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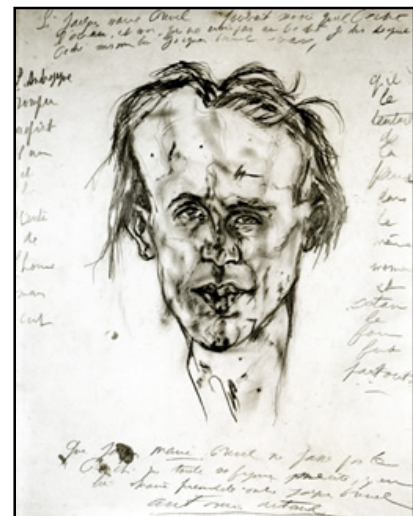
## Antonin Artaud's Unending Death Rattle

“Sa signature aussi me regarde. Est-ce possible?”

-Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge*

**1924:** In his book, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, Jacques Derrida examines Artaud's complex and enduring legacy as both a writer and artist, insisting that “...we have to learn not to be in a hurry to seize, to understand, we have to give the ink of so many words depositing themselves slowly in the thickness of the body time to get absorbed” (71). A question arising from Derrida's plea for a kind of hermeneutic patience is whether now—well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century—enough time has yet passed for the “ink of so many of [Artaud's] words” to have been “absorbed,” his words deposited upon the “thickness” of his dead body, rattling still in their turbulent decay. Distanced, are we now in a more clarifying position “to seize, to understand” that which remains of Artaud's thick body of work?

In large part, the “secret art” to which Derrida refers involves the many drawings that Artaud was working upon during the last decade of his life, an especially troubled period during which he was moving away from his fraught engagements with theater and focusing ever more intensely upon drawing itself. Initially, many of these drawings were included in letters that Artaud was writing to various



individuals, the images integrated alongside the written correspondence (these letters frequently described by Artaud as intended to function as cast “spells”). These and other such graphic works from the last decade of his life would constitute what have become known as Artaud’s “written drawings.” The two words were necessarily conjoined because, in so much of this later work, Artaud’s drawings would frequently include his own distressed and erratic handwriting alongside the various figures drawn, a blending of image and language often violently inscribed onto the paper.

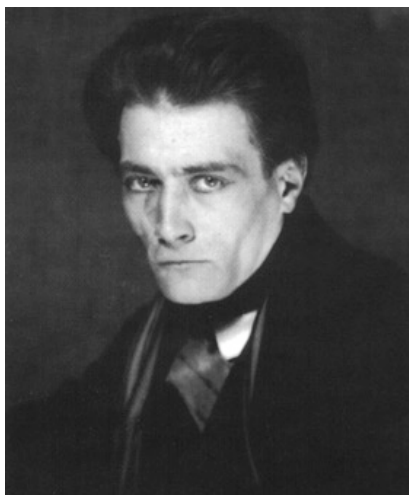
However, as striking as these late drawings are, they are not entirely without precedent when examined in the context of Artaud’s broader body of work. For Artaud had also been drawing quite actively as a young man, in that period prior to his engagement with theater, but only—as Paule Thévenin has noted—to “almost completely stop drawing toward 1924” (*Secret* 9). Indeed, 1924 was to prove a pivotal year for Artaud in many ways. Along with its marking the end of his time actively drawing, it was also the period during which he began his important correspondence with the editor Jacques Rivière, a series of letters that would lead to Artaud’s first publication in Rivière’s influential journal, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

This convergence of events in 1924—the beginning of his letters to Rivière and the ending of his concentrated work drawing—may not, however, be entirely coincidental or of unrelated significance. Indeed, what brings these two events together is a simple graphic fact found within each of them: evidence of Artaud’s own hand, of Artaud’s own handwriting. After all, it was this same hand that was writing the letters to Rivière that would, many years later, return in earnest to pick up the pencils and colored crayons in order to begin drawing again. This time round, however, Artaud’s drawings, his “secret art,” were even more fully to consume him during these final years of his life. In fact, over time, his “written drawings” would come to

constitute a rich, alternative mode of expression after Artaud had “give[n] up the dream of realizing a total theater” (14), according to Thévenin, and when his “Writing no longer ha[d] as its sole function that of transmitting a message or a thought; rather, it [was to] act by itself and *physically*” (*Secret* 15; my emphasis).

