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Mischa Twitchin

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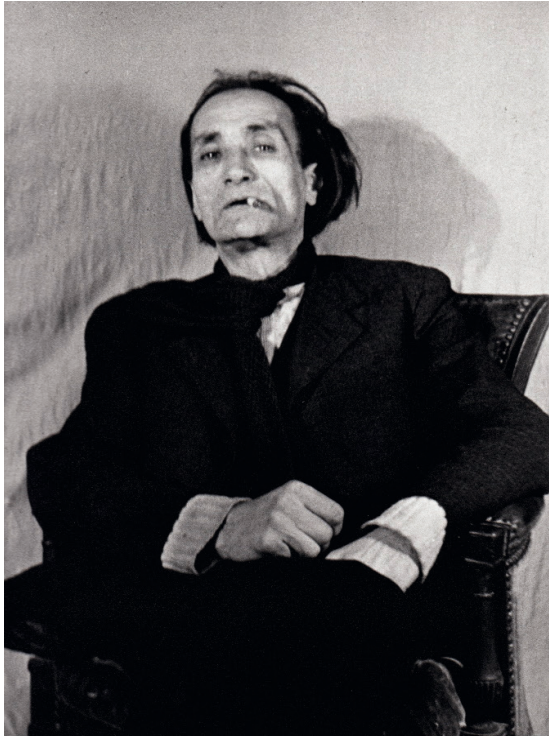
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'A blank page...' or 'Ten years since language left...' (Artaud)

MISCHA TWITCHIN



■ Antonin Artaud 1947
Photo: by Denise Colomb

What sort of testimony to the necropolitics of modernity might be afforded by the interpolation of a blank page in an anticipated publication by Antonin Artaud? How might the possibility of this future—which ostensibly became our past in 1974—be understood when its announcement is specifically dated (in an instance of reflexive writing), on 12 January 1948? Through an interrupted continuity—an interruption in order to write after or beyond it—such projective existence might itself be a dimension of life understood through writing. Denise Riley (2019: 31, 57) observes, for instance, that temporality (its 'flow') is inscribed in the very thought of writing: 'You can't, it seems, take the slightest interest in the activity of writing unless you possess some feeling of futurity' (16)—as also, perhaps, of the past through reading. This dynamic, with

its potential of and for interruption, contrasts for Riley with a different sense of time, the stasis of 'paralysed time' (16). Testimony to an irresolvable loss, like grief for an unexpected death in life, this evokes 'the gap' (distinct, perhaps, from an interruption) that Sigmund Freud recognized (in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger, quoted by Riley), concerning the death of his daughter Sophie (in the post-war influenza pandemic), as 'the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish' (74).

In terms of a verb that is key to the question of reading Artaud here, this complex temporality concerning relations between the living and the dead—in the understanding of their 'interruption'—also attests to the *care* devoted by Paule Thévenin to Artaud and his writings. The twenty-six volumes of what would become Artaud's 'collected works', perpetuating his memory, are due after all to Thévenin's extraordinary commitment to this task (for all that the transcription from Artaud's notebooks entail their own transformation of these writings for publication (Mèredieu 1996: 189)). It is this very conditionality that Artaud is himself addressing in his 1948 note, written into a copy of his then recently published book, *Artaud the Mómo*, the demand of which Thévenin incorporated into the text's re-publication as part of the *Complete Works* (itself a paradoxical project that could perhaps be better understood as the 'incomplete[d] works'—or, indeed, the work of incompleteness—testimony to the latency that concerns us here).¹

Thévenin offers a rare example of positive response to a profound question first posed by Artaud in his essay *Alienation and Black Magic*, written in 1946 and broadcast on French radio on 16 July that year, before being published in book form by Pierre Bordas as the concluding

¹ On the associations of the word *Mómo*, Clayton Eshleman offers the following note to his translations: "'Mómo" is Marseilles slang for simpleton, or village idiot, and as we understand it, "Artaud the Mómo" is the phoenix-like figure which rose from the ashes of the death of "the old Artaud" probably in electroshock in Rodez in 1943 or 1944. "The Return of Artaud, the Mómo" might be understood as the return of Artaud, now as a Mómo, to the world of imagination, as well as to literary life in Paris' (Artaud 1995: 336).

