

# A Letter on Artaud

*By* PAULE THÉVENIN

Dear Bettina Knapp,

You asked me to answer some questions about Antonin Artaud which would interest American readers. These were the questions:

1. Can you tell us something about Artaud's last days?
2. Can you tell us how you read and acted the works of Artaud?
3. How did you meet Artaud?
4. How did Artaud work? What was his method?
5. Why was Artaud institutionalized upon his return from Ireland?
6. Can you tell us something concerning his theatrical theories?

It seems logical to me to answer your third question first. I met Artaud in the simplest of ways: I went to see him.

I must tell you that I was already friendly with Marthe Robert and Arthur Adamov. Now, in 1946, they were finally able to get to see Artaud at the Rodez sanatorium and discuss the possibilities of his release with Dr. Ferdière, head of this institution.<sup>1</sup> This was not an easy task since Artaud had been interned by force. His release would have to be approved and agreed to by an administrative body and in accordance with rather strict regulations. Such a release is usually solicited by the family of the interned, which agrees to be responsible for him and guarantees his support. This, however, was not the case. We must acknowledge the fact that since Dr. Ferdière felt Artaud should be released,

---

<sup>1</sup> This visit was preceded by the visit of Jean Dubuffet and his wife in 1945.

he agreed to substitute friends for the family.<sup>2</sup> But, before Artaud could be released, Ferdière had to present the administration with a dossier which would include a certain number of guarantees. First of all, a sufficient sum had to be collected to assure Artaud's support for several years. The facts are well enough known to make it unnecessary for me to go into detail: a committee was formed under the chairmanship of Jean Paulhan to organize a gala benefit at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt and to auction paintings and manuscripts donated by numerous artists and writers. These brought in more than one million francs. Dr. Ferdière's second requirement was that Artaud be placed in a private rest home when he arrived in Paris. In this way his health and his diet would be supervised and the fact that he would be a boarder in a hospital would be a guarantee against any mishap. Artaud's friends, who had been transformed into organizers, had very little time left to settle this question. Marthe Robert and Arthur Adamov asked me to help them, which I willingly did. They asked me to find a rest home with reasonable rates not too far from Paris, if at all possible. It was most important that the

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1959 Madame Malausséna, Artaud's sister, complained about Dr. Ferdière's action. She wrote in the December, 1959 issue of *La tour de feu*: "But in 1946, some people decided to ask Dr. Ferdière for Antonin Artaud's release under the guise of assuming responsibility for him. This was done with unabashed impudence—the poet's mother was not informed of the request. The freedom was granted. The poet was lost from that time on." Artaud always spoke in malicious terms about Mme. Malausséna, calling her "my so-called sister" or "my would-be sister," or "that person who claims to be my sister," etc. He frequently affirmed and was completely faithful to his desire of rejecting all notion of filiation and this is very pronounced in the beginning of *Ci-Gît*:

I, Antonin Artaud, I am my son,  
 my father, my mother,  
 and me;  
 leveller of the imbecilic periplus in which  
 engendering is caught up,  
 the periplus papa-mama,  
 the child,  
 soot from grand-mama's ass,  
 much more than from papa-mama's . . .

home be headed by a doctor who would understand Artaud's essential need of liberty and yet, at the same time, watch over him discreetly. Of all those I went to see, Dr. Archille Delmas at Ivry, a man of innate tact and great generosity (he had been the doctor of Roger Gilbert-Lecomte and of Lucia Joyce during the war years) was the only one who understood how delicate the situation was. He was ready to receive Artaud. He succeeded from their very first contact in winning Artaud's affection. He gave him the keys to the large front gate the day he arrived and said to him: "Monsieur Artaud, you are in your own home, here are the keys."

Thus, although I did not know Artaud, I was one of those who was waiting for him. A day or two after his arrival, a friend of mine telephoned me and requested that I ask Artaud if he would be willing to read one of his texts for the radio program, Club d'Essai. When I went to Ivry, accompanied by my daughter—who was still a very young girl—Artaud had already gone out. I told the guard I would return the following day at the same time.

