



To whom does a Letter Belong? Psychopathology and Epistolography in the Asylum Letters of Antonin Artaud and Camille Claudel

ARTICLES – FRENCH
AND FRANCOPHONE

SUSANNAH WILSON 



ABSTRACT

This article analyses the published letters of two important artists, Camille Claudel (1864–1943) and Antonin Artaud (1869–1948), who were incarcerated in French psychiatric asylums in the early twentieth century. It argues that although asylum letters deviate from standard modes of epistolography, and pose interpretive difficulties, they remain sophisticated and hyper-meaningful communications. Contending that the language of ‘schizophrenia’ and ‘paranoia’ is not one of disconnection or primitive drives, but one of hyper-reflexivity, the article analyses how these writers responded to the constraints of the communicative situation in which they were placed. It suggests that singular aspects of the texts, related to their materiality and psychotic patterns of thinking, reveal the limitations of traditional theories of epistolarity.

TWEETABLE ABSTRACT

Textual strategies employed in response to the policing of letters in psychiatric asylums in twentieth-century France.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Susannah Wilson

University of Warwick, GB

s.m.wilson@warwick.ac.uk

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The letter as a literary genre is perhaps uniquely versatile; it can take the form of high literary art or a scappily written note as long as it conforms to a few recognizable formal rules. For this reason, corpora of literary letters have historically been distinguished from documents testifying to the experiences of ordinary people whose lives might otherwise have disappeared from the historical record.¹ More recently, however, there have been concerted efforts to explore the poetics of supposedly ‘mundane’ letters, and to develop a structural theory of the ‘pacte épistolaire’. This is based on the recognition of reciprocal epistolographical rituals, such as discourses of absence and presence, shared references to time and space, the practice of invoking the other in thought, shared life rhythms, and the pleasures of reading and writing.² This scholarship relies on stable notions of sender and addressee, on the idea of letter-writing as a highly socialized but intimate and private genre, and on letters as dialogues and collaborations between two living people who usually enjoy certain communicative freedoms and a shared sense of reality.³

The concepts of sociability and intimacy, as well as the idea of the epistolary ‘pact’, are rendered problematic when we consider letters by writers deemed medically to be paranoid or schizophrenic, and whose condition is defined as separation from the possibility of social connection. Patients’ letters were not typically considered to be private property, in either a physical or intellectual sense, and cannot straightforwardly be thought of as dialogues if they were not sent or read. The easy response to this problem is to assert that psychosis blocks the formation of an epistolary pact, a view that fits with all the classical views of madness as essential difference, whether psychiatric or psychoanalytic. According to these views, psychosis is configured as either a deficiency in meaning or an infantile state (a meaningful, but primitive and regressive, type of thinking). In the twentieth century, madness was also at times construed as an expression of radical freedom from bourgeois rationality. The commonality between these positions, as possible ways into reading asylum letters, is that they set the writer apart as cognitively different from the letter’s recipient.⁴

Serge Malausséna, in the preface to the 2015 edition of a previously unpublished portion of the correspondence of his uncle, Antonin Artaud, posits that any ‘reading’ of Artaud’s letters risks contaminating the purity of his thoughts and feelings: ‘Nous nous sommes volontairement abstenus de tout commentaire direct des lettres publiées, afin de ne pas risquer de travestir la pensée ou les émotions de mon oncle. [...] Laissons Nanaqui dans ses rêves’ (Artaud 15).⁵ Malausséna’s comment reflects certain dominant critical assumptions about spontaneity, authenticity and intimacy in relation to correspondences.

This article analyses the published letters of two important artists, Camille Claudel (1864–1943) and Antonin Artaud (1869–1948), whose lives were almost exactly contemporaneous, and who were both detained in French psychiatric asylums during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶ Ville-Evrard, a public institution in Neuilly-sur-Marne to the east of Paris, where both artists were interned at different times, was renowned for its austere regime and for policing

1 See Ambrière on the value of artists’ correspondences; Bland and Cross (7) on ‘the letter as a source for gendered political history’; and Wingard (165–8) on structural differences between fictional and non-fictional correspondences.

2 See Dauphin (131–60) for a detailed discussion of these elements of the ‘pacte épistolaire’ and Grassi (1–27) on epistolary hierarchies and the centrality of the ideas of reciprocity, civility and sociability in the study of correspondences. Dauphin’s concept clearly relies somewhat on Philippe Lejeune’s structural theory of the autobiographical pact.

3 Earle (1–14) insists on the importance of these aspects of correspondences, and the ‘unmediated and unmediated’ quality of letters (5). The insistence on correspondence as a natural, collaborative and socialized genre is quite pervasive; see, for example, Ferguson (108–9).

4 The psychoanalytical approach is epitomized by Gilman (18): ‘Our Manichean perception of the world [...] is triggered by a recurrence of the type of insecurity that induced our initial division of the world into “good” and “bad.” For the pathological personality every confrontation sets up this echo.’ The idea of madness as radical freedom/alterity has, in different ways, been traced in the twentieth century by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and R.D. Laing, among others.

5 ‘Nanaqui’ was Artaud’s family nickname, a diminutive of the Greek version of the forename ‘Antonin’ as ‘Antonaki’ (Artaud’s mother was Greek).

6 In-text references to the letters refer to Claudel (2014) and Artaud (2015) using the abbreviations CC. and AA. for the two writers, in the form: letter number, date, page number. Not all the letters are dated, but the correspondence editors usually give approximate dates based on contextual information.

communication by confiscating patients' letters and retaining them in hospital files.⁷ Two key questions are raised by the censoring of these letters. First, what specific critical issues are raised by psychiatric patients' letters that were never sent, or were not read by their addressees? Second, can anything be learned about the general practices of epistolography from these limit cases? What do we learn from the miscommunications and non-communications they bring into relief?

Artaud's craft was writing, drawing and dramaturgy. His first publication, in 1924, was his correspondence with Jacques Rivière, an editor who had rejected his poetry for publication but who was sufficiently impressed by Artaud's writing to publish his letters (Sigal). In the late 1930s, Artaud embarked on a spiritual mission to return what he believed to be the staff of Saint Patrick to Ireland, where he was picked up by the Irish police and sent back to France. He was incarcerated upon arrival in Rouen and held there in 1937–38, then transferred to Sainte-Anne in Paris from 1938 to 1939, and then to Ville-Evrard from 1939 to 1943 (Artaud 491). Artaud died in hospital in 1948, but he had been released into the care of his friends in 1946.⁸ Dr Chanès, the asylum director at Ville-Evrard, diagnosed Artaud in 1939 as suffering from 'délire systématisé chronique [...] avec prédominance de pseudo-hallucinations', part of a clinical picture that is widely considered to have been schizophrenia (Artaud 135).

Claudé's craft was sculpture, and although her work fell into obscurity in the early twentieth century, her life and artwork would later be widely celebrated. She is now considered an artist who displayed great potential but who was ultimately overshadowed by Rodin, her instructor, long-term lover and rival (Gianeselli; Nantet; Witherall). Claudé was incarcerated at Ville-Evrard, on the instruction of her family, a few days after her father's death in 1913. The following year she was transferred to Montdevergues (near Avignon), where she would remain until her death in 1943.