text of the *Artaud the Momo* collection at the beginning of 1948. It is this question, re-read by Artaud in 1948, with which the text prior to his proposed blank page ends: ‘But what guarantee do the obvious madmen of this world have of being cared for by those who are authentically alive?’ (‘Mais quelle garantie les aliénés évidents de ce monde ont-ils d’être soignés par d’authentiques vivants?’) (Artaud 1974: 60).² A contemporary echo of this profound concern of Artaud’s can also be heard, for instance, in an observation by Anne Boyer (whose work will be returned to): ‘To be cared for is the invisible substratum of autonomy, the necessary work brought about by the weakness of a human body across the span of life’ (2020: 125).

The question of interruption here is not simply one of a hiatus or break in the continuous trajectory or development of either life or literature, but rather an instance of ‘difference’ (or an ‘interval’ (Riley 2019: 76)) that includes its own particular latency. As already cited, something similar is explored by Denise Riley in her ‘diary’ written in the afterwards of (reflecting on the enduring present of) her son’s sudden death, addressing ‘the functioning of a-temporality’ (14) in—and, indeed, as—the consequence of that loss. Of this experience, lasting several years, Riley observes that beyond any metaphor of ‘time stopped’ (15) it is not the case that we ‘live only inside a time that runs in a standard movement’ (14). What Riley evokes in relation to another, to her son, Artaud tries to address in relation to himself—in relation to what he calls ‘the swarming of Bardo which appeared in the limbo of electroshock’ (2020a: 101; 1974: 61) and the example of ‘interruption’ that it imposed.³

Although it is, precisely, a question of writing, this is not just a case of literary interruption, as in the famous example of a blank page in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (2009: 337), a novel with a distinct conception of interruption as concerns the birth of its hero—not a matter of coitus interruptus, but nonetheless posing a question of timing (5); or the perhaps less familiar example, in Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces* (1997: 11), of a blank page—complete with both a marginal note and a footnote!

Nor is it a question of filling in or writing over Artaud’s blank page with a reading of our own, as if ignoring the separation it marks between the text that precedes and follows it. Indeed, how to address ‘a white page to separate the text of the book, which is finished, from all the swarming of Bardo which appears in the limbo of electroshock’ (in Helen Weaver’s translation (Artaud 1988: 532))? How to address—to be addressed by—a blank page (in its textual latency) without thereby closing it up—or without simply skipping over it, as if it was not there to be ‘read’?⁴

What does it mean that this case of interruption can be (re-)cited here? That it becomes or can be made into an example of interruption, rather than being actually—still—an instance of it? Intended to mark a separation between the Momo and society, between Artaud and the swarming of Bardo that is recalled from his experience of electroshock, this interruption bears witness, on the one hand, to the living death (or Bardo) that society demands of those who claim not to suffer from ‘alienation’ (or ‘madness’); and, on the other, to the ‘authentic madmen’ who are ‘suicided by society’ (Artaud 1988: 485, 504). Artaud insists on his refusal of the forced choice between these two possibilities, even as he repeats it to account for his own experience. At a time, today, when necropolitical realities are once again brutally exposed in the name of ‘public health’ (historicized, for example, in Michel Foucault’s seminars of the 1970s), Artaud’s example of interruption proves all the more resonant. Reflecting on ‘the return of Artaud the Momo’ (the title of the first text of the Momo collection, a return understood to herald that transformation of the body that Artaud evoked in his last years), this interruption stages a separation between the living and the dead—in an interruption that tries to turn back on society an awareness that it would prefer to ascribe to madness. Like a homeopathic resistance in (and to) a writing of the interruption imposed in his life by nearly a decade of incarceration and, more specifically, the assault on his consciousness by electroshock, Artaud’s blank page poses its own question of (il)legibility.