By examining the scene of Artaud’s early writings and, in particular, the varied references to handwriting found in those important 1924 letters to Jacques Rivière, we might—with our forensic gaze directed—see various prefigurations of his later letters and his eventual “written drawings” and “spells.” Indeed, reading these first letters alongside these last drawings, we might also find ourselves better positioned “to seize, to understand” the dried ink that has at last been more fully “absorbed,” as Derrida described it, on the thick body of Artaud’s work. For these drawings, inscribed with their pencils and crayons, may finally be seen signaling like an inadvertent signature, speaking to us still, echoing even (like a death rattle), as we scrutinize their authorizing inscriptions upon the page.

**Artaud/Rivière:** The photographs alone of Artaud and Rivière lend themselves, fairly or not, to a kind of character study that largely fulfills expectations and typecasting. Artaud is



darkly handsome and debonair, glowering directly out through his piercing eyes, dashing in his thick cravat, his high-collared jacket; his mouth is clenched, his thin lips pursed tightly downward;



the cheek bones sculpturally shape his nearly gaunt face, a head crowned by a thick mane of long, swept-back hair; leaning forward, he is the living image of the tormented bohemian, the portrait of the pose of the artist as a young man. Jacques Rivière, on the other hand, is nothing if not entirely proper in appearance, sitting bolt upright, with his neatly affixed bowtie, his well-tailored vest and jacket; his hair, parted in the middle, is neatly groomed. The dark eyes are certainly alert, but gentle, almost kind and obliging, with his thick lips nearly forming into a smile; he is the image of the image of the respectable literary gentleman, the successful and responsible bourgeois.

That the paths of these two very different men—the Left-Bank artist and the Right-Bank editor—would cross was to depend largely upon the postal system of the day, their written letters, progressively more passionate and revealing, preceding their eventual face-to-face encounter. Of the early correspondence between them, Artaud's primary objective in first contacting Rivière, in 1923, was to publish his poetry in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Rivière, though, was to dismiss rather abruptly the unknown poet and his unwieldy poems for what he describes—without mincing many words—in a letter back to Artaud for their “awkwardnesses and above all oddities which are disconcerting,” going on to specify that “you do not succeed in creating a sufficient unity of impression.” Nonetheless, Rivière would offer some degree of form letter-like hope to the struggling poet, suggesting that “with a little patience . . . you will succeed . . . in writing perfectly coherent and harmonious poems” (33). Rivière could hardly have known (though, early on, he may have already suspected) that his correspondent was a man of little such prescribed “patience” and that odds were against any “perfectly coherent and harmonious” poems were not likely to arrive anytime soon.

Rivière may have also assumed that his editorial advice about the poems would fall on deaf ears because, in one of the earliest letters between them, there is a brief, but revealing moment where a particular graphic aspect of Artaud's handwritten letters stands out for the editor, opening itself up to further scrutiny and comment. Rivière makes note of this telling detail (as if unable to ignore it), recognizing in it a kind of inadvertent verification of his correspondent's self-described "fragility of mind." In his return letter, Rivière writes of what he has seen so vividly manifested on the letter's stationery: "Even if I had no other evidence, your handwriting—tormented, wavering, collapsing, as if sucked in here and there by secret whirlpools—would be sufficient guarantee of the reality of the phenomena of mental 'erosion' of which you complain...." (Sontag 39).

Of course, the later readers of these published letters—us, for instance—are not generally in a position to see what Rivière saw in 1924, those "tormented, wavering, collapsing" words written onto Artaud's stationery. Since the letters were not addressed to us, we are therefore in a rather peculiar position of having described that which we cannot see, but described nonetheless *as if* we were seeing it—Artaud's distressed handwriting. Distanced, it would seem that we are thus disadvantaged, or misdirected, in our reading of these letters, as their eventual publication would eliminate from sight that which Rivière was unable to ignore, a clear case of (distressed) form mirroring (distressed) content.