Artaud called his persecutors 'Initiés', people in positions of power whom he believed had undertaken 'initiation' into the occult arts, and he was in the habit of going into the courtyard after lunch each day to chase them away (Le Touzé 177; Roumieux 68). Claudé was diagnosed by her family doctor as suffering from 'psychose paranoïde', a diagnosis that would remain unchanged until the end of her life. Her central pathology was in fact fear of Rodin, as Dr Michaux noted in his committal notice, 'elle a toujours la terreur de la bande à "Rodin"'.⁹ Claudé believed that she was being persecuted by a group of powerful people, similar to Artaud's 'Initiés', which included Jews, Protestants and Freemasons, under the instruction of her nemesis. Claudé's letters seem more lucid than Artaud's, but both correspondences explicitly connect fantasies of persecution and omnipotence with the real disruptions to their epistolary communication with the outside world.

Scholars of Artaud agree that his work, far from being an explosion of the Freudian unconscious, is hyper-conscious. Stephen Barber (7) describes Artaud as 'always extremely conscious, intentional and willful'. Ros Murray (5) agrees, 'Artaud was not interested in the unconscious, but in conscious thought as it emerged from and was mediated through the body.' These views concur with perspectives on psychosis from cognitive and clinical psychology, such as those of Louis Sass and Gail Hornstein, who interpret 'schizophrenic' and 'paranoid' thinking as neither Dionysian excess, nor cognitive deficit, nor a failure of signification, but as 'a heightening rather than a dimming of conscious awareness, and an alienation not from reason but from the emotions, instincts and the body' (Sass 4), or 'an adaptive and creative strategy' (Hornstein 35) to safeguard a fracturing sense of self.¹⁰ Sass (8) has argued that the language of schizophrenia can be paralleled with modernist art and writing, remarking that 'these art forms are characterized not so much by unreflectiveness and spontaneity as by acute self-

⁷ For a description of the 'rigorous surveillance' regime in place at Ville-Evrard, see Roumieux (61–82). Gaudichon (2000) reproduces the medical documentation from Ville-Evrard. Conditions in all psychiatric hospitals during the Occupation were appalling, and thousands of patients starved or froze to death. See von Bueltingsloewen (101).

⁸ Robert Desnos, a devoted friend to Artaud, arranged for him to be transferred from Ville-Evrard to the asylum at Rodez in 1943. See Roumieux (80–1).

⁹ Claudé's medical records, including Michaux's committal certificate, are reproduced in Paris (1984: 193–208).

¹⁰ Sass (21–2) is critical of the 'wildman, hero of desire' model of madness as a 'special radical authenticity' championed by the Surrealists, especially Breton, and later by the so-called anti-psychiatry movement.

consciousness and self-reference, and by alienation from action and experience – qualities we might refer to as “hyperreflexivity.” Hornstein’s study of outsider art contends that psychotic language is coded and in need of interpretation, not deficient in meaning (55).

Although asylum letters deviate from models of normal epistolography, they remain sophisticated and hyper-meaningful communications, rather than, to put it in Artaud’s terms, mere ‘word salads’.¹¹ The constraints of the particular communicative situation produced texts that trouble concepts of ownership and intimacy, and pushed writers to adopt strategies to evade these limitations. In addition, the materiality of asylum letters can be starkly at odds with acceptable epistolographical codes, and renders inseparable the physical and intellectual content of letters. Finally, psychotic patterns of thought in asylum letters can be read, in the light of the psychological conceptualization of psychosis and against the grain of traditional views of self-writing, as important dramatizations of the vicissitudes of human emotional connections. Although censored, these letters possess an uncensored tone and an unmasking quality. This opens up potential new ways into the reading of classical correspondences, where gaps, ruptures, silences, misunderstandings, violence and distancing strategies may be given greater import. These letters reveal, in a very striking way, that all letters are performative and constitutive of the writing self, as much as they are interactional. It would therefore be instructive for readers of correspondences to open up the concept of the epistolary pact in order to allow for radical differences of experience as well as shared understanding, and making room for troubled notions of time, space, self and other.

THE COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION

The systematic policing and censoring of letters disrupts the smooth construction of an epistolary pact, leaving asylum letters marked by frustrated communication and the experience of isolation. These issues are foregrounded in both Artaud’s and Claudel’s correspondences, in which a series of epistolary blockages and miscommunications appear. Letters do not reach their explicit destination, and there are instances of both sender and recipient refusing to receive or read missives. These blockages are at times thematized as thefts, whether literal or intellectual, further emphasizing the communicative ruptures that occur.

The most pertinent example from Claudel’s corpus to illustrate the dynamics of unsent or unread letters is an exchange between the artist and her cousin Charles Thierry in 1913, the year of her incarceration at Ville-Evrard. At this moment, Claudel had already been physically and emotionally ostracized from her family. The following letter was sent from Claudel (in Paris) to Thierry on the day she would be forcibly incarcerated:

Tu m’apprends la mort de Papa ; voilà la première nouvelle, on ne m’en a rien dit. Depuis quand est-ce arrivé? Tâche de savoir et de me donner quelques détails. Le pauvre Papa ne m’a jamais vue telle que je suis ; on lui a toujours fait croire que j’étais une créature odieuse, ingrate et méchante. [...] J’ai dû disparaître avec la plus grande vélocité, et bien que je me rapetisse le plus possible, dans mon petit coin, je suis encore de trop.

(CC. Letter 286, 10 March 1913, 281–2)

The final statement, ‘je suis encore de trop’, communicates a strong sense of the writer feeling that she has overreached allowed boundaries; the process of isolation has therefore already begun. This prescient letter was followed four days later by another missive to Thierry announcing her incarceration, implying that Claudel had not received the reply Thierry probably sent – though we can be certain her letter did leave Ville-Evrard, because the artist’s letters were not yet being closely policed:

Ma lettre de l’autre jour paraissait être un pressentiment, car à peine était-elle mise à la poste, qu’une automobile venait me prendre chez moi pour me conduire dans une

¹¹ Artaud had been critical of psychiatric institutions for some years before his own incarceration. See his ‘Lettre aux médecins chefs des asiles de fous’, published in 1925: ‘Nous n’entendons pas discuter ici la valeur de votre science, ni l’existence douteuse des maladies mentales. Mais pour cent pathogénies prétentieuses [...] combien de tentatives nobles pour approcher le monde cérébral où vivent tant de vos prisonniers ? Combien êtes-vous, par exemple, pour qui le rêve du dément précoce, les images dont il est la proie sont autre chose qu’une salade de mots?’ (Artaud 1925, n.p.).

maison d'aliénés. [...] Si tu peux venir me voir, tu peux te donner le temps, car je ne suis pas pour en sortir ; on me tient et on ne veut pas me lâcher.

(CC. Letter 288, 14 March 1913, 283)

This letter expresses a direct parallel between the writer's physical detention and the restrictions that would soon be placed on her communications. As intellectual and physical property, the letter is an extension of body and mind of the *aliénée*. These first two letters were sent, but the Claudel family forbade any further communication with Thierry, so as to prevent Camille from rallying support from friends and family members on the outside. A response from Thierry to Claudel shows that their instructions had been followed, and that the whole correspondence had been successfully interrupted. This letter was not given to Claudel, but was retained in her medical dossier:

Ma chère Camille

Je suis très désolé de ne pas recevoir de réponses à mes lettres. Envoie-moi un mot et donne-moi des nouvelles. J'espère te voir sous peu.

Bien à toi

Charles

(CC. Letter 298, 30 May 1913, 291)

This unread letter, expressing sadness at the lack of a response that did in fact exist, is followed by one from Claudel to Thierry, also retained in her file unsent, in which the artist voices disappointment at having been abandoned:

Mon cher Charles

Tu m'avais promis ta visite: on ne le dirait pas. Les mois ont passé tu n'es pas venu.

