

Artaud and Shelley:

Two Views of Evil

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Artaud's vision embodies a theater in which man's evil, his innermost desires, are put into a communicable form on stage and the chaos achieved purges the audience of the delirium which torments its psyche. Such a theatre achieves a degree of sincerity, an identification with the reality it mirrors. Its main machinery is sound and movement--dialogue is minimal. An excess of words would mask the emotions and obscure the cathartic effect of Artaud's theatre. His idea, which he calls the Theatre of Cruelty, is rooted in a deep aestheticism, but its title is often misconstrued as meaning blood and gore on stage. Artaud feels that any act is cruel. "It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world."<sup>1</sup> In his First Manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud lays the foundation for his only dramatic production of length, Les Cenci. One of the proposed stage productions is an "adaptation of a work from the time of Shakespeare, a work entirely consistent with our present troubled state of mind, whether one of the apocryphal plays of Shakespeare, such as Arden of Feversham, or an entirely different play from the same period."<sup>2</sup>

The work chosen is an adaptation of the story of the Cencis, a family in 16<sup>th</sup> century Rome. Artaud draws heavily on both an historical fiction by Stendhal and a play by Shelley. In fact, he lifts entire sections of dialogue from the Shelley play. Both Shelley and Artaud appreciate the Gothic horror of this tale involving noblemen, the papacy and crimes of passion. An examination of the texts in relation to each other enlightens both the Romantic tragedy and the Avant-Garde adaptation. Shelley and Artaud are both artists who seek to "lift the veil" from life--the difference between them lies in what they find behind it. To pinpoint their contrasting views, it is important to observe the story they both tell, the differences between each version (what Artaud omits and what he changes), and the remarkable effect Artaud's staging techniques have on the tone of the production.

The Cenci legend focuses on the wild escapades of the wealthy Francesco Cenci.<sup>3</sup> His first wife bore him seven children and died soon after. He then married Lucretia Petroni. Cenci's crimes can be summed up as a "propensity for infamous love," and after each conviction (of which there were several), the Count would pay a large sum to the Holy See for his freedom. His sons pleaded with the Pope to execute their father for the shame he had brought on their family, but were refused. Cenci, infuriated at this affront to his parental authority, gave a severe beating to his two daughters who were living at home with him. The elder daughter escaped soon after this by petitioning the Pope to marry her off, leaving young Beatrice to bear the brunt of Cenci's anger.

He imprisoned her in Cenci palace when she was just fourteen so she would have no way of leaving him as her sister had. During her confinement, the Count developed a lustful love for his daughter and when seduction proved unsuccessful, he raped the girl. Beatrice and her mother, with the help of Monsignor Guerra, who was fond of the young girl, communicated a plan to kill Cenci to Giacomo, an "exiled" brother.

Marzio and Olimpio, two of Cenci's former servants whom he had dismissed for no apparent reason, were hired as assassins. They were to kill Cenci on an ambush on his way to the Petrella castle, a summer home, but the plan failed. Instead, Beatrice and Lucretia were forced to submit to even greater abuse at Petrella until the murder was set for September 9, 1598. Cenci was drugged with opium, and the servants, though hesitant at first, murdered him by driving spikes into the Count's eye and throat. Beatrice paid them, and she and her mother withdrew the nails and threw the sheet-covered body out the window. The crime was discovered and Marzio confessed all--only to retract his confession later later and die under torture. Guerra, disguised as a coal vendor, escaped Rome and disappeared. Lucretia and Beatrice confessed and appeals were made to Clement VIII, who almost pardoned the women. However, report of a matricide in Rome reversed his decision, since he felt a pardon would prompt an outbreak of such crimes. Lucretia and Beatrice were beheaded, Giacomo bludgeoned to death on September 11, 1599. The younger brother Bernardo, was pardoned but forced to watch the execution.

Both Shelley and Artaud draw from the sordid facts of this legend to create their separate tragedies. Ironically, each man also draws some inspiration for his work from the world of painting--Shelley, from Guido Reni's portrait of the condemned Beatrice, Artaud from the violence, the frenzy surging through the work of Van Gogh. Shelley's contemplation of the painting reputed to be Beatrice awakens his sympathy for the young woman:

The young maiden...was evidently a most gentle and amiable being, a creature formed to adorn and be admired, and thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, she becomes the heroine of his tragedy. In reaction to performances of the Shelley play, Beatrice has been seen by critics as the embodiment of Human Freedom and Rebellion. Doubtless for Shelley she is the Ideal Woman he sought in his poetry. The evil which courses through the tragedy is not easily ignored, but Shelley consciously works to

...increase the ideal and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring. (129)

The themes of fatherhood and religion's corruption which run through the drama eventually combine to raise Beatrice to the level of martyr, in which she realizes the Romantic ideal.

