

Antonin Artaud and Anaïs Nin

“His lips lined and withered by the black foam of drugs... the modern Christ, crucified by his own nerves, for all our neurotic sins... wiped the sweat streaming down his face, as if he were sitting there in the agony of secret torture.”^[1]

With these words, Anaïs Nin introduces Antonin Artaud into her “House of Incest” and speaks to him: “In our writing, we are brothers, the speed of our vertigo is the same. ... The language of nerves that we both use makes us brothers in writing.”^[2]

Anaïs Nin and Antonin Artaud not only felt like brothers and sisters in writing, practicing a kind of intellectual incest, they also lived an intense but brief love affair.

A love affair that began in March 1933 when Anaïs Nin, who had already read a few pages of Artaud's work and saw in it an “extraordinary twinhood,” met him for the first time. She was immediately fascinated, haunted by “his hallucinatory eyes.” “As soon as our eyes meet, I am plunged into my imaginary world,”^[3] she wrote in her diary.

And in April 1933, when Artaud took to the stage of the Sorbonne auditorium to give his famous lecture on “The Theater and the Plague,” Anaïs Nin, who was in the audience that evening alongside Henry Miller, an admirer of Artaud, she said, witnessed a bewildering spectacle in which Artaud seemed to lose his train of thought and began to theatrically mimic the tragic agony of a plague victim, the death of a crucified man. Most of the students and other spectators who had come that evening to attend a traditional lecture on theater were unable to follow Artaud; they did not understand him, and some

laughed loudly, insulted him, and booed him; many even left the room, slamming the door behind them. Anaïs and her husband, along with a few of his friends and lovers, remain until the end of the lecture, sitting next to Artaud. Anaïs later writes that she was deeply shocked by the audience's brutal and disrespectful reaction. Once the performance is over, Artaud invites Anaïs to accompany him, and the two go for a walk around Paris for hours. Anaïs' grace and beauty quickly made him forget the hostility of the Sorbonne audience; he confided in her and recited poems to her. Anaïs listened to him. "We talked about style, dreams, his work, theater. ... We understood each other,"^[4] she wrote.

Artaud is also fascinated by Anaïs, whom he feels is a kindred spirit, as well as by her beauty. He even mentions wanting to dedicate his new work, *Héliogabale*, which he is currently finishing, to her. He sends her a letter: "From the manuscript you gave me, you seem to have an understanding of subtle, almost secret states, which I have only felt enrich me at the cost of incredible nervous suffering." ... "I don't need to say any more: water is very close to fire."^[5]

Until early June, Artaud and Anaïs meet and write to each other several times, but Anaïs still has no physical desire for him. She even thinks that Artaud might be homosexual until the day Artaud seeks physical contact with her by placing his hand on her knee and then on her shoulder. Anaïs feels that she likes this contact. A few days later, at the Coupole bar, they kissed for the first time, but "our kisses gave me no pleasure," Anaïs wrote in her journal. A day or two later, Artaud writes her a long love letter: "You have the same silence as me. And you are the only person in front of whom my own silence has not embarrassed me. ... I want violent embraces from you, I want to enter you, rest in you, and feel that vibration..."

which brings things of the spirit to light." "[6]Artaud believes in a miracle, "in an encounter that is *too* perfect," in a destiny that is "inevitable, willed by heaven... beautiful to the point of being frightening." Yes, Artaud is afraid, afraid of being "a perpetual disappointment," of losing Anaïs "in one of those periods when I am separated from myself and you cease to recognize me." "Artaud is aware that "it takes a rare subtlety of understanding to admit, to accept that this mixture... of illuminations and eclipses, of intuitions and darkness, of dazzling revelations and idiocy does not affect the feelings one has a right to expect from him." But Artaud is also full of hope, the hope of being reborn: "Something wonderful is just beginning that can fill an entire life. ... I felt my life radically transformed. ... Since yesterday, I have had the taste of a woman's mouth haunting me. ... This taste is not a physical thing; it reveals to me the very meaning of a soul. It teaches me a lot about a whole secret life, and without it, I would not know. I have a name that my mother gave me when I was four years old and that my close friends call me. Nanaqui. That name also describes me in my innocence and in the purest part of my life. "

On June 13, 1933, Anaïs visits Artaud's room for the first time, a bare cell, sparsely furnished. Artaud "is tense with desire," he wants to possess her, he kisses her fiercely, bites "her mouth, her breasts, her throat, her legs. But he is impotent. "[7] laments Anaïs Nin, an impotence that Artaud, humiliated, blames on his heavy opium use. Anaïs wants to dispel his disappointment and downplays it: "I am perfectly satisfied, Artaud. ... Let's forget this moment... Gestures mean nothing." [8]

Five days later, Anaïs Nin meets Artaud at the Viking and spends "a night of ecstasy" with him, walking with him "as if in a dream, in a state of delirium." "It was God

himself, who wanted me to feel him physically, and I felt him melt,"^[9] Anaïs describes that evening. Artaud, for his part, felt he was experiencing the greatest moment of his life: "It's too much, it's too much! What divine joy to crucify a being such as you. What ecstasy to feel you completely, you who never give yourself! My love, my great love," he exclaimed. Artaud was happy, forgetting for a moment his torments and pains; in a café, he tells her: "Between us, there could be murder."^[10]

