

THE
FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW.

NEW SERIES.

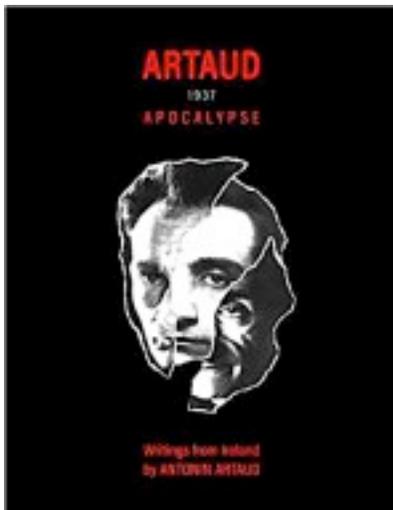
18 FORTNIGHTLYREVIEW.CO.UK 65



June 2018

A Fortnightly Review of
Artaud 1937 Apocalypse: Letters from Ireland by Antonin Artaud
Edited, Translated and with an Afterword by Stephen Barber
Artworks by Martin Bladh, Photographs by Karolina Urbaniak
Infinity Land Press, 2018 | 120 pages | £23.00

By **PETER O'BRIEN**



IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1937, Antonin Artaud went to Ireland to prepare for or perhaps witness the coming apocalypse. Among his stops was Inishmore, one of the three Aran Islands (islands of saints and scholars, as some would have them). Perhaps Artaud was thinking that the end of times would come crashing eastward with the Atlantic waves. He carried with him a cane that he identified as having belonged to both Jesus Christ and St. Patrick.

During his short time in Ireland Artaud wrote postcards and letters to a half-dozen artists and writers back in his home country of France, including André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement and a sometime friend.

Some of his correspondences read like temporal, geographic markers:

14 August 1937
10 in the morning
Ireland.

Antonin Artaud.

Others, including a letter he wrote to Anne Manson, a Paris-based journalist, read like
obsessional amphigouri:

It's You, not Me, who is living in a state of illusion and blindness ... I'm
in the process of preparing something which is not some kind of
daydream, but an Advanced Calculation, of a kind that the current Era has
become too stupid to understand ... A prophecy written-down 14 centuries
ago, and which has been published, and which I've VERIFIED point by
point in all of its F A C T S over the last months, announces a horrendous
future for the World ...

Many of the letters include pleas for money, as in one to literary editor and publisher
Jean Paulhan on 2 or 3 September, in which Artaud slags his publisher Gaston
Gallimard over reducing the royalties on his manuscript, which Gallimard already had
in his possession for two years, and which would be published the following year as
The Theatre and Its Double. Artaud says that Paulhan needs to “send the money” to
General Deliver at Galway, and ends his letter, “IT IS VERY URGENT!!! Fondly
yours, ANTONIN ARTAUD.”

In another letter to Anne Manson, Artaud asks her to send him money “by telegraphic
means,” “because it COULD BE too late for me without that. Do it, *for the best*.”

It seems Artaud spent his entire time in Ireland with no money at all, and had several
violent altercations with the Dublin police.

During his itinerant and obsessive travels in Ireland, Artaud spent time (not money) in
the isolated hamlet of Eoghanacht, and in Kilronan, Galway, Cobh and Dublin. It
seems he spent his entire time in Ireland with no money at all, and had several violent
altercations with the Dublin police, during which he was likely badly beaten as a
vagrant. He was interrogated in Dublin's Mountjoy Prison and was summarily
deported from Ireland as an undesirable alien.

Infinity Land Press, the publisher of this slight book, have given Artaud's ravings a
beautiful home – a far more congenial home than many people offered Artaud over
the course of his tortured life. Included are pages from Artaud's manifesto, “The New
Revelations of Being,” published just before Artaud ventured toward Ireland, and
which includes a passage that invokes for me both Brecht's *Mother Courage* and my
own brother Bob, who physically survived the Vietnam War, but could not survive its
lingering emotional and psychological trauma:

Power eats Power:

Without war, no stability.

Also included are engulfing photographs of Ireland by Karolina Urbaniak. I only know what hell looks like from the Dante work of Botticelli, Blake, and Doré, but Urbaniak's photographs invoke for me some of the middle rungs of the Inferno. Her image of water spilling over an angular wedge of rock – into a cloudy, seething, grey abyss – is a powerful evocation of Artaud's revelatory, fracturing being.

Would we audiences have Brecht or Beckett without Artaud? Or perhaps it's more accurate to say: can we think of any of these three without the other two?

We certainly would not have one of contemporary philosophy's most powerful books, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which Foucault describes as an "introduction to the nonfascist life." *Anti-Oedipus* reads like a circuitous homage to Artaud and his preposterous and grotesque 1948 notion of a "body without organs." (In another Irish letter to Anne Manson, Artaud says to her: "just keep in mind my hatred of human flesh.")

Is it possible, entre-deux-guerres, to be more insightful than to imagine and begin planning for the coming apocalypse from the western precipice of the continent? And is there a safer place in Europe during the years of World War II than a lunatic asylum? Artaud spent the entire span of that second war in various asylums. When France was occupied by the Nazis, various of Artaud's friends ensured that he was transferred to the psychiatric hospital at Rodez, in south-central France, well inside Vichy territory.

While at Rodez, Artaud received dozens of electroshock treatments, and visits from a select group of resilient friends. Editor and translator Stephen Barber also says that,

At Rodez in 1943, Artaud told the asylum's director that he now saw his Apocalyptic prophecies of 1937 as being realized in the Second World War's immense conflagrations and massacres, but in a strangely faded-out and reduced way, like an irradiated film image, that could not compete with the virulence and all-engulfing scale of his own visions.

Whatever else one may say of Artaud, one has to give his consuming aesthetic visions respect: who else would have said that a war that claimed about 60,000,000 lives did not live up to his own visions?



After his release from Rodez, Artaud lived for two years at a convalescent-clinic in the suburbs of Paris, writing and drawing incessantly. He died at the age of 51, on 4 March 1948. He was found sitting upright on the edge of his bed, with a shoe in his hand. His last words, written in a schoolchildren's exercise book found beside him, were "etc etc."

Although many of Artaud's writings from Ireland were lost, Barber collects all surviving material, from previously published work, and archives and private collections. Barber has written extensively on Artaud before, and this book is his acknowledgement of the 70th anniversary of Artaud's death.

In addition to his seminal (sorry about using that sexualized word, Antonin) writings on theatre, Artaud is also known for his cigarette-burnt magic spells and his wild, incendiary curses. Barber chooses to end this book with his own incinerating statement of affection for Artaud:

Curse all those who ever tried to silence Artaud.

Fortunately for us, there are people like Barber who keep Artaud's violent and tenacious wisdoms alive.



Peter O'Brien has written or edited five books, including *Cleopatra at the Breakfast Table: Why I Studied Latin With My Teenager and How I Discovered the Daughterland*. He is in the midst of a six-year project annotating / illustrating / disrupting the 628 pages of *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce. Pages from the project have appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* (here) and in journals in Canada, England, Ireland, Israel, and the U.S.