I still remember this in the greatest detail. I returned alone. It was June, 1946. Artaud occupied a room in the new pavilion, at the end of a large park which I had to cross: the grass had not been cut, it was high under the trees and gave me the impression of being far from Paris. As soon as I knocked on Artaud's door I had the feeling I was going to penetrate another world. One has to have heard him say, and only once, the simple word, "*Entrez!*" to understand this. The word was filled with a special meaning, it was pronounced with such clarity, the two syllables were separated with such total precision, that I had the impression of leaving the place I was actually at and penetrating "elsewhere." I went in. I saw a man standing and writing, his notebook resting on the mantelpiece. He turned his head and looked at me. Though he was of medium stature, his bearing was imposing because of the way he turned his head as he thrust back his rather long hair, the brilliance of his gaze, the bright blue of his eyes. There was something "regal" about him in spite of his excessive thinness and his ravaged face, the result of ten years of privation (he did not have any teeth). I hesitate before using the word "regal," but it is the only one which seems to me to be fitting and besides, didn't he depict himself as *King of the Incas* in a drawing he made at Rodez?

I told him who I was and about the Club d'Essai's proposition. He did not answer me. He offered me some grilled salted peanuts which he took out of a package from his pocket. He spoke to me about the fireplace, of the black hole which it opened into the room (one finds this black hole mentioned in *Artaud the mômô*) and then he continued writing. I waited, seated on a chair, opposite him. I thought he had completely forgotten my request and did not dare remind him of it. Suddenly, he turned toward me: he felt it would be impossible for him to recite anything whatsoever on the radio, this impossibility stemming not from him, but rather from this quasi official organism which would be unable to stand hearing what he had to say and the way he wanted to say it, and so would prevent him from doing just that. "Do you think they would let me say things like:

'I don't like strawberries, what I like is the taste of strawberries in strawberries.

'I don't like kisses, what I like is the taste of kisses in kisses.

'I don't like cunts, what I like is the taste of cunts in cunts.

'I don't like asses, what I like is the taste of asses in asses.' "

I told him he could say or read whatever he wanted to; then he made an appointment with me for the following day. I was to bring the friend who wanted to arrange for the broadcast.<sup>3</sup>

After questioning me with much urbanity about what I was

---

<sup>3</sup> Artaud did not, incidentally, read those sentences. He read *The Sick and Doctors*:

Sickness is a state,  
 health is only another,  
 more rotten,  
 I mean more cowardly and more petty.  
 Never was there a sick one who did not grow  
 never a well one who did not one day betray, because  
 he never wanted to be sick, like certain doctors  
 I've had to put up with. . . .

Several days later, he realized, ironically, what his appearance at the Club d'Essai had been like: he said to me with a glitter in his eyes: "I wanted to hear myself; it was frightful! I thought I was listening to Albert Lambert." (Albert Lambert was an actor at the Comédie-Française. He rang out his lines in the Mounet-Sully tradition. He was Sarah Bernhardt's partner.)

doing and wanted to do, Artaud accompanied me to the gate of the park. Just as he was about to leave me, he asked me abruptly, "Do you come from Afghanistan?"

"No."

"I thought you did, because I am expecting a relative called Neneka, who is supposed to bring me a ton of pure powder from Kaboul and I thought it was you. You look like her."

And he left. I did not know at that time, but discovered later, that he was considering the possibility of my becoming one of his "heart daughters-to-be."

Well, this is how I met Antonin Artaud. Several days later he came to supper at my house. We were many and young at the time. He probably felt at ease among us. He began coming every day. If he was too tired to go out, he would have someone telephone and ask if one of us would visit him.

You might perhaps find this surprising. The picture drawn of Artaud is, most of the time, far removed from reality. Certainly, he demanded much from those who loved him, but he was considerate, even though it might not have seemed so, and so very kind. Shortly after our first meeting he came to the house one afternoon, brandishing an enormous bundle. "This bouquet represents an entire conscience and it's yours. I put it together myself and chose the flowers one by one." He pointed out each flower. He reassembled it before me: in the center, two roses, a white one and a pink one; he attributed extreme importance to the fact that this bouquet had been started with two roses; above, three sweet-williams, a yellow one, a red one, and a third one streaked with red and white; two dahlias, one the color of fire and the other pink; to the right and to the left two white China asters; a pink China aster placed at the bottom of the bouquet which was surrounded by some asparagus and oak branches. I do not know the language of flowers; if I had known it, it would have taught me nothing. What I do know is that never had a bouquet posed so many questions, said so many things, and probably never again would I receive such a one.

