

Resisting the plague: the French reactionary right and Artaud's theater of cruelty.

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Resisting the Plague:

The French Reactionary Right and Artaud's Theater of Cruelty

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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).¹

Despite his uncompromising stance, Artaud found himself profoundly engaged in the "politics of style."² 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, [End Page 71] 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.³ 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 culture, [End Page 72] 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 the 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...

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¹ 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.

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



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