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## Antonin Artaud: Inspiration of Derrida

Elizabeth Nordt

Jacques Derrida, the 'father' of deconstruction, elicits strong reactions in his readers. Either they are adamantly in favor of his creative and innovative approach in dealing primarily with language, or fervently opposed to what they consider his unfounded dismantling of texts they hold sacred. Derrida's work varies greatly in its accessibility, ranging from early essays which are relatively straightforward academic pieces to recent more abstract works which may appear to be complete gibberish on the first reading. I propose that by looking at Derrida's former writings, particularly with reference to Antonin Artaud's life and work, we gain a new perspective and greater understanding for his more recent work.

The first section of *The Postcard: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980) entitled "Envois" is certainly among Derrida's most obscure work. They begin with these words: "You might read these envois as the preface to a book that I have not written."<sup>1</sup> The subject matter skips around, touching on a number of diverse topics, including love, communication, the picture of Plato and Socrates on the cover, and the book of Esther. It is dense, almost nonsensical, ungrammatical and many haven't the patience to weed through its countless references to make sense of it. The "Envois" can be discovered as an artistic rendering of Derrida's theories, one which contains many treasures for the dedicated observer to expose.

The "Envois" is simplest to decipher when referenced with Derrida's other work. Consider the "concept" of iterability introduced in "Signature Event Context" (1971) where Derrida is discussing Austin's theory of speech acts. Iterability is the capacity of a meaningful sign to be used in other contexts both serious and playful. Although a necessary condition for both writing and speech, iterability causes questions about the authenticity of a single linguistic act. Not only does intensive repetition render a word (spoken or written) powerless, but there is also the possibility of multiple meanings, both serious and non-serious. For a word to lose its iterability to avoid these dilemmas is also to make the transmission of its meaning impossible. Although accurate transfer of a specific meaning is the goal of linguistic acts, it is a goal which can never be reached. Yet its unattainability does not thwart its desirability and our quest for it.

This tragic view of language surfaces again and again in Derrida's "Envois". One example is "it is I who am speaking to you, uniquely, each time that I write 'you', it is that I am addressing myself authentically to you, with full and true

speech, presently."<sup>2</sup> One primary issue Derrida deals with is the postal principle. This entails the title theme of the postcard. Derrida implies that the philosophical ramifications of mailing a letter are immense. Derrida tries to get us to understand the impossibility of ever receiving anything (everything ends in the dead letter office). He expands the impossibility from the postal system to all communication between people. His explanations of the failure of communication within the "Envois" remain obscure, although the postal service, delivery and addresses of letters are beautiful metaphors for the possibility (or failure) of communication. Pursuit of the impossible is shown in the following sample:

it begins with a destination without address, the direction cannot be situated in the end. There is no destination, my sweet destiny . . . The condition for it to arrive is that it ends up and even that it begins by not arriving.<sup>3</sup>

And further on:

I have more and more difficulty writing you. I now know what these letters are doomed to, but I've always known.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida's "Envois" serves as a literary, and poetic culmination of his other writings, in addition to offering some new insights. Although the "Envois" is a confusing and enigmatic work when looked at for its philosophical contents, if read while keeping his earlier work in mind it becomes comprehensible. With this in mind we should look further back into Derrida's early work. In doing so we come across two essays found in *Writing and Difference* that both address Antonin Artaud. Upon further examination it is clear that Artaud plays a large role in the "Envois".

### **Artaud and His Theatre**

"Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) was not only an actor, a director, a writer, and an artist; he was also the father of a new brand of theatre known as 'The Theatre of Cruelty.'"<sup>5</sup> To this list are also added visionary, mystic and madman. Although he was a major contributor to theatre theory, he was not a critic or an academic theorist. His dreams of a meaningful theatre resulted from his work in the theatre. Artaud spent his personal and intellectual life fighting this world in order to have what he could accept as an authentic existence. In his personal life, he spent time in various recovery programs for drug addiction and spent nine years of his later life confined in different mental institutions, diagnosed with a variety of mental illnesses.

Artaud was an artist. Although society allows those who create to have some of the eccentricities which this label often entails, Artaud broke the limits of what is acceptable under any circumstances. First treated for nervous disorders at the

age of nineteen, Artaud was never what society would call normal. He proceeded to enter the theatre world as an actor, soon adding cinema roles to his career. His primary work in the theatre was on stage, but he also spent some time directing and writing, both for the stage and about the theatre. In addition to being addicted to drugs, primarily heroin, Artaud was pronounced insane. In 1937, he was forcibly confined by French authorities and remained in asylums for nine years.

