

The semiotics of the theater of cruelty

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Introduction

'Toute l'écriture est de la cochonnerie.' With these few words Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) thrusts us abruptly into the realm he calls the Theater of Cruelty. This uncompromising judgment against the value of writing summarizes Artaud's struggle to replace the linguistic sign with a surreal, 'concrete' sign, to eliminate 'masterpieces' in favor of a type of writing and a theater that would live in the present, not the past. Moreover, in the word '*cochonnerie*', suggestive of the elemental functions of the body, Artaud signals his obsession with a mind/body split. Much of his work seeks to heal that split and to achieve a seamless, surreal purity that will incorporate both the physical and the spiritual. Artaud's attack on writing, that merely cerebral activity, lies at the base of his reformulation of the theater. As a canonized work, the masterpiece has lost its spark, its connection with a 'sur-reality' which is difficult enough to perceive, but impossible by Artaud's standards to represent on the stage with a petrified pattern of words. Performances in which a written text predominates have no capacity to join sign with object. Instead, they produce mere metaphor, or even worse. A new forum, wherein sign and object face each other directly, was Artaud's lifelong goal; his closest approximation may have been his idea of the Theater of Cruelty.

After linking writing with filth or rubbish, Artaud goes on to say: '*Les gens qui sortent du vague pour essayer de préciser quoi que ce soit de ce qui se passe dans leur pensée, sont des cochons*' (Artaud 1956: Vol. 1, 95). In other words, do not strive for precise thought in the arts, for in its connection to the merely rational, logic does not allow for the surreal. Artaud considers vagueness and contradiction to be an integral part of reality, and certainly not to be expunged from any true representation of it, whether in written or theatrical form. We may wonder, in fact, what such a lover of paradox and mysticism might have in common with a logician such as Charles Peirce, or how the two might find common

ground on which to communicate. Peirce in many ways stands for the advocacy of 'masterpieces' that Artaud rejects so vehemently. And, in turn, we do not need Peirce's division of the sign relation into interpretant-sign-object to recognize that Artaud's notion of the 'concrete sign', which he thought of as a cathartic union collapsing the relations of thing representing and thing represented, is an impossible, pseudo-platonic conflation that refuses to deal with the question of consensus and spectator competence. Interpretation does not, should not, and will not exist in the Theater of Cruelty, Artaud implies, for there will be no distance between sign and object in which to misinterpret. Nor does there seem to be any room here (misinterpretation aside) for the interpretant, for the sign exhibits the object, says Artaud, in all its fullness, real and surreal, in the theater space. In what way, then, might Peirce be useful to us?

I think we must remember that it is very easy, and very dangerous, to be enticed into considering Artaud's theories solely on his own terms. As a student of ritual, the Cabbala, tarot, and theories of alchemy, Artaud encourages his readers to follow those same paths with him. It is necessary for Artaud's critics to make use of these tools in understanding such works as 'Les nouvelles révélations de l'être' (based on the tarot) or 'Le théâtre alchimique'. But any one of these texts can quickly become prescriptive in its insistence on the absolute magic of the word (one sign/one meaning), and the critic's perspective on the lifelong struggle in which that work was written may be lost. In the subtleties of this struggle we begin to find material that semiotics might find interesting, or even compelling. To the issues of the activity/passivity of the sign; of what constitutes materiality; of which perceptions are mediated and which might be termed immediate — to these issues Peirce can add interesting insights, usually drawn from his division of experience into triads. As we shall see, Artaud's life was dominated by his struggle against duality, a gnostic structuring of existence that he could never seem to elude. Peirce's triads allow us to reformulate some of Artaud's questions in interesting new ways; and, amazingly enough, they allow us to observe some remarkable similarities of mind between the mystic and the logician. Somewhere in the middle ground between so-called 'absolute' mysticism and 'absolute' rationality, Peirce and Artaud have both tramped and pondered, perhaps seldom agreeing on how the questions should be asked but — oddly enough — sometimes coming to similar conclusions.

Before I pursue this argument further, I would like to provide a brief introduction to a few of Artaud's ideas which will be most relevant here. In terming the masterpiece a 'destructive' way of viewing the arts, we have opened the door to Artaud's thorough-going critique of his society, one

which he defined in terms of the written text; of the mind abstracted into self-torture and the body fallen into self-consuming sexuality. Tying these together was his horror of derivation. We must recognize that Peirce and Artaud had totally different ideas of what constitutes nature or natural processes. Peirce treats the semioses of human experience as part of the larger, natural process of semiosis; Artaud, however, set man in direct opposition to nature. He criticized man for withholding himself from the sources of life and for opposing his rational, abstract will to the concrete deterministic 'forces' which could once again restore man to life, if he cultivated the proper physical and mental states. The Theater of Cruelty was one of Artaud's attempts to purge man of his abstraction and return the two halves of his being to one. It is this archetypal or perhaps Jungian vision of unity with the subconscious that leads him to establish the 'concrete sign' as the cornerstone of his theater and nature as an ideal to be achieved, not a reality to be analyzed.

