as Artaud put it, destiny. While it sounds at first to be very far-reaching, complex, and perhaps hallucinatory, the Theatre of Cruelty is little more than a returning to basics, a casting off of decadence. As Artaud explains in a chapter of *The Theatre and Its Double* titled “Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène,” theatre lost its way in seeking the security of the establishment:

The contemporary theater is decadent because it has lost the  
feeling on the one hand for seriousness and on the other for  
laughter; because it has broken away from gravity, from effects  
that are immediate and painful—in a word, from Danger  
(Artaud, *Double* 42).

Danger: when human beings are most in touch with the primal self. As Artaud points out, this is not exclusive to tragic stories; true comedy is also the eliciting of a primal reaction, “In a Marx Brothers film a man thinks he is going to take a woman in his arms but instead gets a cow, which moos” (Artaud, *Double* 43). This scenario which threatens reason creates the reaction of laughter in its audience. Artaud was quite fond of the Marx Brothers, because he saw in their films an anarchic rebellion against the confines of reason. That rebellion was the force he spoke of, which could lift the stuff of earth into true theatre, and was the source of the false theatre of Europe which had “broken away from the spirit of profound anarchy which is the root of all poetry”

(Artaud, *Double* 42). He labeled August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) as an example of ideal theatre, "one of those model plays whose staging is for a director the crowning achievement of his career" (Artaud, "Strindberg's *Dream Play*" ed. Sontag 163). *A Dream Play* was to be the center of the bill of the Alfred Jarry Theatre, which Artaud co-ran with Roger Vitrac from 1926-28. That of course was still during his time with the Surrealists, but Strindberg and Jarry remained idols for Artaud into and beyond Theatre of Cruelty. As he wrote to Roger Vitrac, "Strindberg revolted, as had Jarry ... as I have. We are producing this play [*A Dream Play*] as vomit against society" (Knapp, "Lettres d'Antonin Artaud à Roger Vitrac" *Nouvelle Revue Française* 63). As much as Artaud called for a theatre that focused less on writers and more on directors and actors, because writers rely primarily on written language rather than movement, he saw the force he was looking for in these playwrights' works.

Both Strindberg's and Jarry's plays have intense vitality and spring forth from a world that is profoundly cruel. There is a spirit of anarchy in them. Strindberg's earlier naturalist works, such as *The Outlaw* (1871), *Master Olof* (1872), and *Miss Julie* (1888), firmly championed the non-bourgeoisies. Authority was in constant question for Strindberg, particularly religious authority as in his epic, medieval-style station drama *To Damascus* (1898-1904). Later plays, such as *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), left the grime of Naturalism for the gossamer of Symbolism—literally with *The Ghost Sonata* being performed behind a scrim, which filtered the whole play to have a hazy, dream-like quality. This was precisely the kind of imagistic, illusionary stagecraft that Artaud was pursuing. It is almost needless to point out the spirit of anarchy that fuels Jarry's singular work *Ubu Roi*, which premiered in 1896, the year Artaud was born. Though it premiered four years early, *Ubu Roi* was the first play of the 20th

century. The entire aesthetics of the early-, mid-, and even late-20th century avant-garde movements took inspiration from Jarry's rotund, beswirled anti-hero. The play spawned the last of the three definitive theatre riots of French theatre history and fired the imaginations of young artists, like Artaud, who hungered for revolution, as Artaud biographer Bettina L. Knapp points out: "Artaud considered Jarry to be his spiritual ancestor" (Knapp 48). Artaud wanted very much to recapture Jarry's "corrosive way of looking at life that is somewhat mitigated by a powerful sense of humor. ... Jarry indicat[ed] his disdain for *appearances* by *dislocating* or *dissociating* what seems rational in the character or object at hand" (Knapp 48). Knapp's emphasis on those words, *appearances*, *dislocating*, and *dissociating* highlight the achievements of Jarry which Artaud sought to replicate and which could just as well be applied to Strindberg's writing, particularly *A Dream Play*.

Both Jarry and Strindberg wrote in a primal mode. They were not confined by any kind of formulaic tendencies, whether it was Strindberg's early basic, naturalist dialogue or later ethereal dreamscapes, or Jarry's boisterously nihilistic vulgarity. Strindberg and Jarry wrote plays which inspired movements—revolutions—and that is what Artaud wanted to do. It is also worth noting that while Jarry and Strindberg faced blowback and censorship for their controversial writings, eventually they found their respective audiences and were seen as visionaries. They were, in a word, successful. Nothing haunts a person with writer's block more strongly than the feeling that success—material, metaphysical, or otherwise—is slipping ever further away. The bluster and swagger that marks Artaud's exceptional confidence in *The Theatre and Its Double* is due to the fact that he saw it as his call to revolution, his Strindberg/Jarry moment. After becoming disillusioned with Surrealism and the dissolution of

the Alfred Jarry Theatre with Vitrac, Artaud's soteriology led him to seek a new savior. As he grew older, Artaud often painted himself as a strikingly Judeo-Christian messiah, due in no small part to his dabbling with Kabbalah, alongside Buddhism and the other disparate mysticisms. He depicted his struggle to create a force or movement as a salvific act: "My heart is that eternal Rose come from the magic of the initial Cross" (Artaud, *Anthology* 101). Crucifixion is not only a path to eternal life, it is an escape from the confines of self, in that "He who crucified Himself never returned to himself. Never. ... I want only to be such a poet forever, who sacrificed himself in the Kabbalah of self for the immaculate conception of things" (Artaud, *Anthology* 101). Knapp expounds on Artaud's Kabbalah influence by comparing him to the apocryphal figure of Enoch, who was transmogrified into the fiery angel Metatron: "Artaud felt the same burning sensations Enoch had experienced, that is, the pain one must know as part of an initiation process which permits one to cross from one world to another" (Knapp 28). But this initiation simultaneously struck Artaud with fear: "Added to his dolor was the terrifying reality of being severed from his *Self*, doomed to a state of oblivion in limbo, fully communing neither with his inner world nor with the world about him" (Knapp 28). As Artaud wrote in his "Fragments of a Journal in Hell" (1927), which was written in the despairing aftermath of Surrealist rejection, "It is this contradiction between my inner facility and my external difficulty which creates the torment I am dying of" (Artaud, *Anthology* 43). While he felt a profound spiritual stirring within, he also felt that words were too weak a vessel to contain his ideas, which he attributed to the weakness of flesh in general: "I am human by my hands and my feet, my guts, my meat heart, my stomach whose knots fasten me to the rot of life" (Artaud, *Anthology*

43). Knapp points out that the idea of knots, to which Artaud repeatedly refers in “Fragments,” is integral to the Eastern mysticism which gave Artaud solace:

These ‘knots’ that the Tibetan, the Buddhist, and the Hebrew mystics refer to have a dual nature. They keep the soul a prisoner within the individual’s body during his existence, but they also protect him against the ‘flood of the divine stream’ or in psychological terms, the contents of the collective unconscious, which would crush or drown him (Knapp 38).

The knot metaphor is then intimately tied not only to Artaud’s own view of his mental state, but to the acting exercise of Charles Dullin, swimming against the stream. While Artaud would have rejected the psychological interpretation out of hand, for his experiences in asylums instilled in him a permanent intolerance for psychology, the fear of drowning in the flood of the divine stream was just as vitally active in him.

Although Artaud believed psychology could not cure him—he saw it as veiling his difficulties at best and altering his Self at worst—he did believe in the curative power of theatre. This belief was a byproduct of Artaud’s deep conviction that theatre was intended and ought to be a magic ritual. Artaud’s primal desire to connect thought, movement, and action had been done before, further back even than the Romantics, “Understandably, Greek drama, . . . attracted Artaud, for art also played an important role in ancient Greece” (Greene 131). Ancient Greece did not have the problem Artaud saw in contemporary France, where art and theatre were accoutrements to culture. Theatrical scholar Naomi Greene connects Artaud’s attraction to ancient Greek theatre to the fact that Greek society existed in the world of an all-encompassing



myth: “Because of an inability to distinguish between the abstract and the concrete, mythical thinking places matter and the mind, or physical and psychic phenomena, in the same category” (Greene 132). Of course the ancient Greeks had some concept of the abstract, as evidenced by Plato; however, even that idea of abstraction is connected to something objective. Platonism would stipulate that humans have an abstract idea of beauty because there exists, *somewhere*, the objectively Beautiful thing. Even a concrete concept such as “tree” is made concrete by its objective “tree-ness,” sensible, physical attributes which take away the abstraction of the general term as they accumulate. But in keeping with Greene’s point, the Greeks are still exceptional in respect to ancient cultures for they had some distinction between the subjectivity of words and the objectivity of senses; they would understand that “soft” has many connotations, but a person would not feel a slab of marble and call it soft. So when Artaud is decrying Reason, civilization, language, and for that matter psychology, what he is really decrying is equivocation. Greene posits this in the context of primitive, myth-based cultures which saw existence as black and white:

Mythical thinking doesn’t merely confuse the abstract and the concrete, but also establishes connections between all things, ...  
Space, time, and number are all interconnected for the following reason: Because primitive peoples constantly distinguished between the sacred and the profane, all objects, and actions, were either worshipped or feared (Greene 133).

Very often the objects or actions that were feared were also worshipped, and that is the reaction which Artaud hoped audiences would have to the Theatre of Cruelty. It is also remarkably similar to Aristotle's call for effective tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; *in the form of action, not of narrative*; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions (Aristotle, *Poetics* Par VI; *emphasis added*).

Not only is the classic definition of catharsis an affirmation that fear plays an important role in theatre, it is also a reminder of the necessity of action. Aristotle argues that the medium of theatre is action; language and narrative inform or embellish it, but the action is the heart of the artform. Artaud had little more use for philosophy than psychology, but here he is yet again echoing words of those who came before: "Furthermore these concrete gestures must have an efficacy strong enough to make us forget the very necessity of speech" (Artaud, *Double* 108). His argument that danger was the primary element missing from contemporary theatre is equivalent to him saying that the theatre he saw was not inspiring the proper level of fear in its audience. And Artaud related this specifically to the lack of dynamic action in staging classical tragic plays, "if we are clearly so incapable of giving an idea of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, that is worthy of them, it is probably because we have lost the sense of their theater's physics." (Artaud, *Double* 108). He stated that speech serves only to abstract what action makes concrete (Artaud, *Double* 108). Both Artaud and Aristotle were operating from the

idea that theatre was a mechanism of social consciousness. The danger, pity, and fear that the audience was meant to feel was not an abstract notion but real, primal empathy. The fear was a holy fear, like that reserved for gods, with actors as their ministers and directors as high priests (for Artaud at least, though Aristotle would have mostly likely loved the concept of a director).

The idea of both Tragedy and Theatre of Cruelty was to “stage events, not men” (Artaud, *Double* 126), for the real tragedy of the ancient Greek dramas was in their universality. To read *Oedipus Rex*, for example, as merely the downfall of one man is wrong. It is the breakdown of a family, a city, a civilization. The play is part of a cycle that shows the cosmic repercussions of human action. And even a stand-alone tragedy such as *Macbeth*, though the titular thane may get the most soliloquies, is not at its core just about a single self-destructive madman. It is about the consequences of doing evil—breaking the natural order. Lady Macbeth sleepwalks because the natural order of the universe has been upended; again, universal reverberations. These tyrants may shake the heavens with their transgressions, but what butterfly effect might our plebian sins cause?

During the age of French Neoclassicism, aristocratic theatregoers began to long once again for the beauty, the idealism, of ancient Greek drama. After Cardinal Richelieu established the *Académie française* in 1635, French theatre was held to a strict paradigm, based on philosophers like Aristotle and Seneca, dedicated to preserving the purity of the French language and decorum on the French stage. Two years later in 1637, Pierre Corneille’s *Le Cid* premiered at the Théâtre du Marais in Paris and caused the first of the three great French theatre riots (it should be noted here that the other two were caused by Victor Hugo’s *Hernani*, which spawned Romanticism, and Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*). *Le Cid* was riotous because Corneille intentionally violated

the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. This shocked the Académie, as did some of the suggestive material of the play. However, the play was a success with audiences, and later was accepted as a staple of French dramatic literature, causing Neoclassicism to pass out of fashion. But it was the Neoclassical movement which created the idea of French dramatic literature. This was the period that gave rise not only to Corneille, but to Jean Racine and Molière, playwrights who are still regarded not only as three of the greatest French writers, but three of the most important writers of history.

Still, the idea of literary drama birthed through Neoclassicism and authoritative by the Académie persisted. Artaud detested the idea of academics hand-selecting which art was deemed acceptable. He wrote that this “conformism makes us confuse sublimity, ideas, and things with the forms they have taken in time and in our minds—in our snobbish, precious, aesthetic mentalities which the public does not understand” (Artaud, *Double* 76). Indeed it was because the public did not understand the objections of Académie to *Le Cid* that they revolted in favor of it. To them, the masses, it was a good story, it spoke to them, and because of them, the masses, it came to be regarded as Corneille’s masterpiece. But Artaud called for “No More Masterpieces.” What Neoclassicism did was put the focus of theatre on intellectual constructs rather than visceral impact. The primary concerns of the Académie were on language and form, while acting and staging were left to those who did not care about getting their hands dirty. Some writers, like Molière, had enough clout to play around with the formula and surprise the authorities when what they *saw* was more enjoyable than what they *read*. But Molière wrote comedies, and the section of *Poetics* dealing with comedy did not survive to be interpreted. Regardless, the rigorous constructs of Neoclassical drama were still ingrained into the French theatrical conscious of

Artaud's day, and even the great rebels *against* Neoclassicism, Romantics like Hugo, Alexandre Dumas *père*, and Alexandre Dumas *fils*, were held as literary heroes, masters of the French language and written word. And once something became enshrined by bourgeois authority, Artaud declared it "detached art, ... a charm which exists only to distract our leisure, [that] is a decadent idea and an unmistakable example of our power to castrate" (Artaud, *Double* 77). While Neoclassicism attempted to revive the standards of ancient Greek drama, the academic dictators of the movement were not focused on danger, pity, and fear, but on formulaic literary checklists. The beauty they encouraged from playwrights was purely linguistic, a glorification of French as a compeer to Greek. But the primal magic, the ritual action, the holy fear were not part of the curriculum.

