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# Resisting the Plague: The French Reactionary Right and Artaud's Theater of Cruelty

Constance Spreen

During a lengthy, hostile divorce from the surrealist circle in 1926, Antonin Artaud reiterated his eschewal of political engagement in the most vigorous terms. The surrealists' attempt to graft their spiritual revolution onto Marxist materialism was for him a deleterious deviation from the ideological position that, with Artaud's participation, those gathered around André Breton had developed the previous year. Demanding a reassertion of the surrealist commitment to "total idealism" [*idéalisme intégral*], Artaud reaffirmed his qualms before all real action: "My scruples are absolute" (1:71, 66).<sup>1</sup>

Despite his uncompromising stance, Artaud found himself profoundly engaged in the "politics of style."<sup>2</sup> As he began to publish his writings on the theater of cruelty in the early 1930s, he became acutely aware of a "resistance" to his dramaturgical theories. His correspondence reveals that this resistance, to which he repeatedly refers, issued mainly from two sources: the critics at *L'action française*, the primary mouthpiece of the movement bearing the same name,

<sup>1</sup> Citations of Artaud's *Complete Works* appear parenthetically and include volume and page numbers. Citations of volumes 1–9 refer to *Œuvres complètes: Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée*, 9 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, vol. 1, 1976; vol. 4, 1978; vol. 5, 1979; vol. 7, 1982); citations of volume 10 refer to *Œuvres complètes*, 26 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, vol. 10, 1974). English quotations of *The Theater and Its Double* are taken from Mary Caroline Richards's translation (New York: Grove, 1958). All other translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 284.

and Benjamin Crémieux, drama and literary critic at the *Nouvelle revue française* (NRF).

For decades theater historians have evoked and commented on the damning reviews of Artaud by *L'action française* critics Lucien Dubech, André Villeneuve, and Robert Brasillach, but without addressing the ideological animus behind the reviews.<sup>3</sup> Yet these sources reveal the logic by which Artaud was “resisted.” Dubech’s, Villeneuve’s, and Brasillach’s opposition to his dramaturgical principles resulted from the politics of exclusion carried out by the Action Française, a reactionary, nationalist movement under the ideological leadership of Charles Maurras. These proponents of “total nationalism” [*nationalisme intégral*] strove to locate Artaud’s theater of cruelty, along with the avant-garde in France, outside French aesthetic values. Meanwhile, for Crémieux, a Jew, the adoption of a traditional French aesthetic signaled Jewish assimilation to French culture. Unlike the Maurrassians, therefore, he was driven to resist Artaud’s dramaturgy by a politics of inclusion during a period of growing nationalism and anti-Semitism. Because it rejected the literary tenets of the French theater, Artaud’s dramaturgy was unacceptable to an assimilated Jew required eternally to prove his Frenchness.

The history of modernism is also one of reception. If Artaud was unwilling to commit himself, as the surrealists did, to a political program, the Maurrassian response to his theoretical and dramatic performances nevertheless testifies to the deeply political nature of his cultural interventions. The metaphor of the theater as plague developed in *The Theater and Its Double* engaged such issues as national identity and political ideology, as well as the aesthetics of the theater. Enlisted by advocates of the Action Française, the metaphors of contagion and bacillus were central to the Maurrassian articulation of a politics of cul-

<sup>3</sup> See Bettina L. Knapp, *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision* (New York: Lewis, 1969), 125; and Alain Virmaux and Odette Virmaux, *Antonin Artaud: Un bilan critique* (Paris: Belfond, 1979), 36–37. See also the editor’s notes in *Complete Works*, 5:247–50.

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ture, defining the boundaries between what was considered French and, consequently, non-French in both art and politics. Whereas for the disciples of Maurras these metaphors expressed the fear of a deadly threat to the body of the nation as well as to the French literary corpus, in *The Theater and Its Double* Artaud recast the plague as a positive force with poetic capacities. In so doing, he reversed the valences that Maurrassians associated with the “poetic” and the “nonpoetic” and that, in their view, undermined the very foundations of the national identity and, indeed, of civilization.

These opposing positions as to the nature of poetry translated into a debate regarding the supremacy of the theatrical text over theatrical spectacle. The Action Française extended its principle of reaction by promoting the written word as the vehicle of poetry and civilization. Guided by a metaphysics of logos, Maurrassian cultural politics militated for a “poetry of reason” that preferred the verbal and the rational to the sensory. By contrast, Artaud’s advocacy of a “poetry of the senses” and his eschewal of the logocentrism of traditional theater in favor of the *mise-en-scène* participated in the formation of a counter-aesthetic of violence and excess [*démesure*] that, for Maurrassians, identified his theater with the aesthetic and political plagues threatening the French nation, above all, with the politics of excess practiced across the Rhine. In an era characterized famously not only by its politicization of aesthetics but by its aestheticization of politics,<sup>4</sup> Artaud’s idealism—his belief in the primacy of the ideational over the political and the material—remained intact. However, the fate of Brasillach, the Maurrassian critic executed in 1945 for collaborating with the German enemy, proved that one’s aesthetic enthusiasms could lead to disastrous political entanglements.

### “French” Aesthetics

The principles and values that guided the young Maurras’s judgment of literature stocked the rhetorical arsenal he later deployed in the

<sup>4</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.

political polemics for which he became famous. Indeed, "all of the ideas of the Action Française were a duplication in the social sphere of aesthetic values."<sup>5</sup> From 1893 on Maurras, maintaining that French taste had been corrupted by the nineteenth century, attempted to wrench nationalism from the grip of the exponents of a literature that he deemed French in subject matter but foreign in sensibility.<sup>6</sup> A national literature, he asserts in his 1896 "Prologue to an Essay on Criticism," signifies an "ensemble of works whose *style* conforms to the national genius, for literature, apart from its style, is nothing."<sup>7</sup> He might as well state that "humanity, apart from the classical tradition, is nothing," for with his definition of a national literature he both corners the style market for the French and identifies the French classical tradition with the qualities constitutive of humanity. Defined as the "order and movement that one gives to one's thoughts," style elevates man above the world of vague sensations and impressions ("Prologue," 22). The literary order (and therefore humanity) reaches its apogee, Maurras claims, in the literature founded by Homer and the Romans and passed on by Pierre de Ronsard to the seventeenth century, when a renewed "classical spirit" perfected it. In the "order and light" of classical literature, human reason is most clearly evidenced.

But if classicism stood for order, clarity, and the primacy of reason, Romanticism represented a "barbarous" descent ("Prologue," 31) into shadow, obscurity, unintelligibility, chaotic sensation, and unbridled imagination. Throughout his career the Maurrassian critic Dubech vig-

<sup>5</sup> Colette Capitan Peter, *Charles Maurras et l'idéologie d'Action Française* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 27.