[...] Serais-tu malade toi-même ; écris-moi vite et donne-moi de vos nouvelles à tous.

[...] Écris-moi vite! Dis-moi quelque chose! Envoie-moi ton portrait à toi ou plutôt viens.

Bien des amitiés à toute ta famille.

Camille

(CC. Letter 302, 27 August 1913, 293)

The Claudel–Thierry exchange is marked by false absences, by the perception of unresponsiveness, which inhibits functioning reciprocity even when each correspondent has reached out to communicate. That a correspondent or interlocutor can be present when apparently absent illustrates the illusory quality of some of the ideas central to the epistolary pact. Does the existence of a pact rely on the addressee reading the letter, or the writer/sender's action of expressing their desired presence? Thierry did attempt to visit Claudel in March 1913, but he was not allowed access into the asylum. He clearly cared deeply about her, since he also took the trouble to write to Dr Truelle, the asylum director, following his attempted visit, and received a response from the doctor saying that the Claudel family had forbidden visits and communication.¹² Both correspondents' requests were effectively silenced.

These letters adhere to certain epistolary codes, such as the request for news and reference to the ritual of exchanging personal portraits, but the confiscation of the letters produces explicit miscommunication and voids the social purpose of the code. The power of the patriarchal family, as well as that of its matriarch, whose requests are followed unquestioningly, reflects the medico-legal power exerted over the body, person, mind and intellectual property of the patient by the state.¹³ The restrictions placed on Claudel's letters close down the emotional connection that is being attempted, and generate greater frustration through the repeated requests to send more news. The letters thus dramatize the loss of affective connection that epistolary writing is supposed structurally to enable.

¹² Letter from Dr Truelle to Thierry, 3 April 1913. Cited in Claudel (294, note 2).

¹³ According to the 1838 'loi des aliénés', the insane enjoyed the same legal status as minors, leaving many at the mercy of their families.

The majority of Artaud's letters were also retained by the administrations of the asylums at Rouen, Sainte-Anne in Paris and Ville-Evrard. They were subjected to different levels of appropriation: most were not sent but retained 'officially' on his file, and others were taken by doctors and kept in their personal papers. Dr Fouks at Ville-Evrard kept most of Artaud's letters to him and other correspondents. Artaud was acutely psychotic during this period, and the letters contain violent and threatening messages, so they may have been kept by Fouks for diagnostic purposes. The letters thus violate social and epistolary norms because they are concerned not with obviously social communication, but with attacking, killing, torturing and with the destruction of meaning. This violent content also inhibits intimacy, and functions to isolate and distance the addressee. In a letter addressed to Langeron, the Prefect of Police, but kept by Fouks, Artaud accuses his addressee, whom he ranks among his antagonists, the 'Initiés', of casting a spell over him. The letter constitutes a furious attack that breaks conventions of time and orthodox manners:

Langeron

Tu m'as envoûté ce matin sur le coup de 6 heures ¼, d'ailleurs l'Initié Menion t'a surveillé, et tu t'es fait aider par Lisette Lanvin.

Je n'ai jamais supporté d'être envoûté par un Ange. Je le supporte encore moins de l'être par le Démon qui a fait les mulots, et qui les a faits avec son derrière, car c'est en chiant que tu fais les mulots.

Si en initiation tu t'appelles LANGRION tu es Langeron dans la vie civile, et tu es le Préfet de Police, et je n'accepte pas d'être interné d'ordre du Préfet de Police [...]

Je demande à ce que tu sois confronté avec moi en tant qu'Initié et en tant que Préfet de Police.

Antonin Artaud

P.S. Rappelle-toi le milliard d'années d'effroyables tortures que je t'ai imposées lorsque tu as osé venir me demander cet envoûtement salacieux, et une ligature que je n'ai aucune peine à faire sauter.

(AA. Letter 44, 7 April 1939, 140-1)

Just as Claudel strategizes to overcome the power of the family, in a classic display of Foucauldian resistance Artaud here consciously neutralizes the power the state holds over him. Indeed, committal to an asylum under the 'loi des aliénés' of 1838 was a decision made either by a family member or by order of the police. Artaud describes this power in terms of magical and religious influence, which he is refusing using the only force he has – the power of words. The use of *tutoiement* renders closely intimate his threat; as we shall see later, Artaud tends to employ 'tu' when angry and 'vous' when calm. This works effectively with the abject but nonsensical image of demonic shitting of a small rodent.¹⁴ Artaud also plays with Langeron's name, as if via an incantation, claiming that his 'initié' name is LANGRION, while the use of capital letters serves the function of unmasking his correspondent's secret identity. The letter is stripped of some of the finer structural elements of epistolary communication: it has no salutation or signing-off greeting, and it is signed twice, with two postscripts. Artaud underlines his name, which is ironic: it asserts his importance in contrast to Langeron, but the true power dynamic is the other way around. In the postscript cited above, the use of the past tense is significant: the writer is not limited by normal perceptions of time, and is saying that he has already eternally punished others. He is asserting the idea that the eternity of his magical powers overcomes the temporary nature of Langeron's power.

Asylum letters were also often refused, either by the patient or by their correspondents, resulting in a further disruption to the epistolary exchange. In both sets of correspondences this is best illustrated through exchanges with the patients' mothers: in Claudel's case, her mother simply refused to communicate with her, further cementing the artist's exiled status. In Artaud's case, he refused to communicate with his mother, whom he believed to be an impostor. Claudel spent the first few months of her incarceration at Ville-Evrard firing off letters to friends and

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of Artaud's abject images, see Murray.

family members asking for help to escape her predicament. This includes a number of letters to her mother, such as this one, which was not sent but kept in Claudel's hospital file:

Ma bonne mère,
J'ai bien reçu les objets que vous m'avez envoyés. Voilà-bien de l'argent dépensé. [...] Ça va-t-il durer longtemps cette plaisanterie-là? [...] Je voudrais bien le savoir? Vous ne pourriez pas me donner quelques renseignements à ce sujet? [...] Je ne me doutais pas de ce qui m'attendait encore cette année, c'est une drôle de surprise ! Après avoir déjà tant souffert !

(CC. Letter 291, March 1913 (n.d.), 285–6)

Another letter, written and successfully smuggled out of the institution and posted towards the end of March 1913, repeats Claudel's insistent attempt to reach her mother to no avail, 'Je vous ai déjà écrit plusieurs fois sans recevoir de réponse' (293. March 1913, 287–9). Claudel's mother angrily sent the letter back without replying to her daughter, instead instructing the asylum authorities to monitor more closely her communications.¹⁵ Indeed, Madame Claudel explains her frustrations directly to her daughter in a letter written a decade later, in reaction to an accusatory letter from Camille, but which was never given to its addressee:

Chère fille,
J'ai sous les yeux ta dernière lettre et je n'arrive pas à imaginer que tu puisses écrire de pareilles horreurs à ta mère. Dieu seul sait ce que j'aurai subi par mes enfants ! Paul m'accable de reproches parce que, selon lui, nous aurions avantage Louise à son détriment et toi, Camille, comment oses-tu m'accuser d'avoir empoisonné ton père ! [...] Arrêtons-là, veux-tu? Ta lettre n'est qu'un ramassis de calomnies, toutes plus odieuses les unes que les autres.

