ARTAUD IN MEXICO

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"I have heard for a long time of a sort of movement deep in Mexico in favor of a return to the civilization from before Cortez", wrote Antonin Artaud to Jean Paulhan, editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française.* In a letter dated July 19, 1935, Artaud informed Paulhan of his plan to go to Mexico to give a series of lectures in Mexico City and study contemporary and traditional cultures. Requesting help in obtaining an official title of mission from the French government in order to line up assignments from *Paris-Soir* and other publications, and to open doors in Mexico, he emphasizes the journey's personal meaning: "I find myself at an important crossroads of my existence". He explains that he hopes to encounter in Mexico a revolutionary society built on ancient metaphysical foundations where he may apply his vision of healing the split between psyche and civilization through alchemical theater.

In letters to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Education, Artaud describes his mission as seeking in Mexico "a perfect example of primitive civilization with a spirit of magic". He proposes to interview "healers and sorcerers on lost plateaux". Even before setting foot on Mexican soil, Artaud's exoticism reaches a fever pitch in anticipation: "Are there still forests which speak and where the sorcerer with burnt fibers of Peyote and Marijuana still finds the terrible old man who teaches him the secrets of divination?"

Antonin Artaud left Europe on a ship bound for Mexico in January, 1936, and arrived on a Friday in the following month. He was charged with the official mission of studying Mexican art and culture. He had left Paris

under a cloud of poverty during the depths of the Depression with fascism on the rise. Even on his arrival he was in dire financial straits.

In a letter dated March 25, Artaud writes to Paulhan that he is being well received in Mexico, where "... all the doors of government have been opened to me". He lectured at The League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists and participated in a Congress of Children's Theater where, according to his report to Paulhan, "they told me I was speaking of things *they had never thought about before in their lives*".

Artaud gave a series of lectures at the University of Mexico on Surrealism, Marxism, theater, and civilization and myth of ancient Mexico. They were published in Spanish translation in *EI Nacional* and other publications. The rights were acquired to all of Artaud's writing which appeared in the Mexican press, but this collection was not published in a single volume until 1962.

In *Surrealism and Revolution*, Artaud explains his points of divergence from the movement and describes how he was drummed out in 1926: "Doesn't Artaud care about the revolution? they asked. I don't care about your revolution, I care about mine, I replied, quitting Surrealism since it too had become a political party". Artaud warns against "the prostitution of action" in propaganda. In closing, he identifies the objective of his journey to Mexico as a quest "for the basis of a magical culture which can still gush forth the forces of the Indian earth".

Man against Destiny is an attack on Marxism and on the rationalist tradition of Europe. Placing his allegiance in the magic of an ancient world with no points of reference in contemporary institutions, he calls for destruction: "what is necessary to let culture ripen is to close the schools, burn the museums, destroy the books, break the printing presses". Artaud valorizes Chinese nondualist philosophy and the science of acupuncture, Paracelsian medicine, and homeopathy, proposing a synesthesic means of healing history through color and sound based on these ancient arts.

At the opening of *The Theater and the Gods*, Artaud identifies his alternative to European civilization as a "culture in space" and correlates the four points of the theater space with the six branches of the Mexican cross found on the walls of certain churches.

Other writings by Artaud which appeared in the Mexican press during the following months were his main source of income. The spirit of Artaud's reception by the Mexican intelligentsia is indicated by the fact that these pieces were translated by various hands out of good will at the last moment in order to make it possible for him to extend his stay in Mexico. Artaud's original texts have been lost, so the Gallimard edition of his *Oeuvres Completes* contains French retranslations of the Spanish in which they first appeared.

Artaud wrote an *Open Letter to the Governors of the States of Mexico*, published in *El Nacional* on May 19, 1936, in which he makes an impassioned plea for the preservation of Indian ways of life. In *First Con-*

tact with the Mexican Revolution, which appeared in *El Nacional* on June 3, Artaud describes a false impression of the Mexican Revolution prevalent in Europe, where they envision "the Mexicans of today dressed in the costumes of they ancestors, carrying out real sacrifice to the sun on the steps of Teotihuacan". In *What I Have Come to Mexico to Do*, published in *El Nacional* on July 5, he predicts that the conquest of modern Mexico will consist of the rediscovery of analogical forces through which man and nature can function in accord.

"I have come to Mexico to make contact with the red earth", Artaud announces in the opening lines of *The Eternal Culture of Mexico*, plublished in *El Nacional* on July 13. The development of Artaud's synthesis of artistic, philosophic and metaphysical thought had reached a threshold beyond which he was unable to pass. His rejection of European culture was so complete that he had found himself alone in his position even in avant-garde Paris.

When the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, organized by the Communist Party, asked him to present his view at the 1935 congress, Artaud wrote a reply in which he declined to participate: "It is a question of defining what one means by culture and what one wants to defend in the culture, and if it is the spiritual patrimony which is the origin of our present culture, I reject it".