² This thought contrasts with the medical ‘transcription’ of care, as cited in the very title of an essay (*J’ai soigné Antonin Artaud*) by one of Artaud’s psychiatrists, Dr Gaston Ferdière, published in the ‘Artaud’ special issue of the magazine *Le Tour du Feu* in 1959: ‘I cared for Antonin Artaud’ or, perhaps, ‘I treated Antonin Artaud’; or—as it is translated in Marowitz (2001 [1977]: 103)—‘I looked after Antonin Artaud’. One might also think here of the very different care manifested, for instance, in the afterlives of Sylvia Plath, recently revisited in Heather Clark’s new biography of the poet (2020).

³ *Bardo* is the Buddhist concept of an afterlife that is intermediary between one incarnation and the next—a state between life and rebirth, rather than being simply a form of posthumous existence. Death here is a practice of liberation, understood through a distinct concept of the body, asceticism, and the possibility of transmigration. This is perhaps most famously expressed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thodol)*, concerning which Artaud was, on occasion, excoriating—just as he was of the Christian notion of *limbo*. In *Alienation and Black Magic*, for instance, Artaud writes: ‘Bardo is the death throes in which the ego falls in a puddle, and there is in electroshock a puddle state through which everyone traumatised passes, and which causes him, no longer at this moment to know, but to dreadfully and desperately misjudge what he was, when he was himself’ (1995: 163). A recent exploration of the concept of *Bardo* can be found in George Saunders’ 2017 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

⁴ This blank page is explicitly overlooked in the *Selected Writings*, edited by Susan Sontag (Artaud 1988: 552). In both of Clayton Eshleman's translations, however, it is given 'in full' (Artaud 1995: 170–1; 2020a: 102–3), as it is in the *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. XII (Artaud 1974: 62); although it is, again, omitted in the Quarto edition (2004: 1,140).

⁵ Indeed, in the preface, Artaud offers an extraordinary condensation that reads like a pre-echo of Jacques Lacan's translations of Freud: 'For where I am there is no more thinking' (1999: 20); 'Car là où je suis il n'y a pas plus à penser' (2004: 21).

What is at stake here, in this instance of the relation between writing and reading (first, by and for Artaud himself), is a testimony to existence, to 'life's very cry' (Artaud 1999: 39), as Artaud had evoked it two decades earlier in his correspondence with Jacques Rivière, published in 1925. Responding to Rivière's suggestion of publishing their exchange as 'a little novel in letters' (39), Artaud insists that—even if it is anonymous—the publication should not make what is lived something that appears simply literary. In his reply to Rivière, Artaud writes:

Why lie, why try to put something which is life's very cry on a literary level? Why fictionalise something made from the soul's ineradicable essence, which is like the complaint of reality?... Should [a man] be condemned to oblivion on the pretext he can only give fragments of his self? (Artaud 1999: 39–40)

These questions may, of course, be read as offering a rhetoric of their own, oscillating between poetics and personality in the meaning of such 'fragments', while also curiously prefiguring the dynamics of 'oblivion' that will mark a future question of interruption after 'the ten years since language left...' (Artaud 2004: 1,512–16)—in a text that Derrida, for example, comments on regarding Artaud's literally graphic, post-war interjections (2017: 21–6). As Denise Riley, again, notes: 'Perhaps only through forgetting the dead could it become possible to allow them to become dead. To finally *be* dead' (2019: 52). The sense of life lived as that of life remembered (even, indeed, of life revealed)—as a matter of and for the lucidity of consciousness—is challenged by the figure of the dead and is key to the cultural politics with which Artaud's writing is militantly engaged. His way of addressing relations between the living and the dead—being himself addressed by them—is the very opposite of the philosophical and poetic tradition of consolation, for instance. As he writes to Marthe Robert: 'There is nothing like a dead man to demand existence' ('Et rien comme un mort pour exiger d'existence') (Artaud 2020b: 145; Artaud 2004: 1,307)—where, precisely, it is a question of understanding who or what a dead man *is*; not least, through a question of their 'demand[s]'.⁵