Artaud had achieved something very rare: he had succeeded in giving a meaning to *his* life and, by the same token, to *life*. One could not remain insensitive to this. Everything he said seemed, at

the moment he said it, so evident and so true. He was this truth to such a degree that one accepted him, totally.

One day on Boulevard Saint-Germain he told me: "I know nothing, or rather, I know, and to say this is perhaps very dangerous; but it isn't the meaning which creates words, but words which create meaning." One could almost say that Artaud created reality.

Anyone who approached him felt this. Since childhood he was in the habit of being shaved every day by a barber. Each day when leaving his room, he went to the barber on Mairie Street at Ivry. Later, the barber came to the rest home. His name was Monsieur Marcel and he arrived generally a little after noon. He entered Artaud's room and usually still found him in bed. He looked like a minister with a brief case, from which he took out his instruments and officiated. During all this time Artaud spoke to him in the most affable manner; the way Monsieur Marcel answered him and his patience while shaving him showed sincere deference and tenderness on his part. No obsequiousness, just the greatest respect, the respect the ancient Greeks felt toward their poets. One day I saw Monsieur Marcel moved to tears; Artaud had just given him an inscribed copy of *Van Gogh*. And I always had the impression that Monsieur Marcel believed everything Artaud told him: he believed it because he felt it was true.

The concierge of our building, a good woman, had a slight tendency to make too much use of the powers vested in her. One day she waited for Artaud at the foot of the stairs to protest some of his activities—the evening before he had been reciting the poems of Gérard de Nerval with the window wide open, and his voice carried beyond the limits of our apartment. She had hardly opened her mouth when he stopped her: "Be silent! If you persist in forbidding me to declaim the verses of Gérard de Nerval I shall change you instantly into a flat-headed serpent!" He left her disconcerted at the foot of the stairs and rang our doorbell. He told us humorously of the incident, which amused us a great deal. As soon as he had gone, the concierge—a Breton with a face which was unusually flat—came to see me, not so much to tell me about the altercation, but rather to be reassured. She was worried, but really did not dare say it. Artaud's evocative powers were so keen that she asked

herself dimly whether some threatening reality was not hidden behind those words.

This humor which was so typical of Artaud added to his seductive powers. One night when returning to Ivry rather late, he noticed that he had forgotten the keys to the outside gate. Everything was closed and it was useless even to look for a taxi at that hour and in that suburb, and so he decided to climb over the iron gate. Impossible. It was much too high. The wall which was contiguous to the pavilion in which he lived was no lower. Two policemen who were watching his maneuvers called to him. He explained his situation, pointed out his room and was so persuasive that the policemen finally helped him over the wall. When Artaud told us of this exploit he added: "And one could see this extraordinary spectacle! Two cops helping an inmate of a mental institution climb over the wall to get back in!"

And then there was his admirable answer to a journalist. I had just arrived at Ivry late in the morning, when a journalist from I don't remember which newspaper came to ask Artaud the following question: "What is your definition of black humor?" Artaud asked him to sit down but did not answer. He spoke rather lengthily with me, took out a notebook, wrote a few pages, and the journalist waited. Artaud's meal was brought in to him, he ate it, remained silent for a long while, and the journalist was still waiting. Then he took his enormous penknife and, after finding the right place under his hair, he held the point against it (this was his usual custom because he said it relieved him of certain pains). Suddenly, and with a rapid gesture, he stuck the knife straight into the table which was near him. "You asked me, Sir, for my definition of black humor. Well, here it is, black humor is this!" And the journalist left.

All of this has made me stray from answering your question about how Artaud worked. I understand that your question is mainly directed to his work as an actor but it seems impossible to me, at least for the period in which I knew him, to think that his activities as actor, writer, and artist were separate. Didn't he himself, as though in anticipation, answer this question?