All of this is easy to claim in retrospect. Theatre at the time of Corneille, Racine, and Molière was mostly reserved for kings and cardinals, and the foremost motivation was the imitation of beauty. The goal of these writers was to get command performance at court, not to appeal to the unwashed masses, and they met that goal. The Romantics introduced the element of the grotesque, and thereafter so-called high art theatre became more accessible to lower classes of society. Theatre was no longer just for the beautiful people. Boulevard Theatre on the outskirts of Paris became as influential on culture as what happened at the Comédie-Française and other state-sponsored theatres. By Artaud's day there was still a clear distinction between the literary elite and the bleeding-edge proletariat, but the touchstones were being created by the unwashed masses (Knapp 49). And Artaud was the least washed of them all.

There must have been something primal, something which spoke to the spirit in the Neoclassical plays. Nothing purely artificial could have survived so many centuries, even if it

was being propped up by the Académie. The urge to elevate beauty is certainly a basic characteristic of humanity. As Artaud said, “Every emotion has organic bases” (Artaud, “The Theatre of the Seraphim”; ed. Sontag 276). The Romantics had introduced the grotesque, but Artaud believed they did not go far enough. They still relied on the old system, language and writing, as their means of communicating. If theatre was to truly evolve, as Artaud saw it, it would have to throw off all semblance of refinement and plunge into a form that was based not on words but actions. Artaud acknowledged:

[A]ll these gropings, researches, and shocks will culminate nevertheless in a work *written down*, fixed in its least details, and recorded by new means of notation. The composition, the creation, instead of being made in the brain of an author, will be made in nature itself, in real space, and the final result will be as strict and as calculated as that of any written work whatsoever, with an immense objective richness as well (Artaud, *Double* 111-112).

Essentially what Artaud was hoping for was a revival of the oral tradition, the crucible of primal theatre, though he did admit the importance of having a written record of the action portrayed onstage. With a tangible written work, the abstract Theatre of Cruelty would become concrete. The rituals of the Balinese, the Tarahumara, and others that Artaud most admired were written down as an afterthought, or by Occidental people for an historical record. Even in ancient Greece, plays were usually only written down once, if at all, and the actors learned their parts by memorizing the recitations of the *didaskalos*. Knapp shows that Artaud saw himself in that tradition:

Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare, Racine, Molière ...  
had dealt with man's profound and eternal aspects, ... because  
their works possessed 'purgative' powers: they instilled fear and  
chilled audiences with terror and fervor. Modern dramatists,  
Artaud reasoned, must find their own *mystique*, their own vital and  
moving force—that special, particular power which will strike hard  
at man's very vitals (Knapp 47).

What was cathartic for Sophocles', Shakespeare's, and Racine's respective audiences drew from their individual and social experiences. Their plays could potentially have a cathartic effect outside of their times and places, but they could just as likely feel dated and irrelevant, as Artaud insisted, without a relevant interpretation, one that tapped into the primal elements of the original text. The works of these literary playwrights purged pity and fear when they were the Myths that civilizations were based on, but they had fallen out of the "living religion. They are not *original* experiences" (Knapp 89) and so came to be viewed at a distance. They were no longer primal, they were domesticated. A maxim from Artaud's private writings reads "Fear is poetry" (Artaud, "Excerpts"; ed. Sontag 190) and in the Aristotelian sense the inverse is also true. This is not to say that Artaud was an Aristotelian any more than he was a Romantic. But he was also not modern, or a modernist, "If anything should be blown up, it is the foundations of most of the habits of modern thinking, European or otherwise" (Artaud, "Manifesto for a Theatre that Failed"; ed. Sontag 162). He wanted to go back to that mythical time when the danger felt real when the True Theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty, was an act of life and human instinct.

Real Primal Theatre could only truly come to be in that natural, real space, the Double of theatre which was life itself, “the theater must also be considered as the Double, not of this direct, everyday reality... but of another archetypal and dangerous reality” (Artaud, *Double* 48). Artaud saw the theatre creator as an alchemist, not subject to scientific laws, but one who could explore that dangerous reality, “a reality of which the Principles, like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry back into the obscurity of the deep” (Artaud, *Double* 48). Those Principles are the subjective. The theatrical alchemist creates catharsis by making the subjective objective, for “dread has been aroused within the audience by something concrete, not by language which is in itself an abstraction” (Knapp 87). As a director, Artaud channeled the abstract. He “would follow no set rules, but rather be guided by intuition, inspiration, chance. ... he tried to bring forth ... ‘a magnetic inter-communication between the spirit of the actor and the spirit of the director’” (Knapp 58). In Artaud’s mind this was the whole of theatre, the medium and the messenger. This was the power he found in the works of Strindberg and Jarry, writers whom he viewed as opening worlds, not limiting with words, creators of possibility. They wrote in a living language which, while not Theatre of Cruelty per se, was certainly not tied to a literary ideal of perfection. Primal Theatre is at once ancient and contemporary, codified and free, mysterious and completely clear. Artaud knew it when he saw it, but not often when he heard or read it. His production of *A Dream Play* was not well received and the Alfred Jarry Theatre soon shuttered its doors. After that experience, Artaud was more convinced than ever that actions were the magic gateway to feeling and truth, catharsis, whereas language was the chain to confusion.



## CHAPTER IV

“All problems are incomprehensible.”

From the outset of his career as a writer, Artaud struggled with the limitations of language. From May 1923 to June 1924, he was in correspondence with Jacques Rivière, editor of the literary magazine *La Nouvelle revue française*. Artaud was still pursuing poetry at this time and had submitted a few poems to Rivière for publication. They began exchanging letters when Rivière sent Artaud a note of rejection, in which he also stated his interest in the poems and his wish to meet their author. Artaud's response was a long and very impassioned defense of his poems, not only for their publication, but for their very existence. Artaud saw his poems as miracles, almost like children who barely survived infancy: “My thought abandons me at every level. From the simple fact of thought to the external fact of its materialization in words” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 31). Artaud was already well versed in many of the ideas which would shape his later works, the Gnostic notions, some occult interest, the reverence for Buddhist and Tibetan spirituality, and he was eager to display his knowledge to Rivière, to show they were in fact equals. But he also freely admitted his mental disturbances, those thoughts he could not keep hold of, “Words, shapes of sentences, internal directions of thought, simple reactions of the mind—I am in constant pursuit of my intellectual being” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 31). Artaud argued his lifelong thesis in this first letter to Rivière: “It is very important to me that the few manifestations of *spiritual* existence which I have been able to give myself not be regarded as nonexistent because of the blemishes and awkward expressions they contain” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 32). This

is certainly a germinal thought for the Theatre of Cruelty, yet to be nurtured by the Balinese dancers, holding words as jailers of his spirit just as much as flesh.

Artaud already saw literary authority as an oppressor to his work as an artist, and summed up his judgment that it is not the eloquence of form but the purity of thought which shows true value: “Do you think that one can allow less literary authenticity and effectiveness to a poem which is imperfect but filled with powerful and beautiful things than to a poem which is perfect but without much internal reverberation?” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 32). This is a rare instance of him referring to his own work, the product of his spirit, as beautiful. While Artaud would later position himself as a disciple of the grotesque, that was only because he saw it as the quickest route to the sublime. Indeed, he argued to Rivière that it was precisely *because* his poems were abrupt, disturbed and unpolished that they were beautiful. Rivière responded shortly and politely, noting that he was moved by Artaud’s honesty. Artaud did not respond for months, wounded that he had “presented [him]self to [Rivière] as a mental case, a genuine psychic anomaly, and [Rivière] answered [him] with a literary judgment” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 34). Artaud felt that language was hindering both himself and Rivière from truthfully communicating with each other. This was the mystery of the inner world, that magic realm he would later dedicate himself to diving. It was

Something furtive which robs me of the words *that I have found*,  
which reduces my mental tension, which is gradually destroying in  
its substance the body of my thought, which is even robbing me of  
those idioms with which one expresses oneself and which translate  
accurately the most inseparable, the most localized, the most living

inflections of thought (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed.

Sontag 35).

Words are not adequate to express the thought process. Idioms exist for this express purpose. They are collections of words that can conveniently give an indication of a thought without having to laboriously organize a thought. The comfort of a cliché, such as “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” is that while it is not really communicating anything profound, it is *saying* something, a reassurance that yes, some things are true even if they are relatively meaningless out of context. The abstract/concrete dichotomy strikes again.

As their epistolary correspondence continued, Rivière became less concerned about helping Artaud with his poetry, and more concerned about helping him with his mind. He tried to comfort and reassure Artaud that help was available and that it could help Artaud to better express himself. Artaud had already been sent to a sanitarium by his parents in 1915 (when he was 19 years old) for symptoms of what today would be diagnosed as depression. In 1918 he was placed in a clinic in Switzerland, after being discharged from his obligatory military service for ill health. He remained there for two years and subsequently moved to Paris to pursue painting and writing. It was this personal history that caused Artaud to viscerally reject Rivière’s advice to seek professional help: “I am a man who had suffered much from the mind, and as such I have the *right* to speak” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 36). Artaud had been through the hospital system and had become, if anything, more paranoid and nervous. The only solace he could see was acceptance as an artist.

He expressed this in his concluding letters to Rivière, whose words give an impression of true concern for Artaud’s well being, “I am not habitually an optimist; but I refuse to despair of

you. My sympathy for you is very great; ... I am keeping your poem. Send me everything you write” (Rivière, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 41). Words proved a bane for Rivière as well, for Artaud saw his letters as little more than condescending pats on the back. However, this fueled a defiance in Artaud, and he resolved that if he was just a non-literary, unwashed plebian, he would embrace it: “I have agreed once and for all to give in to my inferiority. ... I know it is possible to think further than I think. ... I will not allow my thought to be lost” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 36). He was done with trying to be established, “Why lie, why try to put on a literary level something which is the cry of life itself” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 43). Now he was beginning to see himself as the voice of the Primal.

The last words Artaud wrote to Rivière were indeed primal, “I no longer wish to feel anything but my brain” (Artaud, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 46). These proved to be words by which he lived. They would drive him to Mexico and Ireland, and to his third and final institutionalization. But equally profound are the closing words of Rivière’s last letter to Artaud: “There is no absolute danger except for him who abandons himself; there is no complete death except for him who acquires a taste for dying” (Rivière, “Correspondence w. Rivière”; ed. Sontag 41). There are perhaps no words which Artaud took more literally than these. Except instead of the warning Rivière intended, Artaud took them as a challenge. Danger would become the objective of his theatre, and his taste for dying would become ravenous.

By the time Artaud had rejected and been rejected by the Surrealists, founded and been forced to close the Alfred Jarry Theatre, collected his theatrical theories and published them as *The Theatre and Its Double*, he was firmly committed to overthrowing the tyranny of language.

He saw the reliances on dialogue as confining and “Longing for theatre with a metaphysical orientation like that of ancient Greece or the Orient, Artaud reject[ed] Western theater for its traditional preoccupation with psychological and social problems” (Greene 37). Artaud called for “spiritual anarchy” (Artaud, *Double* 79) and asserted “We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and *written* poetry” (Artaud, *Double* 78) in deference to poetry of movement; “Written poetry is worth reading once, and then it should be destroyed” (Artaud, *Double* 78). Doubtless the latter statement was prompted by a continual sting from Rivière’s rejection. Words and written poetry, he argued could have value to the individual who wrote them, but bore no fruit for humanity as a whole, “Once and for all, enough of this closed, egoistic, and personal art” (Artaud, *Double* 79). The art of the ancient Greeks, the Balinese and other Eastern cultures, even Shakespeare was not written as a psychological expression of personal experiences. These dramas were written to induce feelings, to affirm their respective cultural ideals, and to remind them that “the sky can still fall on our heads” (Artaud, *Double* 79). Instead, Artaud saw a theatre that would rather diagnose Hamlet’s disorders and ignore cosmic problems because it had no real culture on which to stand. This was due to the loss of movement in theatre, which Artaud regarded as the central force that gave theatre power: “the communicative power and magical mimesis of a gesture, ... carries its energy with it, and there are still human beings in the theater to manifest the force of the gesture made” (Artaud, *Double* 81). These human beings were both the actors and the spectators. Artaud proposed that those who beheld Theatre of Cruelty be treated “like the snakecharmer’s subjects ... conduct them *by means of their organisms* to an apprehension of the subtlest notions” (Artaud, *Double* 81). He wanted Theatre of Cruelty to be hypnotic, mesmerizing, entrancing, “the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds

him” (Artaud, *Double* 81). Just as the snakecharmer does not use words but sways back and forth playing an instrument that the snake cannot hear—Artaud was very conscious of his metaphor—Theatre of Cruelty actors would use gestures which vibrated within the most primal parts of spectators’ brains. Narrative itself was generally only the framework for the ritual at hand, “His ideal theatre would resemble the Oriental stage in which gestures often replace spoken language. Further, all the non-verbal elements of theater—sounds, lighting, music, decor—would assume roles of prime importance” (Greene 37). Theatre of Cruelty would be a sensual experience, discarding reason and elevating the primal.