<sup>6</sup> According to Ivan P. Barko, Maurras had been a forceful advocate of impressionistic, subjective criticism prior to 1893, claiming that "the talent of a critic lies entirely in his sensitivity" (*L'esthétique littéraire de Charles Maurras* [Geneva: Droz, 1961], 52). His sensibilities led him at first to embrace the Romantic and post-Romantic writers. Barko contends that Maurras, in ultimately repudiating them, was in fact rejecting an aesthetic by which he was himself tempted. An incessant need to triumph over his own inclinations may account for the violence of his language (see "L'art poétique maurrassien: La campagne antiromantique [1894–1900]," in Barko, 87–142). For more on Maurras and the Action Française see Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Maurras, "Prologue to an Essay on Criticism" (in French), in *Œuvres capitales*, vol. 3 (Paris: Flammarion, 1954), 24–25.

orously developed the anti-Romantic stance. His reviews are peppered with such unequivocal statements as “Mr. [Edmond] Rostand represents what we hate: Romanticism. The more he discredits Romanticism, the happier we will be”; “Mr. [Jean] Sarment is remarkably intelligent. He shows . . . an insanely Romantic character, that is, everything that we execrate”; and “He [Henry Bataille] drags into it [his play *La chair humaine* (Human flesh)] rubbish from all the bad literatures, cooked in the sauce and style of Mr. Bataille: Romanticism, naturalism.”<sup>8</sup> Dubech’s every mention of Romanticism is disparaging, to the extent that the term functions as a watchword, signaling the wholesale condemnation of any work so labeled.

The Maurrassians’ vehemence is fully understandable only in view of the powerful political charge that aesthetics carried in their ideology. Gérard Hupin, speaking of his longtime friend Maurras, observed that “the concern for literary order . . . naturally leads him to the concern for political order.”<sup>9</sup> Classicism, like monarchism and nationalism, served for the Maurrassians to preserve and perpetuate political, cultural, and racial order; Romanticism was synonymous with all that compromised it. Like democracy, Romanticism was equivalent to revolution, a spur to the nation’s dissolution (Hupin, 38; cf. Peter, 105). Romanticism and democracy manifested the same anarchic tendencies: rejection of tradition, valorization of the individual, preference for instinct over reason. Finally, both were instruments of change, effecting the forgetting rather than the conservation of the past.<sup>10</sup> The result could only end the nation as a cultural and racial legacy.

Having linked it with democracy and revolution, Maurras diagnosed Romanticism as a “plague” that, like an epidemic, would lead to social anarchy and collapse.<sup>11</sup> His followers then projected their fears of disorder and randomness onto a “diseased” other, thereby reaffirm-

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Dubech, *The Theater, 1918–1923* (in French) (Paris: Plon, 1925), 111, 116, 187.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Hupin, *Un grand défenseur de la civilisation: Charles Maurras* (Brussels: Editions Universitaires, 1956), 38.

<sup>10</sup> It is notable that the Maurrassian association of Romanticism with democracy denied the nostalgic ties of the former to prerevolutionary, and especially medieval, France.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Maurras, *Gazette de France*, 7 January 1895, quoted in Barko, 88.

ing (albeit phantasmagorically) their own wholeness and control.<sup>12</sup> The process of othering rapidly became xenophobic, inasmuch as the Maurrassians adopted an inimical position toward Germany, which supposedly exhibited all the vitiating traits of Romanticism. Indeed, the German was held to be, “par excellence, a carrier of the germs of destruction, decomposition, and anarchy. He experiences a natural penchant for all the revolutions that oppose the order of Rome” (Hupin, 59). A disease imported from abroad—*Germany* [De l’Allemagne], Maurras falsely told his readers, had been written by a Swiss originally from Prussia (Barko, 96)—Germanic anarchy had triumphed over the order of the Latin peoples. The restoration of the French nation, like the restoration of a national literature, was predicated on the extermination of a foreign bacillus.

### **Anarchy at the NRF**

If the end of World War I brought with it an eruption of Romanticism, it also ushered in a fashion for “orderly literature” that Action Française critics embraced as classical.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1913 Jacques Copeau and others had undertaken to resurrect a classical aesthetic by founding the Vieux-Colombier theater. In *The Crisis of the Theater* Dubech explains the Vieux-Colombier’s failure to revive literary theater as central to the crisis he depicts, in racist (i.e., nationalist) terms, in his book. Critical to Dubech’s judgment of Copeau is the latter’s deep French roots: his ancestors were millers, members of a profession who, like breadmakers, “share in the wisdom of the land”; Copeau himself was Parisian by birth and had studied rhetoric and literature in the French schools (151). Above all, Copeau was a Frenchman in a profession dominated by Jews. Just as the German anarchic mentality had taken hold in France, the Jews had infiltrated the French theater so completely that it now found itself “in the hands of Israel” (15). The Jews, like the Germans, were a plague to be eradicated from politics and the arts; in fact,

<sup>12</sup> See Sander L. Gilman, “Depicting Disease: A Theory of Representing Illness,” in *Disease and Representation: The Construction of Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1–6.

<sup>13</sup> Lucien Dubech, *The Crisis of the Theater* (in French) (Paris: Librairie de France, 1928), 70.

Dubech titles his chapter on the Jewish presence in the French theater "The Bacillus." In a chapter titled "The Surgeon," Dubech identifies Copeau as the physician in whom nationalist hopes for a cure lay. "The spirit engendered by the war," he writes, "postulated a classical and national literature (to the extent that these two words agree). Mr. Copeau brought precisely what this spirit was clamoring for" (158). Copeau's productions of canonical works, largely selected from the great authors of the French patrimony, conformed ideally to the aspirations of the Maurrassian critic. Copeau would excise the foreign presence from the French corpus.

While productions of Corneille, Molière, Marivaux, and Musset went far, for Dubech, toward explaining the initial enthusiasm generated by the young director, Copeau's ultimate destiny, he theorizes, was determined by his association with the "complex," "violent, but anarchic" *NRF* (*Crisis of the Theater*, 159). Dubech asserts that Copeau, one of the *NRF*'s founders, was "oppressed" by the availability of talented writers willing to write for the theater but unschooled in the dramaturgical craft. The "anarchic" spirit of the *NRF* also inspired a great variety of stage works. Rather than invent a new classical "literary school," Copeau, attempting to bring order and unity to the diversity of plays he produced, resigned himself to creating a "school of mise-en-scène."

Like Dubech, the drama critic Villeneuve, a devotee of "moderation" [*mesure*], castigates the *NRF* as "violent" and "anarchic," emphatically identifying it with the social and political disorder against which the Action Française was reacting.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, from its inception following the Dreyfus Affair, the *NRF* had maintained an adversarial relationship with that movement's nationalist-royalist newspaper. Several of the review's founders were known Dreyfusards; André Gide, for one, had signed at least one petition on the officer's behalf.<sup>15</sup> Although the *NRF* never advocated a single political view or party, its "leftist" ten-

<sup>14</sup> André Villeneuve, "Le théâtre de la cruauté," *L'action française*, 14 October 1932.