If I am a poet or an actor isn't because I want to write or declaim poems but to live them. When I recite a poem it isn't because I

want to win applause but because I want to feel bodies of men and women, I say bodies, tremble and twist in unison with mine, twist as one twists, from the obtuse contemplation of the seated buddha with set thighs and a gratuitous sex, to the soul, that is to say, to the corporeal and real materialization of an integral being of poetry.

And let us not forget that Artaud indicated the necessity of alienating the actor.

What I can tell you is that he worked ceaselessly. Wherever he was and at all times, no matter how uncomfortable his position was, whether he was at a table, in the subway, among friends, he took his little school-boy's notebook from his pocket and wrote and drew in it. At times he even accompanied his work with rhythmic humming, in a language all his own.

I have never heard him work one of his texts as an actor usually does. But I saw him frequently practice breathing exercises, scanning rhythms punctuated with pantings, and while he was working in this fashion he would strike a block of wood with an enormous hammer or knife. The strength he displayed was surprising. If one had not seen him expend such efforts one could not imagine the extraordinary activity of this apparently weak body. He bore a grudge against Doctor Ferdière, who complained of his "breathing and humming system" because he did not consider this work. Doctor Delmas, on the contrary, understood this need very well; and that is why he had this imposing piece of wood, a barely squared tree trunk, brought into Artaud's room. It facilitated his "language practice," of which he wrote:

But they can only be read scanned, and only in rhythm the reader himself must find in order to understand and to think; . . . but this is only valid if it gushes forth at once; to search syllable by syllable is worthless and when written here and in this way it becomes meaningless and is nothing but ashes; another element which has been lost . . . is needed if the written word is to live.

This constant work made him complete master of his voice and his intonations. It is this work which permitted Artaud to read his poems in a way which was all his own and, for those who heard him, unforgettable.

There were no rehearsals in preparation for the broadcast

*Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* [*To end god's judgment*].<sup>4</sup> There was just a reading before the broadcast, during which Artaud gave the readers a few indications. But he left the job of *finding* their intonations up to them. The noises and screams which accompanied these readings were improvised right there and then under his direction.

I took part in this broadcast. If reading in this manner means acting, I mean acting in the sense of “to act,” it is the only time I ever acted in one of Artaud’s works. Another reading took place before this broadcast at the Galerie Pierre on the occasion of an exhibit of his drawings, but I was in Morocco at the time.

Artaud taught me how to read a poem. I wanted to be in the theatre but had been quickly discouraged by the teaching techniques used in the courses I had taken. I told Artaud of my disappointment and this rather pleased him; he decided to make me work. He had me recite poems by Baudelaire or Gérard de Nerval. This is the way he went about it: I had to invent a melody and sing the verses. I could, in this way, understand the importance of the words in general and also sense the relationship between one word and another. I tried to read a poem after having practiced this technique for a while. I did not always succeed in satisfying Artaud. I had to begin all over again and work until he was satisfied.

Later, he had me exercise his “language practice” technique, which I have already told you about. I had to learn to scream, to let this scream die out only when it had reached the point of annihilation, to go from the over-shrill to the deep tones, to prolong a syllable until my breath was exhausted. I believe I understood during the course of these sessions what the “theatre of cruel purgation” really was.

When I read Artaud’s own poems he gave me no directions but let me work alone. I had to *find in order to understand*: I showed him only the result of my work and only if I thought I had succeeded. He then either corrected me or approved. I do not believe—and this goes counter to what one frequently sees and hears—that an Artaud poem should be spoken in a state of trance; on the

<sup>4</sup> See this issue of TDR, pp. 60–82 for complete text of this radio play.

contrary, one should be master of all one's faculties, one should work very long and arduously and after a patient effort to make the poem clear.

You also asked me about Artaud's last days.

First, I would like to tell you the facts. One has frequently read in newspapers that Artaud died in an institution. This is wrong. He died in Dr. Delmas' rest home at Ivry. Madame Malausséna did not hesitate to write: "And this is the way Antonin Artaud died: eighteen months after his departure from Rodez, alone, abandoned in a type of sordid room in a dilapidated and isolated pavilion, gorged with chloral and laudanum."<sup>5</sup> Now, as I have told you, upon his arrival at Ivry, Artaud lived in a new building. While taking a walk in the park he noticed an uninhabited pavilion dating from the eighteenth century, situated slightly apart, in front of a flowering garden where irises bloom in season; the park extended far beyond that. When he returned from a stay in the south of France in October, 1946, Artaud asked Dr. Delmas to do him a favor and let him stay in that pavilion. In this way, he thought, he would have the feeling of being completely at home. Dr. Delmas tried in vain to dissuade him by pointing out the pavilion's age, the fact that it had neither central heating nor running water. Nothing did any good. Artaud's desire to isolate himself from the other boarders made him consider these inconveniences as negligible.