In sharp contrast to Shelley's moving portrait of Beatrice in his tragedy, Artaud's work examines the principle of evil

and its workings among men. Artaud seeks to bring to the stage all the anger and repressed emotion he sees in his world and in the world of Van Gogh's paintings. In Van Gogh's work, Artaud perceives the dark forces and the occult power with which he imbues his man-myth, Count Cenci. The play concerns destiny and danger, and he imposes on his tragedy

...the kind of gravitation which moves the plants and moves human beings like plants and which becomes concentrated in the form of the earth's volcanic eruptions.<sup>5</sup>

Artaud sees his play as a Great Myth which tells us general truths about Man and God. His hero is the father-destroyer, who succeeds in corrupting all that is within his grasp. Cenci, possessed with what Artaud calls "that fabulous amorality that belongs to lightning as it strikes" (xi) envelops his daughter in his own corruption and, eventually, she falls with him.

Shelley and Artaud, then, are working from two different play-worlds. The Romantic setting is solidly grounded in Roman Catholicism, which Shelley makes quite clear includes "adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct." (130) The religion which controls the lives of all the characters in his play, even Cenci's, eventually emerges as the tragedy's real villain.

Artaud, however, limits the Count's amoral universe to one he has created for himself--his family. In this play-world, the Count says, "For me, life, death, god, incest, repentance, crime do not exist. I obey my own law." (8) And, "the family which I have created and which I command is my sole society." (24)

An examination of the principle scenes of each tragedy helps illustrate the primary differences between their respective worlds.

Shelley's banquet scene introduces the demonic count's latest perversion--his driving obsession to kill his children. In the group of terrified relatives and clergy, Beatrice is the only figure who denounces Cenci's cruel method of announcing the death of his two sons. She shouts at him:

Retire thou, impious man! Ay, hide thyself  
Where never eye can look upon thee more!  
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience  
Who are a torturer?

--Frown not on me  
Haste hide thyself, lest with avenging look  
My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat!  
(141)

The guests depart, leaving Beatrice and her father alone--the only words spoken by Cenci are the triumphant "Thou painted viper!...I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame."(141) Though Cenci succeeds in the scenes' end with planting seeds of terror in his daughter's mind, Beatrice is clearly presented as a moral force in opposition to the Count's evil, a force which successfully intimidates him before his guests. In this particular battle of wits, she emerges an eloquent, clear-headed positive character with a strong sense of what is right.

An aura of the supernatural pervades Artaud's banquet. Here we encounter the man of the Myth, Count Cenci, and watch as he becomes the play's high priest of evil. "I am ready to make my legend real"(13), he announces, telling his guests that his prayers have been answered. "Paradise is on my side."(14) Then, before his ready-made audience of acquaintances,



Lucifer's new priest raises a goblet of wine, with the words:

The priest drinks his God at Mass. Who  
then can prevent me from believing that  
I am drinking the blood of my sons? (15)

Not only is this a symbolic act of cannibalism, it is a sacrilegious inversion of the communion rite. Cenci dismisses his guests, the lights dim--he and Beatrice share a sort of emotional communion. It is interesting to note that whenever Cenci encounters Beatrice directly, there is very little dialogue. What conversation there is shows a certain devotion coupled with extreme emotion.

Withdraw from me, impious man. I shall  
never forget that you were my father,  
but withdraw. On this condition I might  
perhaps be able to forgive you. (18)

Artaud requires only a few seconds of such filial emotion to transpire in order to establish a strong emotional bond between both characters. Cenci is the master magician, the "charm is working"--the charm linking Beatrice's destiny with his own.

A sub-plot for Shelley is the Camillo-Orsino relationship which critics have commented takes away from the story's central plot. Actually, it reinforces the point Shelley will be making all through the play. Orsino, for example, is the instigator of the murder plot, but his motives are more deep-rooted than friendship with the younger Cencis. After launching the assassination plan with Giacomo, he muses:

I see, as from a tower, the end of all:  
Her father dead; her brother bound to me  
By a dark secret, surer than the grave;  
Her mother scared and unexpostulating  
From the dread manner of her wish achieved:  
And she!--Once more take courage, my faint heart;  
What dares a friendless maiden matched with thee? (149)

Shelley presents us with a lustful priest who arranges a murder, earlier we have seen a greedy Pope and an equivocal cardinal who both trade absolution for a fat purse. Apparently there is very little in the way of grace which separates the Count from the Roman clergy, which sadly, Beatrice learns before the play's end.