<sup>15</sup> See Marcel Thomas, "Le cas Valéry," in *Les écrivains et l'affaire Dreyfus: Actes du colloque organisé par le Centre Charles Péguy et l'Université d'Orléans (19–31 Oct. 1981)*, ed. Géraldi Leroy (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 104–5.



dencies were only affirmed as time went on (Weber, 81). The 1920s and 1930s saw a number of its contributors join political parties on the left.<sup>16</sup>

Villeneuve's critique of the *NRF* reveals a second source of friction for nationalists: the review's reputation abroad as representative of French literary tastes. "The foreigner read it," he writes, "to know, or to imagine, what ideas, what art, what principles were fashionable among the postwar literary coteries." Indeed, the *NRF*'s express goal after the war, as formulated by Jacques Rivière, its editor at the time, was to promote French thought: "We are the only ones in the world . . . who still know how to think. In philosophical, literary, and artistic matters, what we say will alone count" (quoted in Hebey, xiv). The nationalistic flavor of such a statement would certainly have met with Maurrassian approval. Yet Villeneuve's use of the verb *imagine* intimates that the literary trends established and promoted by the powerful *NRF* in reality distorted French literature, thought, and art in the eyes of the Action Française.

From its first issue in 1909 the *NRF* espoused an anti-Romantic, pro-classical aesthetic. Yet its classicism actually widened, rather than closed, the rift between the literary review and the nationalist-royalist paper. In contrast to *L'action française*, the *NRF* refused to limit classical works to works of the past, specifically to seventeenth-century models. Classicism, as Gide redefined it, was not limited to any single period, nor did it refer to the poetic principles manifested in Malherbe and articulated by Boileau; instead, it was the incarnation of what was most authentic in each era.<sup>17</sup> Hence the *NRF* focused on contemporary writers. For Gide and its other founders, moreover, "the anti-Romanticism of the *NRF* [was] exclusively of an aesthetic nature" (Eustis, 17). Unlike Maurrassian classicism, which buttressed a nationalist-royalist agenda, the *NRF*'s evaluative criteria were not intended to advance a political cause; the latter's program struggled to remain purely aesthetic. Its redefinition of classicism thus allowed for the wide variety of expression and points of view that Dubech called "anarchic." The *NRF*'s apolitical crit-

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Hebey, ed., *L'esprit NRF, 1908–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), xvi.

<sup>17</sup> Alvin Eustis, Marcel Arland, Benjamin Crémieux, Ramon Fernandez: *Trois critiques de la "Nouvelle revue française"* (Paris: Debresse, 1961), 17.

ical stance thereby dislodged aesthetics and literary criticism from Maurrassian doctrine (Eustis, 12).

Given the antagonistic relationship of the Action Française and the *NRF*, it is not surprising that Dubech speaks of Copeau as having been most successful after he had broken with the *NRF* (*Crisis of the Theater*, 160). However, Copeau's retreat from the review and from the Parisian theater in 1924 left a vacuum in both places. To Dubech's dismay, this "abyss" was soon filled by foreigners, on the one hand, and by Artaud's theoretical work, on the other. The 1926–27 season saw an invasion of plays from Germany, Italy, Ireland, Hungary, Russia, America, Spain, Austria, and elsewhere; French plays lost favor both at home and abroad (93–94). For Dubech, the "vague chaos of cosmopolitanism" (99–100) pointed to the fall of French hegemony in the theater after three hundred years of domination. It further indicated the decadence resulting from the rupture between dramatic art and the art of writing, to which the *NRF* had presumably contributed.

### The Politics of Cruelty

The publication of Artaud's manifesto, "The Theater of Cruelty," in the October 1932 issue of the *NRF* gave Villeneuve an opportunity to defend order and "French" tradition in *L'action française*. He begins by deriding the manifesto: "We are not often given the occasion to laugh, even at comedy. It is therefore fitting to rush out and sample the manifesto of the theater of cruelty." Next, Villeneuve ridicules Artaud by quoting long passages of his prose in the name of answering his call for "cruelty." Rather than contest Artaud's dramaturgical principles overtly, Villeneuve criticizes his expository style through irony. Thus he mocks Artaud's prose for its "elegant precision that leaves no shadow obscuring his thought" and "no doubt as to the essential reform" intended, assured that his like-minded readers will take Artaud's prose as anything but elegant, precise, and clear. Villeneuve's selection of quotations from the theoretical portion of Artaud's essay makes the chasm separating him from the Maurrassian ideal all the more obvious. For Villeneuve, as for his public, Artaud's obscure imagery and use of metaphor undermine the very values on which French culture was founded. What greater cruelty could there be for a true Frenchman than to face the

ambiguous, emotionally charged language and confused reasoning of such an essay? Far from reaffirming the French theatrical tradition, the theater of cruelty seemed to represent its scandal.

Artaud was not deaf to the “disciplinary” criticism of *L’action française* (Peter, 107). In September 1932 he had written to André Rolland de Renéville to describe his unsuccessful efforts to explain the theater of cruelty to a potential benefactor: “I had employed my usual vivid and poetic language, which, I was amazed to realize for the first time, was in reality a *hermetic* language. Which *relatively* delights me” (5:116). That that hermeticism did not seem to prevent the public from being moved by his ideas was a certain sign, he wrote somewhat triumphantly a week later, that his theater would succeed (5:121). In the aftermath of “The Theater of Cruelty,” however, Artaud deemed the manifesto at least “a *half* failure” (5:125); apparently, Villeneuve’s criticism had influenced Artaud’s reestimation of his expressive powers. But he refused to involve himself with *L’action française* in the sort of polemical debate that he had had with the surrealists in the late 1920s following his expulsion by Breton. Instead, regretting the “amphigorical tone” of the theoretical section of his essay, Artaud proposed to the *NRF*’s editor, Jean Paulhan, “a critical article, of a discursive type,” in which to explain himself (5:127). Although no such article materialized, Villeneuve appears to have succeeded in imposing his desire for aesthetic order on a fulminating, undisciplined writer.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically, Artaud’s concern over the criticism of his essay in *L’action française* may be explicable in part by an undeclared identification with the movement it served. The opening line of an unfinished letter dated 14 February 1931 and addressed to Georges Calzant, head of the student branch of the Action Française and the Camelots du Roi, states that “I have been since last June a member of the A.F. league” (7:344). Admittedly, it is difficult to take this brief statement at face value, particularly in light of the lack of references to the Action Française elsewhere in Artaud’s writings of the early 1930s. In 1943, however, Artaud declared that he had always been “a royalist and patriot” (10:104) and that he had been aided in 1937 by Breton and the Action Française, who he said had come to deliver him from the asylum at Le Havre (10:145). It is notable that Artaud resolved in a hallucination the painful rejection he had earlier experienced at the hands of both Breton and the Action Française. This imagined rescue further suggests that he identified with the Action Française on some level. His concern may also have had to do with the caliber of its paper’s readers, many of whom did not subscribe to the movement’s ideology but did appreciate the paper’s provocative style and its reputation as a “school of good taste” (Peter, 127). It was, in other words, a paper to reckon with. Proust, an