While the French commentators recognize this Artaud of the theater, they are influenced much more greatly these days by Artaud's cult of the personal. That is to say, his obsession with his own physical and mental states and the metaphysical implications which he drew from his own experience. Most often this obsession is discussed, both by Artaud and his critics, as a separation from himself: a split within his own personality with the line drawn between his rational faculties and the real identity he felt he should assume. Or, to put it another way, the split *caused* by rationality, i.e., a split between the way rationality represents phenomena and what they 'really' are. Unfortunately this terminology is often not very clear or helpful. Nor can this explication of Artaud's continuing struggle with a body/mind split really deal with the interwoven dualities that flower in Artaud's later poetry. Other critics, notably Jacques Derrida, have avoided a simplistic formulation by discussing Artaud in terms of birth and death, origin and derivation, and '*la parole soufflée*' — the expired word — which is what the word becomes in the Theater of Cruelty: a verbal gesture, as concrete as any of the other 'gestures' made in the theater space. As Derrida says, *l'écrit* becomes *le cri* (Derrida 1965: 62). I will come back to the question of birth and death, materiality/spirituality, and Derrida's important analyses (deconstructions?) of '*la parole soufflée*', once I have given a better sense of what Artaud means by the meeting of the object with the sign in the theater, or — to put it in his terms — when the principles of reality emerge and present themselves to us through the barriers we manage to throw up with our rationality, and with rationality's inevitable other ego, our self-consuming obsession with the body.

The theater and the plague

In the opening essay of *Le Théâtre et son double*, Artaud makes a startling association between the theater and the plague. According to a notation in municipal records, in 1720 a vessel called the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* attempts to land at Sardinia. Instead of welcoming the vessel with standard courtesy, the viceroy of Sardinia orders the ship away in no uncertain terms. His order is considered insane, incomprehensible until it is learned that upon reaching Marseilles, some days later, the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* becomes responsible for a fresh and particularly virulent outbreak of the plague. Why does Artaud consider this story interesting? Only because, according to this account, recorded into the archives of the town of Cagliari, the term 'contagion' takes on a whole new meaning:

Cette peste, qui semble réactiver un virus, était capable toute seule d'exercer des ravages sensiblement égaux; puisque de tout l'équipage, le capitaine fut le seul à ne pas attraper la peste, et d'autre part, il ne semble pas que les pestiférés nouveaux venus aient jamais été en contact direct avec les autres, parqués dans des quartiers fermés. Le *Grand-Saint-Antoine* qui passe à une portée de voix de Cagliari, en Sardaigne, n'y dépose point la peste, mais le vice-roi en recueille en rêve certaines émanations; car on ne peut nier qu'entre la peste et lui ne se soit établie une communication pondérable, quoique subtile, et il est trop facile d'accuser dans la communication d'une maladie pareille, la contagion par simple contact. (Artaud 1956: Vol. 4, 21)

Prior to the sighting of the vessel, the viceroy has had a dream in which he sees himself and all his kingdom infected by the plague; as a consequence, he awakens with the knowledge that his realm is in the gravest danger and that he knows how to prevent disaster. The viceroy has not seen the ship itself in his dream; yet, the plague has communicated so well that he has no doubt upon seeing the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* that the ship must never land.

Artaud then goes on to describe the effects of the plague on the human body, transmuting live, healthy organs into hardened, swollen ones — disfigured but intact, with no loss of matter. With no diminution of material, the disease almost seems to kill by abstraction or by alchemical transformation; this same sort of transmutation afflicts the actor who, without being killed or physically altered in any apparent way, is penetrated by feelings which do not really belong to him. Similarly, the theater has the power to alter the minds of the spectators, with no physical change in them. Artaud's point here is that the plague (and the theater) is as much a spiritual entity as a material one; it is not enough to isolate the microbes which are claimed to spread the disease from one

person to the next. For the plague, says Artaud, is a social disaster so far-reaching and so capable of the absurd that all standards of normality are set on their heads: the captain of the vessel does not contract the disease, though he had little chance of avoiding it; the viceroy is 'infected' without being in the presence of any microbe — in fact, the plague has manifested to him its psychic identity, a contagion that might better be described as communication.