What we then *do* see, or what we are left to see, of the published letters is a cleaned up and clarified form—no longer mirroring—that has entirely eliminated Artaud's original graphic gesture and whatever tell-tale traces of "mental 'erosion'" that Rivière was to find within them. As such, we read of that which is no longer present, no longer visible: the "evidence" of the

actual hand writing the actual letter, the body behind it, and the lawyerly-like “guarantee” that, for Rivière, it granted (as if it were a signature authenticating a contract). Instead, Artaud’s reportedly tortured handwriting has, for us, been replaced posthumously by the visual clarities of a settled typescript, these familiar uniformities imposed by the printed and published letters that, on the surface, render all writing as physically equivalent in appearance, uniformly present and accounted for.

However, such a replacement of Artaud’s text—though entirely rational, predictable and necessary it may have been for its published dissemination—constitutes, if thought about, its own form of purloining of Artaud’s original letter (or even a kind of breach of the author’s signed contract), causing to be hidden, or disguised, that which was so *evidentially* present for Rivière. The letter’s transformation, or transubstantiation, also discloses, inadvertently, several other overarching issues that are at the very heart of many of the subsequent letters between these two men. What Rivière uncovers in his both critical and clinical scrutiny of Artaud’s handwriting is, therefore, not just symptomatically revealing of Artaud’s own suffering or his sanity, or lack thereof. Indeed, the eventual elimination of this apparently graphic and physical *fact* of the letters with their publication only confirms further much of what had been eating at Artaud all along and which he was determined to safeguard: the living, breathing body behind the writing—that real-time body in real-time writing—the “shaky” hand holding the pen (as if for dear life) in order to transcribe the embodied thoughts onto paper.

For, eliminated by such a published replacement of the author’s own handwriting is something of the self’s own staining of the stationery, those lost traces of Artaud having navigated—as if adrift in Rimbaud’s own drunken boat—what Rivière describes as his “secret whirlpools,” threatening at any moment to “suck” him in. This typographic replacement is not,

however, to be construed simply as the loss of a manuscript's (or an author's) aura in an "age of mechanical reproduction" (i.e., publication). But, such substitutions of text into their standardized form stand instead as evidence of a kind of somatic silencing, revealing even a kind of breach of contract in which a signatory's authorizing mark has been eliminated, his body prematurely buried (alive) beneath the more lucid ink of typographic clarities. In its place upon the now cleanly printed page and within the neatly bound book, there remains—in the clear case of Artaud's letters to Rivière—a particular absence that presumes to speak for that erased body, to prompt it into what Rivière had earlier lamented as lacking in Artaud's poetry, into "coherent and harmonious" utterance.

**“Shreds”:** Of these secretive “whirlpools,” what Artaud returns to again and again in his letters to Rivière is less about the poems per se (of which, frankly, little specific is said) and is instead an often anguished account of his own perceived capacity, or incapacity, to think at all, and then, to thus, transcribe such thought, secret or not, into the materiality of language. In fact, his letters frequently read as a sustained record of self-interrogation and self-indictment in which, for instance, Artaud writes, “I suffer from a frightful disease of the mind. My thought abandons me at all stages. From the simple act of thinking to the external act of its materialization in words” (7). While in an earlier letter, Artaud goes so far as to state that “For me, it is no less than a matter of knowing whether or not I have the right to continue thinking, in verse or prose” (Hirschman 9) and, even on a more elemental level, inquiring as to what, in the very act of thinking, his presumed thought thus thinks itself to be...or not to be.