The relationship between his life as an artist and his sanity remains intriguing.

Artaud had said that he was searching for his soul through a cosmic experience, but he could not achieve this end permanently because he was always Antonin Artaud, a victim of his agonized body. To gain liberation from his body, he would have to destroy it.<sup>6</sup>

Artaud was his art. If Nietzsche is right that man creates himself, then when Artaud's vision of himself failed, he would have become empty, absent and mad.

Artaud worked in an age when realism prevailed in the theatre. Plays served primarily as glimpses into the lives of characters who are portrayed by actors whose skill was judged by their believability. Many of these plays were considered psychological dramas, an effect of Freud and psychoanalysis. The legacy of centuries of Western theatre's dependant relationship with texts as scripts still flourished. Artaud rebelled against all these constraints which, on his account, stifled the meaning and crushed the life out of the theatre.

Artaud sought to bring authentic meaning into the theatre. His conceptions of how this could be done were proposed in his *Theatre of Cruelty*. He envisioned this as a living theatre where a performance dominates its relation to a text, if a text is used at all. It would be a spectacle with no spectators, as the public would be a necessary and involved part of the production. Engaging the senses, emotions, and intellect, this would be a theatre for the total human. "Renouncing psychological man, with his well-dissected character and feelings, and social man, submissive to laws and misshapen by religions and precepts, the Theatre of Cruelty will address itself only to total man."<sup>7</sup>

Two fundamental features in the Western theatre which Artaud tried to destroy are representation and language. Representation is the essence of the vision of theatre Artaud denounces. The heritage of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the aim of theatre is *mimesis*, imitation, must be rejected if theatre is to have meaning as an art. To represent life is not to live. The Theatre of Cruelty is alive and therefore must not include representation.

Language became the other primary obstacle for Artaud. The theatre of the text is swamped with words which, through their constant repetition, lose their meaning. Moreover theatre is a three-dimensional art, encompassing bodies in space which language does not exploit, makes traditional texts the enemy of a living

theatre. Hence, Artaud sought to create a new language of theatre which would utilize all the unique resources available to this art form. "Theatre will not be given its specific powers of action until it is given its language. . . . It is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought."<sup>8</sup>

In creating a language of meaning, Artaud faced the challenge of bringing the present into each performance. Authenticity disappears as it appears. The creative process must be manifest in each performance, in order for theatre to be an art. This is possible when theatre is not solely a public reading of a literary work, but a performance in which the text is only one part, allowing director, author and actor room to create. "The old duality between author and director will be dissolved, replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot."<sup>9</sup>

Artaud went on to layout his theatre specifically. He described where the public would sit and where the actors would perform, basic plots for performances, how the actors would interact with the public (because this theatre would be alive and participatory), etc. He accounted for the type of actors needed, those who are artists, creative thinkers who must involve themselves in the process of forming a theatrical piece for the public. He considered that rehearsal would still be necessary in this theatre, regardless of the desire to limit repetition to court authenticity.

Although he did stage his interpretation of *Les Cenci* within his framework for the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud was aware that his theatre is essentially an impossible dream. But Artaud's vision did not die with him. Not only does his work influence Derrida, but it is the foundation for modern absurdist theatre.

### Artaud's Influence on Derrida

The literature on Artaud, most of it in French, is quite large. In my opinion, the single most brilliant critical analysis is in two essays by Jacques Derrida—'La Parole Soufflee' and 'Le Theatre de la Cruaute et la cloture de la Representation'<sup>10</sup>

These essays, found in Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967), do a remarkable job of explicating Artaud's frustration with the theatre and his attempt at a solution. Derrida expands Artaud's work and blends it with his own into a complex, resigned lament as to the limitations and paradoxes of language and communication.