At this point it might be instructive to note that Artaud, in completely different terms, has made the same phenomenological move that Peirce makes, namely, that that which signifies need not be sense-perceptible. Phenomena which we perceive in a dreaming or hallucinatory state may still be called phenomena, existing because, however they are perceived by us, they are demonstrating their capacity to represent something to us. Artaud says:

La peste prend des images qui dorment, un désordre latent et les pousse tout à coup jusqu'aux gestes les plus extrêmes; et le théâtre lui aussi prend des gestes et les pousse à bout: comme la peste il refait la chaîne entre ce qui est et ce qui n'est pas, entre la virtualité du possible et ce qui existe dans la nature matérialisée. Il retrouve la notion des figures et des symboles-types, qui agissent comme des coups de silence, des points d'orgue, des arrêts de sang, des appels d'humeur, des poussées inflammatoires d'images dans nos têtes brusquement réveillées; tous les conflits qui dorment en nous, il nous les restitue avec leurs forces et il donne à ces forces des noms que nous saluons comme des symboles: et voici qu'a lieu devant nous une bataille de symboles, rués les uns contre les autres dans un impossible piétinement; car il ne peut y avoir théâtre qu'à partir du moment où commence réellement l'impossible et où la poésie qui se passe sur la scène alimente et surchauffe des symboles réalisés.

Ces symboles qui sont le signe de forces mûres, mais jusque-là tenues en servitude, en inutilisables dans la réalité, éclatent sous l'aspect d'images incroyables qui donnent droit de cité et d'existence à des actes hostiles par nature à la vie des sociétés. (Artaud 1956: Vol. 4, 34)

We have certainly come a long way from the notion of the theater as the acting-out of a dramatic text. The images and symbols that Artaud speaks of here have little to do with literary images and symbols (unless we attach the latter term to the ideas of the Symbolists of the late nineteenth century), but they have a great deal to do with what Peirce called icons and iconic signs.¹ As we shall see later, these are the only signs, according to Peirce, which can be considered indistinguishable in some way from their objects. Of course, Peirce's definition of the iconic would make it a term applicable to both Artaud's notion of theater and a more traditional theater, say that of Racine or Shakespeare, in which iconic signs certainly are present, but may not dominate the experience to the same extent and

in the same manner that they do in the Theater of Cruelty. Artaud's 'symbols' are signs which have the harrowing and impossible task of bringing into the presence of the spectator certain powers that are otherwise unavailable to him. We may extract another similarity between the operation of the sign in Peirce's system and the function of what I call Artaud's 'concrete sign'. In his essay, Artaud makes the point that the plague was not *introduced* to Marseilles by the *Grand-Saint-Antoine*; in fact, the plague was all around, but at that time it was not exercising its full powers upon the populace. With the arrival of the vessel, however, the powers of the 'original virus' are felt — that is, the virus *exerted itself* upon its victims in a very active manner. In this same way, the signs in the Theater of Cruelty impress themselves upon the spectator. The spectator's role is more one of receptor and initiate: 'The theater restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols,' to reiterate a sentence from the previous quotation (Artaud 1958: 27). Artaud would be quick to point out that when he speaks of conflicts within the spectators or of archetypes he is not pointing to the spectator as the *receptacle of the object*. A sign in the theater space does not act in some psychoanalytical fashion, revealing with a word here or a gesture there something within the spectator that he had not recognized before. That is to say, Artaud is not engaged in a therapy that identifies all specters as 'figments of the imagination' and that proceeds to reduce them to their owners' constituent neuroses and psychoses. Artaud does use the term 'repression' but he gives it a distinctly non-Freudian cast. This theater instead purifies the spectator by acting on the latent 'cruelty' within him, by penetrating him. He may recognize the sign, but he does not create it. In a substantial sense, this is a semiotic viewpoint. The way in which the sign acts of its own volition, transmitting itself to us and inviting us to experience it, bears some relation to Peirce's explanations of the roles of sign and interpretant. Because the sign generates the interpretants, its role is equally, or more, active than that of the interpreter (if present). Certainly, interpretation is not defined by Peirce as a mind actively shaping the world around him; rather, it involves receptivity as much as it involves activity, and that activity is largely the repositioning that the interpreter engages in to explore the widest possible range of interpretants. If we allow that by 'interpreters' Peirce might mean not only various individuals but one individual at various times, we will find his comments on the final interpretant to be relevant here. In his correspondence with Lady Welby Peirce writes:

The Final Interpretant is the one Interpretative result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the sign is *sufficiently considered* [my italics]. The Immediate

Interpretant is an abstraction, consisting in a Possibility. The Dynamical Interpretant is a single actual event. The Final Interpretant is that toward which the actual tends. (Peirce 1977: 111)

A gnostic materiality and the iconic sign

'Le Théâtre et la peste' paints a very idealized portrait of the roles of sign and interpreter, one in which not only the final interpretant but the object is definitely achieved. Does the interpretant in anything but its 'final' form have any meaning for Artaud? I think it does, and we find hints of that meaning in other essays and poems in which Artaud speaks of the difficulties which must be overcome to create a truthful art. Unfortunately, a more extended discussion of the interpretant is not possible here. Dealing, as we are, with an outlook that splits mind from body so radically, we would profit more by continuing our examination of the sign/object relation. Susan Sontag, in one of the best commentaries in English on Artaud, notes that he saw the creation of art not as contemplation but as activity, a passion of the mind. And Artaud insists on a definition of mind that reflects an impossible duality — of mind as body, and body as mind. Sontag comments:

Against all hierarchical, or Platonizing, theories of mind, which make one part of consciousness superior to another part, Artaud upholds the democracy of mental claims, the right of every level, tendency, and quality of the mind to be heard. [...] The quality of one's consciousness is Artaud's final standard. He unfailingly attaches his utopianism of consciousness to a psychological materialism: the absolute mind is also absolutely carnal. Thus, his intellectual distress is at the same time the most acute physical distress, and each statement he makes about his consciousness is also a statement about his body. [...] In his struggle against all hierarchical or merely dualistic notions of consciousness, Artaud constantly treats his mind as if it *were* a kind of body — a body that he could not 'possess', because it was either too virginal or too defiled, and also a mystical body by whose disorder he was 'possessed'.² (Sontag 1976: xxiii-xxiv)

Moreover, says Sontag, body itself has a mind that Artaud cannot tolerate — namely, all of the physical appetites that are ignorant of the 'mystical body' and defile it. This is the body that stands in Artaud's way, as he searches for a state of grace that will resolve all dualities. Sontag explicates these questions in terms of gnostic thought, to which Artaud's dualities owe a great deal. Incorporated in each human being is a microcosm of the struggle between the demonic forces, incarnated in matter, particularly the body, and the divine forces which have vacated

the carnal, leaving the human spirit abandoned and trapped in that body. Grace and freedom can only be achieved by tapping into the dark powers that control the world of matter; hence, Artaud tries to turn theater into a gnostic rite, investigates the tarot, travels to Mexico in search of the peyote ritual of the Tarahumaras Indians. Freedom, oddly enough, lies in an absolute adherence to the proper formulae that will triumph over the demonic (and, as we shall see later, here lies the connection between the rejection of matter and the rejection of literary language, for the latter has no incantatory power and constitutes a mere mindless wandering in the desert of the material). The individual, to be set free, submits himself to the will of these demons and through his suffering (whether by abstention from the pleasures of the flesh or by immersing himself in them) reaches a realm beyond good and evil. In this state of grace, mind recovers its mystical body, and the physical body no longer constitutes an obstacle.

Interpreting Artaud's works, particularly his later ones, in terms of Gnosticism makes sense, when one understands the extent to which his life was hemmed in by these fears of being trapped in a world of matter. Images of birth and death, eating and defecating dominate his poetry; each poem seems designed to summon the demonic forces in order to exorcise them, to release Artaud from his being and allow him to give himself birth. Artaud's new being will have no organs, that is, no parts with which to divide the body and force it into carnal activity: instead, it will be pure and whole, seamless and self-created. In 'Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu' he announces:

L'homme est malade parce qu'il est mal construit.
Il faut se décider à le mettre à nu pour lui gratter cet
 animalcule qui le démange mortellement,
 dieu,
 et avec dieu
 ses organes....
Lorsque vous lui aurez fait un corps sans organes,
alors vous l'aurez délivré de tous ses automatismes et rendu
à sa véritable liberté. (Artaud 1956: Vol. 13, 104)

God, particularly Christ, is associated with death and with death's accomplice, derivation. In keeping with the contradictions of gnostic thought, Artaud both excoriates Christ and claims to be Christ, sometimes in the same breath. As the Redeemer, he will institute a new age; as the crucified man, he will earn that redemption with his sufferings. But at the same time, Artaud cannot accept the rest of Christ's identity, particularly that of son. At times he would deny his real parentage as well, in an attempt to escape the death of being trapped in the body, by refusing to acknowledge that he is a being derived from others — not the source of

life at all, but an extraction from life. Artaud wanted to live at the center of a universe that contained only one being: himself.