He was therefore granted the joy of living in one very vast room with admirable proportions, and a second, smaller room. Both rooms were level with the garden they looked out on and one could step into the garden through the French windows. An old gardener would come to bring Artaud large jugs of water as well as his meals, and in the winter the gardener kept the wood fire going with logs cut to size.

During the last month, it is true, Artaud, against the advice and entreaties of all those who liked him, took too much chloral—he no longer measured his dose. He had complained for a rather long time of intermittent intestinal troubles. His excessive distrust of doctors and medicine in general almost prevented us from suggest-

---

<sup>5</sup> *La tour de feu* (December, 1959).

ing he consult a specialist. If we attempted to suggest it, he answered by blaming his ruined digestive system on the nine years he had spent at Rodez, where he was given insufficient and poor food. This explanation seemed justified: if the greater part of the population was undernourished during the occupation years, the unfortunate sick people, reduced to their strict food rations, were even more so. However, when the pains got worse, when he hemorrhaged, when he started taking excessive doses of chloral, my husband and I succeeded in persuading him to consult one of our friends, a gastroenterologist who, even after the first examination, suspected something serious. X-rays were necessary. It took a lot of insisting on our part to win Artaud's assent.

One morning I accompanied Artaud to the Salpêtrière (our friend was then assistant under Professor Mondor) where x-rays were taken. Professor Mondor examined Artaud for a long time. We waited to learn the results of the x-rays. We were sitting next to each other on two chairs in the hall of the Salpêtrière, our backs to the window. I remember that Artaud talked to me about Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, whom he had known at the period of *Grand Jeu*. Then he told me that one must write only if one really had something essential to say, but one must also be capable of knowing what was really essential. Then Professor Mondor called us in; he reassured Artaud and prescribed a treatment.

As we were leaving, our friend joined us and invited me into his office, supposedly to give me a letter concerning one of my husband's patients. Professor Mondor was waiting for me there. He told me that Artaud had cancer; it had been developing for a long time and was absolutely inoperable. He wrote an account of the consultation which I was to give Dr. Rally, who had become Dr. Delmas' successor after the latter's death several months before. It was evident: only one course of action was open—to relieve Artaud when the suffering would become too great; to administer as much opium as was necessary.

Though not one of us mentioned Artaud's illness to him, he had such a perfect, total, and exact knowledge of his body that I believe he had always known it. He had been speaking frequently and for months now of the "animal which was gnawing at his anus." And it is for this reason, I am convinced, that he became

addicted to chloral. He would be in a comatose state when he took it in large doses: his pain must have been almost annihilated.

In the days that followed—I admit it—I had a puerile reflex. I was living in a medical milieu and had myself studied medicine for a rather long time without ever having completed my curriculum. And yet, I went to see a doctor who had, I had been told, just discovered a miraculous anti-cancer drug. When he looked at the x-rays I brought him, he said he could not help me. These miracles do not exist. I know it, I always knew it, so I wanted to forget it.

On March 4, 1948, the secretary of the rest home called me around 8 a.m. When the gardener had gone to bring Artaud's breakfast to him as he did every morning, he found Artaud dead, seated at the foot of his bed.

The night before, on March 3, Artaud had come to eat lunch with us and had left in the middle of the afternoon. He was neither better nor worse than he had been during the preceding days. Yet on that day he did something which had surprised me. He wanted us to buy him some legal paper bearing the official state seal: he said that everything had to be in order. This was unusual, coming from him. Once he had the paper, and without our knowing what he was going to use it for, with a pen filled with green ink and reading as he wrote in a ceremonious manner, he drew up a type of power of proxy in which he entrusted me with the publication of his books. Now, I did not need this document: Artaud's editors knew him; and for a long time now he had been sending me to them with manuscripts or corrected proofs. Sometimes I went to ask for money. Never had there been any difficulties. Why, on that day, did he want an official notice drawn up? (Especially he who was so totally opposed to society: the legal paper represented all that was official.) I do not know the answer. These words written in green ink are undoubtedly Artaud's last written words.