Artaud attempted to implement the Theatre of Cruelty gradually, starting a company called Le Théâtre de la Cruauté, which produced his adaptation of *The Cenci*. Paris was not yet ready for full-fledged Theatre of Cruelty, and so Artaud went for the closest style, which he found in Shelley’s dark, angst-ridden, Romantic melodrama, though he was sure to increase the portrayals of sex and violence. He wanted to show human beings not as victims of psychology, but tools of destiny (Greene 38). As it turned out, Paris was not even ready for Theatre of Cruelty-lite, and *The Cenci* closed quickly; Le Théâtre de la Cruauté folded concurrently in May of 1935. Artaud saw this as the West’s final condemnation of his work, though there were some who saw it as his true awakening of self. Poet Pierre Jean Jouve noted after viewing *The Cenci*, “Artaud constantly plays against the house and wins. The spectator is continuously upset, and sometimes hurt, by the sharpest tension” (Jouve, qtd. in Greene 39). Such fear and pain were of course exactly what Artaud had hoped to impart, an unrelenting assault of catharsis. What he had not foreseen was that the anger the audience felt as they left the Théâtre de la Cruauté would not be directed at their corrupted culture, but at Artaud himself. André Frank, one Artaud’s

contemporary writers, commented years later that *The Cenci* was when Artaud turned away from all but himself: “I remember a terrible evening in the theatre, ... a chain of incomprehensions had decided his fate: Artaud, the tragic genius, Artaud the prophet magus, had come into existence” (Frank, qtd. in Esslin 42). Regardless of retrospect, the prophet magus was not accepted in the City of Lights. Theatre of Cruelty was supposed to save civilization, and himself, but still, eight years after Rivière’s rejection, Artaud’s thoughts were getting lost.

Esslin points out that Artaud was not completely destitute after the failure of *The Cenci* (Esslin 42). Artaud delivered several chapters of *The Theatre and Its Double* as lectures at the Sorbonne as the book went into publication. These lectures often devolved into spectacle, for he was ever more anxious to be heard (Greene 37). The acclaimed mime, actor, and director Jean-Louis Barrault, who had also studied under Charles Dullin, reached out to Artaud to form a collaboration. But Artaud had grown tired of trying to create theatre, “I no longer believe in being associated with others, particularly since my experience with Surrealism, because I no longer believe in the purity of mankind” (Artaud, qtd. in Esslin 42). Artaud was also deep in the throes of drug abuse, primarily heroin, opium, and absinthe, during the 1930s, as these helped slake his taste for death. It would not be out of the question to link his desire for a theatre of euphoria and terror with his chemical pursuit of the same. But after the collapse of his second theatre company and the most fully-realized production of his own playwriting, the intoxication of theatre had worn off. He had hit rock bottom and wanted to sober up.

Artaud felt utterly incomprehensible in Paris in 1935, fully unwelcome in his native place. His attempt to concretize Theatre of Cruelty had been muddled by critics and audiences—as well as by himself. Perhaps the key factor in why *The Cenci* came to nothing was

that Artaud himself did not fully commit to his ideas. He left the Theatre of Cruelty as an abstraction, hidden under layers of melodrama. The assault, the fear, the danger were most evident, but the ritual, the magic was not there to lift the physical to the metaphysical. Artaud never defended *The Cenci*, not as he had defended his poetry to Rivière. He never called any of his plays beautiful, conceding them as full-throated spectacles of grotesquery. However, he had one idea left, a project he speculated about in *The Theatre and Its Double* as a possible platform for Theatre of Cruelty. He published the framework, the themes and images he hoped to conjure, but he neglected any attempts to actually dramatize it, as if afraid of contaminating it with words. This, the true “first spectacle of the Theatre of Cruelty” (Artaud, *Double* 126), was to be titled *The Conquest of Mexico*.

This spectacle was to “stage events, not men” (Artaud, *Double* 126) and would pit the “fatuousness” of Christian European monarchy, and the feelings of colonial superiority that entails, against the organic, primal, pagan Aztecs, whose religion and monarchy Artaud saw as based on “indisputable spiritual principles” (Artaud, *Double* 126-7). The loose outline of four acts that Artaud provides are nevertheless action packed, following the internal turmoil of Montezuma as Hernando Cortez arrives and sows destruction. There is much imagery of violence, mayhem, poverty, as well as cities crumbling, ships setting sail, and embodied characters of the Zodiac. *The Conquest of Mexico* reads like the treatment for a silent film or a dance drama. The production costs would have been astronomical; the spectacle would have been uncut Theatre of Cruelty. And yet Artaud was done with staging theatrics. He wanted instead to live them: “Attributing his lack of success to European decadence and sterility, Artaud began to dream of a land uncontaminated by Western culture, a land where ancient beliefs and



pagan customs continued to exert a powerful influence. ... so now did Mexico beckon to Artaud” (Greene 39). He viewed Mexico in a mystical light, and though he did not expect to find financial success there, Artaud was immovably convinced he would find spiritual release. As always, there was a dark side, “he had become aware of the existence of a mystical cult based on drugs [in Mexico]” (Esslin 43). The drug was peyote, a wild cactus, which was said to be used by natives to transcend metaphysical boundaries and bring them to new knowledge of the universe. This seemed like the perfect escape to Artaud, he would leave Europe, and let Mexico conquer him.

Once again the question of language crops up. Artaud did not speak more than a few phrases of Spanish, much less any of the aboriginal tongues of Mexico. In fact he seems to have never made any concerted effort to learn the languages of any of the cultures that he believed held so much power. It is probable that he feared learning their languages would ruin the mystique, and he would feel just as confined by them as he felt by his own native French. It is well established that Artaud believed in the communicative power of silence. He always held to the primacy of concrete gestures over the vagaries of words. For this reason he commended cinema on several occasions. Artaud acted in several silent films, most notably playing Jean-Paul Marat in Abel Gance’s *Napoléon* (1927), an intellectual soldier in *Verdun, visions d'histoire* (1928) directed by Léon Poirier, and the monk who accompanied St. Joan in her final moments in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928) (Esslin 30). It was film work that provided most of Artaud’s income in the mid-to-late-1920s and also raised the ire of Surrealist leaders who saw film as a tawdry fad. But Artaud had respect for film because it could communicate without words. Images and movements of actors were the focal point; the words on

title cards were just enough to fill in extraneous information. With regard to films with sound, he had a deep and abiding respect for the work of the Marx Brothers, whose 1930 film *Animal Crackers* he called “an *extraordinary thing*: the liberation through the medium of the screen of a particular magic which the customary relation of words and images does not ordinarily reveal” (Artaud, *Double* 142). He called their 1931 film *Monkey Business* “a hymn to anarchy and wholehearted revolt” (Artaud, *Double* 144). He appreciated the humorous nature of the Marx Brothers, but moreover found in them an intoxicated intellectuality (Artaud, *Double* 144), all without understanding their spoken language. For Artaud, not knowing languages was not an impediment, it was a gift. It freed him from the linguistic confusion of implications and allowed him to connect with the force and spirit of human action. The Balinese performers relied entirely on codified movement and Artaud found metaphysical connection with them. The absurd logic of the Marx Brothers made more sense to him than Rivière’s literary reason ever could. So as Artaud left for Mexico on January 10, 1936, the last thing he was thinking about was the languages we would encounter. He was sure he would understand the people.

## CHAPTER V

### “This crucible of fire and real meat”

The voyage to Mexico was financed by, among others, Jean-Louis Barrault in a goodwill gesture in lieu of collaboration (Sontag, “Notes” in *Antonin Artaud* 634). Once there, Artaud intended to pay his way with fees earned as a guest lecturer at the University of Mexico. He landed at Veracruz on February 7, 1936, then made his way to Mexico City bearing a *titre de mission* from the French Ministry of Education, an uncharacteristic stamp of approval. He was well received by the French Consulate in Mexico as someone on the sharpest edge of culture and art in Paris. Local revolutionary magazines commissioned and translated articles in which he opined about the state of culture back on the Continent versus what he hoped to find in the New World. Artaud leapt readily at this opportunity for importance. With the bitter taste of Europe still on his tongue, he denounced its decadence and hawked the superiority of the primal native cultures over their Christian conquerors. When he discovered that Communism was alive and well in Mexico, he was quick to reiterate that it was avaricious, earthbound, and worst of all, a false revolution. Considering the Communist Party actually held far more political power in Mexico than it did in France, this was an ill-planned move by Artaud, who was hailed on his arrival as an ambassador of French culture—a title he never intended to bear or honor. He would have just as soon never thought of any European culture again; but he could not force himself to stop calling out its flaws. His purpose in Mexico was to find a culture without the flaws of 20th-century civilization, its equivocations, and its abstractions.

Artaud saw Mexico as the last stand of the Primal against Rationalization. Here was a country that in 1936 was still very much untamed. Governmental agencies were trying to force

industrialization and modernization, but the ancient history of Aztec and Mayan empires was not yet ready to die by the Western sword. Artaud commended this: “Modern Mexico, which is aware of the defects of European civilization, owes it to herself to resist this superstition about progress” (Artaud, “What I Came to Mexico to Do”; ed. Sontag 370). There was still much land preserved by indigenous tribes, such as the Tarahumara, whom Artaud was to seek out. He hoped to find in them a direct connection to true primal knowledge:

As for matter and mind, the Mexicans know only the concrete.  
And the concrete never tires of functioning, of drawing something  
from nothing: this is the secret we want to go and ask the  
descendants of high Mexican civilizations (Artaud, *Anthology* 67).

Whenever Artaud referred to Mexicans, he was thinking not just of the Spanish-speaking denizens of urban areas, but more so of the peoples like the Tarahumara who spoke and lived as their ancestors had before European colonization. He believed such tribes held “a key which can unlock all means of expressions” within their very beings: “Old Mexicans did not separate culture from civilization, nor culture from a personal knowledge distributed in the whole human organism” (Artaud, *Anthology* 67). Artaud held ancient Mexican cultures, particularly the Maya, in as high regard as he did the Balinese, Buddhists, or ancient Greeks. In fact, he respected them even more, for he never followed the dancers back to Bali, nor traversed to the Himalayas to meditate with Buddhist monks. By his post-Surrealist estimation, the East was as lost as the West: “As for the Orient, it is totally decadent. India is lost in the dream of a liberation which has value only after death. China is at war. The Japanese of today seem to be the fascists of the Far East” (Artaud, “What I Came to Mexico to Do”; ed. Sontag 371). And so it was that Artaud gave

up on the Old World entirely and set out for the New World, with all its ritual, mystery, and magic, the land where the First People still lived at one with nature and danced under the spell of peyote.

The idea that the Tarahumara were in fact descended from the first people to exist was not a concoction of Artaud's imagination. This was their own foundational Myth. For Artaud, and his deep fascination with all things occult and primal, this was a newly uncovered gospel. The Tarahumara maintained (and still do, for they still live on in approximately the same numbers as in Artaud's day) that their tribal history formed an unwavering line to the first souls to fall from the stars. The roots of the Tarahumara can, in fact, be traced to the earliest known Mesoamerican cultures. As such, Artaud believed that by contacting them, he would be essentially touching the dawn of humanity, and by extension the dawn of theatre. The very anticipation was inspiring to him. It was on the ship to Mexico that he felt metaphysically moved to title the book he had been working on *Le Théâtre et son double*, "For if the theatre is the double of life, life is the double of true theatre. ... The double of theatre is the *reality* which today's mankind leaves unused" (Esslin 44). There is no doubt Artaud was directed to this title while thinking of those mythical Old Mexicans for whom art, culture, civilization, and spirit were one and the same.

While Artaud did consider the Tarahumara and other indigenous Mexican peoples as primitive, he saw their primitivism as more human and valuable than compartmentalized civilization:

One must note that the lowest Mayan barbarian, the most remote  
Indian peon carries [his] culture in him like an atavism; and with

the culture, which provides him with an inner knowledge noticeable in the exacerbation of his whole nervous system, the illiterate Indian is, when confronted with a European, similar to a civilized man of the highest rank (Artaud, *Anthology* 68).

He respected them because they were complete embodiments of action, just as he wanted actors on the stage to be. Every action came from deep within and the abstract ideas of culture and self were made a single, visible, motivated body. What especially impressed Artaud was that people such as the Tarahumara completely *lived* this existence. There was no process of self-denial or discipline as with the Gnostics or Buddhists. What he saw in Mexico was more primal:

Of all the esoterisms that exist, Mexican esoterism is the last to be based on blood and the magnificence of a land whose magic only certain fanatical imitators of Europe can still be unaware of (Artaud, “Destiny”; ed. Sontag 364).

Even so, Artaud allowed that whatever the esoteric basis of every culture from the Maya to the Buddhists to Kabbalah to Christianity was on some level all aimed toward the pursuit of “rais[ing] the human consciousness to the level of divine thought” (Artaud, “Destiny”; ed. Sontag 364). And the similarities Artaud saw are indeed demonstrable.

The Tarahumaran year is marked by festivals of indulgence and revelry, akin to the festivals of Dionysus in ancient Greece. During these festivals, all the Tarahumara who are of age drink sacred corn beer called *tesgüino*, play music, and dance. They are allowed to drink as much *tesgüino* as they wish, provided they have ritually purified themselves beforehand. These festivals occur several times throughout the year, giving honor to the various gods the

Tarahumara kept alive after the advent of Roman Catholicism. In addition to the imbibing of *tesgüino*, at select festivals of great importance—or when deemed appropriate by tribal priests—the peyote dance occurs. It was that experience, reminiscent of the Mysteries of Eleusis, that Artaud was seeking when he set out on the 48-hour journey from Mexico City to the land of the Tarahumara.

It does not detract from Artaud's intentions to say a major factor in his travelling to Mexico was to take peyote. By August of 1936, when he headed to the Chihuahua territory the Tarahumara called home, he had long been an abuser of opium. He had written treatises defending opium use as a way to combat his mental anguish, suggesting that the criminalization of such drug use was another example of doctors not actually caring about their patients' well-being. When his occult research led him to studying the Maya, Artaud discovered two things which must have fired his frenzied imagination. First, that they possessed a drug which not only took *control* of the mind, but *transported* it beyond the earthly plane to the stars, the dimension of ancestors, a primal, ethereal state of being. Second, this drug was incorporated into a ritualistic dance drama which unified performers and spectators, priests and laymen, living and dead in understanding and purpose. Though the Maya had long died out, the peyote dance survived amongst some of the scattered tribes of Mexico.