The publication of Artaud's manifesto in the *NRF* also offered *L'action française* an opportune occasion to strike a blow at a long-standing rival. If the *NRF* could be credited with having published Copeau's ideas on the theater, its support of a writer so wholly at odds with Copeau's aesthetics must indicate the decline of the literary review itself. In the second half of his article Villeneuve's derision gives way to sham melancholy as his critique shifts from Artaud to the "fall" of the *NRF*: "One pities it and raises a sword to it, as one salutes a disarmed opponent whom it was preferable to look upon face-to-face." To the *NRF*'s dishonor and the theater's peril, the review had fallen from Copeau's "benevolent doctrines" to the notions of "that cruel man," Artaud. Villeneuve then exposes and measures for the readers of *L'action française* the yawning stylistic chasm between the two dramatists and the two moments they represent in the life of the *NRF*. He aims to prove that the review had sunk from the heights of Copeau's "clear and energetic language, nourished with serious and sensible reflections, and steady and fair thoughts," a language that Boileau could have admired, into the abyss of hermeticism and extravagance.

It is apparent, from his letters to Paulhan following the publication of his manifesto, that Artaud was aware that at least one figure at the *NRF* also perceived its support of him as a radical, undesirable departure from Copeau's dramaturgy. "The critic from the *NRF* who will quit if they publish so much as another note from me" (5:129) was, of course, Crémieux, a contributor since 1920 and a member of the reading committee of *NRF*-Gallimard. Artaud assumed that Crémieux's

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avowed reader of *L'action française*, received from it his daily "mental high-altitude treatment." His justification for reading an anti-Dreyfusard (anti-Semitic) paper was the critical acumen of its editor, Léon Daudet: "No longer able to read more than a single newspaper, in place of those of the past I read *L'action française*. I can say that this choice is not without merit. The thought of what a man could suffer having once made me a Dreyfusard, one can imagine that reading a 'rag' infinitely more cruel than the *Figaro* and the *Débats*, with which I had formerly contented myself, often gives me something like the first symptoms of heart disease. But in what other journal is the portico decorated by Saint-Simon himself, I mean by Léon Daudet?" (*Contre Saint-Beuve* [Paris: Gallimard, 1954], 439–40). Artaud also appears to have had a high opinion of Daudet and to have followed his articles in *L'action française*. Indeed, he once wrote to Daudet in response to an article, "Les ondes du temps," *L'action française*, 26 April 1931, that had especially piqued his interest (3:196–98).

influence lay behind the *NRF*'s seeming desire to distance itself from him by publishing no more of his work (5:137). While Artaud may have exaggerated Crémieux's hostility toward him, as the editors of the *Complete Works* claim (5:275), Crémieux's aesthetic loyalties did militate against the dramaturgy put forth in the theater-of-cruelty manifesto.

Looking at French literature since the seventeenth century, Crémieux had observed as early as 1922 that it "renews itself [every century] during the '30s."<sup>19</sup> The seventeenth century had produced *The Cid* and the *Discourse on Method*; the eighteenth, Voltaire and Montesquieu; the nineteenth, Hugo's *Hernani*. Crémieux therefore augured a "modern classical" theater from which a literary renaissance would emerge. Like the Maurrassians, Crémieux placed his hopes for theatrical reform in Copeau and the school that he had established, maintaining his loyalty to them until World War II (Eustis, 104).

Crémieux's 1931 article on Louis Jouvet proposed that, even if Copeau's retirement from the theater had divided recent French theatrical history into a before and an after, Copeau had passed the torch to a number of promising directors, among them Jouvet, "the ideal director for the rejuvenation of our great classical and Romantic repertoire."<sup>20</sup> What is most striking about Jouvet's selection as the savior of the French canon is that Crémieux hails his *mise-en-scènes* as "the most French or, if you prefer, the most Cartesian that one might see." Once again, aesthetics merge with national identity as Crémieux forges an equivalence between Jouvet's "analytic" and "luminous" directing style, Frenchness, and Cartesianism. Jouvet's style is shown to be French insofar as he is less a director [*metteur en scène*] than an "illuminator" [*éclaireur de texte*], shedding light on every obscure element of a work. Thus, while Frenchness is identifiable by a text's *mise-en-lumière*, as it were, rather than by its action and decor, privileging the *mise-en-scène* over the text is for Crémieux the converse of Frenchness.

Germany's and Russia's most prominent directors bore out this dis-

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Crémieux, "Réponse à une enquête de MM. Henri Rambaud et Pierre Varillon sur les 'Maîtres de la jeune littérature,' publiée dans la *Revue hebdomadaire* (30 septembre 1922)," app. 1 in *Inquiétude et reconstruction* (Paris: Corrèa, 1931), 263.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Crémieux, "Directors: Louis Jouvet" (in French), *Je suis partout*, 12 September 1931, 2.

tion and exerted a profound influence on their contemporaries. Gaston Baty returned from Germany in 1927 indelibly marked by the Germans' interest in the spectacular aspects of theater. His enthusiasm for German *mise-en-scènes* led him to the tautological assertion that the ancestor of modern German theater was the theater, meaning that the origins of German theater lay in religion and not in dramatic literature.<sup>21</sup> While Baty celebrated the retheatricalization (or what he called the "re-Catholicization") of the theater,<sup>22</sup> Crémieux reproached the German and Russian directors for overvaluing the spectacular ("Directors: Louis Jouvet," 2). In a critique of Baty's "Catholic aesthetic," Crémieux underscored the need to distinguish "pure theater" from "spectacle theater." As far as he was concerned, theatrical purity and literature were not at odds; on the contrary, they were identical, both opposed to the "spectacle theater" that Crémieux saw as the stuff of music halls. To regard the pinnacle of French theater as a fall, as Baty did ("Fallen drama becomes a literary genre" ["Saint Thomas versus Racine," 4]), was an unpardonable affront to literary theater as well as to the French tradition. Crémieux's only response was to exclaim incredulously, "What a fall, this evolution that has given rise to the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, the comedies of Molière!" ("Saint Thomas versus Racine," 4).

A letter from Artaud to Crémieux, dated only three days after the article on Jouvet appeared, anticipates Crémieux's reaction to Artaud's manifesto a year later. The letter, included in *The Theater and Its Double*, represents an effort on Artaud's part to defend a nonliterary theater. For Artaud, unlike Crémieux, the rejuvenation of the theater was contingent on the differentiation of theater and literature and the replacement of articulated language by other means of expression. Following Baty's lead, Artaud argues against the primacy of "Sire the Word": "The language of words may have to give way before a language of signs whose objective aspect is the one that has the most immediate impact upon us" (4:103; Richards, 107).<sup>23</sup> Rather than mediate the written text, the *mise-en-scène* is meant to provide an immediate sensory experi-

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Simon, *Gaston Baty, théoricien du théâtre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), 64.