Given the discussion of the theater and the plague above, it is easy to see how these fears and desires prompted Artaud's obsession for immediacy in the theatrical event. 'Immediate perception' is a tricky question, as Ransdell (1979) points out. However, it seems likely that semiotics allows for some form of immediacy, based on capabilities of the icon. Ransdell quotes from the *Collected Papers* (3.362):

Icons [that is, iconic signs] are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them. [...] [I]n contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream — not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an *icon*. (Ransdell 1979: 58)

I find it amazing that Peirce refers to that moment as a 'pure dream', a term which might have come from the pen of Artaud. The images and language of the Theater of Cruelty were to have the power of their counterparts in a dream. However, Ransdell also notes that we must be careful to distinguish these *iconic signs* from the *icon* which, as a sign by Firstness, cannot be a material object, or even an idea, because its identity with the object is a *formal* one. That is not to say that the icon limits the identity of the object to its form, but that it and the object are indistinguishable from one another only in that way. Iconic signs have an even smaller area of identity with the object, because they are in themselves individual objects some form or character of which is functioning iconically. It seems likely, then, given these interpretations, that Peirce would try to bring to Artaud's attention that he is creating in the Theater of Cruelty, not icons, but iconic signs. The only successful sense in which Artaud might use icons is in a theoretical sense, which we find in his polemics and manifestoes on the theater. In *calling* for a Theater of Cruelty, Artaud manages to create the signs which he believes can only be created in the theater. (Hence, it is not surprising that his written metaphors often carry a more vivid and workable sense of the iconic than did his work on the stage.) But to say that written language can carry a sense of the iconic which Artaud has reserved for a specifically nonliterary experience is to say that 'immediate perception' is a much broader term than Artaud intended. In fact, Ransdell follows Peirce in suggesting that all perception is mediated, and that only the media used will vary. Instead he offers the terms 'direct' and 'indirect' perception and 'self-representation'/'other-representation' to supply a better sense of the range of possible iconic signs. Self-representation probably corresponds best to

Artaud's definition of the sign-relation, but that designation in no way allows the 'purity' of self-representation that Artaud demands.

Artaud's sense of the 'purity' of the relationship is based on an imagined platonic hierarchy which assumes 'object' to be always more complete, more real than 'sign' and hence automatically inclusive of it. For Peirce, such a hierarchy misrepresents the fluidity and mutuality of semiotic relations. Dependent on how the elements of the relationship are formed or considered, an iconic sign may have additional iconic characteristics that link it to that *or other* objects. Or the sign may be connected to these objects indexically or symbolically. Even so exact a relationship as that of icon and object does not eliminate a multiplicity of other possible relations: a photograph of a young girl can refer us not only to that particular girl, but also to her twin sister. That the photo is considered iconic of the one does not prevent it from being iconic of the other. An actor, such as Artaud in the role of Count Cenci, might elicit in the course of his performance such an uncanny sense of *cruauté* that for a moment 'we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream'. But that this correspondence can be made does not prevent other legitimate iconic relations which may or may not become apparent to members of the audience. In this manner, Peirce allows for and deals with the questions of interpretation and mediation, although he refuses, for very good reasons, to phrase the multiplicity of semiotic relations in those terms. Mediation lies in any number of hidden places, not only in how the spectator receives the sign, but how the sign might relate, for example, to the Dynamical Object through the Immediate Object. While reaching for the 'fullness' of the sign in the theater space, Artaud has actually impoverished it by trying to eliminate mediation as much as possible.

However, Artaud did acknowledge, in an indirect fashion, that *perception* can be successfully mediated. In searching for the most effective medium for his ideas, Artaud seems to have considered seriously film and poetry, as well as the theater. Poetry he claimed to have rejected, but never actually abandoned. Film fascinated Artaud (he appeared in a number of films, most notably several directed by Abel Gance), but he did not have the means or opportunity to create his own. As a densely mediated experience, film, one would think, would lack a certain physicality (the confrontation between actor and spectator, for example, which avant-garde theater often uses as its distinguishing mark). Yet, Artaud incorporated certain types of technology into his production of *Les Cenci* (recorded sound and a prototype of the 'moog synthesizer' are the best instances) that he felt in no way interfered with the 'directness' of the spectator's perception. Once the sound was present 'in the theater space' it

could function as effectively as the original sound itself. So, insofar as we are speaking of the relationship between spectator and sign, Peirce and Artaud seem to agree that the sign can effectively substitute itself for the object without losing its (the sign's) own material and individual identity.