These tribes did not treat peyote flippantly; abuse of the drug for recreational purposes was as sacrilegious as a Catholic stealing consecrated hosts from the tabernacle. All who were to take peyote for the ritual had to ritually purify themselves before doing so, and Artaud saw himself as no exception. This meant going through severe opioid withdrawal. He left Europe with no opium in his baggage. He took no opium and drank no alcohol while in Mexico City. By

the time he was trekking through the Chihuahua territory into the Sierra Madre mountain range, he was in severe bodily pain, cripplingly nauseous, and judging by his accounts of the landscape, more than a bit hallucinant.

As he went deeper into the Sierra Madre—with the help of a guide, though Artaud barely mentions this person—his anguish began to metamorphosize into an overpowering sensation of the unity between the people and the land they inhabited:

If the greater part of the Tarahumara race is indeed indigenous, and if, as they claim, they fell out of the sky into the Sierra, one may say that they fell into a *Nature that was already prepared*. And this Nature chose to think like a man (Artaud, *Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*; ed. Sontag 379).

There was dramatic action in the landscape itself. It appeared to him that the same esoteric spirit that was trapped in humanity was trapped in the mountains, “Just as [Nature] *evolved* men, she also *evolved* rocks” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 379). He began to see cruel and disturbing images in the rock formations, as if the stones were performing a dance drama of their own.

Artaud vividly recounted his detoxified visions:

This naked man who was being tortured, I saw him nailed to a rock and worked on by forms which the sun made volatile; but by I know not what optical miracle the man up there remained whole, although he was in the same light as they. ... in my periplus across the mountain I saw an optical miracle of this kind occur at least once a day (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 379–80).



The man and the rock he is nailed to are the same formation. But Artaud describes them as he saw them, scenes of Nature's own Theatre of Cruelty. His mind was racing from withdrawal, but it was more clear than it had been in Paris for years. He knew what he saw were optical illusions, but he also did not think these images accidental: "There is in the Cabala a music of Numbers, and this music, which reduces the chaos of the material world to its principles explains by a kind of awesome mathematics how Nature is ordered and how she directs the birth of the forms that she pulls out of chaos" (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 381). He inferred numerical order in the landscape, an order he would also find in the rituals of the Tarahumara. It was the fruition of the unity he heralded finding in Mexico: culture and civilization, people and place were all telling the same story.

This story was "of childbirth in war, a story of genesis and chaos, with all these bodies of gods which were carved out like people; and these truncated statues of human forms" (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 381). The hallucinatory mountains were like a prologue to what Artaud would find when he finally reached the Tarahumara settlement. As he got closer, he began to distinguish the "statues" that Nature had carved and the handiwork of her inhabitants, "This inhabited Sierra, this Sierra which exhales a metaphysical thinking in its rocks, the Tarahumara have covered with signs, signs that are completely conscious, intelligent, and purposeful" (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 381). This New World was an organic *mise en scène*. It was more moving to Artaud than even the Balinese dancers had been. The contrast of the natural and manmade forms echoed the conflict of matter and mind. The concrete forms of the earth were abstracted and then reformed by its people: "At every bend in the road one sees trees that have *deliberately* been burned into the shape of a cross, or in the shape of creatures, and often these

creatures are double and face each other, as if to manifest the essential *duality* of things” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 381). The mountains were an act of mimesis, imitating the true invisible reality. Artaud felt pathos in the rocks (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 379). He experienced fear: “Between the mountain and myself I cannot say which was haunted” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 379). And he knew the unified chaos of parallel human thought as he finally reencountered civilization:

[L]ines of Egyptian anserated crosses grew into processions; and  
the doors of the Tarahumara houses displayed the sign of the  
Mayan world: two facing triangles with their points connected by a  
bar ... the Tree of Life which passes through the center of Reality  
(Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 382).

As he encountered the Tarahumara for the first time, Artaud felt more connected to true life, and its double, theatre, than ever before or since. All the elements he called for in Theatre of Cruelty were manifesting themselves, save one. But he would experience the Danger of the ancient Mayan world soon enough.

Artaud often conflated the various distinct native Mexican cultures into more or less inseparable things. He actually argued that separating them was a European imposition:

Anyone who claims today that there are several cultures in  
Mexico—the culture of the Mayans, that of the Toltecs, the Aztecs,  
the Chichimecs, the Zapotecs, the Totonacs, the Tarascans, the  
Otomis, [the Tarahumara] etc.—does not know what culture is, he is

confusing the multiplicity of forms with the synthesis of a single idea (Artaud, “Destiny”; ed. Sontag 364).

The heart of Artaud’s idea of culture is that it is bigger than civilization. Civilization is the relatively petty business of government, politics, laws that are encompassed and informed by culture. Culture is more spiritual, primal, and collective. Artaud believed that at one time, perhaps a mythic time, Europe had had an all-engrossing culture as well, but this universal secret had deteriorated and become abstracted through the machinations of language and false ideas of progress. He stated this in one of his lectures: “Unlike the modern culture of Europe, which has arrived at an insane pulverization of forms and aspects, the eternal culture of Mexico possesses a single aspect. ... [E]very unified culture has a secret” (Artaud, “What I Came to Mexico to Do”; ed. Sontag 372). In Artaud’s mind, Europe and Mexico were analogous. While there were semantic differences between France, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, there were reflections of Platonic “European-ness” in each of them. This is poignant considering that European culture had literally just been pulverized by one Great War and, in 1936, was brewing another which threatened to obscure the secret forever.

Artaud saw unity as vital, and warned his audiences at the University of Mexico to not let divisions of words lead them to death. What was necessary was to focus on those unifying works which transcended conceptual forms, the esoterisms which gave birth to culture. Artaud elaborated: “There is Moslem esoterism and Brahman esoterism; there is the occult Genesis, the Jewish esoterism of the *Zohar* and of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and here in Mexico there is the *Chilam Balam* and the *Popol Vuh*” (Artaud, “Destiny”; ed. Sontag 364). These are the secrets of these unified cultures.

The *Chilam Balam* (*Chilam* being a priestly title, *Balam* the Yucatec word for jaguar, a sacred beast to the Maya) originated with the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula and is a nine-volume collection of history, myth, riddles, calendars, almanacs, and medicinal recipes, thought to originate from the titular holy man. The *Popol Vuh* (*Book of the People* in the Quiché Mayan language) is more religious in nature, and comes from the Guatemalan highlands. It serves as the foundational creation myth of the Quiché people, the ancestors of the Maya. Both were originally transmitted as oral histories or via hieroglyphs until they were transcribed into the Roman alphabet by Spanish friars after the conquests of the 17th–18th centuries. For Artaud, the *Popol Vuh* was fundamental in laying out his claim that Mexico, through its Mayan heritage, was the last bastion of unified culture and civilization. It was an “occult Genesis” which concretely displayed the synthesis of searches for metaphysical truth.

Mexico can bring us ... those *analogical forces* thanks to which the organism of man functions in harmony with the organism of nature and governs it. And insofar as science and poetry are a single and identical thing, this is as much the business of poets and artists as it is the business of scientists, as was clear at the time of the *Popol Vuh* (Artaud, “What I Came to Mexico to Do”; ed. Sontag 372).

Artaud had yet to meet the gaze of the haunted, tortured rocks of the Sierra Madre when he delivered these words, but they recall his passionate description of his mountain passage. In those mountains he finally saw Nature and humanity contriving together. As he ingratiated himself to the Tarahumara people, he felt he was metaphysically transcending to the time of the

*Popol Vuh*. However, it is doubtful whether any of the Tarahumara had even heard of the *Popol Vuh*. The Tarahumara had their own creation myth, their own theistic tradition, and their own religious ceremonies. They did share the ritualistic use of peyote with the more ancient cultures such as the Maya, and they also shared the dionysian festivals of alcohol and dance dramas.

By historic coincidence, one of the most important Mayan dance dramas had been preserved by none other than a Frenchman. In 1850, Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, a Catholic priest and historian, travelled to the same Guatemalan highlands where the *Popol Vuh* had emerged and transcribed this drama from an old Mayan gentleman, who still remembered it from oral tradition in its original Quiché language. This drama was called the *Rabinal Achí*, meaning *The Man of Rabinal*. Artaud was as familiar with the *Rabinal Achí* as he was with the *Popol Vuh*, and he noted its “high magical poetry and metaphysics” (Artaud, “Draft of Letter to the Director of Alliance Française”; ed. Sontag 347). The *Rabinal Achí* is one of the most important artifacts of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican theatre history, as it is the only surviving documentation of the formula for ancient dance dramas. Despite the fact that Brasseur de Bourbourg transcribed it centuries after the downfall of Quiché Mayan civilization, his written record of the *Rabinal Achí* provided a visible example of Mayan culture, myth, and history in action.

In many ways, the *Rabinal Achí* reads like an actual dramatization of Artaud’s *The Conquest of Mexico*, albeit without the arrival of Cortez. The *Rabinal Achí* tells the story of an insurgent warrior, Cawek of the Quiché Forest People, who is placed on trial by his captor, the Man of Rabinal, who in turn is a warrior in service of Lord Five Thunder. The politics of the time are highly involved, but all the characters, of both the Cawuk and Rabinal tribes, are Quiché

people, ancestors of the Maya dating as far back as the fourth to tenth centuries A.D. (Tedlock, “Introduction” 2). Cawek is representative of the Cawuk nation, who occupy a disputed territory adjacent to the Rabinal nation. His opening lines, “I’m not finished/ chopping through/ the root/ the trunk/ of that Lord of Walkers/ Lord of Workers/ Cawuks and Rabinals” (Tedlock, *Rabinal* 26) recall the carved and burned trees Artaud saw as he neared the Tarahumara settlement. The dialogue served mainly as background narrative for the dance performance. The power of the drama is not in the Man of Rabinal forcing Cawek to confess his attempts to usurp Lord Five Thunder’s power over Cawek’s lands, but in the characters’ valiant demonstrations of bravery and nobility. The culmination of their call-and-response is the beheading of Cawek. While not as graphic as the violence Artaud describes in *The Conquest of Mexico*, or as gory and lurid as *The Cenci*, the cathartic ending of the *Rabinal Achí* is a perfect example of Theatre of Cruelty. The drama is set up to be an imitation of actions that is serious, complete, and momentous.

Rather than being a melodramatic tale of good versus evil, the *Rabinal Achí* portrays both central characters as being strong and brave (Tedlock, *Rabinal* 44, 122). The rebel Cawek defends his crimes of spying and insurrection against Lord Five Thunder with an air of defiant purity. The Man of Rabinal even commends Cawek’s fighting for the independence of his people. Artaud would have also commended Cawek as an avatar of anarchy and danger. The Man of Rabinal is unnamed, giving him an Everyman quality, a true representation of the unity of the people in their culture-civilization. The dueling nobilities of Rabinal and Cawuk peoples are allegorically represented by the Jaguar and Eagle priests, who dance in costumes displaying their respective beasts as symbols of the earth and sky they worship.

Historically, the drama provides insight into cultural aspects of Mayan society. The courtly addresses always begin with characters repeating the words their fellow just spoke before making their own statements, a level of linguistic clarity that Artaud certainly would have appreciated. The intertwining of the jaguar and eagle gods also serves to highlight the immersive spirituality of the Maya. While it is thought that the verbal invocations of deities and powers was a latter-day addition in response to Spanish mystery plays' constantly calling upon *Jesús* and the saints, no dance drama would have been complete without visual representation of the invisible gods who observed their lives. Regardless of its origins, to Artaud this priestly representation of occult magic would have been the most meaningful part of the performance. Rather than being restricted to a general playing space as were the other characters, the jaguar and eagle priests danced around them and out into the audience. They served as a conduit between the ancient Quiché warriors and the modern Mayan citizens. The jaguar and eagle, as symbols, also unify spirituality, science, and theatricality which were, as Artaud stated, very much one and the same thing in Mayan culture. This was the original intent behind the *Rabinal Achí*, to show the interconnectedness of all things.

The *Rabinal Achí* survived the wiping out of Mayan culture in part because of its parallels to plays imported to the New World by the Spanish. These plays often held similar attributes, featuring allegorical characters, audience immersion, and glorification of martyrdom. Cawek's beheading would have been viewed as a martyrdom—by the Guatemalan Mayans as a Quiché hero whose language they still spoke; by the Christians as one who sacrificed himself for his people; and by Artaud as a true metaphysical rebel who would rather die than surrender his spirit. In the ancient Mayan practice of ritual beheading, only someone immensely stout-hearted

and dangerous would have been seen as a worthy sacrifice. Artaud would have also admired the drama's subversive method of keeping an ancient cultural practice alive. While the Conquistadors prohibited the Maya from continuing to sacrificially execute convicted prisoners of war, the performers of the *Rabinal Achí* kept the primal power of doing so through mimetic representation.

The Tarahumara were not descended from the Quiché. Just as the *Popol Vuh* was not their Genesis, the *Rabinal Achí* was not their Passion play. However, Artaud was correct in his observation that there were stark similarities in the rituals of the diverse Mesoamerican tribes. The Tree of Life symbol on the lintels of the Tarahumara homes was indeed similar to a traditional symbol used by citizens of the Mayan empire. It is very likely that the jaguar and eagle priests of the *Rabinal Achí* would have danced under the influence of peyote, so as to magically connect the performers with the world of the spirits they embodied. The peyote cactus was uncommon in the jungle empires of the Maya, but it grew wild and plentiful in the dry Sierra Madre. If the ancestors of the Tarahumara had any contact with Quiché people at all, it most likely would have been through peyote trade lines.