(CC. Letter 323, (M^{me} Claudel to Camille Claudel), 1927 (n.d.), 312–13)

The correspondence continues over wide lapses of time, and there are sections missing, elements that are read and elements unread. Messages are only partially read, and imperfectly received. The letter demonstrates clearly that Madame Claudel misunderstood the fragility of her daughter's mental state, since she interprets Camille's accusations of poisoning literally, rather than as a manifestation of paranoia. In a letter to her mother dated 2 February 1927, Claudel describes the difficult conditions of her incarceration:

Ma chère maman,
J'ai beaucoup tardé à t'écrire car il a fait tellement froid que je ne pouvais plus me tenir debout. [...] Une de mes amies un pauvre professeur du Lycée Fénelon qui est venue s'échouer ici a été trouvée morte de froid dans son lit, c'est épouvantable. Rien ne peut donner l'idée des froids de Montdevergues. Et ça dure, 7 mois au grand complet : jamais tu ne peux te figurer ce que je souffre dans ces maisons. Aussi ce n'est pas sans une surprise mélangée d'épouvante que j'ai appris que Paul me faisait mettre de 1^{ère} classe. C'est curieux que vous disposez de moi comme il vous plaît sans me demander mon avis sans savoir ce qui se passe vous n'êtes jamais venus ici et vous savez mieux que moi ce qu'il me faut.

(CC. Letter 324, 2 February 1927, 314–15)

Claudel powerfully evokes here the process of infantilization to which she is subjected, and her status as a powerless object. The physical conditions of her incarceration, notably the extreme cold, are also barriers to communication. Rather than creating a sense of keeping the other in mind, here the writer insists that her interlocutor cannot possibly imagine her situation. A sense of epistolary distance replaces one of intimacy and shared understanding.

¹⁵ See Claudel 287–9: 'Lettre retournée par Mme Claudel. Le 28 mars [...] Mme Claudel écrit à la surveillante: "Madame, Je viens de recevoir la lettre ci-jointe que je crois devoir vous communiquer. J'ai été très étonnée que ma fille ait pu la faire mettre à la poste. [...] Dieu sait ce qu'elle est capable de dire' (CC. Letter 293, March 1913).

Claudé became increasingly aware of the fact that her letters were intercepted. She resorted to using bribery and go-betweens to bypass the official routes that frustrated her efforts to communicate. In a later letter to her brother Paul, sent from Montdevergues, Claudé mentions this explicitly as a strategy to overcome the policing of her communications: 'La femme de charge qui habituellement me rend ce service (contre graissage de patte!) est malade' (CC. Letter 339, 1932–33 (n.d.), 333). The figure of the 'entremetteuse', the woman who sends and receives letters on Claudé's behalf, recurs periodically throughout the correspondence. In a letter to her cousin Henriette Thierry in 1915, Claudé gives the address of a woman called Mme V^e Blanc in Avignon, to whom letters should be sent.¹⁶ Despite these strategies, the correspondence remains fragmentary. Claudé's isolation, and her complaint that she had been abandoned and forgotten, is rendered poignant by the existence of letters of support and solidarity that were sent to her but never read. In a letter to her brother Paul in May 1915, Claudé directly references her abandonment and social isolation – the effect of communication being barred:

Mon cher Paul,
J'ai écrit à plusieurs fois à Maman, à Paris, à Villeneuve sans pouvoir obtenir un mot de réponse.
Toi-même, tu es venu me voir à la fin de mai et je t'avais fait promettre de t'occuper de moi et de ne pas me laisser dans un pareil abandon.
Comment se fait-il que depuis ce moment tu ne m'aies pas écrit une seule fois et que tu ne sois pas revenu me voir. Crois-tu que ce soit amusant pour moi de passer ainsi des mois, des années sans aucune nouvelle, sans aucun espoir? [...]
On m'enverrait en Sibérie que rien ne m'étonnerait.
À vrai dire, j'aimerais mieux rentrer dans la vie civile et oublier toutes ces aventures.
[...]
C. C.

(CC. Letter 311, after May 1915 (n.d.), 303–4)

Claudé here highlights several ideas: unresponsiveness and therefore lack of a sense of reciprocity in her exchanges; abandonment; absence of news; despair. In addition, her desire to return to 'la vie civile', to normal life, underscores her socially exiled status. She is an outsider who is prevented from participating in the normal rituals of civilized communication, including effective epistolary connections. Yet, despite the manifest poverty of communication, these missives are rich in meaning precisely because of these failed attempts to connect.

The potential solidarity offered to Claudé is evidenced in a number of letters from friends and admirers who wanted to connect with her – letters that were never given to her to read. An old school friend, Madame Montavox, wrote to Claudé at her address at Quai Bourbon in Paris, from where the artist had been forcibly removed to the asylum at Ville-Evrard. The letter was forwarded but not given to its addressee. Montavox writes,

Beaucoup de vos chefs-d'œuvre me sont connus. Je sais la brillante carrière que vous avez faite, [...]. Vous souvenez-vous de Marie Dazois [...] Si souvent je lui ai parlé du grand sculpteur Camille Claudé. Voulez-vous, Madame, nous recevoir quelques instants, votre jour et heure seront les miens.

(CC. Letter 299, 9 June 1913, 291–2)

Other letters from friends also express solidarity and attempt connection on the grounds of similarity, for example one from a friend called Maria Paillette, who begins by recounting her sadness at losing a brother in the war. Paillette seems to want to show Claudé that she shares in her sadness, and that she is not forgotten: 'Mais sois sûre Camille, que je ne t'oublie pas. Ta lettre de Montdevergues m'a fait beaucoup de peine. Comment peut-on être assez méchant pour te garder enfermée alors que tu n'as rien fait?' (CC. Letter 310, 12 March 1915, 302). During the same period, Claudé wrote to a cousin named Marie-Madeleine on her saint's day celebration, evoking her isolated status:

¹⁶ See CC. Letter 315, 1915 (n.d.), 306.

Malheureusement ce n'est pas avec une fleur à la main que je viens vous offrir mes souhaits, c'est avec les larmes dans les yeux. Les larmes de l'exil, les larmes que j'ai versées goutte à goutte depuis que j'ai été arrachée à mon cher atelier. [...] n'oubliez pas votre petite cousine sculpteuse.

(CC. Letter 312, July 1915 (n.d.), 304–5)

Claudél would continue to thematize her detention as a forced state of exile to the end of her life, as late as 1938 signing letters to her brother, 'ta sœur en exil' (348. CC to PC. n.d. Nov–Dec 1938, 341). The feelings of despair expressed in her letters are made even more meaningful by these missed expressions of solidarity.

The retention of Artaud's letters and the power of the authorities to interrupt his epistolary exchanges are mirrored in an interesting way by his own refusal to engage with correspondents, which emerges as another strategy to exert control from a position of relative powerlessness. This is most clearly dramatized in Artaud's refusal to read letters from his mother. Artaud was first admitted to the asylum at Rouen in 1937, and the first letter from his mother, Euphrasie, to her son is marked, 'Lettre refusée par le malade' (AA. Letter 5, 11 December 1937, 41). A letter from Artaud to the director of the asylum the following day includes a refusal to recognize his mother:

Il y a 3 jours une autre vieille dame en qui je ne peux voir qu'une autre indicatrice de police m'a été amenée à 2 heures par un infirmier qui a osé me la présenter comme ma mère alors que j'ai perdu mes parents à l'âge de 7 ans et que je suis tout à fait orphelin. [...]