While Artaud had established in "No More Masterpieces" and other essays in *The Theatre and its Double* his contempt for the enduring institutions and monuments to art which have held European civilization in thrall for centuries, he had no sympathy for fascism: "I will never give fascism the honor of believing that it could extinguish my culture or any culture by burning books". His Bergsonist vitalism viewed *esprit*, the spontaneous spark of brilliance behind all forms of human cultural expression, as absolutely foreign to all systematizations of culture, no matter what their political orientation.

Artaud had gone against the grain of European culture, but even his most experimental productions had taken place within the realm of traditional literary, artistic, cultural and social contexts. Going to Mexico was a means of circumventing limitations which prevented the breakthrough he had long been anticipating. His reception there as a spokesman for Europeans avant-garde theater and culture was an image he played upon an attempted to demystify in his lectures, articles and essays in favor of a theoretical model of revolutionary Mexican culture based on the metaphysics of pre-Columbian civilization. Beneath his semi-official objective of learning from "the lost soul" of ancient Mexico in order to report his findings back to Europe, Artaud admits that his goal is the harnessing of shamanistic forces of pre-Columbian sorcery to subvert European ideology and heal what he perceived to be a plague threatening the collective body and psyche.

In *The Eternal Secrets of Culture*, published in *El Nacional* on the first of August, Artaud challenges the Mexican intelligentsia to accompany the economic revolution with "a revolution in consciousness". *The Occult Forces of Mexico*, published in the August 9 edition, is a plea to the govern-

ment to allow him to enter the regions where tribal people carry on their traditional ways so he may study them first-hand. He proposes to write a book based on his researches and experience of "the rites, beliefs, festivals, costumes of the autochthonous authentic tribes". The book was written, but the 200 page manuscript was lost with many of Artaud's other possessions during his disastrous trip to Ireland several months after returning from Mexico.

Artaud left for the mountainous Tarahumara country with an assignment as correspondent for *El Nacional*, which enabled him to enter the territory, and the support of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Mexico. Upon his return to Mexico City in the first week of October, his writings began to appear in *El Nacional*.

The Mountain of Signs opens on the stark, rocky landscape of the Tarahumara country. What Artaud describes here could be a tableau from his Theater of Cruelty: a figure carved out of stone of a man being tortured repeated at intervals along the slow journey on horseback, another stone man leaning out a window, "his head a ... circular cavity where the sun and moon appear following the hours", and "drowned men, eaten by stone, on the highest rocks".

At each turn in the road in this long trek through rarely-traveled mountain wilderness inhabited only by indigenous tribes, Artaud sees "burnt trees in the form of a cross or of a being". He understands them to be among the signs with which the Tarahumara have seeded the mountain, translating their metaphysical thought into the form of the landscape and of their villages.

The Peyote Dance opens on Artaud in a village on the mountain, immobilized, out of the body, bewitched by the Tarahumara sorcerers after waiting twenty-eight days to see the peyote rite. Desperate, he writes, "Having come so far, to find myself finally at the threshold of an encounter and of this sight from which I had hoped to extract so many revelations, and to sense myself so lost, so desolate, so cheated". This moment that he had viewed as the ultimate objective of his journey — to make direct contact with shamanistic traditions surviving from pre-Columbian Mexico — finds him a powerless observer, barely able to get up and walk a few steps, his enthusiasm nearly exhausted: "And all this, for what? For a dance, for a rite of lost Indians who don't even know who they are or where they come from and who, when interrogated, respond to us with stories of which they've lost the secret and the connection".

Artaud experiences a vision of Hieronymous Bosch's *Nativity* and, upon returning to his senses, he sees the sorcerers descending the mountain leaning on huge staffs, finally arriving for the peyote rite. His description of the ambience where the peyote dance takes place, written during or just after his journey to Tarahumara country, is clear and precise in every fantastic detail. He sees fires "rising from all directions toward the sky", the women grinding the peyote with "scrupulous brutality", the circle of earth

trampled down by the priests where a bush lit on fire is blown upward in whirlwinds, the heart and lungs of two goats killed earlier in the day "trembling in the wind", hanging from a tree trunk in the form of a cross.

The rite is performed for Artaud. He sees the priests with their wooden staffs and the peyote dancer wearing hundreds of miniature bells. At this point begins his obsession with the staff used by the Tarahumara sorcerers in the ceremony. He wonders what it is the Peyote Master tells them during the three-year initiation in the forest when they learn the secret of the staff.

Artaud collapses from fatigue. The dance is performed over and around him. In a state of dissociation, he becomes a "man of stone who requires two men to get him mounted on his horse" when the ritual ends at dawn. His body resists returning to civilization after what he has witnessed, "to bring back a collection of worn-out images which the era, faithful to its system, will take for more ideas for advertisements and models for clothing designers".

Although Artaud reached the goal of his journey to Mexico and Tarahumara country — travel in time as well as space to the rites of pre-Columbian shamanism — his weakened physical and mental condition prevent him from grasping the secret of the peyote dance. He leaves the site of the ceremony with the resolve that "from now on something hidden behind this heavy grinding and which equalizes dawn and night, this something left out, *will serve... in my crucifixion*".