The Tarahumara were a reclusive tribe. Most renowned for their endurance as runners, they had little contact with other tribes, let alone the Spanish. There was some influence of Catholicism, but it had been amalgamated with their original spiritualities, and the Tarahumara incorporated aspects of it into their native rites. Images of the cross and names of saints had become new interpretations for ceremonies that remained otherwise intact from the time of the Conquistadors. Because of this adherence to ancient custom, Artaud saw them as his best connection to the secrets of the Maya, “for it is over the whole *geographic expanse of a race* that



Nature *has chosen to speak*” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 379). The Tarahumara were authentic, organic, and primal, their traditions were not broken or tainted by European influence. They were those descendants of the high Mexican civilizations he spoke of, and he believed they still held the key to primal, ritual magic. As Artaud observed the signs and symbols the Tarahumara carved and painted in their villages and on the rocks of the Sierra Madre, he felt in tune with a primal science, a science older than any of the esoterisms he knew so well. He claimed “the primitive people of the Tarahumara tribe, whose rites and culture are older than the Flood, actually possessed this science” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 382). Artaud was determined to understand this science as well. He hoped it would let him finally transcend the linguistic barriers which had prevented him from fully accessing his primal self. Few white Europeans had ever witnessed, let alone participated in, a true peyote dance, but Artaud had cleansed and purified himself. Though he was still a “piece of damaged geology” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 382), he reasoned he was ready.

As Artaud transitioned the narrative of his account *A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*, he adheres to the conceit of man as a formation of the earth, like rocks. He, as a pulverized European, still felt barred from full participation in the metaphor; but the more time he spent on the mountain, the more connected to it he felt. Before the peyote ceremony could happen, the Tarahumara had to prepare themselves, which for Artaud meant 28 more days of waiting. Since he was still under the boot of opium withdrawal, this was excruciating:

“Twenty-eight days of this heavy captivity, this ill-assembled heap of organs which I was and which I had the impression of witnessing like a vast landscape of ice on the point of breaking up” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 383). As his landscape of ice met the landscape of the desert, he

was becoming reformed, returning to his elemental state. He felt an intense need to escape his body. At this point in his account, he seemed beset by flashbacks and *déjà vu*. The withdrawal and anticipation exacerbated the pain of the last ten years of rejection: “Was there anything for me which was not at the gate of death, and could there be found at least one body, a single human body which escaped my perpetual crucifixion?” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 383). But he continued to wait for the curative power of the peyote dance.

What really seemed to be occurring, if one reads between the lines of the “*Le rite du peyote*” section of *A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*, was that the peyote priests were testing Artaud for themselves. The eremitic Tarahumara had no reason to trust a white man who came almost out of nowhere in an attempt to partake in their most secret ritual. Artaud began to doubt that the experience of the peyote could ever live up to the wait. He had travelled across an ocean, through treacherous, unknown mountains, endured severe bodily weakness and agony, only to find what he might have guessed at anyway. Even high in the haunted Sierra Madre, charlatans run the civilization. The sorcerers, as he called them, were Tarahumaran versions of Breton and Rivière. Once again, his soteriology had come up blank.

Then one night, Artaud recounts, “I saw before me the Nativity of Hieronymus Bosch, with everything in order and oriented in space, ... the flame of the Infant King glowing to the left amid the animals, ... and to the right the dancer kings” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 385). Bosch was a painter with whose work Artaud had long struggled. While one may have expected Artaud to relish Bosch’s cruel and dark interpretations of Christ’s suffering, Artaud preferred the vivid, earnest suffering of Vincent Van Gogh. Perhaps Artaud’s distaste was precisely because Bosch’s

contorted figures were reflections of the spectres that haunted him, as indeed they did that night on the mountain.

As he revived from his hallucination, Artaud saw three sorcerers approaching. Their servants were weighed down under massive bundles of crosses, mirrors, firewood and all manner of devices needed for the *Ciguri*—the peyote dance. Fires were lit. A pair of goats were slaughtered, their hearts and lungs draped on the crux of a freshly carved cross. Women ground the sacred cactus with mortar and pestle “with a kind of scrupulous violence” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 386). The priests trampled a gigantic circle into the earth for the dance. The circle was surrounded by ten crosses adorned with mirrors that flashed and reflected in the light of the fire in the center. This theatre of *Ciguri* was said to be a container for all evil, and would curse anyone or anything foolhardy enough to enter. The meekest bird or insect that crossed into its circle would be cursed and fall dead; expectant mothers kept far away, for fear their unborn children would die inside them. The dance was charged with danger.

Four priests stood amidst the crosses around the circle, representing the dualities of male and female, the setting sun and the rising sun. The three sorcerers stood nearby, a hole dug into the ground before each. These holes each contained a basin, which represented the World. And the hero of the ritual, a dancer decked head to foot in bells, prepared himself off in the wilderness.

Artaud stood by, cleansed of bodily toxins, now anxiously waiting to be purged of his spiritual illness. He stared, transfixed, into the circle:

There is a history of the world in the circle of this dance,  
compressed between two suns, the one that sets and the one that

rises. And it is when the sun sets that the sorcerers enter the circle, and that the dancer with the six hundred bells (three hundred of horn and three hundred of silver) utters his coyote's howl in the forest. The dancer enters and leaves, and yet he does not leave the circle. He moves forward directly into evil. He immerses himself in it with a kind of terrible courage, in a rhythm which above the Dance seems to depict the Illness. And one seems to see him alternately emerging and disappearing ... as is said of Man's Double in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. For this advance into illness is a voyage, a *descent in order to RE-EMERGE INTO THE DAYLIGHT* (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 387).

The entire ritual represented the triumph of light over darkness—Van Gogh's colors superseding Boschian gloom. The sorcerers mixed the peyote with water and *tesgüino* in their basins, bowed, and shook rattles, keeping time for the dancer. In a shocking turn which delighted Artaud, the priests, the dancer, and the sorcerers, relieved themselves outside the circle. After this final release of mortal corruption, they partook of the basins' contents. Immediately, they spat it back out, "as deep in the ground as possible," Artaud was told, "for no particle of the *Ciguri* must ever emerge again" (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 389). The dance moved through twelve phases until night surrendered to day. During each phase, Artaud drank the *Ciguri* mixture. He spat it deep into the ground. His head was reeling, and he could barely stand up any longer. The sorcerers led him to the crosses, where they struck him over the head with their rattles. They began to recite incantations and sprinkle him, and each other, with water. The dance was at its fever pitch; all

were wild with peyote and *tesgüino*. The sun breached the shadows of the Sierra Madre. The peyote dance was ended.

The moment had passed. For over a year, and those anxious 28 days, Artaud had expected the Tarahumara and their peyote to infuse primal forces into his brain, to enlighten him with ancient, magical secrets, transcend the boundaries of mortal abstractions, and unite him with metaphysical Reality. He had experienced his own harrowing Mysteries of Eleusis and tasted the desert fruit which was said to obliterate dualities and purify the darkened spirit. And he felt nothing: “I had not conquered by force of mind that invincible organic hostility in which it was *I* who no longer wanted to function” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 391). He was still frozen. His mind was still blocked and unable to escape itself. As he mounted his horse back to Mexico City the day after taking part in the *Ciguri*, he grappled sourly with the fact that he would return to Europe with no means of saving it. He still had no idea how to make Theatre of Cruelty the concrete foundation of an undivided culture and civilization. All he would return with was “a collection of outworn imageries from which the Age, true to its own system, would at most derive ideas for advertisements and models for clothing designers” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 391). The spoils of his quest to Mexico were trivia, not knowledge. He felt that there was something more deeply disturbed in his mind than he could fathom, more severe even than what he confessed to Rivière. The sorcerers had proved themselves false saviors. Perhaps he was thinking of his reflection in the mirrored crosses of the *Ciguri* circle when he realized “It was now necessary that what lay hidden behind this heavy grinding which reduces dawn to darkness, that this thing be pulled out, and that it *serve*, that it serve precisely by *my crucifixion*” (Artaud, *Voyage*; ed. Sontag 391). He would die for his own sins, strung on the cross of his mental

impotence like the guts of the Tarahumara goats. On 31 October<sup>f</sup> 1936, Artaud boarded a ship back to Europe and entered willingly into his Passion.

## CHAPTER VI

“Now I repeat, death is an invented state”

Artaud divided his time between Paris and Brussels for a few months after his return. There he fell in love with a young Belgian lady, Cécile Schramme, whom he had met before Mexico, but now pursued with the intent of marriage. He humbled himself to seek medical help to detoxify himself from his drug addiction. He kept himself fed by giving lectures, and occupied his free time by writing up his account of his time in Mexico. Jean Paulhan, editor of the *Nouvelle revue française* and friend of Artaud, asked to republish some of the lectures and articles Artaud had given in Mexico, which helped assuage the feelings of folly toward that episode. There were occasional drug relapses, often associated with bouts of psychosis. There were fights with Cécile, with whom he hoped to have a Platonic, nonsexual marriage. Something in the Male/Female dichotomy of the *Ciguri* circle, and what he saw as the hermaphroditic shape of the peyote cactus had made him deeply troubled about sexuality. Cécile had no such qualms, and sometimes felt she had to seek out elsewhere what Artaud could not provide. But all in all, it was as tranquil a domestic life as Artaud had ever experienced since his boyhood. It lasted from January to June of 1937.

By May, Cécile had called off their marriage. Artaud was heartbroken, but not surprised. She had grown weary of his paranoid outbursts; in that May alone he had gone on a wild rant in the lecture hall of the Brussels Maison de l'Art, shrieking and howling like the Tarahumara dancer, telling obscene jokes, and calling for his own death. Bourgeois observers were torn somewhere between laughter and fear. Soon after, Artaud returned to Paris under a cloud of

gossip, wishing he could vanish from the earth completely. He even requested that Jean Paulhan, print *A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara* with no name attached, for he felt the man known as Antonin Artaud was quickly vanishing.

One bright spot in Paris was that Artaud reconciled with André Breton. They reconnected over their mutual search for a primitive language which could be more expressive and help society evolve (Greene 145). Artaud began to once again admire Breton who, despite everything, had stuck to his pursuit of truth against all setbacks and criticism. Breton was a source of comfort and validation for Artaud's latest existential crisis. Artaud expressed his despair in letters: "For me, the only hope that remains in this world which my Spirit has already left is to watch the growth of this great Dream which alone nourishes my reality" (Artaud, "To André Breton, July 30, 1937"; ed. Sontag 402). Artaud had become convinced that the reason the peyote had no effect on him was because he was a body with no soul. The *Ciguri* was supposed to metaphysically transform the participants; he had remained the same and thus he was a totally physical being. If spirit was order and matter was chaos, that was the reason he was unable to create anything as Breton had done. As he wrote to Breton, "so long as I am able to imagine one thing, a single thing that must be saved, I shall destroy it in order to save myself from things, for that which is pure is always elsewhere" (Artaud, "To André Breton, July 30, 1937"; ed. Sontag 403). The taste for death was on his lips again.

Artaud began to denounce many of the esoterisms that had formerly captivated his mind. Instead of reading texts fed by any organized religious principle, he turned to the Romantic *poètes maudits*: Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, and Lautréamont



(Greene 161). True art could only be created by martyrs such as these, who concretized their suffering and society fearfully rejected as insane. Artists who, like Van Gogh, was “Only a poor ignoramus determined not to deceive himself” (Artaud, *Anthology* 149). Art was the suffering of destruction, the Cruelty of life. Artaud would accept nothing but this premise. But he still believed in magic. In fact, he was in possession of perhaps the most magical totem in the world.

Before travelling to Mexico, Artaud’s friend René Thomas had given him a rustic walking stick which Thomas had purchased at a little occult shop in Paris. These establishments were all the rage among the avant-garde set and sold tarot cards, candles, crystals, and antiques (often forged) that were sold under the auspice of being magical. Thomas knew that Artaud was obsessed with such things, and so gave him the walking stick as a parting gift. If nothing else, it would be a sturdy source of balance as Artaud hiked through the Sierra Madre. The shopkeeper had told Thomas that it had originally belonged to a powerful sorcerer back in the days of Gaul. Thomas took it a step further, and said it had been Artaud’s in past lives. Artaud did his own occult calculations and discovered the staff bore a resemblance to one described in the prophecies of St. Patrick. It was the very staff used by the Saint himself to cast the snakes out of Ireland, a lightning rod of great metaphysical magnitude.

Artaud cherished the gift and kept it as a good luck charm. After the heartbreak and disillusionment of May 1937, he began using the staff as a literal crutch. He studied it, to the point he had every bit of it memorized like a poem. The wood had thirteen knots in it—thirteen dams of the divine stream. It had three hooks, like the leaves on a shamrock, or thrice the power of an ordinary bishop’s crozier. Artaud would boast to friends such as Breton that the staff had

“two hundred million fibers with special signs representing ‘moral forces and prenatal symbolism’” (Knapp 156-7). He knew because he counted them. St. Patrick’s staff became the new love of Artaud’s life. Often he would be seen leaping and dancing with it through the streets of Paris, to the bemusement of his companions. Every day Artaud would divine something new about the staff. Not only had it belonged to St. Patrick and the Gallic magician, it had been used by Jesus Christ himself when he fasted and battled demons for forty days in the desert. This he reasoned by way of a stain on the ninth knot which, no matter how hard he scrubbed, would always reappear exactly the same. The stain was supernatural blood, whether Christ’s, or the demons’, or a mixture of both he could not yet determine, but it was definitely the source of the staff’s power. Artaud knew it was an awesome responsibility to be the caretaker of this staff. It gave him a prophetic status he had heretofore only dreamed of, and he had no idea what his next step should be. Then the staff spoke.

Through the magic of the staff, Artaud believed St. Patrick was contacting him. He stated that he first experienced this illumination on 3 June 1937. Artaud had abandoned Catholicism in his youth as one of the major false constructs of French culture. But the pity and fear instilled by the rite of the Mass never fully ceased haunting his brain. And Patrick was no ordinary saint. He was patron of a mystical island, a doer of mighty deeds. He was a prophet and a folk hero. Many of his followers still spoke the Gaelic tongue of their ancestors, the language St. Patrick had used to convert them. Above all, St. Patrick was a transcender: of matter, spirit, even language. Just as he had spoken to the Irish in a vernacular that was not his own, so now did he speak to this battered and lost French poet. Artaud was prepared to listen to anything St. Patrick had to tell

him. What Artaud heard was that between 3–7 November 1937, the elements of Water, Earth, and Fire would be celestially galvanized and destroy the world.

