

Artaud meets Beats

"A young man with black hair came down the stairs, trembling, and read what I later discovered to be Artaud's *Ci-Gît*. I also remember a man wearing a turban who was shouting... I long believed that the young man was Artaud, but one day I learned that Artaud was much older," Carl Solomon recounts his Parisian encounter with Antonin Artaud in July 1947 in his book *Emergency Messages, An Autobiographical Miscellany*. Carl Solomon had just attended a reading of Artaud's texts accompanying the exhibition "Portraits and Drawings by Antonin Artaud" at the Pierre Gallery^[1], and the young man he heard reading was likely Antonin Artaud's assistant and friend, Roger Blin, who described his relationship with the author in an interview: "I know Artaud only through his trajectory within me, which will have no end." Carl is a nineteen-year-old American Jew who enlisted in the US Navy in 1945 and whose ship called at the port of La Pallice in La Rochelle. Unable to contain his desire to discover the origins of surrealism, existentialism, and post-war Marxism, he spontaneously decided to desert and left for Paris. He settled in Montparnasse, went to see the Mona Lisa, attended a lecture by Jean-Paul Sartre on Kafka, and made friends at the Cité Universitaire who introduced him to Prévert, Michaux, Isou, and Lettrism. One day, while strolling through Saint-Germain-des-Prés, he passed by the Galerie Pierre, where a crowd had gathered, and had this life-changing encounter. Since that day, the young American has been fascinated by Artaud, by his poetry, his cries, and by the spirit and energy of Artaud channelled through Roger Blin. That day in Paris would

remain etched in his mind forever, and Carl would contribute throughout his life to spreading the myth of Artaud in America, thus influencing one of the most interesting literary experiences of the 20th century.

After spending six weeks in France and driven by hunger, Carl resumed his service in the Navy without being punished for his desertion and returned a year later to Paris to buy Van Gogh, *the Man Suicided by Society*, the book by Artaud that would have the greatest impact on him, a book that speaks viscerally about those suicided by society, about himself, who voluntarily checked himself into a New Jersey psychiatric hospital in 1949 to undergo a lobotomy. In a corridor of this asylum, as he emerges from his hypoglycaemic coma after a session of insulin therapy and reopens his eyes, Carl meets Allen Ginsberg, who has just arrived at the hospital and is waiting to be assigned a bed. To escape prison, Allen chose to be sentenced, during his trial for complicity in drug trafficking and receiving stolen goods, to this internment, with the judge hoping that this psychiatric treatment would "cure" Allen of his homosexual urges. With Gerd Stern, another young Jew from New York whose parents fled Nazi Germany in 1936 and whom Carl met before Allen's arrival, a hellish trio has just formed in the heart of this asylum for the (literary) insane. Carl, who seems to have brought his entire library with him to the asylum, lends them his books, tells them stories of his travels, and spreads his love of French writers, Michaux, Isou, Genet, Céline, and above all Artaud, whom he never tires of mimicking and quoting, as well as recounting his incredible encounter with his idol in Paris. Allen, already introduced to Baudelairean poetry and the writings of the cursed poets by Lucien Carr, is very impressed by Artaud's texts and, of course, by Carl's story, which he will pass on in a letter to Kerouac: "Solomon was walking

through Paris when suddenly he heard barbaric, electrifying cries in the street. Terrified, transfixed, totally devastated, frozen, he saw this madman dancing in the street, repeating be-bop phrases with such a voice, his body rigid, like a flash of energy, a madman who had opened all the doors and was running down Paris screaming. After Gerd left, Carl and Allen continued to philosophize and discuss literature, quoting Antonin Artaud, screaming like Artaud in the Rodez asylum, screaming like Artaud and Solomon under the effects of electroshock therapy. And all the while, Allen Ginsberg took notes and recorded everything Carl said, did, and recounted, all his antics, his follies, and his screams.

After their release, Allen and Carl stayed in New York. Carl started working for Ace Books, the publishing house run by his uncle, A. A. Wyn, and Ginsberg, who enjoyed his role as agent, editor, and promoter of his own works and those of his friends, *suggested that Carl publish Junkie, the book* by his friend William Burroughs. After advising Allen to convince Burroughs to revise his text, which many considered unpublishable, and to make the necessary changes so that it could be placed with a publisher, which Burroughs did, Carl had the brilliant idea of publishing Junkie in one of those double-sided paperbacks. Readers thus had two books, back-to-back, on one side Burroughs' unpublishable book and on the other Narcotic Agent, a text by Maurice Helbrant, telling the story of a narcotics agent who pursues and jails the despicable drug addicts so well described by Burroughs. Carl Solomon wrote the preface to the book and thus played a decisive role in spreading the works of his friends. Ginsberg, proud of his editorial and publicity coup, felt vindicated in his role as promoter.