Though Artaud includes a great deal of Shelley's dialogue concerning Orsino and Camillo, this aspect of the play appears to be a minor plot whose main function is to advance the action. When Orsino mutters darkly, "My one desire is to give this wretched family the means to destroy each other" (29), he really has no power as an agent in their annihilation. Cenci's small kingdom, his family, is already doomed for destruction from within. The Count's incest prompts his daughter's parricide--two crimes which could as easily have happened without the prelate's aid.

Perhaps the scene which follows Cenci's act of rape best demonstrates the divergence in theme and characterization for both plays. First, in Shelley, the actual crime is never verbalized. There are two possible reasons for this. Shelley knows the effect an incestuous act will have on an audience of his contemporaries, thus he only alludes to the crime rather than specifying it. Also, Beatrice is presented as being so horrified at the deed that her revulsion prevents her from articulating it. Instead, she appears in a maddened state at the beginning of Act III:

(She enters staggering, and speaks wildly)  
Reach me that handkerchief! My brain  
is hurt;

My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them  
for me...  
I see but indistinctly...(150)

Her raving evokes the sympathy of the audience:

The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!  
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air  
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe  
In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! (150)

Cenci has polluted his daughter's body and the world around her, but does not succeed in polluting her soul. She has despaired and plans to avenge the wrong-doing, but her faith is not shaken--

Many might doubt there were a God above  
Who sees and permits evil, and so die:  
That faith no agony shall obscure in me. (152)

Somehow, one never doubts Beatrice's continued purity of body and soul, as she becomes a kind of Joan of Arc figure as the play goes on.

Artaud's maddened Beatrice, however, runs onto the stage as if demented, but soon composes herself enough to tell Lucretia, "Cenci, my father, has defiled me." (31) Through her sobs she says:

My body has been made a filthy thing,  
but it is my soul that has become  
truly polluted. (32)

Artaud's heroine, in effect, gives up her soul to the devil when his priest, Cenci, rapes her. The playwright's stage directions have Beatrice embracing Lucretia's knees "like Mary Magdalen at the foot of the cross." (32) Perhaps Beatrice, for Artaud, now represents the Whore of Babylon in sixteenth century Rome.

Cenci's daughter--now disciple--relates a childhood dream to her mother, in which she stands naked in a large

room with a large animal, and "a mass of vile things" breathing in the darkness around her. She and these creatures are extremely hungry and thirsty:

I set out stubbornly, determined to try to find the light once more, for I feel that only the light will allow me to eat and drink my fill...But the animal is still close behind me, chasing me through cellar after cellar. Then I feel it upon me and realize that my hunger is not merely willful. (33)

The dream portrays best Beatrice's peculiar dilemma--her longing for good (the light), her attraction for evil (the animal, and by extension, Cenci). Further on in the scene, Beatrice tells Orsino, "From now on I can believe only in the justice which I myself choose" (34), a statement similar to her father's at the play's beginning. Her defiance is not really that of a wronged woman, but that of a proud woman when she tells Orsino:

I would gladly stand in the public squares and cry out that my father has dishonored me. (35)

Artaud believes then, that evil begets evil, and Beatrice in effect, becomes the head of the family, usurping her father's position as she takes control of the plan of assassination.

In both plays the first attempt at assassination fails and Cenci reaches Petrella. The opening scene in Act IV of Shelley's version offers us a different side of Cenci--one which we find slightly sympathetic. Lucretia tells her husband that Beatrice has had a vision of his forthcoming death. The Count, an old man, has previously exhibited a tendency for paranoia, accusing his wife and Beatrice of

planning to dungeon him like a madman, his sons of trying to put him in prison with the help of the Pope. He responds to the vision (which he later discovers never occurred) as a man who really does fear the wrath of God:

'Tis plain I have been favoured from above,  
 For when I cursed my sons they died. --Ay...so...  
 As to the right or wrong, that's talk...repentance...  
 Repentance is an easy moment's work  
 And more depends on God than me. (163)

Cenci is an evil man, but for Shelley there is a bigger villain, the Church. This scene serves to put the Count in a proper perspective--that of a hypocritical servant of God.

Act IV for Artaud does not really alter our sympathies for Cenci at all--he muses on repentance only momentarily, concluding, "I harbor a demon whose task is to avenge the whole world's sins. Now no fate can stop me from carrying out everything I have dreamed." (40) Artaud's Count never really shows any fear, he remains constant as a symbol of evil. Perhaps he staggers briefly after Lucretia warns him that his life has become perilous and vulnerable because he fears the counterforce which he has created in his own daughter.