A. ARNANAPULOS

ANTONEO ARLAND

(AA. Letter 6, 12 December 1937, 43)

Any sense of an epistolary pact here is challenged by a disruption in the perception of self and other, including references to events, such as being orphaned, that have no clear basis in Artaud's life history. In subversive response to enforced communicative limits, the writer gives himself the power to decide, 'I am not me', or 'you are not you'. This allows the writer to control and transform the past, something that cannot ordinarily be changed, and to write his own biography. It is also a means of retaining control over the meaning and person of the *destinataire*, as well as his own role as recipient and writer/sender of letters. Control and enforced distance are achieved partly through the manipulation of signatures; from his first committal in 1937 until July 1938, Artaud signed all his letters with his Greek name, Antoneo Arland or Arlanapulos, claiming that Antonin Artaud was an impostor. In a letter to the Minister of Ireland (which was, unusually, posted) Artaud asserts:

Mon nom est ARLAND ANTONEO, en Grec ARLANAPULOS. La Police Française essaie de me faire passer pour un autre, elle a transformé mon nom et je l'accuse d'avoir fait changer mes papiers à la Préfecture de Police de Dublin avec la complicité de quelques traîtres.

(AA. Letter 13, 23 February 1937, 57)

Artaud was convinced, not without reason, that his internment was a police matter rather than a medical affair. Like many people who innocently fall foul of the powers of law and order, he feels betrayed, and casts the police as traitors. His committal certificate to Sainte-Anne, written by Dr Nodet on 1 April 1938, notes the existence of this 'personnalité double' and adds, 'il connaît peu et par ouï-dire la personnalité qui porte son nom Artaud' (Artaud 59). Antoneo Arland/Arlanapulos is a persona, but one that unmask its wearer.

The policing of letters, and the communicative frustrations experienced by both writers, is thematized through the repeated motif of theft. For example, in a violent postscript to a letter to Dr Chanès – which was retained in Dr Fouk's personal papers and never read by Chanès himself – Artaud references both the confiscation of letters and items he says have been stolen

from him. Artaud was obsessed with the idea that a journalist friend of his, Anne Manson,¹⁷ had visited the asylum to bring him heroin and cigarettes, had been barred from entering and had these packages confiscated:

P.S. Je te baffe ta gueule de Médecin chef à toi SHA- NYON SBAOTH [Chanès] et si tu ne rends pas les lettres qu'Anne Manson m'a écrites que tu as volées au bureau de l'asile, si tu ne rends pas les paquets à moi expédiés et qui contiennent des cigarettes et dont tu t'es emparé pour les fumer à ma place, bougre de sale voleur, je te les ferai rendre à coups de couteau dans la gorge.

(AA. Letter 83, May 1939, 234–5)

Cigarettes are 'expédiés' and then appropriated illegitimately (expressed through the verb 's'emparer'). This procedural practice is compared to the action of a 'sale voleur', and the doctor in charge is accused via his 'initié' name (SHA- NYON SBAOTH), which is a deformation of 'Chanès'. A packet of cigarettes thus stands in for a letter and becomes a symbol of the whole communicative process; similarly, in a subsequent letter, from Artaud to Ligeia Laval, Artaud accuses Laval of having cast a spell on him, in order to steal his very words, and responds with rhetorical violence by listing the types of torture, in loud capital letters, to which he will subject his *destinataire* as punishment: 'POUR M'AVOIR CAMBRIOLÉ 4 MOTS PENDANT QUE J'ÉCRIVAIS CETTE LETTRE' (AA. letter 78, 5 June 1939, 222–5, on p. 224). This idea that the addressee can steal actual words from the letter-writer is a commentary on the epistolary restrictions routinely placed on psychiatric patients, and the rhetorical shouting in all capital letters is a means of escaping them.

Both correspondences are marked by appropriations, non-communication or disrupted communication. The ideas of presence and absence are also painful dramatic ironies for the reader, who knows that interlocutors are present but unable to make themselves heard, apparently absent but keeping the other firmly present in mind. The reciprocal structure of epistolary communication therefore appears to break down. Yet these letters also powerfully demonstrate that the epistolary pact is dynamic, and its functioning is affected by the injunctions placed upon the physical letter. In short, the communicative situation affects how a letter should be read as much as the conditions of its composition. In a similar way, as we shall now see, the materiality of the letter inscribes further layers of meaning upon the text.

MATERIAL INSCRIPTIONS

In terms of its original manifestation, as opposed to any later reproductions, the letter has a particular status as a text, shared only with other forms of intimate self-writing such as private diaries or personal memoirs, and also manuscripts: it exists as both a physical and an intellectual object and is only indirectly offered for mass consumption – and in these conditions without the consent of the authors. Under normal circumstances, reading another's private correspondence is a social taboo. As with a manuscript, or certain forms of experimental writing, a letter's physical and intellectual objectivity cannot be easily dissociated. The critic, therefore, must pay attention to the materiality of the text. If the intellectual content of letters is indissociable from their physical manifestation, this complicates the idea of legal ownership, which under French law is divided simplistically along the lines of the intellectual content (so, the words) of a letter being owned by the writer, and the physical letter being owned by the addressee (Lejeune 75–8). Marie-Claire Grassi (5) argues that the status of language in a letter sits somewhere between very codified, contractual language and the language of spontaneous expression. Asylum letters test the limits of this codification by manipulating and subverting common epistolographical practices, and part of this linguistic flexing takes place on the surface of the letter itself.

Material inscriptions can frustrate the possibility of communication between writer and potential reader, but they are also in themselves meaningful. The letter's meaning is thus bound up with its materiality. In Claudel's writing, the understanding that her letters may be intercepted is

¹⁷ Anne Manson was the journalist Georgette Dunais, who met Artaud in May 1937 (Artaud 482). Roumieux (1996, 74) says that Anne Manson had tried to bring opium pills to Artaud but that he had refused to see her. During September 1940 Artaud refused to see anyone (Artaud 64, note 1).

literally inscribed on a letter to her family doctor, Dr Michaux, probably written in 1918 and sent from Montdevergues. The envelope is carefully stitched around the edges in an attempt to ensure that it is not opened before it reaches its destination.¹⁸ This letter thematizes the writer's need to protect her communications from intrusion, a message plainly and delicately marked on the surface of the text by the stitching. It also dramatically thematizes the effect of detention – the letter being hemmed in reflects the reality of Claudel's life as constrained, with communication disabled:

Monsieur le Docteur,

Vous ne vous souvenez peut-être plus de votre ex-cliente et voisine, m^{elle} Claudel, qui fut enlevée de chez elle le 3 mars 1913 et transportée dans les asiles d'aliénés d'où elle ne sortira peut-être jamais. [...] Inutile de vous dépeindre quelles furent mes souffrances. [...]

Du côté de ma famille il n'y a rien à faire ; sous l'influence de mauvaises personnes, ma mère, mon frère et ma sœur n'écoutent que les calomnies dont on m'a couverte. [...]

On donne ici pour moi 150 f par mois et il faut voir comme je suis traitée, mes parents ne s'occupent pas de moi et ne répondent à mes plaintes que par le mutisme le plus complet, ainsi on fait de moi ce qu'on veut. C'est affreux d'être abandonnée de cette façon, je ne puis résister au chagrin qui m'accable. [...]

Maman et ma sœur ont donné l'ordre de me séquestrer de la façon la plus complète, aucune de mes lettres ne part, aucune visite ne pénètre. [...]