When Ginsberg arrived in San Francisco in August 1954, the Artaudian virus had already invaded the minds of the

poets of Big Sur and San Francisco Bay, but this time it was new strains, less direct and oral than those that had fascinated Carl, strains that were more literary, more intellectual, the Van Goghian strain transmitted by the reading of Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society, and a more spiritual, peyote-inspired strain, derived from Artaud's *Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras*, also translated and published in 1948. Artaud's encounter with the Tarahumara Indians and his description of the peyote ritual, described in quasi-mystical terms, exploded in the hearts and minds of the poets of the bay like seismic bombs. Artaud the Seer's calls, whispered in their ears or shouted from the depths of his being, inspired them and invited them to devote themselves body and soul to the search for the infinite. The post-surrealists, post-Dadaists, and future Beats could not resist the call of peyote, this miraculous plant that a religious edict had declared contrary to the purity and sincerity of the Catholic faith, punishing all those who took it with excommunication, which could only incite its followers even more to experiment with it. When Artaud told them that "the world... has become abnormal?" and that we must seek the Truth, seek the Self, and that Peyote can lead us there, many poets of the San Francisco Renaissance who recognized themselves in this description of the world and of society's suicides also wanted to receive this message communicated by the forces of nature, a message that resonated in the bay area like Timothy Leary's future "turn on, tune in and drop out" of Timothy Leary, the apostle of LSD.

Phillip Lamantia, whom the New York avant-garde hailed as a kind of American Rimbaud and whom André Breton met in New York and recognized as "a voice that rises once every hundred years," felt particularly drawn to Artaud's stories and the psychotropic effects of peyote.

He was one of the first to taste it during a religious ceremony with the Washoes, an Indian tribe from the Sierra Nevada, and to visit a mountain village in Mexico, accompanied by the poet and avant-garde filmmaker Christopher Maclaine, to relive and film these mythical rites. Upon his return from Mexico, Lamantia introduced peyote to the Bay Area scene, and Ginsberg had his first experiences with it in San Francisco. It was during one of these peyote trips that his Moloch (shouted in *Howl*) appeared to him. Burroughs took it in Mexico City with Kerouac and, inspired by Artaud's experience and well-intentioned to discover a new hallucinogenic plant himself, he set out in search of Yage, ayahuasca, "the vine of the spirits," which he eventually found in Colombia, but which did not receive the same success as Artaud's peyote.

In San Francisco, Allen met the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and others who would later be associated with the Beat Generation. The poetic atmosphere of the West Coast was fertile, creativity explosive, and a year after his arrival, inspired by Kerouac's spontaneous method and carried away by a bebop beat, Allen began writing *Howl*: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked..." All the notes he had taken over the last few years, all the anecdotes, images, and sensations he had experienced or dreamed of swirled around in the air of his room and settled, exploded in his brain, and before sunset, seven pages of howls, wolf cries, and cries of madness filled the first seven pages.

Howl, his greatest poem and his first success, a work he would dedicate to Carl Solomon, his friend from the asylum, has just seen the light of day! "Carl Solomon, I am with you in Rockland where you are crazier than I am ." Carl's suffering and howls, echoing Artaud's howls,

electrocuted in Rodez, explode in Ginsberg's head. In *Howl*, Allen reviews his life as well as that of his friends and his mother. He refers to his idols, Rimbaud, Genet, Cézanne, recites/screams how Carl Solomon "appeared on the granite steps of the asylum dressed as a harlequin, with his head shaved" and made "suicidal speeches, demanding immediate lobotomy and administering the concrete void of insulin... of electricity," thus alluding to all the so-called convulsive therapies, those methods of psychiatric torture that Carl Solomon and Antonin Artaud underwent before losing themselves "in the total animal soup of time." Several months would pass before Allen Ginsberg could finally read *Howl* publicly in an old converted garage in October 1955. Ginsberg was in charge of organizing the event and invited Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder to read their works alongside him. Jack Kerouac chickened out, finding himself too shy to go on stage and with nothing else to do that evening but organize a few gallons of cheap Californian wine, which he passed around among the audience and the poets preparing to present their works and dreams on stage. A legendary evening began:

Michael McClure, who moved to San Francisco in 1952 and remembers that one of his first exchanges with Philip Lamantia was to ask him where he could find more of Artaud's works, read several of his own works: *For the Death of 100 Whales*, a poem inspired by the horrific massacre of a hundred whales by seventy-nine bored GIs stationed at a NATO base in Iceland, followed by *POINT LOBOS: ANIMISM*, a poem he says he wrote in response to Antonin Artaud's phrase: "It is no longer possible for the miracle not to burst forth," to which McClure responds in this poem: "It is possible, my friend /.../ This talk of miracles!"