<sup>22</sup> See Benjamin Crémieux, "Saint Thomas versus Racine; or, Antihumanism in the Theater" (in French), *Les nouvelles littéraires*, 9 October 1926, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Baty, "Sire le mot," *Les lettres* 11 (1921): 679–711.

ence. A stage full of actors seated in a row delivering their lines, however well written, is not theater; it is, in Artaud's words, the theater's "perversion."

For Crémieux, a former *normalien* well versed in Greco-Latin literature and the French classics, the suggestion that literature represented a corruption of the theater was heretical. As a member of an influential Jewish family, moreover, he would have been highly sensitive to popular notions concerning the "perverted." To describe literary theater as a perversion was to levy against it a charge that had long been made against both Jews and the intellectual avant-garde: (sexual) deviance.<sup>24</sup> The association of deviance with avant-gardism and Jewishness is here turned against what Crémieux claims to be "a self-evident truth" [*une vérité première*] ("Directors: Louis Jouvet," 2): the *mise-en-scène* must be subordinated to the written text. For Artaud, however, literary theater is a "sick" form of theater. Its pathology stems from an overturning of a hierarchy existing in primitive forms of theater, in which the sensorial elements of the production—sound, gesture, light, and costume—are primary. The borrowing of imagery typically evoked in anti-Semitic and antivanguardist discourse to describe the literary theater continues in Artaud's essay "Metaphysics and the *Mise-en-Scène*," written shortly after the letter to Crémieux. In this essay Western theater is denounced as "a theater of idiots, madmen, inverts" (4:39; Richards, 41), as having prostituted itself. Once again Artaud labels the proponents of "the theater of dialogue" with the very epithets so often applied to Jews and the avant-garde (see Gilman, 155–81). Mimicking the politics of exclusion used by his adversaries, he transfers the image of (sexual) deviance from the avant-garde to the literary theater. In other words, he perverts the very terms of perversion deployed against the avant-garde and Jews. The result was to project Crémieux and those holding similar views on the theater into a category of otherness into which Crémieux, an assimilated Jew, had avoided inclusion.

Crémieux's case is especially significant because it illustrates that

<sup>24</sup> See Pierre Birnbaum, "Hermaphroditism and Sexual Perversion," in *Anti-Semitism in France: A Political History from Léon Blum to the Present*, trans. Miriam Kochan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 162–65. See also Peter, 102: "Literally, it [the Action Française] perceived the activity of the mind, intellectual exercise, as a perversion."

espousing a “French” aesthetic was for Maurrassians a necessary but not a sufficient part of establishing one’s Frenchness. Crémieux’s aesthetic views were acceptably French in their valuation of classicism, disaffection for Romanticism, and respect for the written text.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, for years he had published reviews in *Candide* and *Je suis partout*, two publications important for their interpretation and extension of the thought of the Action Française (Weber, 501).<sup>26</sup> However, despite his family’s presence in France since the fourteenth century and his own total assimilation to French culture, Crémieux remained a Jew, as Maurras was quick to remind him in a polemical exchange in 1935.<sup>27</sup> Maurras asserted that Crémieux and others of his “race” posed to France and French culture the permanent threat of disassimilation, or ethnic particularism. Even if Crémieux espoused a French aesthetic, a Jew might revert at any time to Jewish tradition, whose “conservative and destructive elements” were synonymous with subversion and revolution. Maurras reasoned that to trust an “alien Jew” [*juif métèque*] with the canonization of French authors was to risk French literature’s ultimate destruction. In an open response to Maurras, Crémieux strove to extricate Frenchness from ethnicity, asserting that the French tradition is “a spiritual legacy that any individual is free to accept or reject” regardless of ethnic origin (“That One’s a Jew,” 105). Following his argument, an assimilated Jew could be more French than a full-blooded Frenchman who had rejected France’s spiritual heritage. However, Crémieux’s death at Buchenwald in April 1944 proved that assimilation of a French aesthetic was not insurance against racism. Having placed his faith in

<sup>25</sup> In *Inquiétude et reconstruction* Crémieux argues, however, that the attitude of neoclassical traditionalists motivated by nationalism was in essence a Romantic one. For Crémieux, Romanticism was synonymous with nationalism, the spirit that had driven the French Revolution and that characterized modernity. By contrast, classicism was the continuation of Greco-Latin literature and was characterized by a universal ideal, which in times past had unified all of intellectual Europe. Ironically, Crémieux found the French, with their inclination to rationalism and abstraction, best suited to re-creating a universal (i.e., European) literature (193–203).

<sup>26</sup> From 1919 to 1924 Crémieux contributed regular pieces to the *Revue européenne*; from 1923 to 1927, a weekly article to *Les nouvelles littéraires*; from 1925 to 1932, a monthly article to *Candide*; and from 1930 to 1936, drama criticism to the weekly *Je suis partout*.

<sup>27</sup> See “That One’s a Jew” (in French), *NRF*, no. 250 (1935): 100–108.



the redemptive possibilities of art, Crémieux had lived “the assimilationist wish.” He had either refused or been unable to see that “French (literature) will not absolve from (Jewish) suffering because it is its enabling condition.”<sup>28</sup>

If Crémieux’s attachment to the Vieux-Colombier and its founder’s aesthetic principles raised his defenses against the theater of cruelty, he was not alone among those associated with the *NRF*. Even Paulhan did not fully understand Artaud’s theories, nor did he perceive the shift that they represented vis-à-vis Copeau’s dramaturgy. Prior to publishing the manifesto, Artaud accused Paulhan of not reading or misreading his text. The theater of cruelty, he explained in response to Paulhan’s queries, had nothing in common with the improvisational techniques practiced by Copeau’s actors (4:105–6). The enduring confusion surrounding Artaud’s ideas and terminology, particularly the term *cruelty*, gave rise to an exchange of letters from September 1932 to May 1933 in which Artaud strove to clarify his dramaturgical views to the *NRF* editor. His difficulty in doing so, along with Crémieux’s opposition, was probably the reason that between October 1932 and March 1934 the *NRF* published none of his work. Villeneuve had perhaps been vindicated, after all.

### Poetic Plagues and Bad Taste

Artaud’s dramaturgy represented a shift from a theater based on written plays to one based on spectacle. Some who had followed the *NRF* since its early years interpreted this change in the review’s emphasis as a reversal of the advances that Copeau had brought to the French theater. In 1913 he and Jean Schlumberger, another critic central to the founding of the Vieux-Colombier, contended that the revival of the theater depended on quality productions and, correspondingly, on the reintroduction of the cultured elite to the theater. Schlumberger’s indignant cry “Enough spectacles; plays!” was a call to arms for those convinced that a dearth of culture and an overabundance of “spectacularly” bad taste had impoverished the theater. The solution was to “put on

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman, “Literature and Collaboration: Benoist-Méchin’s Return to Proust,” *MLN* 98 (1983): 979–80.

masterpieces, even if one had to begin by stumbling through them in a barn.”<sup>29</sup> That is, it was preferable to read or recite a great work badly than to expose audiences to mediocre productions of contemporary works.