Now more than sixteen years later I have come to think this way: Antonin Artaud died just the way he wanted to and probably when he wanted to.

During the last weeks of his life he frequently repeated: "I have

nothing more to say, I have said everything I had to say." He declared he would no longer write.

One day, before he had even crossed our threshold, his first words were: "I shall never write again, I have written everything. Besides, look, you see, I do not have any notebook." He showed us the inside of his jacket pocket which was minus the usual notebook. I told him that I did not believe him. He sat down ostentatiously in an arm chair and crossed his arms. I had gone to the other end of the apartment to finish some work. On my way back I heard him ask my daughter in the most courteous manner, "My little Domnine, will you please go and buy me a notebook in the stationery store?" I could not resist the desire to tease him a little: "But you just said you wouldn't write any more!" "That is true," he said, "the book's only to doodle in! My hand can no longer get along without writing." Indeed when he had the notebook he began drawing sticks very conscientiously. He drew two pages of sticks; then, the sticks turned into letters.

It is true, nonetheless, that he certainly had the feeling of having done what he wanted to do; what he had to do.

He was alone when he died early in the morning: I do not believe he would have liked to have any witnesses. The unthinkable Count de Lautréamont did not have any witnesses; nor did Edgar Poe have any in his Baltimore gutter; nor did Gérard de Nerval, who hanged himself from a street lamp. And those who witnessed Charles Baudelaire's death did not see Baudelaire die, but only a carcass which had formerly been Baudelaire.

Artaud said that he would never die lying down. And he died sitting. He also had said he would never die like other men, that his body would burst into pieces. He wrote:

Who am I?  
 Where do I come from?  
 I am Antonin Artaud  
 and let me say it  
 as I know how to say it  
 immediately  
 you will see my present body  
 burst into pieces  
 and reassemble itself  
 under a thousand notorious aspects

into a new body  
 which will never ever  
 let you  
 forget me.

How can his death be better described?

You also want to know why Artaud was institutionalized upon his return from Ireland. This is a much more difficult question for me to answer. No one can answer it. Artaud did not want any witnesses to this even in his life. I can only conjecture.

Why did Artaud go to Ireland?

We are in the month of August, 1937. Artaud returned from Mexico in November, 1936. He had gone to Mexico to contact "dormant forces in any form. These forces cannot emerge from a contemplation of forms for themselves, but only from a magic identification with these forms." Some months following his return a friend gave him a cane with thirteen knots. After he had it tipped, sparks flashed when he struck the macadam violently. He explained this by saying that the "ninth knot bore the magic sign of thunder." Besides, this cane was of mysterious origin: it supposedly belonged to Saint Patrick. Did he see in this a "sign" which invited him to Ireland—Ireland which is supposed to be a land of legend and magic?

A real reconciliation took place between Artaud and André Breton during the months after his departure for Ireland. For these two men the profound magic of things was very real. Was there at that moment a return on Artaud's part to what was most deeply rooted in surrealism? Breton also probably thought of going to Ireland, since on August 23, 1937, Artaud wrote him from the Isle of Erin: "Life in Ireland seemed terribly expensive to me! I doubt whether you could get along in the cities for less than a pound a day." Artaud went to the Islands of Erin immediately after disembarking. He wanted to go where he thought he might discover traces of the ancient Druids.

On September 5, he wrote to Breton:

For there are gods if there is not a God. And the unconscious and criminal law of Nature is above the gods, we and the gods, We-the-Gods are its victims jointly.

Paganism was right but Men who are eternal slobes betrayed

the Pagan Truth. Then Christ returned to bring Pagan Truth up to date, all the Christian churches defecated upon it ignominiously. Christ was a magician who struggled with a cane against Demons in the desert. And a drop of his blood has remained on the cane. It goes away when you scrub it with water, but it returns.

In certain men there is a god which returns and these men struggle against this god because he tires them materially. But the gods are always stronger.

