

### **Schoolroom of the Sorbonne, a Thursday evening in Paris**

Anais Nin *The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. I (1931-1934)* (New York: The Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), pp.191-193.

Extract abridged by Kieran Burgess :: [kieran@kpburgess.com](mailto:kieran@kpburgess.com)

The room was crowded. The light was crude. It made Artaud's eyes shrink into darkness, as they are deep-set. This brought into relief the intensity of his gestures. He looked tormented. His eyes do not seem to see the people. Artaud steps out on the platform, and begins to talk about "The Theater and the Plague." He asked me to sit in the front row. It seems to me that all he is asking for is intensity, a more heightened form of feeling and living. He is trying to remind us that it was during the Plague that so many marvelous works of art and theater came to be, because, whipped by the fear of death, man seeks immortality, or to escape, or to surpass himself. But then he began to act out dying by plague.

No one quite knew when it began. To illustrate his conference, he was acting out an *agony*. "La Peste" in French is so much more terrible than "The Plague" in English. But no word could describe what Artaud acted out on the platform of the Sorbonne.

His face was contorted with anguish, one could see the perspiration dampening his hair. His eyes dilated, his muscles became cramped, his fingers struggled to retain their flexibility.

He made one feel the parched and burning throat, the pains, the fear, the fire in the guts. He was in agony. He was screaming. He was delirious.

He was enacting his own death, his own crucifixion.

At first people gasped. And then they began to laugh. Everyone was laughing. They hissed. Then one by one, they began to leave, noisily talking, protesting. They banged the door as they left. More protestations. More jeering. But Artaud went on, until the last gasp.

He stayed on the floor.

Then when the hall had emptied of all but his small group of friends, he walked straight up to me and kissed my hand. He asked me to go to the cafe with him. Artaud and I walked out in a fine mist. We walked, walked through the dark streets. He was hurt, wounded, baffled by the jeering. He spat out his anger.

"They always want to hear an objective conference on the Theatre and the Plague. I want to give them the experience itself, the Plague itself! So they will be terrified, and awaken! I want to awaken them. Because they do not realise they are dead. Their death is total, like deafness and blindness. This is *agony* I portrayed. Mine yes, and everyone who is alive."

For him the Plague was no worse than death by mediocrity; death by commercialism; and death by the corruption which surrounded us. He wanted to make people aware that they were dying. To force them into a poetic state.