In the three other texts which appeared in *El Nacional* after his departure for Europe, Artaud attempted to correlate what he had observed of Tarahumara shamanistic practices with his already-existing body of occult, mythic and metaphysical knowledge. *The Land of the Magi-Kings* is an interpretation of the geologic forms in Tarahumara country in light of nativity scenes by pre-Renaissance painters and the symbols of universal esotericism. In *A Primordial Race*, Artaud discusses the Tarahumara belief that they are directly linked to the original male and female principle of nature. His thesis in *The Rites of the Kings of Atlantis* is that a blood-drinking bull sacrifice he witnessed in Tarahumara country on Mexican Independence Day originates in "the same prehistoric and fabulous source" as a similar ritual described by Plato.

Artaud produced *The Race of Lost Men* for *Voilà* magazine in Paris just before his departure for Ireland in July, 1937. It was published under the byline of John Forester on December 31. *The Race of Lost Men* consists of three fragments dealing with different aspects of the Tarahumara way of life. There are condensations of motifs touched upon in earlier Tarahumara writings, including a description of the staffs used by the sorcerers during the ceremonies and of the three-year initiation ritual they undergo when called to handle the staff. First focused on in *The Peyote Dance*, the motif resurfaces again in *The Peyote Rite in Tarahumara Country*, *Supplement to a journey to Tarahumara Country* and in *Tutuguri.* In the initiation of the sorcerer's staff is found the symbolic focal point of Tarahumara shamanistic tradition and philosophy passed from generation to generation.

In *The Peyote Rite in Tarahumara Country*, Artaud recounts being struck by a sorcerer's staff, a blow which drew "a single drop of blood" and "gave me the impression of waking up to something to which I'd been poorly born and oriented... and I sensed myself filled with a light which I had never before possessed". Shortly thereafter he enters into relations with the priests of the peyote rite. Artaud perceived the staff to be the fetish of initiation and empowerment which represents for the Tarahumara the male-female principle and signifies entry into their shaman-elite.

Artaud was carrying a magic cane during his journey to Ireland after returning to Europe. This cane becomes the object of the disturbance leading to his deportation and incarceration. It was a cane which had supposedly once belonged to St. Patrick. Artaud decided to return it to its country of origin. He took a boat to Ireland with much the same intent as when he went to Mexico, "in search of the last authentic descendants of the Druids". In Dublin, hungry and penniless, he sought refuge in a convent, where he caused a disturbance with the cane and was arrested in a violent episode during which the cane was lost. He was deported back to France and interned in a psychiatric hospital upon debarking at Le Havre. Artaud related in a letter to André Breton the delusion that Breton had braved machinegun fire to rescue him in Le Havre, a surrealist act *par excellence*.

Artaud repudiated *The Peyote Rite in Tarahumara Country* after his release from Rodez in 1947. In a postscript extracted from two letters written to his publisher, he states that he wrote it after seven years of hospitalization "in the stupid mental state of a religious convert". His imposition of Christian elements upon the pagan imagery of the peyote ceremony, which had begun with the nativity scene hallucinated in *The Peyote Dance*, was taking over by 1943. Revisions toning down the extreme Christian interpretation were made by Artaud in 1947 when he wrote the postscript.

Supplement to a Voyage to Tarahumara Country was written in January 1944. Here Artaud refers to the sorcerers as priests and correlates the peyote god Ciguri with Christ. In contrast to his disappointment at not having grasped the secret of the ritual at the end of *The Peyote Dance*, here he writes, "Be chaste or perish, this is what I learned among the Tarahumara of the mountain, but that Evil made them forget". Artaud later indicated that he wanted this piece removed from his collection of writings on the Tarahumara.

Tutuguri was written in early 1948, months before Artaud's death. It is his last attempt to resolve in writing the contradictions which had obsessed him since his visit to Tarahumara country over a decade before. *Tutuguri Rite of the Black Sun*, a similar poem, was written a few months earlier and became part of the suppressed radio broadcast, *To Be Done with the Judgement of God*. In this reconstruction made to satisfy contractual obligations to his publisher for such a piece in a collection called *The Tarahumara*, Artaud restages the rite set in lines of poetry.

Six men dressed in white carry crosses made of "two sticks tied together with a dirty cord" and carry out Artaud's final distillation of the Tarahumara rite. The "seventh Tutuguri" opens the dance by striking a wood harp he carries which has a sound "between a bell and a gun". An exploding sun burns up the crosses and the sound of approaching hoofbeats is heard. The poem ends on the image of "a horse advancing at a gallop, carrying the trunk of a naked man, and which brandishes/not a cross,/but an ironwood staff/ attached to a gigantic horseshoe/through which his entire body passes".

This is Artaud's crucifixion prophecied at the end of *The Peyote Dance*. He never found out what the Peyote Master told the Tarahumara sorcerer-initiate in the forest. The secret of the sorcerer's staff was not revealed. Artaud's journey to Tarahumara country and his voyage into the mountain via peyote constitute an interior odyssey from which he did not return.

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