Artaud's poems and letters, thus materialized “in words” (in the very inky substance that Artaud was so ambivalently engaged), are offered as the pretextual, or post-textual, rendering of

this apparently dead-end, or circuitous encounter with thought's own thoughtful boundaries. Maurice Blanchot describes these boundaries as arising, for Artaud, from "...a poetry...linked to the impossibility of thinking which is thought, this is the truth that cannot disclose itself, because it always turns away, requiring that he experience it beneath the point at which he would really experience it" (Scheer 112). The difficulty of this impossible thought for Artaud that, as Blanchot describes it, "turns away" from itself just at the moment of its own enactment suggests a gestural, even theatrical kind of teasing concealment to the very act of thinking, like a staged refusal to show that which one wishes to see but which, as Herbert Blau writes, "...in the very activity of perception, *disappears*, as if in fact exhausted in the energy required...to see it. Almost," as Blau continues, "as if there were a dramatization of the Heisenbergian principle: the very instruments of perception dematerialize the object; that is, the instruments of perception get in the way" (*Herring Fleet* 153).

Or, as Derrida depicts a similar "dramatization" of Artaud's vision, this bumping up against an apparently impermeable border functions as a reflecting mirror (and perhaps a funhouse mirror at that, splitting the stymied viewer into multiples of himself); on this mirroring stage, there is encountered this "circular limit" of thought *appearing* in the guise of theatrical self-representation, of thought thinking itself...thinking itself, and the "tragedy" of *that*, "its gratuitous and baseless necessity" (*Writing* 250). Within the tight confines of such internal awareness (and its fraught, or diminished, externalizations in language), the words inscribed are then imagined by Artaud almost as a kind of (double) agent of irrepressible interrogation, evidence of a half-demented Cartesian demon conducting a mediating commentary upon all thinking that is thought. I think, therefore I see myself thinking; I see myself, performing



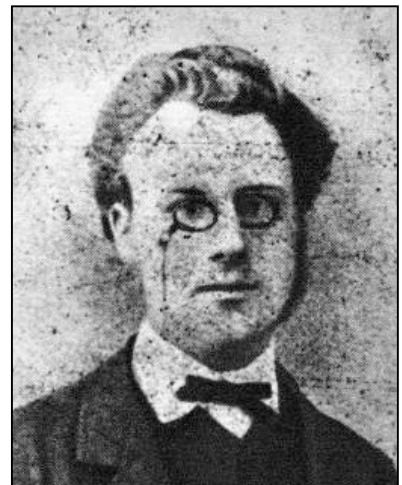
thought—like Beckett’s Lucky on a leash in *Waiting for Godot*, ordered by Pozzo to “Think! [...] Think pig!”—to the captive audience of no one in particular.

Positioned “tragically” and theatrically thus, at such an unstable precipice of thought’s own entrapment, or abandonment, Artaud goes on nonetheless in his letters to describe his anguished poems to Rivière as “the shreds that I have managed to snatch from complete nothingness [...] They come from the deep uncertainty of my thinking” (Sontag 8). Picturing now the shaky hand that once held the pen, one would not therefore be surprised—as Rivière apparently was not—to find such “shreds” of thought barely maintaining their own legibility, while graphically confirming the authenticity of the author’s anguished claims of a “frightful disease of the mind.” Indeed, as if emerging from what Rivière’s described as Artaud’s own “secret whirlpools,” the letters might have appeared to have been written from within thought’s own mirroring maelstrom, before the mind’s own doubling proscenium—veiled, vanishing, with curtains closed, exhausted in the energy required to write them.

***Penser/Panser:*** It’s worth noting that in 1871, almost exactly fifty years prior to Artaud’s correspondence with Rivière, the very young poet Arthur Rimbaud was writing a series



of letters of his own (handwritten, of course) to his high school teacher Georges Izambard. As with those earlier photographs of Artaud and Rivière, archival images of Rimbaud and Izambard are again revealing and largely fulfilling of expectation



and typecast. After all, the boy poet Rimbaud looks almost impossibly precocious, rustically handsome, perhaps even a bit bratty through his grainy gaze, with his ruffled hair, his tousled tie, his fixed lips in their studied grip; while Izambard, his pince-nez awkwardly affixed, appears young, but striving, callow but properly professional (if provincial) behind his own degraded image. If, in Artaud's later letters to Rivière, the most rudimentary *act* of thinking, and the "dramatization" of that *acted* thought, was center-stage in their correspondence, in these earlier letters between Rimbaud and Izambard thought is even more overtly presented as theatrically eclipsing of any enduring reassurances of insight and understanding. Offered in place of such self-securing thought, and perhaps as thought's own stand-in or double, is something resembling a corroded and mediating mirror (even a decaying photograph) of self-reflecting reflection, rather than a transparent window onto an adjacent, an immediate world.