Artaud no longer saw himself as a poet, or an actor, or director, playwright, any sort of theorist on theatre. He was not any compartmentalized kind of artist. He was a prophet. And like a true prophet, he did not seek his own glory. His determination to disappear, to vanish his body to wherever his soul had gone, was stronger than ever. Late July of 1937 saw the publication of his pamphlet *Les Nouvelles révélations de l'être* (*The New Revelations of Being*). Like *A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*, *The New Revelations of Being* was distributed anonymously, though instead of the three asterisks which took the credit for the former, the latter was signed *Le Révélé*, The Revealed. *The New Revelations of Being* was like nothing Artaud had produced before. Passages that seem to be poetry give way to intense condemnations of human greed and folly, warnings of a war at hand, and dense numerology equations adding up to apocalypse. There is a strong influence of Nietzsche on the work as well, “For a long time I have felt the Void, but have refused to throw myself into the Void. ... When I believed I was refusing the world, I know now I was refusing the Void” (Artaud, *Anthology* 85). Artaud sees the Void as more real than the world he had been fighting for so long. The Void created the world, a mass of lies and abstractions, a cruel entrapment for souls. Existence, the right he had sought from Rivière, the release he sought from theatre, and the key he lost in Mexico, was itself a fabrication. To exist was to worship a false idol, which Artaud denied thenceforth: “I no longer wish to be a Believer in Illusions” (Artaud, *Anthology* 85). He no longer resented his soul for leaving his body. His Being, as he called it, had escaped the clutches of the Void, and now

knowing the great truth whispered from beyond the Void by St. Patrick, he finally had the courage to escape after it.

In the final paragraph of the introduction to *The New Revelations of Being*, Artaud bluntly stated, “This is a real Madman talking to you, one who never knew the happiness of being in the world until now that he has left it and become absolutely separated from it” (Artaud, *Anthology* 86). Knowing that his Being was in a better place, so to speak, Artaud no longer had to fear any material thing that might befall his body. Other people, the zombies made by Europe’s fractured culture, could not see as he did: “Dead, the others have not been separated. They still hover around their corpses. I am not dead, but I am separated” (Artaud, *Anthology* 86). Their attachment to the corporeal would be their destruction, and the undead Artaud would bring it about. The supernatural, the more-than-real, was humanity’s reason for being, and humanity had turned its collective back on their own Beings in favor of material distractions. There was only one outcome that Artaud could see in his tarot cards: “It means that nature is about to revolt. Earth. Fire. Water. Heaven” (Artaud, *Anthology* 88). Nature, which had carved effigies of its suffering in the rocks of the Sierra Madre, was going to enact its terrible revenge on these unfeeling humans. *The New Revelations of Being* quickly devolves into a fanatical tirade on the metaphysics of the male/female dichotomy. Clearly informed by his disturbance at the Male and Female representations in the *Ciguri* and his failed engagement to Cécile Schramme, Artaud fantasized about an age where even the material differences between men and women were obliterated. Essentially the whole mistake of reality as it was understood was to be corrected, and Artaud was to be the eraser. This fact astounded him, due to his previous failed endeavours: “THE DESTINY OF MAN AND THE UNIVERSE IS SUSPENDED BY THIS

MOUNTEBANK OF A LOU” (Artaud, *Anthology* 91). Much of *The New Revelations of Being* is written in capital letters. Whenever Artaud felt something might be linguistically misinterpreted, he chose to emphasize it as strongly as possible, so that even if his readers thought he was nebulous, they would know he was earnest.

Artaud presaged his apocalypse through the numerology of St. Patrick’s staff. The number of knots, the number of hooks, the place of the stain, all held cosmic significance to him. *The New Revelations of Being* contains diagrams that illustrate his conclusions as to when the destruction of the world would happen. By the seventh of November, he, the Tortured Man, would finally be able to cross the planes of existence. Just as he had always argued that destruction breeds creation, Artaud predicted that this coming destruction would “culminate in the *Construction of Abstract Man*” (Artaud, *Anthology* 99). The Abstract Man was an aspect of Artaud’s numerology. It represented the idea of humanity divorced from constructs of nationality, language, and most of all sexual dimorphism. Artaud’s jilted feelings towards Cécile Schramme are perhaps the most clear part of *The New Revelations of Being*. The loss of masculine power he felt in being unable to satisfy her would be revenged when he “Rendered justice everywhere, on all levels simultaneously in motion ... avenged the evil that issued from the darkness of woman, by the power he has just reinvented” (Artaud, *Anthology* 97). The very possibility of love, or any *thing* human beings had previously constructed to avoid the Void, would pass away and all would exist as Artaud the Tortured Man did—which is to say not at all.

There was no more need to worry about semantics, publication, theatre, language, or any of the old plagues. The only thing he thought about from July to August of 1937 was how to get to Ireland. It seemed only logical to Artaud that he should return with the staff to its homeland

for the coming transcendental destruction/construction. The idea that such an event was imminent was a total release for him. His state of mind in planning this voyage was nothing like his reasoned approach to getting to Mexico. It was pure Madman's logic: through the magical staff he knew the world's destruction was at hand, the staff and its voice were St. Patrick's, St. Patrick was the patron, the avatar, of Ireland, therefore there was no better place for the destruction's prophet to be than the Emerald Isle. Concluding *The New Revelations of Being*, Artaud advised "we must consent to burning, burning in advance and immediately, not a thing, but *every thing that represents things for us* in order not to expose ourselves to being burnt up whole" (Artaud, *Anthology* 98). If he did not beat the Void to the punch, then he would be in its clutches forever. Once again, his trip was primarily funded by a Surrealist: Breton seems to have fronted the most of the money to get Artaud from the Continent to Cobh, a port on Ireland's southeast coast. Paulhan is also known to have provided financial help, under the pretense of sending Artaud to gather information for another article in the *Nouvelle revue française*. Breton and Paulhan were two of the few non-family members with whom Artaud corresponded while making his way from Cobh to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Another was Anne Manson, a young journalist whom he had met through mutual friends when she was considering her own excursion to Mexico. While Breton and Paulhan were the first people to read *The New Revelations of Being*, it was to Anne Manson that Artaud divulged the visions he dared not publish. These three still believed Artaud was on some manner of artistic quest. They would soon learn that this phase, this "new and *final* attitude" as Artaud called it (Artaud "To André Breton September 15, 1937"; ed. Sontag 405), was not based on discovery of any kind. Artaud

no longer thought he was going to stumble across the great metaphysical secret; he was certain he had grasped it and walked surefooted with it.

Artaud did have doubts about whether or not he would be permitted to disembark at Cobh. Irish authorities were not known for letting just anyone without express purposed go freely into the mainland, as the country was still in its formative stages of independence from Britain. The Constitution of Ireland had just undergone public referendum in July 1937, but would not be in force until December of that year. Exact laws and policies were unclear in many cases, and the threat of guerrilla violence still caused eyes to shift. Every county was humming with excitement and danger. And there was Artaud, standing on the bridge, with little luggage, less money, and an inability to communicate with anyone who did not speak French. He never spent time learning English or Gaelic; St. Patrick spoke to him in French, so what needed he worry? Art O'Briain, the Irish Minister Plenipotentiary stationed in Paris had sent Artaud a letter of passage in the hope of easing his way through:

This letter will make known to you Monsieur Antonin Artaud from  
Paris. M. Artaud is about to leave for Ireland in search of  
information concerning ancient Gaelic customs and other matters  
relating to ancient Ireland, her history and so forth. He himself  
would be very grateful for any help that you can give him  
(*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File").

The letter was written in Irish Gaelic, a more useful language for traveling the country in those days. O'Briain also sent Artaud a list of people who might be able to give him food and lodging along the way. They never met in person. Artaud's Parisian companions acted as go-betweens to

get the letter of passage, and O'Briain simply attached the list of names to be helpful. Artaud used the letter to pass from Cobh to Galway, but not before sending a postcard to René Thomas, assuring that he and St. Patrick's staff had arrived in one piece. Once in Galway, Artaud sent a voluminous letter to a magazine publisher in Dublin by the name of Richard Foley, whose name was on O'Briain's list, requesting help in finding a knowledgeable travel guide. He also wrote to Breton and Manson back in Paris. His letters belie a zealot's insecurity that his friends might not be saved with him. As he wrote to Manson on 8 September, 1937, "My terrestrial life is what it should be: that is, full of insurmountable difficulties which I surmount. ... But I perceive that you *do not wish to understand me*" (Artaud, "To Anne Manson"; ed. Sontag 403). He pleaded desperately with her to give up her world pursuits, as they would soon be rendered irrelevant. As always, his greatest desire was to be understood, "You regard my existence as a brilliant speculation. ... [B]ut you do not notice the World is cracking beneath your feet ... It is You who live in illusion and blindness and not I" (Artaud, "To Anne Manson"; ed. Sontag 403). However, it remains unclear how Manson was to survive the construction of the Abstract Man. Whereas *The New Revelations of Being* detailed a very esoteric apocalypse, Artaud's private letters from Ireland carried a much more terrestrial dread. These letters were densely packed with desperation, as he was moving about frequently and his timeline was rapidly shrinking. Whereas in *The New Revelations of Being* Artaud seemed to laud the coming destruction/construction, in his letters he expressed deep, immediate disquiet over his prophecy. He wrote that it "foretells a future of terror for the World. This future is at hand. A large part of Paris will soon go up in flames. Neither earthquake, nor plague, nor rioting, nor shooting in the streets will be spared this city and this country [Paris and France]" (Artaud, "To Anne Manson"; ed. Sontag 403). In the



past, when Artaud had been misunderstood he blamed the faults of language or his own inability to order words properly, but in his letters back to Paris he was as clear as knew how to be. He told Manson to give up her dream of travelling to Mexico; “all one has been able to derive from Mexico is an egotistical and terribly individualized pleasure” (Artaud, “To Anne Manson”; ed. Sontag 404). Artaud in Ireland is Artaud at his most altruistic. As he left Galway, he was embracing more and more passionately the feeling of being the mouthpiece of God. This meant Artaud was being considered more and more a dangerous, raving lunatic; but when, less than three years later, Nazi forces invaded France, and a large part of Paris was indeed in flames, surely someone must have looked back and wondered.

By mid-September of 1937, St. Patrick had ceded to a higher authority. Artaud no longer heard the bishop’s voice in the staff, but the voice of its original bearer Jesus Christ. Not the Jesus Christ worshipped in churches, which Artaud deemed putrid and decadent, but a calamitous warrior Christ, fed up with the vanities of the world. It is unclear exactly when the transition of voices happened, but Artaud’s letters indicate it occurred in Dublin. Retracing Artaud’s steps across Ireland is following a chain of unpaid hotel bills, postcards back to Paris, and communications between Irish authorities who were becoming increasingly concerned about rumors of a deranged Frenchman wandering the countryside, brandishing an odd-looking staff. He did make it to the Aran Islands—quite literally the edge of the Western world—and visited Kilronan Castle on the island of Inishmore. After becoming perilously short on money, he travelled to Dublin in hopes of wiring in funds at the French Consulate. While there, he met with Richard Foley, who had received his letter weeks ago and had begun wondering if Artaud would ever show up. Foley’s secretary had studied in France and was able to translate. As Foley would

later write to O'Briain, "We came to the conclusion that our visitor was travelling light in the upper storey; unknown to me, he quietly appropriated your letter and kept showing it (as well as mine to him at Galway) as his introduction" (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File"). Foley was unsure what to make of Artaud, who after their meeting vanished like a phantom. Artaud was vacillating between two primal needs: the need to witness the nearing apocalypse, and the need to not starve or freeze to death beforehand. He still bore the staff, which he now referred to only as "Jesus Christ's cane" (Knapp 157). This motivated his clandestine behavior, as he feared it falling into the wrong hands.

However, it did not prevent him from sending out letters. Perhaps none was more heartfelt than his final letter to Breton, dated 14 September 1937. It is imbued with the full weight of Artaud's situation and shows his primal need for understanding was still foremost in his mind. He began:

My dear Breton, My Friend,

It would be a great sorrow to me, the greatest no doubt that among the only sorrows that I can still feel, if you were to detach yourself from me, ... I have abandoned a great many things in the course of my abominable existence, and in the end I have abandoned everything, including the very idea of Existence. And it was in seeking NONEXISTENCE that I rediscovered the meaning of God. If I speak of God, then, it is not in order to live but in order to die (Artaud, "To André Breton"; ed. Sontag 405).

Artaud was not expressing his regret in going to Ireland, he was sending Breton his letter of spiritual resignation. He provided more detail of the coming destructive war—a blend of Gnostic Christian and Hindu mythologies. He drew a parallel between the Christian Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the Hindu Triad of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. The human concepts of God had decayed, and so the Son-God was going to rebel against the Father-God to destroy creation. The Holy Ghost-Vishnu, whose duty was to preserve creation, would act as an antichrist to prevent destruction. But the Father was the terrible creative Void who had thwarted Artaud his entire life, and so he stood with Christ-Shiva the Destroyer, the voice in his staff. Christ-Shiva had said that “he chose to pass through a body in order to teach us to destroy bodies, and to put away attachment to bodies” (Artaud, “To André Breton”; ed. Sontag 407); to PILE UP BODIES, as Artaud himself would later write. He begged Breton to stand with him, for “there comes a time when this force of life must die” (Artaud, “To André Breton”; ed. Sontag 407). Somewhere in Ireland, on the rocky western islands, in the rolling green hills, or in some back alley of Dublin, Artaud had embraced the absolute danger Rivière warned of ten years earlier. If he was to die as Christ-Shiva had, he needed an Apostle. And so he concluded his epistle to Breton with a plea:

If you believe me I am entrusted to tell you that a formidable  
power will be placed at your service and at the service of  
everything you have ever dreamed that is beautiful, just,  
formidable, *incredible*, and desperate.

If you do not believe me I will have to find another just man.

But you are the most just Man whom I have so far encountered.