Such elitism was profoundly at odds with the intentions of Artaud, whose essay “No More Masterpieces” argues for an end to the bourgeois reverence for great literature and for restoring the theater to the masses [*la foule*]. That masterpieces reified the values and concerns of other historical periods and social groups rendered them incomprehensible: “If the masses do not frequent [performances of] our literary masterpieces, it is because those masterpieces are *literary*, that is to say, fixed; and fixed in forms that no longer respond to the needs of the time” (4:73; Richards, 75; my italics).<sup>30</sup> By contrast, modernity, marked by perpetual, sudden, often violent change, had a “rude and epileptic rhythm” (4:73; Richards, 75). The railroad calamities, wars, revolutions, and epidemics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had aroused in the masses an ardent desire to understand the increasingly unintelligible laws governing their own destiny. Consequently, Artaud wrote, “in the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theater which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times” (4:82; Richards, 84). The function of the theater was thus to produce and at the same time contain a catastrophe [Greek *katastrophé*, lit. an overturning] of the psyche equal to if not greater than the upheavals of modern times.

In the essay “The Theater and the Plague” Artaud discovered an image that expressed at once the theater’s popular and its catastrophic potential. Like the plague, the theater is “popular” in that it strikes at all people indiscriminately. It is catastrophic in that it breaks down social structures that distance human beings from their primitive selves and so releases their repressed desires and instincts, their “blind appetite for life” and indeed the “irrational impulsion” of life itself (4:99–100; Richards, 103). Whereas the Maurrassians projected their

<sup>29</sup> Jean Schlumberger, “Le théâtre,” *NRF*, no. 50 (1913): 305, quoted in Sylvia Caidés Vagianos, *Paul Claudel and “La Nouvelle Revue Française” (1909–1918)* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), 118.

<sup>30</sup> I have altered Richards’s translation here to read “masses do” rather than “public does.”

fear of destruction and decay onto the Jewish and German “bacillus,” Artaud cast the plague as a force with therapeutic powers. The Maurrassian exorcism of society’s perceived malignant influences was transmuted by the theater into a process by which hidden malignancies and social disorder were rendered manifest. Through the catastrophic experience of the theater as plague, the spectator was presumed to gain mastery over the randomness and vulnerability of modern existence by reestablishing contact with the primitive forces, desires, and atavistic tendencies that social man continuously strove to repress.

In attempting to give vent to feelings buried in the psyche and in refusing to pay homage to literature, Artaudian theater performed a primitivizing function antithetical to the civilizing role that the Maurrassians envisioned. Civilization was defined by Maurras, its “great defender,” as “the totality of traditions,” as “first and foremost a material and moral capital, then a transmitted capital” (Hupin, 40). For him, civilization’s survival relied on the textual reification of ideas and values, which permitted their continued transmission. Not every written work merited perpetuation, but the best works and the most significant ideas, when brought from the past forward, acted as barriers to the vices that always besieged humanity (Peter, 123). In doing away with the written word, Artaudian theater threatened to dismantle the wall preventing the fall of civilization into barbarism.

While the Maurrassians clung to their belief in the word’s indispensability for expressing human passions<sup>31</sup> and, most important, for preserving civilization, Artaud was deeply disturbed by what he viewed as language’s incommensurability with the cataclysmic character of modern life. Language, he complained, no longer had a stable meaning; it suffered from a “confusion” (4:9), a rupture between things and meaning. Believing that the modern public, heedless of the Maurrassians’ “poetry of reason” (Hupin, 34), thought first with its emotions and senses, Artaud posited instead a “poetry of the senses,” a poetic language “intended for the senses and independent of speech” (4:36; Richards, 37). If language was to be employed at all, it had to be emphatic, even violent; it had to draw its meaning from the sensations it produced in the spectator. Attained through an economy of excess, Artaudian

<sup>31</sup> See Léon Daudet, *Ecrivains et artistes* (Paris: Capitoile, 1929), 51.

poetry was the convulsive living force that resonated through mass spectacles, celebrations, and revolts. Having abandoned their socially constituted subjectivity, spectators identified with the “super-elevated, monstrous characters” (5:153) onstage and were infused with “a heroic and superior attitude that [they] would not have had” otherwise (4:31).

Therefore, in mounting *The Cenci* at the Folies-Wagram theater in Paris in 1935—it was the only play that the theater of cruelty actually produced—Artaud aimed to jar the spectators from their “hypnotic sleep” (5:41) and induce in them a “poetic” state of collective exaltation through the release of latent, yet powerful, atavistic energies (4:83; Richards, 85). He could not have chosen a more jarring or monstrous tale. Artaud based his version on Shelley’s 1819 play *The Cenci* and Stendhal’s 1837 translation of a sixteenth-century firsthand account of the events. Count Francesco Cenci, the father of seven children, one of them sixteen-year-old Beatrice, had married Lucretia Petroni following the death of his first wife. A depraved, cruel man with a history of committing capital crimes (for which he bribed Pope Clement VIII to pardon him), Cenci plotted the murder of two sons whom he had left indigent, publicly celebrated their deaths, and, after years of confining and beating Beatrice, raped her as (according to Stendhal) he forced his wife to look on. With the aid of Lucretia and her remaining brothers, Beatrice hired two assassins to murder him. After several attempts, the assassins carried out their charge by driving a nail into Cenci’s eye and another into his throat as he slept. Once the conspiracy had been discovered, Beatrice, Lucretia, and her brother Giacomo supplicated the pope for a pardon. He refused, and on 11 September 1599 they were executed, the youngest brother, Bernardo, forced to witness their deaths.<sup>32</sup>

Excessive to the point of implausibility, the story of Cenci’s heinous crimes and murder is nonetheless true. While the gruesomeness of Cenci’s murder led Shelley to refashion the truth as a case of strangulation, the hyperbolic proportions of the historical events suggested to Artaud a mythic (i.e., transhistorical and suprahuman) significance.

<sup>32</sup> Artaud’s *Cenci* appears in *Complete Works*, 4:147–210. Knapp provides a brief account of Cenci’s murder and a detailed description of Artaud’s staging of *The Cenci* (112–25).

The Cenci story seemed in fact to embody conflicting natural and psychic forces within beings who were no longer merely human but were not quite gods (5:40). Whereas Shelley idealizes his female heroine, Artaud casts not only Cenci but the outraged Beatrice as figures drawn by destiny to enact evil. For Artaud, the Cenci story revealed grand truths about the human condition in an era that he deemed especially tragic but notably devoid of grandeur.