Artaud knows very well that the existence of the iconic sign is predicated by its Secondness, that is, its material or individual identity. In terms of theater, we might think immediately of the presence of the actor on stage, which we could consider as an index of that actor's off-stage existence. The filmic presence of the actor could work similarly, of course. Moreover, a 'cruel' performance, like any historical play, functions indexically as a whole because of its relation by cause and effect to the actual events from which the play was derived. I have often been puzzled, in reading Artaud's essays, at his insistence that the Theater of Cruelty must draw upon public events in a most particular way. Despite his surrealist assumptions that the artist must remain true only to the surreality of events, not to a historical accuracy, Artaud's projects for the theater were to be adapted from accounts inscribed in government records (witness his story of the plague) or from literary texts based on historical events, such as Shelley's *The Cenci*, which provided the bulk of the material for Artaud's only full-length play. (We will leave aside the irony of his aspirations to adapt any number of plays — masterpieces, heaven forbid! — from Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* to John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, although reliance on texts certainly did not correspond to his own aspirations to complete originality.) Artaud felt that the success of a performance was intimately bound to its genesis in the material world, that is, to the event's original occurrence.

It is this sort of half-buried evidence that leads me to believe there is indeed a 'semiotics' of the Theater of Cruelty that shares certain attitudes and tenets with Peirce's theories. Certainly one cannot interpret all of Artaud's ideas semiotically, since it is apparent that his sense of the semiotic usually played servant to other, more-or-less psychologically framed questions. But in the following section, I hope it will become clear that even so compatible a commentator as Jacques Derrida is blind to aspects that are rather easy to explain in Peircean terms.

Language as incantation

In '*Le Théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation*' Derrida defines the function of speech and writing in the Theater of Cruelty. First of all, he notes that Artaud does not distinguish between the two: as *derivative* forms, as representations of a creator who must be eliminated

from the theater, speech and writing (*logos*) contribute to the theological (his term) nature of the stage. But they should not be eliminated altogether; rather, '[t]hey will once more become *gestures*; and the *logical* and discursive intentions which speech ordinarily uses in order to ensure its rational transparency, and in order to purloin its body in the direction of meaning, will be reduced or subordinated' (Derrida 1978: 11). Words have concealed themselves by their 'rational transparency': that is, they have been treated solely as symbols, with their iconic and indexical characteristics neglected, or even deliberately concealed. The sign should be streamlined to its iconic form. Derrida continues:

We know what value Artaud attributed to what is called — in the present case, quite incorrectly — onomatopoeia. *Glossopoeia*, which is neither an imitative language nor a creation of names, takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet discourse, when repetition is *almost* impossible, and along with it, language in general: the separation of concept and sound, of signified and signifier, of the pneumatical and the grammatical, the freedom of translation and tradition, the movement of interpretation, the difference between soul and the body, the master and the slave, God and man, author and actor. (1978: 11)

Derrida's analysis of Artaud's ideas is characterized not only by his taste for paradox and dualities (a taste perhaps acquired in part from Artaud) but also by his contention, often repeated, that marginality is one of the key issues for the contemporary artist and critic. He would like to place language on the edge of comprehensibility, where it will reveal its

sonority, intonation, intensity — the shout that the articulations of language and logic have not yet entirely frozen, that is, the aspect of oppressed gesture which remains in all speech, the unique and irreplaceable movement which the generalities of concept and repetition have never finished rejecting. (1978: 11)

Hence, gesture and speech are/are not separate entities in the Theater of Cruelty, says Derrida. It is not enough to say that the linguistic sign shares iconic characteristics with nonlinguistic signs created in the stage space (e.g., a particular kind of lighting or movement), while assisting in presenting a symbolic side as well. The characteristics of the sign must not be distinguishable from one another; only if they form a 'clamor [which] has not yet been pacified into words', their immediacy will permeate the spectator. Derrida would seem to be saying that the linguistic sign becomes an entity which can represent in only one way: once again, self-representation.