I embrace you (Artaud, “To André Breton”; ed. Sontag 409–10).

Artaud had truly been transformed. This man whom he had once derided as a fraud and a sell-out he now regarded as his most trustworthy and dearest friend. The letter was signed “Art.” The word served as an abbreviation of his name, the pursuit that had driven him to the ends of the earth, and as a signifier that he was no longer who he had been. He was a primal embodiment. He was the Abstract Man. But he needed the same assurance as always had: that he was worth listening to. It was after sending this letter, postmarked 14 September 1937, ten days after Artaud’s 41st birthday, that he ceased sending correspondence from Ireland. He had no identity, literally and metaphorically, and no money for postage. In less than a month he was certain the world would be on fire. All he had when he turned his back on Dublin to face the wilderness was his staff and the voice of Christ-Shiva ringing in his brain.

The world ended early for Artaud on 23 September 1937. Having nowhere else to turn, he sought sanctuary in a community of Jesuit friars outside the city limits of Dublin. In the still of the night, the Tortured Man pounded the gates and began shouting about St. Patrick, Jesus, a mission from God, Shiva, the Antichrist, destruction, and all manner of great and terrible things. No one answered. Perhaps none of the Jesuits spoke French, perhaps they were too frightened by the clamorous, anonymous ramblings, perhaps they were away on retreat. All that is known to history is that someone heard a real madman disturbing the peace and alerted the *Gardaí*—the nickname of *An Garda Síochána* (the Guardians of the Peace). Even a one-man riot was no small matter in Ireland’s troubled times. Swiftly did the *Gardaí* arrive, as Artaud continued to bellow in the streets outside the community known as Milltown Park. What curses he wrathfully called down as he tried to evade capture can only be imagined. A violent skirmish ensued, Artaud

striking out with his magic staff, the police striking back with their billy clubs. The Abstract Man was not constructed that night, in truth he sustained severe damage to his back. He was arrested and brought back to Dublin to await deportation. The staff's fate was uncertain; lost, confiscated, or discarded in despair, it was never seen again.

For six days, Artaud was locked in Mountjoy Prison in the heart of Dublin as Irish authorities tried to figure out who he was exactly. Communications between Seán Murphy, an assistant secretary in Ireland's Department of External Affairs, to Art O'Briain back in Paris reveal an incredulity as to how this disruptive vagrant was permitted into Ireland at all.

According to Murphy,

Artaud is being deported as a destitute and undesirable alien.

Artaud would have been refused permission to land by the Immigration Officer at Cobh were it not for the fact that he produced a letter of introduction signed by you. Since his arrival in this country Artaud has failed to pay his hotel bill in Galway and has had to be removed from the grounds of Milltown Park (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File").

It seemed impossible that such a wild character could slip through their rigorous system. At the time, the authorities believed Artaud had never had any form of identification, and so O'Briain was blamed for writing Artaud a letter of introduction. Murphy admonished O'Briain for endorsing a man he had never met: "I am to suggest that in future, letters of introduction should only be granted to persons who are personally known to you and about whom you are satisfied that their credentials are entirely satisfactory" (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File").

O'Briain was quick to protest, arguing that no self-respecting immigration officer would have allowed a foreigner with no passport to enter the country, and that his letter was simply meant as an introduction, not an affirmation of Artaud's character. Furthermore, the discussion was beside the point. However Artaud had gotten into Ireland, it was clear he could not be allowed to stay. Murphy made arrangements for him to be taken back to France as soon as possible.

On 29 September 1937, Artaud was placed on the United States liner *Washington* which was destined for Le Havre. Completely alone, he had lost all will to write or try to communicate with anyone. While aboard the *Washington*, Artaud had a second outburst. Repairs were being done aboard ship and the mechanic was going from cabin to cabin fixing this and that. He was accompanied by the ship's steward as a matter of protocol. During the afternoon of the ship's first day out, they knocked on the door of one particular cabin and proceeded to enter it. This cabin was Artaud's. After the beating he had gotten from the *Gardaí*, and six days in Mountjoy prison, Artaud was more paranoid than ever, and the slightest hint of danger was liable to set him to action. Seeing two men enter with metal tools and implements was enough. The only possession Artaud had left besides his clothing was a stiletto he had bought from an African man in Havana on a layover to Mexico. Artaud believed the weapon to hold lethal Voodoo powers, and at the first sight of the mechanic and steward, he drew the stiletto and charged. The rest was a blur, to attacker and the attacked. Artaud was formally arrested as soon the *Washington* docked at Le Havre. He was adjudged dangerous and mentally ill in the extreme and was taken to the Quatre-Mares asylum at Sotteville-lès-Rouen, around 90 km from Le Havre and 112 km from Paris. It seems unlikely that Artaud had any idea of what was happening to him, with his notions

of reality so far distorted. The ship line notified his mother that he had been detained at Le Havre, but provided no further details of his whereabouts. Artaud was truly lost.

Back in Ireland, word of the strange events in Milltown Park had gotten out and the case was written up in Dublin's *Evening Herald* newspaper. Richard Foley saw the story and sent the clipping to O'Briain, essentially just to gossip about the ill-tempered, French stranger O'Briain sent by his office for some reason. Foley wrote "I believe there was the devil to pay all round and now the evening paper explains everything in a few words. I noticed your cautious phraseology [regarding Artaud] in the letter" (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File"). He also mentioned he had heard Artaud had no passport or visa. O'Briain, still under the pressure from Murphy, wrote back curtly that of course Artaud had to have had a passport to get through at Cobh. By now O'Briain was quite indignant at so many people telling him how to do his job, so he fired off another letter to Murphy, inquiring:

For my information, I should be much obliged if you would kindly  
inform me whether in fact Artaud had a passport and also if the  
immigration officer did not give the necessary permit for landing,  
and how Artaud was able to evade the landing officers and proceed  
into the country (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File").

It seemed to O'Briain that the fault of this caper lay with those who last had Artaud, and not he who simply wrote his name and alleged business in Gaelic. Eventually, Murphy was able to sort things out with the immigration offices. Artaud had been in possession of a passport upon arriving at Cobh. Murphy apologized for the mixup, but it was not the end of their troubles. A man named Seán O'Milleáin of Kilronan in the Aran Islands, whom Artaud still owed one

pound, 17 shillings, and sixpence for lodging, contacted Murphy through his parish priest, Fr. Thomas O'Cillín. The people of Kilronan were quite indignant, Fr. O'Cillín pointed out, "I saw the letter from Art O'Briain myself and it was my opinion that we were in honour bound to heartily welcome Antonin. A lot of people were led astray and poor Seán lost his money to him" (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File"). It seemed to them that if Artaud were not going to pay, it was O'Briain's responsibility. Back in Paris, Artaud's mother contacted O'Briain demanding to know what had been done with her son. While Murphy wrote back to Fr. O'Cillín that his parishioner had best give up hope of ever seeing that money again, O'Briain wrote to Murphy to ask what had been done with Artaud post-deportation. Murphy responded to O'Briain with the requested information, also informing him of Artaud's outstanding debt to O'Milleáin. O'Briain laughed the petty sum off, "It is difficult to understand from the wording of Father Ó Cillín's letter whether he is aware that the Art O'Briain to whom he refers is the responsible Minister Plenipotentiary in Paris" (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File"). His sardonic response led Murphy to question again why it was O'Briain had given a letter of introduction to a man whom he had never even seen. Fr. O'Cillén was deeply insulted and wrote to O'Briain personally, asking how he could be so careless of the plight of the poor people of Aran. O'Briain then reluctantly wrote to Artaud's mother, informing her that her son owed outstanding debts back in Ireland. Madame Artaud replied that her son was incapacitated and his debts were not her duty to pay. Breton and Paulhan also wrote to Dublin, aggravating for details about what had happened to their friend. The letters from Kilronan to Dublin to Paris flew back and forth for the rest of the year, as all concerned argued over O'Brian's letter, where Artaud was confined, and O'Milleáin's pound and change. Seán O'Milleáin never got his money, and at the end of 1938,



Art O'Briain retired as Minister Plenipotentiary in Paris. He was replaced by Seán Murphy (*Dublin Review* "Extracts from the Artaud File"). In February of 1938, *The Theatre and Its Double* was published.

## CHAPTER VII

“The breathing of freedom was elsewhere.”

About a month passed before Artaud’s mother was able to find him at Quatre-Mares. The perils of his last month in Ireland and his arrest at sea had left him in a catatonic state. Though he did not recognize or acknowledge the family and friends who visited him, they worked diligently to have him freed. Because Artaud had been declared not only insane but a danger to himself and society, the doctors and psychiatrists would not release him, however, they did allow him to be moved to the Sainte-Anne mental hospital near Paris. He remained there from April 1938 to February 1939, when he was again transferred. In the meantime, *The Theatre and Its Double* was garnering attention for Artaud throughout the theatrical circuit of Paris. Was this the same radical who had two failed theatres under his belt and was last seen toting a staff he claimed had belonged to St. Patrick? What had happened to him? Where was he now?

He was in Ville-Evrard, another asylum just outside Paris for patients diagnosed as incurable. There were some signs of life in him, though his head had been shaved to prevent lice and he was increasingly malnourished. He had begun to write letters again, including one five pages long to Art O’Briain, warning him that the *Gardai* were traitors under the pay of England and begging to be allowed to return to Ireland, “I MAY FIND EVERYTHING WHICH I HAD LEFT THERE” (*Dublin Review* “Extracts from the Artaud File”). He wrote to friends as well, including Breton and Charles Dullin, asking for their continued support in freeing him. In his most abstract hours, he turned back to those men who had first helped him believe he could be concrete. Some letters argued his sanity quite lucidly, while others were distraught, primal cries for bread, cigarettes, and heroin (Knapp 160). As France fell to the Nazi void in 1940, conditions

at Ville-Evrard worsened considerably. The heat was turned off and the food was further decreased due to rationing. Family and friends of Artaud feared for his life. He was in extensively worse health, and even more harrowing was the knowledge that mental patients were being dispatched to Nazi death camps without a second thought. They redoubled their efforts to have him moved yet again, to a more compassionate facility that would help continue his improvements. In February 1943, at the suggestion of Artaud's mother, they succeeded in moving him to Paraire asylum at Rodez in the south of France, closer to his hometown of Marseille and further from the perils of Paris.

At Rodez, Artaud was placed under the supervision of Dr. Gaston Ferdière, who was fascinated by his new patient. Artaud, as ever, doubted the sincerity of psychiatrists, but they managed to have amicable conversations, when Artaud was capable of doing so. By this time Artaud was drastically thin, toothless, and exhibiting a range of symptoms from dissociative amnesia to glossolalia. There is a sad sense of dramatic irony in that two of his greatest desires were granted; he was free from thoughts and free from language.

Despite Artaud's erratic behavior—at times still quite belligerent and savage, Dr. Ferdière frequently invited Artaud to lunches at his house and encouraged him to draw, read, and write again. Artaud's outlook began to take a more positive outlook. He wrote his mother thanking her and God for sending him to Rodez. And it was not the corpulent Father-Brahma about whom he wrote to Breton. Artaud returned to Catholicism, and he valued the Eucharist almost as much as opium. He renounced everything he had ever written as evil, save three works: his correspondence with Jacques Rivière, *The Theatre and Its Double*, and *The New Revelations of Being*. The rest he wanted destroyed, and prayed, with all the zeal he had for Christ-Shiva, that

God forgive him for writing them. His return to the Christian Savior was closely allied to his continued view of himself as one who had been pierced with the world's inequities. He believed he had been given a new soul. That soul's stay would be short.

At the request of his superiors, Dr. Ferdière began giving Artaud electric-shock treatments. Artaud held out for some months, believing the pain and despair he felt from the shocks were temptations of the devil. All of the happiness he had formerly felt at Rodez disappeared. The shocks were sometimes so great that they would put him in a coma. And while Dr. Ferdière believe the shocks were clearing away Artaud's delusions, Artaud felt they were stealing his new soul. He wrote to Ferdière's superior, Dr. Jacques Latrémolière, "God needs all the help that can come from the good will of all just men who want no part of this government from hell" (Artaud, "To Jacques Latrémolière"; ed. Sontag 423). Whatever might have been psychologically observable in Artaud was not what he saw in his mind's eye. The fear of the pain, the comas, and the loss of self yet again were regrowing his paranoia, the paranoia that drove him to Rodez in the first place. He began an earnest petition for his release, starting with Dr. Latrémolière:

[O]ne thing has offended and unsettled your conscious: that God *in time* has not yet put an end to the appalling human depravity of people, I mean the French people who have now passed over completely to the Antichrist and to Satan and who have kept a man locked up in an Insane Asylum for years for the sole purpose of feeding off of his seminal fluid and his excrement (Artaud, "To Jacques Latrémolière"; ed. Sontag 423).

The subject matter of this passage, written 25 March 1943, is the first glimpse at the last years of Artaud's life's work. Life in asylums had driven him lower than any humiliation he had suffered for his art, and so those traumas, those shocks, those demons became his art. In spring of 1945 he wrote to a friend, "I have decided to be myself, that is, simply Antonin Artaud, a religious unbeliever by nature and soul who has never hated anything more than God and his religions, whether that of Christ or Jehovah, or Brahma, not forgetting the naturist rites of the lamas" (Esslin 57). He decided he had it backwards all along. The spirit was not the prisoner of the body, the body was chained to the spirit. He embraced his glossolalia as an opportunity to finally be done with a language that could not adequately express *his* mind. He would create his own language organically out of himself, in poems of his own meter, science of his own brain, a world of his own creation. He still believed in magic.