The Maurrassians might have challenged Artaud's choice of text on the grounds that *The Cenci* undermined both paternal and papal authority.<sup>33</sup> Or they might have critiqued the absence of a moral voice among the characters. Instead, it was over aesthetics and the nature of poetry that Artaud and the Maurrassians again clashed in May 1935. Reviewing *The Cenci* for *Candide*, Dubech found the play's subject matter objectionable because those authors who had exploited the Cenci theme had not followed Boileau's caveat: "Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable."<sup>34</sup> Truth, Boileau had stated, is sometimes more bizarre than fiction. The bizarre does not, however, make for good poetry. On the contrary, Dubech had earlier observed that "poetry does not reside in great catastrophes; it resides in Man's heart. . . . it is the exact [*juste*] sound of a soul" (*Theater, 1918–1923*, 216–17). But as the classicist expression "the exact measure" [*la juste mesure*] suggests, behind the demand for exactness lies the additional condition that poetry represent a happy medium. The classicist quest for "the exact measure" is thus pitted against the surfeit of emotion aroused by the catastrophic. Notwithstanding the historical circumstances, the Cenci story was, as Dubech stated, "beyond measure" [*hors des mesures*] ("Les Cenci: Aux Folies-Wagram"). For the proponent of classicism, this story is by definition nonpoetic; it is an aesthetic monstrosity.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Yet the Action Française itself was not on the best of terms with the papacy. The Vatican had condemned Maurras's movement in December 1926 for using Catholicism as a political tool. The Action Française was not finally reconciled with the Catholic Church until the summer of 1939. Weber provides an account of the condemnation and its consequences (240–55). Ernst Nolte also briefly discusses the condemnation in *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 76–77.

<sup>34</sup> Lucien Dubech, "Les Cenci: Aux Folies-Wagram," *Candide*, 23 May 1935.

<sup>35</sup> Press reviews of *The Cenci*, though largely negative, were not uniformly so. Colette, despite certain reservations, recognized the play's innovative qualities. For a discussion of reactions in the press see Virmaux and Virmaux, 33–40.

While excess was for Dubech antithetical to aesthetic beauty, the drama critic Brasillach conceded that excess, if properly treated, could give rise to a type of poetry. Having made this point briefly in a review in *L'action française*,<sup>36</sup> he takes it up more extensively in the weekly magazine 1935/*Le magazine d'aujourd'hui*: "I am willing to admit that out of excess and bad taste can be born a particular sort of poetry: the theater of Seneca the tragedian, for example, which is not reasonable in the slightest, carries us off in such a torrent of images and unleashed forces that we do not resist. At least in the best plays, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *The Trojan Women*. But then it is necessary that power justify all" (quoted in Artaud, *Complete Works*, 5:250). With un-Maurrassian generosity, Brasillach acknowledges the possibility of a poetry of the senses, a poetry not founded on reason and *mesure*, even among classical writers. For Brasillach, what saves bad taste from itself in Senecan tragedy is the excessiveness of the excess. Bad taste is transformed into poetry at the point when the spectator is swept away by the sheer power of images and other sensory stimulation. Brasillach judged Artaud's play a failure not because it treated the Cenci theme but because it confused "power and bellowing" ("Chronicle of Theaters"). Attempting to create a new theatrical language that employed incantation, sound and lighting effects, pantomime, gestures, and symbols, Artaud's actors ground their teeth, wrung their hands, struck poses, and shouted their lines as thunderous claps and Incan rhythms sounded offstage. Yet none of these histrionic devices created the depth of disturbance necessary for bad taste to surpass itself and become its opposite.<sup>37</sup> *The Cenci* remained, according to Brasillach, "a minor play along the lines of *The Tower of Nesles*," Alexandre Dumas and Frédéric Gaillardet's nineteenth-century historical melodrama.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Brasillach [pseud. Interim], "Chronicle of Theaters: I. The Cenci" (in French), *L'action française*, 17 May 1935.

<sup>37</sup> Although Brasillach's notion of a poetry of bad taste in some ways resembles kitsch, it is necessary to distinguish between the two. Kitsch refers to the popularization and, especially, the commercialized fabrication of objects and works of art that once belonged to and signified an elite social class. It suggests therefore a slippage "downward" from "high" to "low" art, from authenticity and uniqueness to reproducibility and "aesthetic inadequacy" (Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987], 236). Brasillach, on the contrary, is speaking of an "upward" movement from the vulgar to the poetic, of the recuperation of bad taste by a social elite.

In recognizing that bad taste might be recuperated through the intensity of the theatrical experience, Brasillach acknowledges, as the German expressionists did, the possibility of creating beauty from ugliness, an aesthetic that Henry Pachter has termed “the conquest of the ugly.”<sup>38</sup> In expressionism, the ugly, the distorted, and the nonrepresentational attained the status of the beautiful through the link they established, on the one hand, with the “truth” of a brutally disorienting modernity and, on the other, with the primordial world of essences and universality (see Bronner and Hicks, 242–43). Heightened emotional pitch, the expressionists contended, forced surface reality to yield its hidden essence. This effect was achieved in their painting, theater, and cinema through such devices as color, masks, angularity, exaggerated gesture, and lighting.

Despite Artaud’s profound displeasure over Brasillach’s review of *The Cenci*, the critic’s evocation of expressionism’s poetry of bad taste in reference to the production did not misrepresent Artaud’s intentions.<sup>39</sup> His aim of reviving a nonverisimilar theater can indeed be viewed as a continuation of the expressionist project. Moreover, Artaud applauded the popular orientation of German avant-garde filmmakers, who had worked to develop a “total” cinematic language accessible to the general public and the intellectual elite alike (3:308). Unlike their French counterparts, he observed, writers of German cinematography undertook systematic research of the affective quality of their works and of the emotional responses they were likely to provoke in the audience. The Germans had achieved, for example, unequaled perfection in stage lighting, with which they created psychological settings coherent with the unfolding drama (3:308–9).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Stephen Eric Bronner and D. Emily Hicks, “Expressionist Painting and the Aesthetic Dimension,” in *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin, 1983), 242. Brasillach reiterates his formulation of expressionism as a poetry of bad taste in *Histoire du cinéma*, written with Maurice Bardèche and published in 1935. See *Œuvres complètes de Robert Brasillach*, 12 vols. (Paris: Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1964), 10:285.

<sup>39</sup> Artaud’s reaction to Brasillach’s review again reveals his susceptibility to the criticism of *L’action française*. In *La bête noire*, 1 June 1935, Artaud admits that the review by “Mr. Interim” (Brasillach) in *L’action française* especially sickened him. It is clear from various references that Artaud also has in mind Brasillach’s article in 1935/*Le magazine d’aujourd’hui*.

Artaud felt that his own experience and acting style, as well, were most attuned to the German cinema. In a letter dated January 1931 he begs Paulhan to put in a good word for him with Erich Pommer, producer of the expressionist masterpiece *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, who was soon to begin a series of detective films. Paulhan is to inform Pommer that Artaud's physical and mental sufferings make him well suited for "certain character parts and tortured souls" (3:190–91). Expressionist films—*Caligari* is merely the most representative—exalted the demonic man and exploited exaggerated acting techniques akin to those that Artaud, to the dismay of directors and critics, had been using in his own roles since his work with Charles Dullin in 1922.<sup>40</sup> His admiration for German film probably inspired the role of the terrorizing, demonic father in Artaud's *Cenci*. The stage for his 1935 production had been set, as it were, by the gothic and horror films that constituted much of the best of German filmmaking in the 1920s.