Aussi je vous prie de ne pas m'écrire ici et de ne pas dire que je vous ai écrit, car je vous écris en secret contre les règlements de l'établissement et si on le savait, on me ferait bien des ennuis !

(CC. Letter 317, 25 June 1917 or 1918, 308–9)

Claudel says that her letters are greeted with silence. Furthermore, this letter foregrounds the theme of frustrated communication, and the sequestering of letters reflects Claudel's experience of imprisonment. The letter highlights forgetting rather than keeping the other in mind, because Claudel assumes the doctor does not remember her. Memory is erased, and any affective connection is suspended, as the writer comments that it is 'inutile' to discuss her emotional suffering. Instead of responsiveness, Claudel is greeted with 'mutisme' from her loved ones, and abandoned to suffer the weight of her sorrow alone. Here she also directly references the physical and mental isolation that has been forced upon her, the repetition of 'aucune' reinforcing the idea that she is barred from human connection through letter-writing. The act of stitching itself is ambiguous: it shows a concern to protect the integrity of the relationship between sender and recipient, because it is an attempt to stop the letter being seen by uninvited readers. Yet, as a physical barrier to the letter's contents, it serves the dual purpose of preventing admittance and symbolizing the various ways in which Claudel's access to the outside world is barred.

The stitching of the letter also recalls some of the most interesting examples of outsider art, such as the jacket created by Agnes Richter in mid nineteenth-century Heidelberg, and later studied as an important example of psychotic expression by Hornstein. Richter's jacket is a patchwork of scraps of linen painstakingly sewn together and covered in embroidered writing in a now-undecipherable script. One of the only lines that has been successfully decoded from the jacket is: 'I plunge headlong into disaster' (Hornstein 267). Hornstein believes that the jacket shows an urgent need to communicate, and a great deal of resourcefulness on the part of the patient: 'Agnes's jacket is not neat. It is not feminine. It is an angry testimony. [...] Agnes's jacket is a private, symbolic statement, more like an expressionist painting' (Hornstein 260). Like Claudel, Richter was incarcerated at the request of her family, diagnosed with paranoia, and institutionalized for the rest of her life. Like Richter, Claudel inscribed the surface of her text with the symbolic meaning attached to her distress. The stitching of the letter is like a code,

¹⁸ The letter was described by Dr Michaux's son as 'cousue pour éviter des indiscretions'. The editors of the correspondence confirm this observation: 'En effet les trous d'aiguille sont tout a fait apparents sur le document' (CC. Letter 317, 310, n. 1).

expressing at once the experiences of violation and blocked communication, and it marks the text with urgency. It also symbolizes an attempt to exert control and to contain an experience over which Claudel had no control.

Artaud's letters also work with the physical surface of the letter in creative ways. Artaud attached great importance to the material surface of a text, calling it the 'subjectile'. Rather than just considering the paper to be a 'support', Artaud invents a new concept, giving the physical text its own subjective status. Murray (119) suggests that through the concept of the subjectile, 'Artaud is engaging with the body of his recipient through the medium of paper [...] he is staging the support, interacting with it.' She argues further that the idea of the subjectile makes the support active rather than passive; it 'invests a sense of agency in the surface' (122).¹⁹ For our purposes, it is useful to think in terms of the letter as subjectile challenging the traditional separation of *émetteur* and *destinataire*. A clear example of the subversion of this binary is a letter written by Artaud while in Sainte-Anne in 1938. A letter sent by Anne Manson is refused and returned to its writer, in rejection of her as a 'false' rather than a 'true' friend. Artaud has taken the original letter and crossed out his own name on the envelope. Then he simply writes:

Madame
Je vous retourne votre lettre
~~Monsieur Antonin ARTAUD~~
ROUEN
qui m'a certainement été envoyée ici par erreur
Je tiens à ce que les faux amis de M^r Artaud me laissent définitivement la paix

Antoneo Arland

(AA. Letter 15, June 1938 (n.d.), 61)

The letter was retained unsent in the medical dossier. Nonetheless, the technique of subversion is effective because it is done on the surface of a letter previously written, owned and sent by the original sender. The result is a perfect confusion of *émetteur* and *destinataire*. However, Artaud's treatment of this letter functions as an ironic commentary on the appropriation of his own letters and the problems of communication. In this act of physical and intellectual appropriation, he is making the point that he still has communicative agency despite the limitations to which he is subjected.

The themes of violence and abjection in Artaud's letters also disrupt the functioning of the epistolary pact. Artaud cast magic spells on his addressees and antagonists, which took the form of written texts. He burnt cigarette holes in these texts and smeared them with blood and other fluids. Burning has the effect of both destroying meaning, through the obscuring of the text, and inscribing meaning by making a statement about the inexpressibility of an experience or by articulating rage towards the people mentioned in the letters. Critics generally agree that the purpose of Artaud's spells was to transform the world (Derrida 2002, 70–2; Murray 69–76). His letters as spells have an incantatory quality which although not reciprocal, or inviting interaction, is performative. Derrida posits that the spells are acts of exorcism rather than sorcery, so the violence they contain should not be read in terms of actual intended harm but rather as a means by which the writer can externalize and purge feelings of rage. Artaud was, quite logically, attempting to neutralize the supernatural powers of his antagonists by physically removing their names from his text.

A pertinent surviving example is one of the rare letters that Artaud was able to give directly to its addressee, his great friend, the actor and theatre director Roger Blin, in 1939. Artaud – who had been a heavy heroin user prior to his incarceration – had developed the belief that Anne Manson had been butchered and dismembered by hospital personnel when trying to deliver a parcel of the drug to him earlier in the year. This belief was not fixed in Artaud's mind, but her presence was indicative of the type of omnipotent fantasy whereby he could create

¹⁹ For further discussion of this idea, see Jacques Derrida's essay on Artaud's subjectile, in which he suggests that the idea blurs the boundary between subject and object, being both and neither things. See Derrida, cited in Murray (124).

and destroy others: Manson reappears in later letters apparently alive and well. Artaud's letter to Blin repeats this accusation briefly, and casts a spell, a semi-legible scrawl of words and symbols in purple crayon over the text of the letter, which is also perforated with burn holes and soiled with the writer's blood. The significance of the physical burning of the letter and the corporeality of the blood is first of all a literal physical connection between the body/person of the writer and the intellectual content of the letter; second, the text makes explicit Artaud's violent aggression towards those he holds responsible for the 'murder' of Anne Manson:

Tous ceux qui se sont concertés pour m'empêcher de prendre de l'HEROÏNE tous ceux qui ont touché à Anne Manson à cause de cela le dimanche Mai 1939 je les ferai percer vivants sur une place de PARIS et je leur ferai perforer et brûler les moëlles. Je suis dans un Asile d'Aliénés mais ce rêve d'un Fou sera réalisé et il sera réalisé par Moi.

(AA. Letter 68, May 1939, 197)

The literal perforation and burning of the letter with tiny holes reflects exactly and directly the verbal threat within the text to physically destroy others through burning and the piercing of their bodies. Indeed, Derrida (2002, 70) argues that the physical treatment of the letter is a mimetic repetition of the blows dealt to the *destinataire*. Ironically, however, despite symbolically killing her, Artaud maintained that Anne Manson was his 'amie unique et dernière' (Artaud 241).