Cenci's murder introduces us to the two assassins--important to both Shelley and Artaud. Shelley holds close to historical fact by using the actual murderers, Marzio and Olimpio, two former servants of the Count who bear a grudge against him. Both, however, are hardly cold-blooded assassins, and only Beatrice's firm order compels them to go through with the crime. Shelley has followed Elizabethan form in not showing the strangulation on stage, perhaps to

prevent us from associating the crime with his poetic ideal, Beatrice. Instead, during the murder, Beatrice is on stage prophesying the good the murder will do for the world of men:

Darkness and Hell  
 Have swallowed up the vapour they sent forth  
 To blacken the sweet light of life. My breath  
 Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood  
 Runs freely through my veins. (169)

When the Pope's legate arrives, she still fears nothing.

Her oppressor dead, Beatrice's spirit triumphs:

I am as universal as the light;  
 Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm  
 As the world's centre. (171)

Beatrice never admits her guilt as planner of the parricide, and retains a blind trust in God that she will be spared punishment for the deed. ("His shadow ever clothes the innocent" 174).

It is at Rome that the assassin Marzio figures prominently in Shelley's plot. Marzio confesses his guilt and the family's after being threatened with torture, but when Beatrice confronts him, her inner virtue and angelic beauty prompt him to retract his confession:

...I would pledge my soul  
 That she is guiltless. (179)

Finally he is brought to torture, but dies before his mentors can even begin. Shelley's assassin dies with a smile on his lips because he has protected the saint-like Beatrice, at least momentarily, from death.

The Cenci murder is far more grotesque in the hands of Artaud. His assassins, mutes, remind one of robots programmed to kill. Beatrice clearly is their commander as, in a short

mime scene, she

walks around them, using the skirts of their cloaks as long bandages and wrapping the two up like mummies...She passes her hand over their faces to wipe away their sneering grimaces. (40)

She hands them their weapons, and when their first attempt fails, orders both to "split his head in two or I shall kill him." (42) Artaud brings the blood bespattered Cenci on stage, linking the crime directly with his daughter, the usurper of his family power. The effect of Cenci's presence also serves to reinforce the violence on which the Theatre of Cruelty depends. One critic calls Cenci a martyr, a Christ-figure in reverse, since he dies in a nail-hammering ceremony.<sup>6</sup> Surely Cenci is a martyr to the evil principle by which he has lived, and at whose hands he dies.

Finally, the themes of both plays are realized in the closing scene. Shelley's Beatrice, sleeping quietly in her cell after submitting to torture, wakes as her brother Bernardo enters:

I was just dreaming  
That we were all in Paradise. Thou knowest  
This cell seems like a kind of Paradise  
After our father's presence. (182)

For the young girl, prison is a Paradise because it is a spot untainted by her father's poison. The hope of finally leading a life without Cenci dies as her family confesses and the Pope, the greatest symbol of fatherhood in the play, denounces the appeal for a pardon saying:

Parricide grows so rife  
That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young  
Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs.  
Authority, and power and hoary hair  
Are grown crimes capital. (186)

According to James Rieger, the tragedy's great developmental irony is Beatrice's growing awareness, uncompleted until the moment the headsman waits for her, that Cenci, Clement and Almighty God form a triple entente.<sup>7</sup> She says:

...I

Have met with much injustice in this world;  
 No difference has been made by God or man,  
 Or any power moulding my wretched lot,  
 Twixt good or evil, as regarded me. (187)

Corrupt religion and an evil father have become one and the same. The final episode is Beatrice's touching farewell to Bernardo and this earthly existence. She cautions her young brother:

For thine own sake be constant to the love  
 Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,  
 Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,  
 Lived ever holy and unstained. (189)

Beatrice, for Shelley, dies a martyr to virtue and faith in God, a woman who fights the forces of corruption only to find that they envelop her anyway. Critics have said that after the murder, our sympathy with Beatrice declines. Rather, it seems that Shelley's Romantic ideal emerges more clearly when she confronts Marzio among her accusers, and as she dies, yielding to the principle that, in her world and time, "such is the reward of innocent lives." (188)

Artaud ends his play with a fallen, yet almost pitiful Beatrice. The final scenes reaffirm her struggle with evil and good, a struggle we saw earlier symbolized in her dream. Under the Count's influence, Beatrice is hypnotized by the power of the devil. She is drawn by the charisma of the Count's vileness as metal to a magnet. With his death, she is released



from the spell and actually has an opportunity to reverse her fortune. But she is arrested and put to torture. Her existence has held nothing but degradation and torment, and the prison becomes a metaphor on her life. She asks Bernardo:

Did you really expect anything but  
torments in this prison we call life? (47)

Beatrice casts off her soul to the God in whom she found no solace--dooming herself perhaps to eternal damnation and fulfilling her destiny:

...so do I renounce a soul  
bruised by the harsh business of living,  
and hurl that soul back in the face of  
the god who made me, as a blazing fire  
to cure him of creating. (48)

Beatrice finds that the law which governs her destiny has no absolutes, that fortune is never bestowed solely on the good, punishment on the evil.