With the liberation of Paris in August 1944, *The Theatre and Its Double* was reissued, and Artaud was quickly becoming a legend. Just as during Artaud's youth they had spoken of Alfred Jarry in awed, reverent tones, so now were young Parisian artists speaking of Antonin Artaud. Still in Rodez, he continued enthusiastically churning out poems, incorporating his language, and his gleefully unfiltered, primal obsession with the body and its functions. He wrote open letters for publication as he had once done in support of the Dalai Lama and the Buddhist schools. He wrote against Kabbalah and numerology, he called Samuel Taylor Coleridge a coward who latched onto the safety of God, afraid to delve into the true dark depths of Romanticism. There were still black magic forces out to get him, he thought, and he silently pantomimed battle with them in the gardens of Rodez. For occult things, God, souls, were still quite real to him, but he chose to follow his body instead: "The body is a fact which dispenses

with idea and all feeling emotion, but which, from the depths of its dark cavern, throws up a look so that even the heart hasn't time quick enough to register its own existence" (Artaud, *Anthology* 112). Artaud's spirit had cracked and forced him to be institutionalized, but his body had persevered through drug withdrawal, the peyote dance, heartbreak and humiliation, the hunger and loneliness of Ireland, the beatings by the *Gardaí*, the steward and mechanic, the occupied asylums, and approximately fifty electric-shock-induced comas. What was more concrete than solid flesh and blood? Spirit was the real abstraction, which both amused and worried him:

[W]hen I see Claudel calling upon the spirits at the outset of the century for help, I am still able to get up a chuckle, but when I see the word spirit in Karl Marx or Lenin, like an old invariable value, a reminder of that eternal entity back to which all things are brought, I tell myself that there's scum and crud abroad and god's sucked Lenin's ass: and that's the way it's always been, and it isn't worth talking about anymore, it doesn't matter, it's just another fucking bill to pay (Artaud, *Anthology* 112).

And just like his bill to Seán O'Milleáin of Kilronan, he would refuse to pay it. Artaud's mind was broken, but unfettered. He often spoke incoherently, and he could be heard chanting to himself in his imaginary language long into the night. His temperament would swing rapidly and without warning from warm and cordial to vicious and accusatory, resulting in several beatings by Rodez attendants. But in spite of these detriments, Artaud sensed he was now the genius he had spent twenty years of destruction to build.

Strange as it may seem, the lack of autonomy afforded by his confinement at Rodez did give the notoriously independent Artaud the creative fire he needed. The abstract persecutions he had railed against for his entire public life now had a physical embodiment. With his body subject to the very real, and cruel, tortures of electric-shock treatment, his words became less obscure. With the respect he garnered from *The Theatre and Its Double*, his escoterism of pain, filth, and freedom, developed into something mystical in its own way. Amidst the squalor of the Rodez asylum, Artaud was cementing his legacy. More of his works were published as well. In early 1944 he issued a *Supplément au voyage au pays des Tarahumara*, and in April of 1946, a selection of letters he had written from Rodez was published in book form. He also wrote a number of critical works on various writers, notably the Romantic poet Gérard de Nerval. Though his subjects diversified, theatre still lay at the heart of his pursuit of the true artform. And his views on theatre remained ever steadfast:

True theatre has always seemed to me the exercise of a  
dangerous and terrible act  
where the idea of theatre and spectacle is done away with  
as well as the idea of all science, all religion and all art.  
The act I'm talking about aims for a true organic and physical  
transformation of the human body (Artaud, *Anthology* 169).

Theatre and Life had been and always would be Doubles. Artaud proved this by his very existence. Though he was more sure than ever that he was a body oppressed by a spirit, his figurative spirit was igniting the hearts of increasing numbers of avant-garde artists throughout Paris.

Spearheaded by his family's efforts to get him released from Rodez, Artaud's Paris allies, led by Paulhan, Breton, and Barrault, formed a committee to raise fund to pay for the Tortured Man's liberation. They were not alone. Prominent artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, André Masson, François Mauriac, and many others contributed donated works, manuscripts, and autographs to be sold at auction. The auction was to be held in conjunction with a staged reading of Artaud's works at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre. Dr. Fredière was skeptical as to the safety of letting Artaud leave the grounds, mostly because he feared Artaud would relapse into the drug abuse he had finally been able to manage. Upon assurance by Artaud's friends that he would remain under some psychiatric supervision, and Artaud's promise to abstain from drugs, Fredière relented; Artaud was allowed to leave Rodez. On 26 May 1946, he returned to the theatre district of Paris for the first time in over ten years.

The auction and readings were great successes, and raised almost a million francs over the evenings of 6 and 7 June 1946 (Esslin 59). Those onstage who spoke of Artaud and performed his works included Breton, Barrault, Dullin, Louis Jouvet, Jean Vilar, and Alain Cuny. Artaud did not see it however, as he was in a nearby café, writing new ideas for poems and essays. He no longer feared language, for he now knew how to write his screams. The block had been lifted, not in small part by the reassurance from so many old and new friends that his writing did mean something. As he breathed the free air of Paris, Artaud took in all of the history of the city's great writers and he knew what it felt like to be one.

After that victory, the theatrical urge pumped Artaud's blood again. The promise he made to Dr. Fredière was broken, and began taking laudanum as soon as he could get his hands on



some. His complete works—which he no longer renounced—were being assembled for publication by Gallimard, the same house that had put out *The Theatre and Its Double*. Artaud wrote addendums for certain pieces, one of which summed up his current state of mind quite succinctly: “it was I (not Jesus Christ) who was crucified on Golgotha; and I was crucified for having risen against God and his Christ, because I am a man and God and his Christ are only ideas” (Esslin 60). Freedom—and admiration—had given him confidence. He wanted to read a collection of his new poetry before an audience. The reading was to be staged at the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier, the theatre Jacques Copeau had founded to revive French theatre in early 20th century. The program was for Artaud to read his latest work, *Le retour d’Artaud le Mômo*. *Mômo* is a Marseilles colloquialism for fool, so this was to be *The Return of Artaud the Fool* (Esslin 60). On the evening of the performance, the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier was completely packed. Every young artist in Paris, and many older ones, had clamored for a ticket. Not a one in attendance was sure of what they were about to see. They were going to see Theatre of Cruelty.

The night of 13 January 1947, Artaud appeared onstage. He was barely over fifty, but his lanky, frail build and toothless smile made him seem impossibly ancient. He hoarsely stammered the three poems of *Artaud le Mômo*, his whispers cracked with cathartic sobs. The last time he had commanded any audience was those ranting lectures in Brussels, and if his racked brain had any memories of that time, he surely relived them then. He doubled them. His life became theatre as he broke away from the prepared material, and made the Abstract Man real for his audience. Scattering his papers and gesticulating manically, he spoke loudly now in a voice like squeaking thunder. He talked unromantically about his Mexico and Ireland, the excruciating sufferings that would have killed many men, or at least driven them to insanity much sooner. He

vividly divulged the horrors of the asylums during the Occupation, and the crippling torture of electric-shock treatment. He told them of magic, interrupting himself when he revealed too much. Guttural, otherworldly sounds came forth from his throat, as Artaud switched to his own language. Two hours passed until he ran out of secrets. Alone he stood on the stage of the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier. The audience grew confused and restless. As Artaud tried to improvise a poem as he gathered his papers from the floor, he looked out and saw he had lost them. Then he fled the stage.

This embarrassment that would have devastated the younger Artaud, or thrown him into a rage, the experienced Artaud saw it was just another bill to pay. In letters regarding the evening he neither defended nor excused his performance, simply stating “what I had to say could no longer be said with words. ... [Explosions] are the only language I feel capable of speaking” (Hayman 135). His audience had pitied him, and moreover they had feared him. Artaud was content that he had given them theatre.

Later that January, an exhibition of some paintings by Van Gogh was shown at the Orangerie art gallery. Artaud openly wept when viewing the artworks, particularly Van Gogh’s final painting, *The Crows*, in which Artaud saw all of Van Gogh’s mental anguish intersect with his own. After spending the day in the presence of Van Gogh’s concrete spirit, Artaud rushed back to the little room he occupied and penned his most poignant and heartfelt work, *Van Gogh, le suicide de la société (Van Gogh, Society’s Suicide)*. The essay contains samples of Artaud’s former furor,

Van Gogh had reached a stage of illumination in which disorderly thought surged back through invading discharges of matter, and where thinking is

no longer exhausting, *and no longer exists*, and where the only thing is *to gather bodies*, I mean TO PILE UP BODIES. It is no longer the astral world but one of direct creation which is understood beyond consciousness and the brain (Artaud, *Anthology* 146).

Van Gogh had dealt with heartbreak and psychiatry and rejection and he martyred himself for it. Artaud had long admired Van Gogh, but when he looked at the canvases those tortured fingers covered in color and life, his mind surged with vindication. The ice he had hoped to melt in the Sierra Madre, the lightning he hoped would strike him on the Aran Islands both melted and burst him into flame. He found the truth:

The inclination of lofty natures, always a notch above reality, is to explain everything by a guilty conscience, to believe that nothing is ever due to chance, and that everything bad that happens happens because of a conscious, intelligent concerted ill-will. Which psychiatrists never believe. Which geniuses always believe (Artaud, *Anthology* 147).

After seeing these Van Gogh's paintings up close, observing the brush strokes, feeling the warm and cool colors wash over him, Artaud did not feel alone. Not in the paranoid way he used to, with some occult spy always at his back, but as if he were in the company of a true kindred spirit. Both of them were called lunatics. Both were shunned by the world and shunned it back. Both were told to stop raving. Neither of them did.

As 1947 came to a close, Artaud was contacted by Fernand Pouey of the French Radio about producing a piece for the series *La voix des poètes*. Artaud's health had taken a turn for the

worse, so he had friends select which poems they thought best, and dictated some new ones. The program was titled *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (*To Have Done with the Judgment of God*) and it was relentless. Artaud performed with his friends Roger Blin—who had also performed at the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier reading—Paule Thévenin, and Marie Casarès. Artaud also provided accompaniment on xylophone, gong, and a variety of other percussions. It was the most primal work of his career, a series of grunts, screams, howls, laughter, profanities, blasphemies, glossolalia, and earnest appeals for understanding. The epic poem of cacophony was scheduled to be broadcast on 2 February 1948. It was not.

The scandal surrounding *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* was as considerable as any in Artaud's life, but he took less direct part in it. All of his strength had been put into the action the title suggested. His drug use had escalated profoundly as he discovered his frailty was the result of rectal cancer. His final writings often featured expressively graphic descriptions of being born, emerging from the dark prison of the womb. For an Abstract Man, who saw his life as a construct of death, birth was the final destruction of the place that made him. Sometime in the early morning hours of 4 March 1948, Artaud ceased hovering around his corpse and escaped the Void.

## CONCLUSION:

“But who has drunk at the sources of life?”

To accept Artaud's artistic theories as gospel truth is to embrace the developments, contradictions, and complexities in any form of faith. As mentioned in the introduction, many past and present readers of Artaud, initially caught up in his passion and defiance, soon lose their bearings in the complexities of the Tortured Man. Was he a convert in search of transcendence, or a rebel seeking destruction? The answer lies in his odysseys to Mexico and Ireland. In those journeys and the trials he faced within them is the Double of Theatre. His life was theatre. His life was cruel. His theatre was cruelty. This statement has been made countless times, but the true meaning of it is often lost as well. Artaud's expeditions to Mexico and Ireland appeared to be abject failures that drove him mad. In both he searched for higher knowledge and found delirium. He put all his trust in totems, or props, of peyote and St. Patrick's staff. He had wrung his brain dry trying to overcome the mountain of language until it erupted in a volcano of glossolalia and formed his own island. And though he was mad, he finally learned his magic. His body and his spirit battled for 51 years and five months and ended in a draw. In the end, he was entirely consistent. He was primal.

Those three pieces of writing which Artaud never renounced and always held as the truest representatives of his voice show his consistency. The Letters to Rivière show his hope for acceptance, his need to be heard, his struggle with making himself clear, and his love for hidden truths. *The Theatre and Its Double* shows his hope to save humanity from itself, his need for action, his struggle with finding control, his love for danger. *The New Revelations of Being* shows his hope for destruction, his need to reconstruct, his struggle with abstraction, and his love

for magic. Each of these pieces of writing contains all the hopes, needs, struggles, and loves of all the others. And every poem, essay, fragment, or cry he produced has them as well.

Theatre of Cruelty is the Mysteries of Eleusis, Balinese dance, *Ciguri*, Primal. It is failure, for without Artaud's failures and sufferings it would have been just another movement and not a mystery. A mystery which now can only be pursued, like the enchantment of the Sierra Madre or the resting place for the staff of St. Patrick. It cannot be found without failure and destruction, without accessing the primal truth that language tries to hide. To truly grasp the mind of Antonin Artaud one must see how he became abstracted until forced to be concrete. As he swore to Jacques Rivière, he did not let his thoughts get lost. He always believed in magic, and he drank from the sources of Life.

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## VITA

Andrew Hagerty was born 7 February 1990 in Atlanta, Georgia. He was homeschooled under the Seton Home Study program through his high school years, graduating in 2008. He pursued his long-standing interest in writing by leaving Georgia to attend Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, beginning fall of 2010. There he majored in English and theatre, earning Bachelor's degree in both disciplines and graduating May of 2014.

While studying theatre at Benedictine, Hagerty developed skills in many facets of the artform. He worked as a sound designer, designed and built several stage sets, and directed two mainstage productions, *Everyman* and *Pas de Deux*. His love of academic theatre led him to pursue a Master's degree in Theatre from the University of Missouri–Kansas City.

During his time at UMKC, Hagerty focused particularly on French theatrical movements of the early 20th century. He also earned recognition for his work as a playwright. His short play *Rocking Horse* was performed at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota as a stage reading at the Kennedy Center American College Festival in 2015, he was a finalist in Kansas City's fourth annual Project Playwright competition, and was commissioned to write a play for young audiences by the Shawnee Mission Education Foundation. This play, *We Share a Language*, was performed by students of Westridge Middle School and the Kansas School for the Deaf in February of 2016.

With the completion of this thesis, and graduating from UMKC on 14 May 2016, Hagerty plans to pursue doctoral studies in theatre in the near future, as well as to continue working as a playwright in Kansas City, Missouri where he currently resides.