Although I understand how Derrida has extrapolated from the ideas of

Artaud, I wonder if his commentary does full justice to the semiotic aspects of those ideas. By assuming that a sign only signifies in one manner at any one time, he can divide 'gestural' language from 'discursive' language, as though the two were completely independent of one another. Moreover, Derrida's analysis of the question of the linguistic sign perpetuates an unfortunate formulation of the capabilities of that sign: namely, that only in its iconic aspects can the sign be considered open, accessible, flexible. Derrida turns at the end of his article to the issue of play, the evanescent and self-contradictory appearances of the sign when it is pushed to the limits of its iconic qualities ('its sonority, intonation, intensity'). In the Theater of Cruelty, says Derrida, the sign flirts with its own identity. It stays alive by refusing a Creator, i.e., by emerging in the space/time of the performance itself, rather than being the excrescence of a literary text, bound to certain rational meanings and hence truncating the sign's ability to reach into and represent in any way the forces of Cruelty. As a translation of a written sign, the verbal sign cannot truly communicate (that is, bring the spectator into the presence of the real); it can only repeat and derive, and in so doing the sign dies.

The misfortune of Derrida's formulation (as it applies to Artaud) does not lie in his division of the sign's iconic capacities from its indexical and symbolic ones. As I have already noted, Artaud maintains this division himself. My complaint with both Derrida and Artaud has more to do with their notion that a linguistic sign, derived from a written text, has been 'frozen', i.e., that its signifying capacities are somehow stunted. If, in a production of *Hamlet*, the actor recites that old favorite, the speech beginning 'To be or not to be ...', *must* the experience be desiccated by the fact that it is derived from a 'classic' and that we may have heard and read this speech before? How does *familiarity* in itself really cramp the linguistic sign's power to signify, particularly in an iconic fashion? And more than that: why are these signs 'frozen' into one set of meanings, while speech in the Theater of Cruelty is assumed to be somehow freer, more generous in its possibilities for interpretation? Why, in the case of *Hamlet*, is the sign more tied to its creator (and hence less 'playful') than the sign in the Theater of Cruelty, which also has its creators, namely, the director, actors, perhaps even a rough text. In Peirce's view, the sign has its iconic, indexical, and symbolic relations to the object, whether or not it has an author in the literary sense of that word, and I do not think Peirce would distinguish between 'authored' signs as more or less iconic than 'non-authored' ones. (Obviously a more complicated problem of intentionality is implicit here, but I think it would be more appropriately discussed in another study.) Now Artaud might say that 'non-authored' signs *are* in fact more iconic than symbolic by virtue of the fact that it is society which emphasizes the

symbolic side, abstracting and deriving in society's usual way, and distancing itself as a result from the object. Artaud, we might say, considers the symbolic to be a matter of convention, of structures invented and perpetuated by men alone, and hence not 'real'. Once men have agreed on certain conventions, there is no give in the system, the meanings are, as Derrida says, 'frozen'. This is not to say that they are unchangeable but that they can only move within the structure of convention. In Artaud's eyes the symbol seems to be entirely a matter of *mediation* between the spectator and a sign and has no access to the object at all.

While this interpretation of the function of linguistic signs is widely accepted today in literary circles, Peirce disagrees. Our understanding of Hamlet's speech may be guided in part by convention, but Peirce would maintain, I think, that the general uniformity of our response to this speech (e.g., that it is well-written, moving, truthful, whatever) has to do with the way in which these qualities inhere in the text itself. (This would also apply to the way in which the speech has been presented, the setting, lighting, choice of actor, and so forth.) Of course Peirce does not come to this conclusion by means of survey or statistics; rather, he has come to it logically, via the categories which he established on the basis of observation and experience and by extrapolation from these and other basic conceptions. It is difficult to resist the temptation to say in contradiction: surveys of audiences who have attended the play *Hamlet* show us that, in fact, there is a great deal of variation in their response to the play. X culture thinks the 'to be or not to be' speech is quite funny. Peirce might reply that such surveys are not measures of interpretation, but of misinterpretation, since the culture finding the speech to be amusing is reacting, in fact, to a different interpretant than the one the Western audience reacts to.³

But I don't think this argument over conventionality would be one that Artaud would take much interest in; for, unlike contemporary critics, Artaud would not assume that the Theater of Cruelty, like any other theater, has its own conventions which would be difficult for non-Western audiences to appreciate. His application of conventionality is confined solely to theaters based on written texts, in which the written text dominates the method of production, and he would deny that a spectator needs any introduction to be drawn into the Balinese spectacles he witnessed and by which he was greatly affected. That he felt it necessary to write about the Balinese, and not just to adopt their techniques, indicates that he recognized the difficulty the Western audience would have in understanding these spectacles. But in Artaud's essays this difficulty is attributed less to the issue of convention, than it is to the 'blindness' of Western audiences. Convention is the crust that has been deposited on the senses of Western man by his rational outlook; if the crust is removed, he

will have no trouble in seeing reality, as it is presented through gesture, speech, and other physical means in the Balinese theater — or in the Theater of Cruelty.