Philip Lamantia begins his reading by immediately deciding not to present one of his own texts. Instead, he chooses to read *Journey to the End*, a text by and in honour of John Hoffman, his friend, a young surrealist poet found dead on a Mexican beach, a suicide victim of society like many young Beats who try to go further than their bodies and minds are capable of carrying them.

Around 11 p.m., with all the participants already slightly drunk thanks to the cheap wine Kerouac had organized, it was Allen's turn, also tipsy, to read *Howl*. Jack accompanied each line with an encouraging "Go," which was taken up in chorus and crescendo by the audience, intoxicated by the atmosphere and Allen's text. His reading lasted about twelve minutes, and when he finished, Ginsberg burst into tears and his gaze met that of Kenneth Rexroth, who was also wiping away tears of joy. The audience also exploded and applauded frantically, everyone sensing that something had just happened, even though most could not describe the spirits that hung in the air of the room. A liberating bomb had just exploded! Allen Ginsberg had found his form of expression, a powerful poetry that grabs us by the gut and transports us to a new world, freed from lies, where we can encounter madness and death, asylum and prison, a world of men kissing and more, a world of hallucinators and lost souls, where we can take drugs or cut our veins, a total, true, and powerful world. An Artaudian world?

A few months later, Allen Ginsberg repeated his reading of *Howl* in a small cabin in Hollywood, this time in the presence of Anaïs Nin, who had personally known, admired, and deeply loved Artaud in the 1930s, even though their first night together was a failure, Artaud unable to make love to her, mutilated by his opium use. After attending the performance of *Howl*, Anaïs Nin

wrote in her Journal 1934-1939 that his performance had "a savage power. At times, it resembled animal howls. It reminded me of Artaud's crazy lecture at the Sorbonne." She criticized the Beats for fetishizing Artaud. "They only love his madness and his drug use. They know nothing of the seven volumes of collections he wrote. Artaud would have disowned them," she confided in her Journal. Kenneth Rexroth, a pacifist anarchist recognized and accepted by all, believed that Artaud's true place was here with them on the West Coast of the United States. But were they talking about the same Artaud? No, of course not! Anaïs remembered the genius with whom she had walked through Paris in the 1930s, his head gently resting on her shoulder, and Rexroth, the libertarian poet, imagined himself as the rebellious poet reading Surrealism and Revolution in Mexico City or taking peyote with the Tarahumara Indians. The world had changed, Artaud had been adopted by the Beat poets, and the revolution was just beginning.

The first chapter of the history of the Beat Generation had just been written. This term, attributed to Jack Kerouac, a then virtually unknown writer who had published only *The Town and the City* (Before the Road) to little acclaim, was first used in November 1952 by essayist and novelist John Clellon Holmes in an article for the *New York Times* entitled "This is the Beat Generation," and, according to him, implies "the feeling of being raw, a kind of nakedness of the mind and, ultimately, of the soul." More in-depth discussions about the Beat Generation did not really begin until 1957, when the obscenity trial against Howl was in full swing and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* had been published in the United States. The Beat poets took advantage of this to expand their influence and promote their works.

One might naturally wonder what would have happened if Carl Solomon had not attended Antonin Artaud's show in Paris and had not entered the psychiatric hospital where he met Allen Ginsberg. Without Carl, there would have been no Howl, and without Howl, there would have been no obscenity trial, and thus no publicity. And without Carl and his connections, without his publication of *Junkie*, and without the \$500 advance from ACE Books to Jack Kerouac, would Allen have had the energy to continue on his path, get his friends published, and advance his dream? And what would have become of Burroughs' literary career without Allen's irreplaceable help in formatting and publishing his second book, *Naked Lunch*? So, without Carl, no Ginsberg, no Burroughs, no Beat Generation? No, I don't think so! You can't stop history, you can't stop poetry, you can't stop spiritual revolution. You can't just stop the madmen, the fools, and the poets, as long as they don't lose hope, don't lose themselves, body and soul, to drugs, or commit suicide. However, we are entitled to wonder whether the meeting between Carl Solomon and Antonin Artaud was not, for the Beat Generation, that famous flutter of butterfly wings in chaos theory.

In 1957, Ginsberg embarked with Peter Orlovski, his lover, on a Yugoslav cargo ship to Morocco, where they wanted to find William Burroughs, who had been getting high there for several years and "shitting out his Western education once and for all." Ginsberg and Kerouac helped him assemble and organize his chaos to finalize his *Naked Lunch*, then Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovski, and Gregory Corso crossed the Mediterranean to stay in a Parisian hotel at 9 rue Gît-le-Cœur, a nameless hotel for a dollar a night in the heart of the Latin Quarter, which became famous as the *Beat Hotel*.