The question of the cry, as of a testimony to

existence, has its own retroactive latency also. For Artaud chose the Rivière correspondence as the opening text for his projected *Collected Works* (although the first volume did not appear until 1956, nearly a decade after Artaud's death). This choice is fundamental to reading Artaud (as Maurice Blanchot already explored in 1959 (2003 [1959]: 34–40)), presented in a dialogue that is not subsumed into the poems to which it initially refers. The proposed relation between thought and language, like a lightning storm across a landscape, is amplified in Artaud's preface to the *Collected Works*, where he presents the correspondence as a marker for how his works may be read. Like the Rivière letters, then, the interruption of a blank page in the *Complete Works*' re-edition of *Artaud the Mōmo* presents a question of the writing's own address—of its potential addressees and their afterlives—starting with Artaud himself.⁵

Relations between the living and the dead here—and their interruption—concern not simply the passage from one state to the other (an interruption as, perhaps, 'cure' or 'remission'), but a reflection on the possibilities of surviving one's own death, of a *return* to (or, indeed, from) a life interrupted. As Artaud writes to André Breton (in an unsent letter): 'The bottom of things is pain, but to be in pain is not to suffer but to sur-vive, and I also mean to perpetually survive oneself...' (Artaud 2020b: 160–1; Artaud 2004: 1,314). Although the focus here is on the relation of a particular publication (*Artaud the Mōmo*) to the experience of both incarceration (with its associated violence) and the specific form of interruption that is the coma induced by electroshock, it is also important to remember that many in the 1940s did not survive to make such a return to life or to society—let alone to the Café de Flore (where Ferdière had arranged for Artaud to meet friends on the first day of his return to Paris (Artaud 2020b: 151; 2004: 1,309)).

Artaud's letters at this time refer, for example, to his friend Sonia Mossé, who was murdered at Majdanek ('incinerated', as Artaud repeats in several letters, and he also evokes the 'seething of burnt flesh' in her name in the preface (Artaud 1999: 20; 2004: 22)); and also to Robert Desnos

(who had been responsible for getting Artaud transferred from the clinic of Ville-Evrard to that of Rodez, in the unoccupied zone, in 1943), who died in Theresienstadt in 1945, after having first been deported to Auschwitz in 1944. For all that Artaud's references to others remain references to his own situation, his sense that the fact of 'extermination' (2020b: 90; 2004: 1,287) was something that had to be explained (in however paranoid a fashion) touched on a truth that often seems denied, even in its apparently being recognized. As Zygmunt Bauman attests, there remains a question—beyond 'the facts'—of 'knowledge... or comprehension' concerning an understanding of modernity in light of the Holocaust (2019 [1989]: 222). That the question itself—beyond that of the guilt of specific perpetrators, as one concerning the innocence of society (224)—seems incomprehensible (and, indeed, is so often re-framed as if it were a question of the incomprehensible, as though the question itself was already its own answer) is precisely what Artaud challenges his readers with.

Taking the reader beyond the 'END' (which he added emphatically in capital letters to his own copy of the published *Artaud the Mómo*), the interruption of a blank page presents Artaud's desire to put a space 'between the world and myself' (in the words on the page that follows this interruption), as between himself and 'the swarming of Bardo'. This literalization of the interruption of death (in its double meaning) touches on the very heart of Artaud's testimony concerning the decade of his incarceration (in which 'language left'). The term Bardo (drawn from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) names the hoax that Artaud sees institutions and authorities perpetrating across the globe—a farming of the living dead for the profit of a few through the exploitation of the many. The modes of such exploitation are, of course, manifold and Artaud uses a trope from his own experience when he writes, in *Alienation and Black Magic*:

To thus create death artificially as present-day medicine attempts to do is to encourage a reflux of the nothingness which has never been to anyone's benefit, but off which certain predestined human profiteers have been eating their fill for a long time. (2020a: 99; 1974: 60)

If we abstract from Artaud's metaphysical, or esoteric, claims concerning 'medicine' here into reference to 'big pharma', and the metaphors used to 'treat' its often totally cynical operations, we might find ourselves reading this text anew. A contemporary version of such reflection can be found, for example, in Anne Boyer's *The Undying* (with its genealogy of women writers addressing treatments for breast cancer and the corollary social symptoms of exhaustion), where she writes:

The system of medicine is, for the sick, a visible scene of action, but beyond it and behind it and beneath it are all the other systems, *family race work culture gender money education*, and beyond those is a system that appears to include all the other systems, the system so total and overwhelming that we often mistake it for the world. (Boyer 2020: 66)

Boyer's writing aims to retrieve the person from the effects of what she calls the 'industrialised world's carcinogenosphere' (Boyer 2020: 119) and she declares, in a way that resonates with Artaud's own testimony: 'I would rather write nothing at all than propagandise for the world as is' (2020: 116).

Bardo is not 'the next world' but an attempt to preclude or pre-empt the possibility of this world (Artaud 2020a: 107; 1974: 64). In the paradoxical attempt to articulate the incomprehensible, the 'post-script' that comes after Artaud's interpolated blank page ends with a new question: 'why?/ I simply ask: *why?*' (2020a: 111; 1974: 65). In a necropolitical context, where it is possible to say (perhaps for the first time so explicitly) 'are we not all, like poor Van Gogh, suicided by society!' (1988: 504; 2004: 1,457), this final question in the *Artaud the Mómo* texts echoes profoundly. 'No one is ever born alone,' Artaud writes in his famous essay on Van Gogh (1947), just as one 'does not commit suicide by oneself' (in Artaud, 1988: 511; 2004: 1,462)—an insight that turns inside out the understanding of care, or treatment, usually offered by society (whether medically or religiously). Just as Boyer says of cancer, such suffering 'is not a sameness eternalised in an ahistorical body, moving through a trajectory of advancing technological progress... [It] is also marked by our historical particulars, constellated in a set of social and economic relations' (2020: 30). Questioning the

cause of interruption in such relations, through the figure of ‘being suicided’, is perhaps Artaud’s most profound challenge to any attempt at reading him simply ‘on a literary level’.

For Artaud demands the possibility of making an interruption in the continuous dispossession of human beings by society (by ‘the’ economy), vehemently countering the lack of care for life, as someone who has been through ‘the Bardo of electroshock’. Even as his writings are themselves invested in the idea of an artistic canon (albeit *maudites*), the cultural attempt to save human beings from this power of necropolitics in the name of history (identifying exceptions to this social-political indifference) is rigorously exposed by his work. In the example of ‘interruption’, then, the question of reading Artaud is one that is raised *by* him—engaging us in the question of what we can still learn *from* Artaud; not least, *for* reading him.

This returns us to the opening question of the relation between writing and time, as itself a return of the very possibility of interruption as a matter of ‘performance’ beyond the ostensibly ‘literary level’ of its testimony. Artaud addressed precisely this in his letter to Peter Watson, reflecting on his own relation to his past work, where the question of reading Artaud, as posed by him, concerns the future of its writing:

[W]orks improve with age and..., since they all *lie* as far as the writer is concerned, they constitute in themselves a bizarre truth which life, if it were ever authentic, should never have accepted. The inexpressible expressed through works which, at the time of writing, are nothing but debacles, and are only worth anything by the posthumous distance of a mind dead to time and deadlocked in the present, what is that, can you tell me? (Artaud 2001: 194; 2004: 1,097)

What, then, might be the testimony of (or even to) writing as a relation between the living and the dead—not least, as this relation concerns the same person, posthumously? How does this paradoxical (perhaps impossible) temporality show itself in the interruption of that writing by the insertion of a blank page, for example, by a reader who is also the author, trying to protect himself from the Bardo of a living death by appealing to a future edition of his text? Between Artaud the *Mômo* and Artaud the

patient, subjected to the comas of electroshock (as well as the execrations of ‘madness’), what testimony to the interruption of life by death—as, indeed, that of death by life (as if it were a choice between everyday ‘life’ and ‘madness’)—is offered by the example of this blank page, ‘written’ by Artaud into the ‘ten years since language left’?

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