Neither God nor man, nor any of the  
forces which dominate what is called  
our destiny, have chosen between good  
and evil. (51)

She despairs and signs her death warrant saying, "I die and I have not chosen." (51) Artaud's heroine is merely an extension of Cenci's evil will during the major part of the play. And, at its very end, the author leaves her no real hope of salvation as she laments:

I fear that death may teach me that I  
have ended by resembling him. (52)

Though Artaud's dialogue indicates the philosophical approach to this play, equally, if not more important, are his staging techniques which actually create the world in which his characters move.

First, the playwright tries to achieve distance from his

audience. Cenci becomes "the actor" when he explains his evil plan to the viewers and says, "then let anyone try to accuse me of being a mere play actor." (9) The lifeless dummies at the banquet are in sharp contrast to the intensification of life in Artaud's play. Eventually, the banquet guests become like dummies, or ghosts, as they grope in terror to escape the madman's home. The mute assassins are dummy-like, and Orsino reminds us that, "Each of the two knows the part he has to play." (37) Their inability to speak somehow makes Cenci's death more impersonal, as if Evil itself and not a human being had been assassinated. Finally at the play's end, when perhaps we cease to be shocked and are beginning to feel again, Bernardo summons us to, "Quick, quick, turn the page: let us try to imagine that none of this ever really happened." (51) After our senses have been teased and tormented, Artaud leads into the final scene with a call back to reality.

The playwright's distancing allows him to set up his own world in which he is governor. Cenci's universe is circumscribed at the play's beginning by a spiral gallery, giving an illusion of limitless depth and height.<sup>8</sup> Artaud invites his audience into a bizarre world whose boundaries are later echoed in the circle Beatrice runs around the stage at the banquet, the circle the soldiers form around Lucretia and Beatrice after the murder, and finally the torture wheel to which Beatrice is tied at the play's end.

Color is subtly dispersed in the play to enhance or foreshadow the action. Tones of scarlet run through several scenes, culminating in the Count's bloody death. Artaud

calls for purple curtains at the Poe-like banquet, where Cenci drinks red wine in celebration of his sons' death. He and Beatrice share some wine symbolic of their blood's eventual mingling, and finally Cenci's blood-spattered body completes the color schema of the play.

Garish sound and supernatural music also enrich the stage production. Normal sounds, like Cenci's footsteps, are magnified until they deafen. The Count's supernatural power reverberates across the stage as he strikes a gong at the end of Act I, scene 1. Somehow this reverberation continues in our consciousness throughout the play. Music complements several of the play's important actions--voices chant "CENCI, CENCI, CENCI," as a wild storm rages and the first assassination attempt fails. Perhaps this is a chorus of fates which thwarts the murder. Soft music in the screaming torture chamber accompanies Beatrice as she renounces her soul and throws it back in the face of her God. Finally, an old Incan rhythm sets the pace for Beatrice's death march and the language becomes an incantation, a lament for the life she has not lived.

Cenci's universe is a realm where dark deeds transpire in dark places. In fact, the only direction which specifically calls for light comes directly after the Count's death--as his universe crumbles. A "blinding and terrible light" appears, which grows in intensity as the papal guards enter the palace, preceded by a "forest of torches". The light is the light of judgement, but only the audience can decide whether heaven or hell is the judge. Artaud's domain is one of sorrow, shadow and raging storms--and candles snuffed out by the wind.

Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1958) 91.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 99.
- <sup>3</sup>Eric Sellin, The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud (Chicago, 1968) 44. All subsequent biographical information is taken from this text.
- <sup>4</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, Selected Poetry, ed. Neville Rogers (Boston, 1968) 129. All subsequent references to Shelley's play are taken from this text.
- <sup>5</sup>Antonin Artaud, The Cenci, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York, 1969) vii. All subsequent references to Artaud's play are taken from this text.
- <sup>6</sup>Bettina Knapp, Antonin Artaud, Man of Vision, (New York, 1969) 123.
- <sup>7</sup>James Rieger, "Shelley's Paterin Beatrice", Studies in Romanticism, IV (1965) 173.
- <sup>8</sup>Knapp, p. 113.

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