Anaïs is also lovingly spellbound and writes him two long letters shortly afterwards: "I would like to relive that moment on the quays a thousand times, and every hour of that evening. I want to feel that violence and your gentleness again, your threats, your spiritual despotism. ... I believe in that moment when we lost all sense of reality and separation and division between beings. ... Everything else is just torture of our minds, the ghosts we create... because for us, love has immense repercussions. ... I feel that I will bring you the wonderful flavor of material things. ... I love you." "^[11]"

But Anaïs becomes afraid, afraid of disappointing him, afraid of hurting him, afraid of making him even more unhappy than before she came into his life. Anaïs looks at herself in the mirror and sees "the green-eyed tigress, the mocking tigress." " She feels that Artaud is "imprisoned by the Inca princess, by the feathered serpent—by her plumage and her fluidity, by her cunning and her kindness," and that Artaud is undoubtedly too fragile to experience a love that he would have to share with her husband, the banker Hugh Guiler, as well as with Henry Miller, his wife, and other lovers. She would like to protect him from himself, to save him.

Anaïs flees and soon leaves alone for Nice. From her hotel, she writes love letters to Henry (Miller), to Hugo, her husband, to her father, and to Artaud: "Nanaqui,

Nanaqui, my love... I come to beg you to forget me. ... Hate me. ... I recognize my own intransigence in you. Tell me you understand... Forget me. This is a supernatural proof of love that I am giving you."^[12] And, a day later, torn between her fear of hurting him and her selfish desire to continue the relationship, she writes to him again, apologizing for her excessive scruples and asking for absolution for the harm she may have caused him: "The greatest joy I had on the evening we were together was when you spoke of your happiness." "^[13]

But in the south of France, Anaïs began a new romance, meeting her father and embarking on an intense incestuous relationship with him. After spending a few weeks with her father and then with Henry, she confided in her diary that she had sorted out her feelings and had even forgotten Artaud.

Upon his return to Paris in early August 1933, Artaud senses that something in their relationship has changed and makes a scene: "I sensed in your letter that you no longer loved me—or rather that you had never loved me—that another love had taken hold of you. I guess it's your father. This love... is an abomination, " and Anaïs replied: "No, it was the purest love. And if you don't believe in my purity, it's because you don't know me. "^[14] The few days of shared love and the exceptional relationship that had developed between the two poets were shattered in an instant. Anaïs was disillusioned, disappointed; she hated his pettiness, his medieval mindset, his "fury of a castrated monk."^[15] She believed "that a mind capable of writing certain sentences was incapable of behaving differently in life."^[16] and she suddenly discovers that Artaud is nothing more than "a puritan, a provincial, a Montparnasse street urchin. *An old maid*," a prisoner of his upbringing and his milieu. Artaud felt betrayed; Anaïs had become a green-eyed

monster to him, a dangerous feathered snake. Anaïs, for her part, was sure of herself. "Only my judgment matters to me. I am what I am... I loved Artaud with more talent than other women could muster in a lifetime. I gave him a great moment, even if it was only a mirage."

Artaud's mind torn between his romantic and sexual desires, torn between his poetry and his suffering body, a body that Artaud would like to be without organs, without pain, cannot insinuate to Anaïs as he did a few years later with Anne Manson that "what unites beings is love, what separates them is sexuality" and that "only men and women who can come together above all sexuality are strong."^[17] Anaïs had shown him the opposite, and Artaud's idea that "women only understand sensual love, and as soon as you try to give them soul, they don't want it" was nothing more than the petty excuse of an impotent male, which Anaïs, that emancipated tigress who was half a century ahead of the women of her time, would brush aside with a smile.

Like many women who knew and loved Artaud, she would testify a few years later to A. and O. Virmaux: "Artaud was a seducer, not a fucker. He was fascinated by women and he fascinated them."^[18] Anaïs knew how to be both. She also knew that "prophets have no sex... women adore them. Women are masochists. That's the truth."

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[\[1\]](#) A. Nin, *House of Incest / Haus des Inzests*, dtv, p. 76

[\[2\]](#) Ibid., p.76

[\[3\]](#) A. Nin, *Journal inédit et non expurgé des années 1932-1934*, Stock, p.169

[\[4\]](#) Ibid., p.185

[\[5\]](#) A. Artaud, *Eleven Letters to Anaïs Nin*, Tel Quel No. 20

[\[6\]](#) A. Artaud, *Eleven Letters to Anaïs Nin*, Tel Quel No. 20

- [7] A. Nin, *Unpublished and Unedited Diary from 1932-1934*, Stock, p.266
- [8] Ibid,, p.266
- [9] Ibid,, p.267
- [10] Ibid, p.268
- [11] Ibid., p. 270
- [12] Ibid., p. 276
- [13] Ibid., p. 277
- [14] Ibid., p. 318
- [15] Ibid., p. 320
- [16] Ibid., p. 326
- ,[17] A. Artaud, *Lettres à Anne Manson*, 1937
- [18] A. and O. Virmaux, *Antonin Artaud*, Ed. La Manufacture, p.105
- [19] A. Nin, *Journal inédit et non expurgé des années 1932-1934*, Stock, p.198