In these letters to Izambard, with the audacity of his youth on full display, Rimbaud was almost impishly turning on its head the long-held and reassuring Cartesian certainties of thought's constituting capacity. For instance, in one such letter to his teacher, Rimbaud famously wrote that "It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: one thinks me.—Pardon the pun [in French: *penser*, "to think; *panser*, "to treat a wound"].— I is someone else" (371).

Of Rimbaud's pardonable pun, where the poet plays off—as in a game of ping pong—the *penser* with the *panser*, there is an illuminating parallel between our two young poets, Artaud and Rimbaud, where—pun intended—thought is homonymically rendered as a wounding act in need of treating, a necessary dressing of a self-inflicted suffering that thought itself has caused. Writing on Derrida, Gayatri Spivak describes the exacting, wounding cost incurred by such a thought *of thought*, and of a "text where '*penser*' (to think) carries within itself and points at

*'panse'* (to dress a wound); for does not thinking," Spivak wonders, "seek forever to clamp a dressing over the gaping and violent wound of the impossibility of thought?" (lxxxvi).

And now, by metaphoric extension pointing back to Artaud's handwritten letters to Rivière, might the published transubstantiations of Artaud's own thought—as in the kind typographically required to publish his letters so that *we* can later read them—be seen to have "clamp[ed] a dressing" of its own "over the gaping and violent wound" exposed in Artaud's own "impossibility of thought"? Indeed, for Rivière, might Artaud's own "tormented, wavering, collapsing" script have been seen as the unignorable evidence of Artaud's own undressed wounds, so visible in the immediate ink of his tortured handwriting?

Artaud would later write of Rimbaud (sounding like an eager and earnest student) that he "taught us a new way of being, a new way of maintaining ourselves in the midst of things" (Sontag 26). And, perhaps as a consequence of this "new way of being," Artaud was also to learn from Rimbaud a "new way" of maintaining himself in the midst of, not just "things," but of thought, within the theater of one's own thinking, and of the wounds incurred in the (self) alienating violence of that act.

Let's see if, returning to Rimbaud's letters one more time, this "new way of being" is further spelled out in the young poet's letters and whether Artaud's own wounds have been even more fully prefigured in Rimbaud's ruminations on thought's alienating event. Where, in place of the "I" in firm possession of thought, it is the other, the "one think[ing] me," who is in possession of "someone else."

As he writes two days later to his friend Paul Demeny, Rimbaud repeats his conclusion about thought's own dispossessions, while amplifying their potentially delirious and even scenic manifestations. Rimbaud writes: "For I is someone else. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not

its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at this birth of my thought: I watch it and listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes on to the stage in a leap” (375). Here, Rimbaud’s vivid description of thought as a watchable, listenable medium of birthed (and brassy) apparition is particularly revealing if seen alongside Artaud’s own early letters. For, speaking as “someone else,” Rimbaud describes a “stage” upon which such thought-filled enchantments appear gesturally to “leap” forth and theatrically perform, the dressed wounds daringly displayed, and contrasted with Blanchot’s earlier referenced depiction of thought’s own “turn[ing] away,” undisclosed.

One might now imagine that Artaud, in his letters to Rivière, has in effect split the difference between the dramatizing tropes of the earlier Rimbaud and the later Blanchot, with Artaud’s thoughts both “leap[ing] forth” *and* “turn[ing] away,” disclosing *and* undisclosed. Artaud’s letters might consequently be seen as a conceptual staging ground of split and division between thought and the one thinking it. For the scene of that writing now resembles a theatrical arena, a cordoned off space of self-sacrifice doubling as a site of (strained) self-affirmation—“I watch it and listen to it,” Rimbaud writes, but with the “I” here understood as now elsewhere and other, the “it” as a watched thought performing its own disappearance, its own self-immolation.