The theatre and the language of the stage epitomize the complications in the theories of speech acts. By its nature the theatre makes us question the authenticity of speech acts. It is an actor's purpose to make speech acts authentic on stage, while outside of their theatrical realm they are not fully meant, not completely

serious. Theatre itself cannot be serious if the speech on its stage is not serious. This is unfortunately too often the case, and lead Artaud to develop a theatre where this was guaranteed not to occur. In the Theatre of Cruelty this would not happen as speech acts, in whatever form they take, would be fully serious. This was Artaud's goal. His theatre still must deal with the idea of rehearsals, however, as they are a necessary part of the theatre. Here we find one flaw in Derrida's account of Artaud. "Artaud wanted to erase repetition in general. For him, repetition was evil."<sup>11</sup> Derrida does not allow Artaud to rehearse, as this is additional repetition. Artaud did not like the problems which repetition causes for meaning but he never intended to give up rehearsals. This is an expression of his impossible dream for a fully authentic theatre: without rehearsals, it could not be theatre, with rehearsals it could not be authentic. In Derrida's terms: "Plenitude is the end (the goal), but were it attained, it would be the end (death)."<sup>12</sup> The idea of pursuing the unattainable is the essence of a theatrical performance. In a dramatic scene each character must have a goal, a reason for being on stage. Without a goal there is no action, hence no meaning and no scene. If a character achieves its goal the scene must end quickly, or else die the painful death of having lost the audience's attention.

### Inspiration and the "Envois"

Themes which Derrida discusses in "La Parole Soufflée" in relation to Artaud are recurrent in Derrida's later writings. Artaud's influence on Derrida reaches much further than the two essays of which he is the focus, although he is named in only those two pieces. By reading the *Postcard* with reference to 'La Parole Soufflée', with the understanding that it is a less formal academic work, parts of it become quite intelligible. Passages such as "And I kill you at every moment, but I love you. And you can no longer doubt it, even if I destroy everything with the most amorous patience (as do you, moreover), beginning with myself."<sup>13</sup> are interpretable after reading the argument leading up to the conclusion: "Death is an articulated form of our relationship to the Other. I die only of the other: through him, for him, in him."<sup>14</sup> These relate to Derrida's elaboration on Artaud's proposition that the body's lack of unity with the mind, which begins at birth, results from its theft by the Other. The Other can also be called God. Artaud struggles with Being. Living as a unique and integrated being means becoming both himself and the other within him. The passage in the "Envois" shows the struggle with this duality: "the uniquely each time that I love: beyond everything that is, you are the one—and therefore the other."<sup>15</sup> "Promise me that one day there will be a world. And a body."<sup>16</sup> The theft, of everything, which Derrida continues to refer to in his essay can be seen here.

Although this connection may well be coincidental, Derrida's interest in Edgar Allen Poe might be attributed to Artaud. Derrida investigates Poe's "The Purloined Letter" in the "Envois". In his earlier essay on Artaud, Derrida plays with

the word purloined, using it to describe speech, the body, and the mind. Artaud, during his years on the stage as an actor, discovered and found solace in a kinship with a Poe character.

He declared he had found his prototype in the person of Poe's character, Mr. Usher. The similarities between these two men were frighteningly exact: almost although time had been abolished, and Poe had modeled his character on Artaud.<sup>17</sup>

### Dear Artaud, ?

As a postcard, the "Envois" is meant to be sent by an individual through the postal system and received by the addressee. This raises the question of both who the writer is and to whom the postcard is addressed. There are themes of love in many of the entries. We generally assume heterosexuality and Derrida is male, so the most common assumption is that the writer is Derrida and the addressee is a female lover. This is only an assumption however and there are reasons to doubt its accuracy. It is possible Derrida addresses some of his entries to Artaud.

Artaud wrote several essays which were compiled into the book *The Theatre and Its Double*, but the majority of what has been published as his writing consists of his letters, written throughout his life. The style and themes of many of Artaud's letters are such that they must be connected to Derrida's "Envois" in *The Postcard*. It could easily be concluded that at least parts of Derrida's postcard are indeed addressed to Artaud.

Artaud's letters which bear the most remarkable resemblance to the "Envois" are those from the years 1937-1948 (the year of his death). Nine of these eleven years Artaud spent confined to various mental institutions. Amidst his correspondence are letters which cover themes of love, burning, death, and the postal system along with such stylistic devices as ending mid-sentence, skipping a line and beginning a new topic. All of these motifs are prevalent in the "Envois". Here are two examples of Artaud's letters:

I feel you more than ever, I experience again the same quality of atmosphere, the same warmth, the same thoughts in the air as when we were together. It's been a year already. A year of complete, absolute love. It is beautiful. I am happy and it is because of you.

Until tomorrow. I hold you tight in my arms. I take you into me.