Allen settled in Paris with his friends and wasted no time in trendy cafés, haunting the romantic Parisian cemeteries, placing his *Fleurs du Mal* on Baudelaire's grave and paying his respects at that of Jacques Rigaut, a heavy user of opium, cocaine, and heroin, a Dadaist who lived in New York for a few years before returning to France, where he eventually committed suicide. Allen visited the Père Lachaise cemetery in search of Apollinaire, the creator of surrealism, a Polish immigrant born in Italy, and even dedicated a poem to him: *Au tombeau d'Apollinaire*. "I ate the blue carrots you sent from the grave and Van Gogh's ear and Artaud's maniacal peyote, and I will walk the streets of New York in the black cloak of French poetry. It was also in Paris, at a table in the café Le Sélect, that Allen began writing his Kaddish, a funeral song dedicated to his mother Naomi. A magnificent text, inspired, it is said, by André Breton's poem *Union libre*, which Ginsberg had just read.

It was also here that Allen went in search of Artaud's ghost and found him. One evening, during a literary reading, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso, who were looking for hashish, approached a young man they suspected might be able to help them. As luck would have it, the young Jean-Jacques Lebel had spent his childhood in New York in the company of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and a few other European exiles, and he took them to an Arab café in the Latin Quarter where even the house dog was completely stoned. He quickly became their friend. JJ Lebel, who would later have the honour of translating *Howl* into French, was also fascinated by Artaud and one day played them *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* (*To Have Done with the Judgment of God*), Artaud's legendary recording made a few months before his death, a radio play read by Antonin Artaud, Maria Casarès, Roger Blin, and Paule

Thévenin, accompanied by various percussion instruments, drums, timpani, gongs, xylophone sounds, and pre-recorded screams. A mythical work, which would remain censored by the French state for a long time and whose magnetic tapes were allegedly stolen from the archives by JJ Lebel to play them to his friends. During this evening, high and sitting on the floor around a tape recorder, JJ and his American friends listened, amazed, to these otherworldly sounds, a flood of screams and sonic explosions that they did not understand, but which seemed to transcend them. Ginsberg, perhaps a little less high than the others or more critical, asked to listen to the tape again, and it was then that Jean-Jacques realized he had put the tape on backwards, corrected his mistake, and played the tape again. Artaud's voice thus re-enchanted them, even if this time it was very different parts of their brains that were being stimulated. Ginsberg heard for the first time in his life the voice that Carl Solomon had so highly praised and imitated. A voice that never ceased to hover over the poets' heads.

Allen, totally enthusiastic, made a few copies and sent them to several of his American friends, including Michael McClure, who played it to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as Philip Lamantia and a few other San Francisco madmen. It is said that it was after listening to this historic recording that McClure began writing his *Ghost Tantras*, a book written largely in "bestial language." McClure also gave a copy to Gerd Stern, who one evening played Antonin Artaud's screams as background music for a lecture by Timothy Leary. Leroi Jones also received a copy of the recording of Antonin Artaud, the French author who, along with Jean Genet, inspired him the most. And in 1965, in a review of two of his plays, *Le Métro Fantôme* and *l'Esclave*, the newspaper *Le Monde* wrote: "The art of cruelty recommended by Artaud

seems like a pleasant game of the mind compared to the cries of visceral hatred uttered by the black theater that has recently appeared in Harlem and whose first echoes we are now hearing." This is proof, if any were needed, that Artaud was truly a visionary and that Amiri Baraka (the African name he took in 1965 after the assassination of Malcolm X), who wanted "poems that kill," deserved to receive this legendary recording.

The publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* in the 1960s led thousands of young people around the world on the path to bliss. Ginsberg transformed himself into a hippie, chanting Hare Krishna, and Artaud inspired many rock musicians such as Jim Morrison, David Bowie, and Iggy Pop, *before* Patti Smith, the Godmother of Punk, mixed her voice with the original sounds of the Sierra Tarahumara for her musical project *The Peyote Dance, dedicated to Artaud*. Burroughs, for his part, distanced himself from the Beat Generation, which he recognized more as a sociological phenomenon than a literary movement.

To conclude this story with Carl Solomon, Claude Pélieu, a young French Beat poet and translator of William Burroughs, who wrote the preface to *MISHAPS, PERHAPS* for his friend Carl and honoured him in his poem L.S.D. 25 by naming him *Carl le Momo*, I take the liberty of plagiarizing a sentence from his work *Le tout ça d'un instant*, which gives his opinion on the cut-up method used by William Burroughs: "In the beginning was the Beat Generation, in the beginning of what, asshole? -- ... Because in the beginning, it was in the air and in the minds of a few," the Hashishins, Rimbaud, Artaud, Dada, Isou, and others such as Pélieu, Trocchi, and Lebel, and why not Boris Vian and the Pataphysicians.

[\[i\]](#) And not at Artaud's lecture at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, as has been mistakenly published.