From such a space of conflicted and theatricalized thought, it is perhaps little wonder that the hand that held the pen to write of such conflict, its incurred wounds still showing (as a graphic stain upon the page), might itself appear at times deeply distressed, capable of leaving only those earlier described “shreds” of thought—“tormented, wavering, collapsing”—transcribed onto paper, “snatch[ed] from complete nothingness.”

“**Why Lie?**”: Still, in writing to Rivière, physically weak or not, Artaud recognizes what he is up against in his pursuit of publication in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, acknowledging (with some irony likely intended) that such a journal “requires a certain formal excellence and a great purity of matter...” Nonetheless, he goes on to ask directly of Rivière if, “this [formal excellence] aside, is the substance of my thought so tangled and is its general beauty rendered so inactive by the impurities and uncertainties with which it is marred that it does not manage to exist *literally*?” (Hirshman 8).

Such a plea for acceptance and understanding on Artaud’s part (which would seem to extend even beyond his plea for publication) begs the question of whether, of his poems submitted to Rivière, a vital dimension of their *literal* existence might have had to include something of their very materiality, a manifestation of their “nervous force” inscribed upon the page, seen as if “signaling through the flames,” gesturing through the ink. And might it also be that any translation of those inscriptions into a uniform script, coagulating around a publishable “object,” would cause such a radical depletion of the writing’s visceral vitality as to render it virtually invisible or mute, something profoundly other than what it once was—a now lost record, or trace, of their author’s word-filled wounds, visible “*literally*” on the page?

Evoking the very issue of Artaud’s legibility and the revealing materiality of its form as it relates to his imagined theater, Derrida, quoting Artaud, writes in his early study of him that “The depth sought after [in his proposed theater] must thus be the depth of illegibility: ‘Whatever is part of ...illegibility’ ‘we want to see sparkle and triumph on stage’. In theatrical illegibility, in the night that precedes the book, the sign has not yet been separated from force” (*Writing* 189). The cruel theatricality of *this* hand—Artaud’s—holding the pen, the body’s engaged gesture as it, risking illegibility, having inscribed itself onto the stationery, might now

be seen to offer a kind of staging ground for a *de facto* performance. However, as Derrida concludes, disrupting any thought of a coherent performance while seeming to anticipate the clarifying act of eventual publication, writes that “This derivation of force within the sign divides the theatrical act, exiles the actor far from any responsibility for meaning, makes of him an interpreter who lets his life be breathed into him, and lets his words be whispered to him... The stage is no longer cruel, is no longer the stage, but a decoration, the luxurious illustration of a book” (189).

Rivière would, as is now known, soon decide to publish Artaud—not yet as Derrida’s



“luxurious illustration of a book,” but in his luxurious literary journal, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. However, what Rivière was to select for publication would not be Artaud’s submitted poetry, but the letters themselves that emerged from the initial engagement. As he writes to Artaud on May 24, 1924, of his desire to publish this correspondence, he indicates that “All that would be required [for such publication] is a slight transposition. I mean that we would give the writer and the recipient invented names... The whole might form a little novel in letters which would be rather curious” (19).

Responding immediately, indeed, the *very next day* to Rivière’s proposal, Artaud’s reaction to this offer is instructive and probably predictable, as he starts the letter, abruptly addressing the request to change names and make “a little novel” of the letters, with the pointed question, “Why lie, why try to place on the literary level a thing which is the very cry of life?”

Why give an appearance of fiction to what is made up of the ineradicable substance of the soul, to what is the wail of reality.” Still, as we now know, Artaud goes on to accept the proposal but under the condition that the eventual publication “give whoever reads us the impression that he is not being presented with something being fabricated. We have the right to lie, but not about the essence of the matter . . . . But it is absolutely necessary that the reader feels that he has in his hands the element of a true story” (19).