Artaud's spells are attempts to exert power over others whom he perceives to be secretly controlling him; these are hostile rather than social communications. Artaud experiences bewitching ('*envoûtement*') and the casting of spells by others as acts of aggression that threaten his integrity through the theme of an internal burning sensation; we may well, therefore, view his own 'casting' of spells in a similar vein, as an act of aggression, and thus as blocking or rupturing the epistolary pact. Artaud clearly views this process of '*envoûtement*' in terms of blocking, paralysis and rage, and not in terms of reciprocity, exchange and mutual pleasure:

Mr Langeron était ici hier soir vers 7 heures et il m'a lancé en compagnie de quelques autres Initiés un envoûtement à me faire sauter le cerveau et la boîte crânienne [...] un autre envoûteur a pris sa suite pendant la nuit et il a bloqué tous mes réflexes psychiques et affectifs, une formidable réunion d'Initiés a eu lieu cette nuit à la Coupole en Montparnasse et les envoûtements de rage, et de paralysie des réflexes de la rage ont repris collectivement contre moi sous la direction d'un envoûteur.

(AA. Letter 75, 3 June 1939, 214–15)

There is a direct reference to the obstruction of cognitive processes, to 'le cerveau et la boîte crânienne' and the paralysis of '[s]es réflexes psychiques et affectifs'. Artaud experiences these obstructions as being causally external, rather than processes in his own mind. However, the best way of communicating these blockages, which are both emotional and cognitive ('*psychiques et affectifs*'), is by inscribing them on the surface of the paper as physical and visible textual interruptions. As Le Touzé asserts, 'l'expérience limite de la lettre, chez lui [Artaud], c'est le heurt violent du front contre la paroi, l'acharnement à plier à l'incommunicable un genre de discours qui est par essence communication' (182).

The physical letter, therefore, holds meaning in both the material support and in the words written upon it. If one were to transcribe the words without reference to the materiality of the letter, part or all of the letter's meaning would be lost. Many editions of Artaud's letters, for this reason, contain photographic reproductions of the letters. The paper and all the inscriptions made upon its surface become part of the text, beyond the recognizable linguistic script. These inscriptions are the text, just as much as the written words are the text, making it impossible to draw a line between textual, metatextual and paratextual elements within Artaud's communications.

Asylum letters demonstrate a heightened level of consciousness of self and other, and dramatize the relation between sender and addressee in ways that undermine the formation of a functioning epistolary pact. Psychotic writing is acutely conscious, and renders the *destinataire* hyper-present, in opposition to the psychoanalytical view that the 'other' is only a projection and therefore an unconscious but intolerable aspect of the self. It places a focus on the created-ness rather than the external reality of the *destinataire*, foregrounding the performativity of the letter. These asylum letters are acutely aware of the real hostility of the world against their writers. I now want to explore several writing strategies employed by these letter-writers that showcase this hyper-reflexivity: doubling, experiences of time, feelings of omnipotence and expressions of hostility and violence.

The figure of the double is a repeated element in Artaud's letters, and indeed all his writing, and the letter-writer is also, via the creative use of signatures, split into multiple versions of themselves. This is particularly evident in Artaud's exchanges with Dr Fouks, through which the patient appears to be negotiating a complex set of positive and negative feelings towards the doctor:

MOI J'AI FOI DR FOUKS EN VOTRE VÉRITABLE PERSONNAGE et je crois que le meilleur et le plus représentatif de votre volonté et de vos forces est capable d'imposer silence à ce Double attardé de vous même qui me jalouse et qui me hait [...] Alors que c'est le contraire qu'ont voulu les Initiés. Ils veulent extraire de vous un Personnage de haine.

(AA. Letter 75, 3 June 1939, 215)

This 'véritable personnage' and the 'Personnage de haine' exist simultaneously, laying bare the capacity of the writer to hold two versions of people in mind. Psychotic writing brings these tensions to the fore. In the figure of Fouks, these are directly thematized as expressing love and hate:

IL Y A EN VOUS UN HOMME QUI M'AIMAIT, IL Y A EN VOUS UN AUTRE QUI ME HAIT.
LEQUEL Dr FOUKS EST-IL LE VÉRITABLE?

L'ENVOÛTEUR DE HAINE QUI EST EN VOUS ET DONT JE RECONNAIS QU'IL SE DISSOCIE DE VOUS M'A LANCÉ CETTE NUIT UN EFFROYABLE ENVOÛTEMENT DE BRÛLURE, D'INCENDIE INTÉRIEUR [...]

DANS LE MÊME TEMPS JAQUELINE LAMBA M'ENVOYAIT UN ENVOÛTEMENT DE RAGE ET UN ENVOÛTEMENT DE PARALYSIE DES RÉFLEXES DE LA RAGE. [...]

LIVREZ-MOI VOTRE ENVOÛTEUR DE HAINE, CELUI QUI EST EN VOUS ET DONT VOUS NE VOULEZ PAS JE LE FERAI CRUCIFIER LUI AUSSI PLACE DE LA CONCORDE ET JE LUI VITRIOLERAI SON PSYCHISME À LE DÉSESPÉRER DE ME VOLER QUOI QUE CE SOIT. QUANT À JAQUELINE LAMBA, JE FERAI CRUCIFIER À CÔTÉ DE LUI CETTE ENVOÛTEUSE DE HAINE QUI M'A TORDU, DESSÉCHÉ, BLOQUÉ ET ASPHIXIÉ L'ÂME PENDANT TOUTE LA NUIT.

(AA. Letter 76, 4 June 1939, 218–19)

The figure of hatred supplies bodily and emotional sensations which are insisted upon in painful detail: terror, burning, rage and paralysis as well as physical twisting, dehydration and asphyxiation. There is, also, mention here of great violence which is expressed as physical but which might be read as cognitive, 'JE LUI VITRIOLERAI SON PSYCHISME', threatening to attack Lamba's mind with acid. The threat of crucifixion is perhaps symbolic – the 'bad' versions of his interlocutors need to be sacrificed in order to retain or discover their 'good' versions.

Furthermore, this splitting of the person of Fouks is reflected in parts of the letter where the doctor is directly apostrophized by Artaud. For example, here Fouks is alternately called 'Fouks' or 'Jean', or 'vous' and 'tu', in reflection of this split:

Parce qu'une femme qui était ma dernière amie avait eu le geste d'avoir pitié de moi vous l'avez tous polluée et dépecée, maudits que vous êtes, afin de m'arracher

ce qui était ma vie, et qui était tout mon espoir dans la vie. Et vous, Dr Fouks, vous avez participé à ce crime? ET TOI JEAN TU Y AS PARTICIPÉ. [...] JE SUIS DIEU, JEAN FOUKS, DIEU LUI-MÊME, ET IL IMPORTE AU SALUT UNIVERSEL DES ÊTRES [...] QUE TU RECONNAISSES MON ACTUELLE FIGURE.

(AA. Letter 85, 9 June 1939, 240)

The figure of 'Jean/tu' is both a trusted intimate and a subordinate, since Artaud positions himself as God. Artaud clearly articulates that his aggression is directed only at the bad version of his addressee, and he implores the good Fouks to 'get rid of' the bad one. His request is inflected with urgency, presented in capital letters, because time is running out.

MON AGRESSIVITÉ S'ADRESSE À CELUI EN VOUS QUI DISCUTE TOUS CES PROBLÈMES ET NON A L'AMI QUI VIENT ICI ET VOUDRAIT M'AIDER. DÉBARASSEZ-VOUS DE L'AUTRE IL EST TEMPS IL NE SERA BIENTÔT PLUS TEMPS.