Another way of putting all this is to focus on the issue of danger. 'Playing it safe', Western society has managed to put distance between itself and the object with the intricate structure of *différences* which it continually refines and elaborates in all its activities and attitudes. As I explained above, Artaud's personal horror of derivation and repetition caused him to search for an absolute unity to which he could align himself. Yet, at the same time, he recognized the dangerousness of such unity, particularly because an individual's experience is shaped by, among other things, particular phenomenological attitudes: these things are real and those are not; if you engage in this type of behavior and not that, you will be considered insane. Artaud denied that he was insane, but he did not deny that he felt divided in his own mind and that the division was a painful one. Hence, I find it difficult to agree with Derrida that Artaud felt the Theater of Cruelty should be 'playful' in any sense. Derrida seems to equate the 'danger' referred to by Artaud with another type of danger that he himself writes about, namely the 'play' of meanings in certain texts. While I recognize that Derrida does not define 'play' as mere frivolous activity, even the issue of marginality does not apply well to Artaud's theories. Artaud did not wish to ~~confirm~~ ~~destroy~~ rational certainty by incorporating into meaning an ineradicable element of doubt; that is a refinement introduced by Derrida himself. Artaud wants to *pull the barriers down* and rejoin the sign with its object. That he engaged in what might be called play with these barriers was, by his own judgment, a mark of his failure to finish the job. Whether he even saw his problem in terms of the marginality of the sign's identity is not fully established, for in the Theater of Cruelty, the identity between sign and object is designed to be a necessary one, that is, one determined by the object itself.

Artaud allows the linguistic sign its various relations to the object, but only because it, as the only possible sign of that particular object, has been carefully chosen from many possible signs, all but one of which can only approximate the object. The 'to be or not to be' speech would fail to satisfy Artaud because it relates to an object he does not value. For Artaud, there is only one Object in the final analysis, and any sign which does not correspond in *all* its facets to that 'necessity' is dead and useless. In the Balinese theater, Artaud says,

Tout chez eux est ainsi réglé, impersonnel; pas un jeu de muscle, pas un roulement d'oeil qui ne semble appartenir à une sorte de mathématique réfléchie qui mène tout et par laquelle tout passe. [...] C'est un théâtre qui élimine l'auteur au profit

de ce que dans notre jargon occidental du théâtre, nous appellerions le metteur en scène; mais celui-ci devient une sorte d'ordonnateur magique, un maître de cérémonies sacrées. Et la matière sur laquelle il travaille, les thèmes qu'il fait palpiter ne sont pas de lui mais des dieux. Ils viennent, semble-t-il, des jonctions primitives de la Nature qu'un Esprit double a favorisées.

Ce qu'il remue c'est le MANIFESTÉ. (Artaud 1956: Vol. 4, 70, 72)

In the struggle between man and the higher powers, any sign which is not exactly right will fail to persuade those powers, and man will remain trapped in a truncated sign-relation.

Postscript

I wonder, then, if we have not found tentative agreement between Artaud and Peirce on certain key issues. Could we not place the Theater of Cruelty, as Artaud envisioned it, on that range of possibilities from 'direct perception' to 'indirect perception', albeit at the extreme limits of the direct? And as the source which defines all possible signs and interpretants of itself, is not the object the controlling element in the Peircean schema of representation, as it is in Artaud's? These questions await closer analysis.

Notes

1. While a discussion of Artaud in terms other than the icon–index–symbol distinction is certainly possible and might produce interesting results (particularly if it focuses on the rheme–dicent–argument triad), in this paper I restrict myself to the relation of sign to object.
2. Another topic that needs, unfortunately, more attention than I can give it here is that of 'mind'. As Joseph Ransdell points out in his article, 'The epistemic function of iconicity in perception,' Peirce seems willing to expand the term to an Aristotelian definition of a life principle, and this willingness opens some interesting possibilities for comparison with the larger sense in which Artaud refers to mind. However, we must keep in mind too, that Artaud's use of the term is generally colored by, even at times restricted to, the psychological definition.
3. We might prefer to say, following Ransdell, not the *interpretant* but the *intentional object*, 'the object as it is in our thought, whether our thought be false or true of the object *intended*, as it *really* is' (Ransdell 1979: 55).

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