Of course, a conflict, a split, a division, a *différance*, instantly arises here at this point of publication, perhaps repressed at the time by Artaud in his overriding desire to see his work in print. For in Artaud’s insistence upon a “true story,” there is the inevitable story-*ing* of his truth, of representation’s (via publication’s) inescapable betrayals of, not the reader’s, but the author’s own hand in the matter, that *actual* hand, and of the “tormented, wavering, collapsing” *handwriting* that is then formalized, cleaned up and clarified, made available and legible to all of those readers to come.

Us, for instance; that published book is now in *our* hands, as the later readers of Artaud, reading his “true story.”

For we are clearly complicit in this transformation of Artaud’s text, essentially demanding—if we wish to see the letters—their printed dissemination, as well as their typographic substitutions into legible, publishable form. Perhaps, though, we are equally, if less consciously, complicit in our desire to transform Artaud himself into something that he may never have been, making this deeply troubled individual into someone who is finally presentable in public, palatable in good company, a rich subject for scholarly investigation and conference coinage (as if we were now casting Artaud, the actor, in a performance of our own making).

As his handwriting has been cleaned up and clarified for publication, so perhaps has Artaud himself. But at what cost? What has been lost in the tidying up, in this “make over” of a man otherwise absent? For, once published, Artaud has become, not a “body without organs,” but instead a kind of brain without a body, a mind without a hand to transmit its many agitated signals of ecstasy and insight, torment and suspicion, those scrambling dissolutions of thought thinking themselves scenically outside of life.

**Secrets:** In part, a greater awareness of this hand, and the erasure of those visibly handwritten wounds, might help to clarify a conflict that often arises in reading the now published Artaud. For the question is frequently asked, as it was by Rivière himself, about “the contrast between the extraordinary precision of [Artaud’s] self-diagnosis and the vagueness, or at least the formlessness, of what you are trying to achieve” (Sontag 14-15). How could anyone write of such suffering with the degree of focus and sustained fluency with which Artaud was apparently capable? And how does a reader reconcile this often extraordinary eloquence, even this beauty of composition, with the instability and confusion so forcefully presented by Artaud?

Absent the visual record of Artaud’s handwritten letter, and left only with the clarities—the *deceptive* clarities—of his published manuscript, there is a puzzling disjuncture between the distressed content of those letters and the tidied form which we later see in their publication. As Artaud’s own tortured pursuit of thought is presented in its typographically fixed and steadied legibility, the signatory’s body behind it is largely eliminated, the torture itself tamed. Whereas, clearly, what Rivière was encountering in his initial reading of Artaud’s handwritten letters offered the editor the unignorable evidence and guaranteeing dimension to the writing that more fully and faithfully represented the troubled thought of the anguished thinker involved.



It will be some time before Artaud returns, with a kind of vengeance, to a writing in which the graphic act of his own spellbinding letters would once again conjure forth images of their own inscribed enchantments, of a “writing made flesh.” Indeed, Artaud will spend the next decade or so—from 1924 until around 1939—with his focus largely trained upon the theater, exploring there a writing in space that never quite found a way to inscribe itself in the ether of *that* air. But one might now reasonably wonder if, in his letters to Jacques Rivière, something of that ethereal stage had already presented itself to Artaud, and to Rivière, and now to us. For, offered there, in those earliest letters, was perhaps a kind of unscheduled performance upon the page, with the “secret art” of his much later “written drawings,” his cast “spells,” prefigured from within his own early instances of haunted handwriting. Like one secret giving way to another, what Rivière had immediately recognized in Artaud’s handwriting—“tormented, wavering, collapsing, as if sucked in here and there by secret whirlpools”—might now be seen as leading and linking to what Derrida characterized as the “secret art” of his later “written drawings.”

Shortly before his death in 1947, Artaud said of this later work that combined so forcefully, magically, both image and writing, “So it is that / these drawings must be accepted / in the barbarity and disorder / of their / graphic expression ‘which never / concerned itself with / art’ but with the sincerity / and spontaneity / of the stroke” (97). Like actors impatiently waiting in the wings, Artaud’s handwritten words—both early and late—are compelling evidence of such graphic energies poised to perform upon the privacy of the page, in the “spontaneity / of the stroke,” within and upon the secret seclusions of Artaud’s own stationery.

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