In his second review of *The Cenci*, appearing in *L'action française* a day after the one in *Candide*, Dubech, like Brasillach, identifies in Artaud's "screaming Romanticism" a certain anachronism, a reversion to the avant-gardism of the early 1920s.<sup>41</sup> Although he conceded that the wave of Romanticism that swept through France in the wake of World War I had a certain historical logic as a reflection of the "madness" attacking Western consciousness in general, Dubech refuses to consider Romanticism any longer an accurate reflection of the French state of mind. Romanticism, to which the French surrealist movement had belonged, was a temporary phenomenon, a mood swing whose time had passed. Denying Artaud's claims to novelty as "false audacity," Dubech applies to him Proudhon's saying that "revolutionaries are the most backward of Europeans" ("Chronicle of Theaters").

By way of juxtaposing this brief but damning review of Artaud with a review of the German play *The Creature*, by Ferdinand Bruckner, Dubech succeeds, in provocative fashion, in linking Artaud's outmoded aesthetics to the equally backward political and cultural revolution tak-

<sup>40</sup> Fernand Tourret, for instance, appraised Artaud's interpretation of his character in Jacinto Grau's play *Monsieur de Pygmalion* as that of a "melodramatic villain, brushing against the scenery, simian, sly, ignoble" (quoted in Ronald Hayman, *Artaud and After* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 46).

<sup>41</sup> Lucien Dubech, "La chronique des théâtres," *L'action française*, 24 May 1935.



ing place in Hitler's Germany. Using the occasion of Bruckner's play—a "bastard" and a "monster" that evokes in him "a feeling of the same order" (of disorder and anachronism) because it harks back to the crisis of German national identity after World War I—Dubech strives to force a distinction between a national literature that emanates naturally from the people and one imposed on them from without. In France, he suggests, order and reason are in harmony with instinct. If the Hitlerian revolution emerged out of a desire to impose order on the German people and thereby to cure the madness of Romanticism unleashed by the German defeat in World War I, the excessive measures that the Germans are taking to root out that madness only serve as further proof of the German's natural anarchy: "It [Romanticism] is all that Germany today proscribes, all that it vomits with acts of violence and excess [*démesure*] through which, despite itself, its anarchic soul is made visible." This revolution, Dubech is saying, has succeeded only in substituting a politics of excess for an aesthetics of excess, in replacing one type of madness with another. Like Artaud's attempt to revolutionize the theater, National Socialism, as a cultural and political project, was merely goose-stepping in place.<sup>42</sup>

In light of the intransigence (one is tempted to say "excess") of Maurrassian critics such as Villeneuve and Dubech, for whom Artaud's apparent ties to Romanticism and expressionism identified him as a carrier of the "germs of destruction" originating in Germany, Brasillach's recognition of expressionism's poetry of bad taste reveals, for a proponent of total nationalism, uncharacteristic receptivity to the project of the avant-garde. The Maurrassian fortress, however unbreachable it may have seemed, was penetrable after all. Indeed, Brasillach's willingness to admit the possibility of a poetry of bad taste took on its full significance only in the ensuing years, when he confessed that he had been led to embrace National Socialism through its "poetry."<sup>43</sup> The aes-

<sup>42</sup> Dubech means that, given Germans' supposed penchant for anarchy, they are by nature revolutionary and—if Proudhon's dictum that "revolutionaries are the most backward of Europeans" applies to Germans as well as to Artaud—therefore innately anachronistic.

<sup>43</sup> In his *Lettre à un soldat de la classe 60*, written during his imprisonment in 1944 and only three months prior to his execution for collaboration, Brasillach describes the evolution of his feelings toward the German people: from distrust, to curiosity

thetic of excess that the young Maurrassian posited in his review of *The Cenci* can be viewed as a theoretical articulation of the “poetry” of sensational excess that he experienced at Nuremberg in 1938. As Brasillach recounts in *The Seven Colors*, his largely autobiographical novel, Hitler’s choreography of light and sound in the Zeppelfeld ceremony produced the most stunning spectacle the young writer had ever witnessed. For as great a failure as *The Cenci* had been in infusing the audience with the “superhuman passions” and “superior and heroic attitude” that Artaud had envisioned (5:153), the Nuremberg spectacle suffused the sensorially intoxicated crowd with “the harshest ideas on the value of life and death.”<sup>44</sup> It was clear to Brasillach that such poetry threatened those who, like himself and his compatriots, were not participants in the Hitlerian revolution.

Brasillach’s experience of National Socialism’s poetry of the senses raises the question of the relation of Artaudian aesthetics to the politics not only of the reactionary right but of the radical right. In an era in which the distinction between aesthetics and politics has been blurred, if not effaced, does advocating an aesthetic of excess neces-

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over their “poetry,” to reasoned collaboration, and, finally, to a love affair, though one that had ended, the couple parting ways with sweet memories and some regret (see his *Œuvres complètes*, 5:589–609). Critics have debated the nature of Brasillach’s aesthetics and its relation to his politics. While Gérard Sthème de Jubécourt underscores the young writer’s devotion to literature, Peter D. Tame describes him as much more a man of the theater than Jubécourt would like to admit, arguing that Brasillach’s attraction to the theater underpinned his fascination with National Socialism (Jubécourt, *Robert Brasillach, critique littéraire* [Lausanne: Amis de Robert Brasillach, 1972], 194; Tame, *La mystique du fascisme dans l’œuvre de Robert Brasillach* [Paris: Latines, 1986], 117–22). More recently, David Carroll has made a convincing case for Brasillach’s “literary fascism,” claiming that the aesthetic principles behind his literary criticism (among them unity and order) also undergirded his politics (“Fascism As Aesthetic Experience,” in *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995], 99–124). Focusing on his literary production, Alice Kaplan argues that the naïveté and sentimentality that mar Brasillach’s novelistic writing emerge in his political writings. Questioning the sincerity of his naïveté, Kaplan further attributes to him a witting evacuation of politics and economics from his representations of fascism as a means of propagating it through entertainment (“The Making of a Fascist Writer,” in *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 1–27, esp. 13–14).

<sup>44</sup> Robert Brasillach, *The Seven Colors* (in French), in *Œuvres complètes*, 2:428.

sarily involve one in a politics of excess? By linking Artaud with the excesses of National Socialism, Dubech's review of him seems to imply that the answer is yes. However, one must bear in mind Artaud's unwavering commitment to total idealism. Whereas theatricality and spectacle at Nuremberg were prelude and incitement to imperialistic warfare, Artaud held steadfastly to the belief that theatrical cruelty rendered real acts of violence unnecessary. By countering the aestheticization of politics, theatrical cruelty would foreclose art's usurpation by the political. "Violence and blood having been placed in the service of the violence of thought," Artaud defied any spectator "to give himself over externally to ideas of war, riots, and assassination" (5:80). Against the plagues of violence and excess in all forms that afflicted modern life, especially excessive nationalistic fervor, the theater as plague was a badly needed force of resistance.