Since he had gone to awaken the “gods asleep in the Mexican Museums,” didn’t Artaud want to see the forces of a culture buried for so long under so many accumulated layers of old soil flourish again?

Wouldn’t he be able to find in Ireland the “authentic culture” which the occidental world had lost?

Wasn’t the trip to Ireland a duplicate of the Mexican trip?

None of these questions has been answered. The enigmas concerning this trip to Ireland are far from having been resolved.

We even know very little concerning the trip itself. We can reconstruct his itinerary thanks to the letters he sent.

He disembarked at Cobh on August 14, 1937 in the morning. He was in Galway on the seventeenth. He was at Kilronan, Inishmore, the largest of the Isles of Erin, on the twenty-third. On September 5, he returned to Galway and stayed at the Imperial Hotel. On September 8, he left Galway for Dublin. The last letter received from Dublin was addressed to Jacqueline Breton and is dated September 21. Though he revealed some practical details concerning his life at Kilronan in his letter to André Breton of August 23, the other letters yielded no information concerning his activities. Only in his letter to Jean Paulhan during his second stay in Galway did he give some precise information. He asked that money be sent to him at once.

He was in Dublin without money, speaking English very poorly, and still in possession of his cane. We know that the Irish police arrested and imprisoned him at the end of September. A few days before his arrest he created a little scandal at the Jesuit College: the police were alerted and threw him out at the request of the Jesuits.

In November, Jean Paulhan, who was worried because he had

no news from Artaud, wrote to the French Consul in Dublin. He received this reply:

The Irish police made M. Artaud's presence in Dublin known to the French Legation at the end of last September. They expressed the desire of sending our compatriot, who was without resources and in a state of high exaltation, back to France. The Legation intervened as much as possible in favor of M. Artaud, who embarked at Cobh on September 29, on the Washington, and must have arrived the following morning at Le Havre.

Ten years later Antonin Artaud explained the reasons for his forced repatriation in this way: "I was deported from Ireland following the outbreak of street riots centering around and concerning the cane I had with me at the time." And about the cane: "I left it in a bed at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu's shelter in Dublin, the day before the Irish police broke my spinal column in two and then had me imprisoned on top of it."

In the *Letters from Rodez*, Antonin Artaud gives a rather complete interpretation of the entire affair:

Only brute strength is capable of struggling against such hideous infamy; and I resorted to this one day in Dublin in a square during September 1937. The Irish are implacable Catholics, and the foundation of Catholicism is to taste god-the-ego in the mass of all the obscene support; the tongue prays with obscene phallic weightiness, as though when drawing breath it were ejaculating milk, lewdly, while at the same time experiencing an orgasm.

That's what the hypocrite Tartuffe loftily makes in his soul, like every Christian, unctuously concealed behind the clasped hands of his life. And that is what people at the Dôme or on Avenue de Ségur no longer do hypocritically or supernally but straightforwardly and corporeally.

I was not alone in Dublin, one against one thousand. I was alone with a special cane that everyone could see in Paris during the months of May, June, July, and August, 1937, the time when *Le Voyage au Pays des Tarahumaras*<sup>6</sup> was published. I took a walk with this cane and went to the Deux Magots, to the Dôme,

---

<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud had wanted *Le Voyage au Pays des Tarahumaras* (*The Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras*) to be published anonymously, as *Les Nouvelles Révélations de l'Être* (*The New Revelations of Being*) had been. "My name must disappear," he had written to Jean Paulhan. Indeed, the text was published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* without the author's name.

the Coupole, and most every place in Paris. I showed it to André Breton and to several other friends rather closely. It was my friend René Thomas who lived on 21 rue Daguerre at the time, who gave it to me, who had gotten it from the daughter of a Savoyard Sorcerer mentioned in Saint Patrick's prophecy. And this cane is also mentioned in Saint Patrick's prophecy published in the hagiographic dictionary which I read for the first time in 1934 at the Bibliothèque Nationale. This cane has 200 million fibers, and it is incrustated with magic signs representing moral forces and a prenatal symbolism, the study of which incidentally should be taken up again because it was interfering with the principle of the cane, the stick's own fulminating power, keeping it from possessing all the action it could have. But this symbolism denies the principle of fire because it achieves and succeeds in criminally diverting it toward the idea of predestination of beings who, whatever evil they might have been able to perpetrate, could not one day fail to be saved. Whatever the case may be, I used this cane in Ireland only to impose silence upon all the barkers and I was put in prison and deported only because I realized that it was worthless as a means of defense and that as I used it I myself was becoming very bad, that is, inept, idiotic, and insipid in my soul. This cane, so the legend goes, belonged to Lucifer who thought himself god but was only his vampire. It passed through the hands of Jesus Christ and then to those of Saint Patrick.