NAKY

notice how my handwriting resembles yours.<sup>18</sup>

I agree to go on living only because I think and believe that this World with which Life insults me and insults You will die before I do. . . .

To agree to burn as I have burned all my life and as I burn now is also to burn; and I know that I was predestined to burn. (Letter to Andre Breton, July 30, 1937)<sup>19</sup>

However, unlike similar passages in Derrida, Artaud's letters are as authentic as possible, meaning they were actually sent through the postal system. Derrida could remain authentic if indeed he is writing to someone without an address, a dead Artaud perhaps? Even if Artaud is not the addressee, (who must be absent anyway) he is definitely referred to and discussed by Derrida.

In 1969, Bettina L. Knapp's book *Antonin Artaud: A Man of Vision* was published, just a couple of years after Derrida's essays on Artaud. Knapp states: "In this volume, I have tried to trace Artaud's intellectual, philosophical, and psychological development through his own works, in order to understand the visions and perceptions of this man who lived ahead of his time."<sup>20</sup>

Derrida both refers to and addresses a "Bettina" in the "Envois".

and I have thought a lot about Bettina. Oh, she is not you but the situation is terrifying and must be spoken of without gynemagogy. The most innocent and most pained victim places you in the worst double bind: whatever initiative 'he' might take with her and her writing he was a priori guilty.<sup>21</sup>

It seems reasonable that this is indeed about Bettina Knapp and the 'he' referred to could well be Artaud.

Further on Derrida writes to Bettina.

Ah Bettina, my love

and it will be even worse if I publish your letters under my name, signing in your place. Listen Bettina, do what you want, I will restore everything to you, j'accepte everything, from you I will receive my last breath. I have no right to the history that we have told each other<sup>22</sup>

This passage, involving publishing letters, personal histories, and breathing is undoubtedly concerning Artaud. "Souffle", translated in this passage as breath, along with several derivations meaning spirited, inspiration, and prompter are all discussed in Derrida's essay "La Parole Soufflee", which admits Artaud as its focus.

There are times when it seems that Artaud himself seems to be the addressee.

I know very well that you 'would like to write a book of the unique, and of



the absolutely unequivocal. Madness itself, don't you think? I even ask myself what this means.' Me too, but you are mad and I love madly that which makes you write this, and nothing else.<sup>23</sup>

Considering that *The Theatre and Its Double* was Artaud's attempt to write just such a "unique, unequivocal" book and the many levels of madness related to Artaud, this does seem to be a letter that quotes and is addressed to Artaud.

### Echoes of Artaud

It is curious that despite clear evidence of his presence, Artaud is not among the many, many other people who are referred to by name in the "Envois". Without mentioning his name, Derrida invokes his voice and engages Artaud's attitudes in the "Envois" as intensely as he does in "La Parole Souffle" and "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation".

Artaud may be equally present in the "Envois" as in the earlier essays, but he is certainly more camouflaged, as are all of Derrida's references and reflections. Derrida does not wish to be trapped with a specific 'philosophy', which would stifle any further inquiry and life itself.

Artaud is relevant and understandable, a cultural monument, as long as one mainly refers to his ideas without reading much of his work. For anyone who reads Artaud through, he remains fiercely out of reach, an unassimilable voice and presence.<sup>24</sup>

Although not as extreme since he remains within the limits of what is seen as sanity, this description can easily be applied in reference to Derrida.

Although we can only guess the extent of Artaud's effect on Derrida, it is clear that he is present in *The Postcard*, in addition to Derrida's earlier essays. Undoubtedly, bearing the work of Artaud in mind when investigating the "Envois" brings greater understanding to the work.

## Endnotes

1. Derrida, Jacques, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 3.
2. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 136.
3. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 29.
4. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 200.
5. Knapp, Bettina. *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision*. (New York, David Lewis, 1969, p. xiii.
6. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 192.
7. Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*, (New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1958) p. 123.
8. Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, p. 89.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
10. Sontag, Susan, editor *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).
11. Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1978) p. 245.
12. Derrida, Jacques *Limited Inc*, (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1988) p. 129.
13. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 112.
14. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 180.
15. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 143.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
17. Knapp, p. 65.
18. Artaud, Antonin. *Selected Writings*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976) p. 21.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 400-401.
20. Artaud, *Selected Writings*, p. xiii.
21. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 201.
22. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 231.
23. Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 141.
24. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. lix.

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