(AA. Letter 81, 7 June 1939, 233)

The *destinataire* is the main focus of the themes of violence, omnipotence and time in asylum letters. What this shows us as critical readers is that an omnipotent author controls entirely the figure of the *destinataire*, whom they can construct and destroy at will, and influence from a physical and temporal distance. Artaud's perception of time is very flexible and lends his letters a sense of unlimited possibility. A letter to Ligeia Laval ascribes responsibility for Artaud's feelings of cognitive paralysis and rage to his addressee, and punishes her with symbolic mummification of 'eternal' duration, but one also specified to last 439 billion years:

P.S. POUR AVOIR RECOMMENCÉ CE MATIN MARDI 6 JUIN 1939 VOS ENVOUTEMENTS DE PARALYSIE, DE BLOQUAGE ET DE RAGE LIGATUR SEXUELLE LIGATURANTE VOUS SEREZ MOMIFIÉE ET COULÉE DANS LE NATRON PENDANT L'ÉTERNITÉ ENTIÈRE D'UN CYCLE DE 439 MILLIARDS D'ANNÉES.

(AA. Letter 78, 5 June 1939, 224)

There is no apparent contradiction in the writer's mind between these two assertions of periods of time. Time can, in these letters, expand and contract beyond the parameters of the 'real' and shared temporal paradigm of letters that is often observed in standard correspondences. Just as these letters are not limited by time, nor are they limited by inconvenient notions of life and death.²⁰

As well as this flexibility in relation to time, expressions of hostility further highlight the way in which the *destinataire* is both imbued with and emptied of meaning. A letter to fellow author André Gide enacts linguistic and conceptual destruction on the *destinataire*. Another letter that was not sent, here Artaud states boldly that there is no substance to his addressee: 'TU ES VIDE, GIDE. VA-T-EN' (AA. Letter 124, 15 July 1939, 311). As others are carefully or violently dismembered, Gide's very self is emptied out. This asserts the omnipotence of the writer, and the passivity of the recipient. The appropriation of the self, or even soul, of the other re-enacts the action of taking or intercepting the letters.

Claudé's disturbed sense of self and other is not characterized by 'schizophrenic' thinking as described by Sass, but as straightforward paranoia or feelings of persecution. It is, of course, possible to read this persecution, in the context of her life as a French woman artist and her treatment by family and society, as literally and metaphorically real. Claudé's letters show, above all, a hyper-conscious level of awareness of her correspondents and the power they exert over her physically and mentally through the restrictions placed on her communications. They invoke the *destinataire* as a generalized, hostile other. Like Artaud, she is obsessed with the idea of influence: it is difficult for her to believe that her loved ones are her real persecutors, so she explains their actions by describing them as being under the influence of higher powers, much

²⁰ Claudé also seems to have experienced acute disturbances in her perception of time. Dr Truelle, chef de service at Ville-Evrard, notes in her file that Claudé claimed that the plot against her 'remonte à 3000 ans ou avant le déluge' (Claudé 287).

like Artaud's concept of 'Initiés'. Claudel's sister, Louise, is portrayed as under the influence of Rodin and of Protestants:

Louise a mis la main sur tout l'argent de la famille par la protection de son ami Rodin, et comme moi j'ai toujours besoin d'un peu d'argent, [...] c'est moi qui me fais détester, lorsque j'en demande. Ce sont des choses faites exprès, parce que tu sais Louise donne dans les protestants.

(CC. Letter 286, 10 March 1913, 281–2)

Claudel keenly feels herself to be the object of their hatred: excommunicated, shunned and shamed by her own family. Rather than reading this psychoanalytically as evidence of primitive thinking, of 'splitting' the world into good and bad, we might say, rather, that Claudel demonstrates here an absolutely acute awareness of the bad that is being done to her. Paranoia is the clear apprehension of, and a coherent explanation for, the pain being caused to the person who is mentally ill. Paranoia is a state of vigilance, of extreme consciousness.

Finally, just as Artaud kills his correspondents and brings them back to life, all within the universe of the letter, Claudel gives Rodin (in particular) power even after he has died; Rodin and his 'bande' are equivalent to Artaud's powerful 'Initiés'. The normal limits of time, and indeed of life, do not apply. Many years after his death, Claudel believed Rodin had plotted to make her suffer for the rest of her life:

Tout cela au fond sort du cerveau diabolique de Rodin. Il n'avait qu'une idée c'est que lui, étant mort, je prenne mon essor comme artiste et que je devienne plus que lui : il fallait qu'il arrive à me tenir dans ses griffes après sa mort comme pendant sa vie.

(CC. Letter 335, 3 March 1930, 329–30)

The idea of Rodin holding her and others captive in his 'griffes' is repeated in letter 317 to Dr Michaux, and cited previously: 'Ce qui gêne dans cette circonstance c'est l'influence secrète des étrangers qui se sont emparés de mon atelier et qui tiennent maman dans leurs griffes pour l'empêcher de venir me voir' (Claudel 310).

By this stage, in the 1930s and towards the end of her life, the evidence from her correspondence reveals that Claudel's letters were more likely than not to be sent, and she clearly had sight of letters addressed to her, too. Claudel was able to write to an old friend from her art school days in Paris, the English sculptor Jessie Lipscomb, who would visit her in 1929, by which time she was the old lady shown in a photograph taken by Lipscomb's husband (Claudel 331). Although she never abandoned her beliefs about Rodin and those he influenced persecuting her, she was calm enough to meet her friend, with whom there was an obvious remnant of connection, evidenced through their letters and photographs. A more 'normal' epistolary connection was at last established, free of the obstructions of institutional, medical and family policing, and with less of a sense of chronic persecution. Unlike Artaud, however, Claudel's champions outside were never able to secure her release, even though her sustained detention was no longer warranted on medical grounds.

The study of asylum letters and their salient characteristics suggests that they, and perhaps all letters, should be read as general rather than specific communications containing multiple possible messages. Limit experiences and the associated practices of epistolography tell us more about the processes of catharsis, exorcism and the experience of psychical distress than about the relationship with epistolary others. Much as Nijinsky claimed that his diary, which expressed terror at the idea of being incarcerated, was his 'message to the world' (Horstein 168), asylum letters often speak to the world more than they do to their stated *destinataires*. They bear witness to the experience of psychosis, that 'important limit-case of the human condition' (Sass 7), and they demonstrate an acute level of awareness of the writer's isolation. Madness and private letter-writing are both viewed as particularly authentic types of communication by clinicians specializing in the psychological understanding of psychosis and by scholars of correspondences. Even though these letters were prevented through institutional monitoring from reaching their destinations, and to some extent *because* they were policed in this way,

they are available to us as testimonies that bear witness to common experiences which are rarely described in great detail, and which reach out for understanding and connection.²¹

Asylum letters bring to the fore elements of the writing process to which we should turn our attention in the reading of more conventional correspondences. Violence, hatred, missed connections, physical destruction and the disruption of meaning are equally important drivers of writing as love, connection and complicity. Many of these processes are only made explicit to the modern reader because of institutional restrictions and the contemporary politics of psychiatric treatment. Rather than, as Malausséna suggests, leaving the writers of asylum letters to wallow in their delusions and dreams, we owe it to these writers to test the limits of classical theories of epistolography in order to expose the richness and complexity of their lived experiences.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Susannah Wilson  orcid.org/0000-0001-6427-8392
University of Warwick, GB

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²¹ Judith Lewis Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, says 'bearing witness is an act of solidarity' (cited in Hornstein 297).

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