I have planted and established another which I am expecting momentarily and I have not stopped working on it here. When it will be ready the battle will begin again and I have already told you that as I went to Mexico in 1936, I now plan to take a long trip around the Himalayas.

Whatever the case may be, Artaud was on board the Washington on his way to France certainly against his wishes. Not much imagination is required to understand his frame of mind: that of a hunted man. So, when he saw a steward and chief mechanic enter his room armed with a monkey wrench he did not for a second believe that the two men had perhaps come to repair something. He probably thought they had come to beat him up. He probably became aggressive in self defense. It was then that he was put in a straightjacket. He was interned upon his arrival at Le Havre.

I am convinced that none of this would have taken place had Artaud been surrounded by friendly people. It happened that he was alone among foreigners whose language he did not know. He was incapable of understanding or of making himself understood.

I am not up to your last question: "can you tell us something about his theatrical theories?" No, I can't, because I know no more than you do since you read *The Theatre and Its Double* carefully. Don't think I am trying to evade answering, it's only that I refuse to paraphrase this work from a strictly theatrical point of view.

It is difficult to separate Artaud's work from his life; it isn't any easier to separate his writings on theatre from those on life, that is, those concerning a major notion of poetry. "If the theatre is the double of life, life is the double of true theatre."

Long before he wrote this, Antonin Artaud published "L'Evolution du Décor" in *Comoedia's* daily in April, 1924.<sup>7</sup> Two plans illustrated this text, one of which was accompanied by this statement:

Architectural plan by Antonin Artaud  
for *The Place of Love*  
mental drama  
after Marcel Schwob.

Did you notice this little sentence in one of the versions of *Paul the Birds* or *The Place of Love*: "I am touching the impalpable line MENTAL POEM"?

Mental drama; mental poem; the theatre, life's double, the theatre's double . . . just to speak of Artaud's theories leads to a profound study of his work.

I know that many people want to turn *The Theatre and Its Double* into a reference book for specialists. It is, of course, a theatrical treatise and in it one can find in embryo many ideas which have been exploited by the best of today's dramatists. We must not forget what is said in the preface: "All our ideas on life should be reworked . . ." and I prefer to side with Maurice Blanchot when he writes:

Antonin Artaud left us a major document which is none other than an *Ars Poetica*. I realize that he speaks of the theatre, but what is really treated here is the requirement that poetry, such as it is, can be realized only if it refuses to be limited by genres and

---

<sup>7</sup> Published in TDR, Volume VIII, Number 2 (T22), pp. 57–60.

only if it affirms a more primitive language, *the source of which will be drawn from a more hidden and distant point in thought.*

I suppose, dear Bettina Knapp, I have in part disappointed your expectations. Do not be angry with me, please.

*Translated by* BETTINA KNAPP

---

---

**3**  
**PLAYS**  
by  
**ERNST**  
**BARLACH**

translated by  
**ALEX PAGE**

This new book makes available for the first time in English translation three of Ernst Barlach's finest plays, *The Flood*, *The Genuine Sedemunds*, and *The Blue Boll*. Barlach was best known as a sculptor and graphic artist, but he was also a leading dramatist in the German expressionist movement. Alex Page, the translator, provides an introduction in which he discusses the three plays and Barlach's dramatic techniques and relates both to Barlach's other artistic achievements and to contemporary drama of the same movement. Mr. Page is a member of the English department at the University of Massachusetts. There is a frontispiece reproduction of a Leonard Baskin portrait of Barlach. \$5.50

Order from your bookseller or from  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS  
2037 University Avenue S. E.  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

---