

Psyche & Muse: Creative Entanglements with the Science of the Soul  
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**The Strange Case of Dr. Ferdière  
Checklist and Object Descriptions**

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*Shock Aesthetic/Shock Therapy*

**Photograph of Gaston Ferdière with Antonin Artaud on the eve of his departure from the psychiatric hospital at Rodez, May 25th, 1946, in *Tour de Feu* no. 63/64, special issue on “The Health of Poets” (1959).**

**Antonin Artaud, *Lettres de Rodez*, Paris: GLM, 1946.**

No one personifies the thorny entanglement between modernism and the science of the soul better than Dr. Gaston Ferdière, the psychiatrist who administered no less than 58 electroshock treatments to the Surrealist playwright Antonin Artaud during the Second World War. Determined to reconcile poetry and medicine, Ferdière had studied under “Professor Claude”—target of Breton’s anti-psychiatric rants—at Sainte-Anne while at the same time passing as a “star of Surrealism in the bistros” of Paris in the mid-1930s. A friend of Breton, Desnos, Péret, and Crevel, the young Dr. Ferdière arranged to have a mural painted in the Sainte-Anne guardhouse by an artist close to the movement, and he even published several volumes of poetry himself.

By the time Artaud showed up on his doorstep at Rodez psychiatric hospital, Ferdière had long since abandoned his poetic aspirations. Yet his old interests were rekindled in long conversations with the Surrealist playwright, whose talents he sought to revive by a combination of “art therapy”—writing, drawing, translating Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*—and shock treatments—six courses ranging from 4 to 13 sessions each between June 20th, 1943 and January 24th, 1945. Electroshock was still in its experimental phase—the machine had hardly rolled in the door at Rodez—and the convulsions were so severe that Artaud fractured a vertebra in his neck during one of the treatments.

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**Isidore Isou, *Antonin Artaud torture par les psychiatres*, followed by Maurice Lemaître, *Qui est le docteur Ferdière?* Paris: Lettrisme & Maurice Lemaître, 1970.**

The strange case of Ferdière and Artaud remains a source of controversy to this day. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that the psychiatrist saved Artaud’s life by taking him in. The playwright had been confined to various mental hospitals since suffering a psychotic break in

1936, but with the outbreak of war the Nazis restricted food supplies to asylum patients, and by 1943 Artaud was on the brink of starvation. Spirited out of Occupied France to the “free zone,” he quickly recovered under the care of Dr. Ferdière, who openly defied the restrictions and kept his patients well fed by working the black market. Whether the psychiatrist “taught Artaud to write again”—as Ferdière and his supporters claim—seems more dubious (the patient had already been diagnosed with “graphorrhea” long before he was admitted to Rodez). But the intensity of his delusions certainly increased, as did the quality of the “magical” drawings and incantations he scrawled, chanted, and howled in a desperate attempt to keep his “demons”—quite literally—at bay.

Claims of torture came quick upon Artaud’s release from Rodez, starting with a benefit held at the Sarah Bernhardt Theater in Paris on June 6th, 1946. In his opening remarks, however, André Breton refused to criticize Ferdière at the event, and the following year he expressed disgust with the “friends” who organized a second conference at the Vieux Columbier in February 1947. Stunning his audience, Artaud broke down on stage mid-performance, before ranting incoherently and describing his torture at the hands of Ferdière. Mutual recriminations followed after Artaud’s death from an overdose of chloral hydrate on March 4th, 1948. Ten years later poets and family members were still fighting in the literary magazine *Tower of Fire*, which devoted an entire issue to the case, and Ferdière once again found himself the center of controversy after treating another member of the avant-garde, the founder of Lettrism, Isidore Isou, who published this assault after his release: *Antonin Artaud Tortured by the Psychiatrists*.

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“*A Passionate and Convulsive Life*”

**Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre de la cruauté*, Fontenay-aux-Roses: Louis Bellenand et Fils, 1933.**

**Antonin Artaud, *L’Ombilic des limbes*, with a portrait of the author by André Masson, Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle revue française, 1925.**

**Antonin Artaud, *Le Pèse-nerfs, suivi des Fragments d’un journal d’enfer*, frontispiece by André Masson, Marseille: Cahiers du sud, 1927.**

Artaud had pushed the Surrealist quest for altered states to the extreme long before he suffered the decisive psychotic break that eventually brought him to Ferdière at Rodez. Tormented by pains caused by a childhood outbreak of meningitis, he had been in and out of mental institutions, where he first became addicted to opiates, and his agony was reflected in works like *The Umbilical of Limbo* and *Fragments of a Journey from Hell*, shown here. Artaud’s most famous contribution, however, was his conception of experimental performance as a means for bodily and spiritual transfiguration, *The Theater of Cruelty*:

“The Theater of Cruelty has been created to give back to theater the notion of a passionate and convulsive life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor, of extreme condensation in scenic elements, that we must grasp the cruelty it needs to sustain itself.

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*To the Land of Peyote and Beyond*

**Antonin Artaud, *D'un voyage au pays de Tarahumaras*, Paris: Fontaine, 1945.**

**Antonin Artaud, *Les nouvelles révélations d'être*, Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1937.**

In 1936 Artaud's quest for physical and spiritual deliverance took him to Mexico, where he participated in the peyote rites of the Tarahumara Indians. Returning to France in a semi-delusional state, he immersed himself in studies of magic and the occult, divined an impending apocalypse based on readings of the Tarot in his *New Revelations of Being*, and became obsessed with an elaborately carved cane, which he believed to be the Staff of St. Patrick. An attempt to return the cane to its native land led to tussles with Irish authorities, who forcibly deposited the crazed and defiant playwright on a boat back to Le Havre, where he was immediately arrested and confined to a psychiatric hospital in October 1937.

For the next nine years—and indeed until his death in March 1947—Artaud continued to suffer from severe paranoid delusions. Haunted by the “demons” that followed him back from Mexico, he was convinced that his friends were systematically being replaced by evil doubles, tools of a conspiracy of “the Initiates,” who were hell-bent on poisoning him and stealing his soul. In a bizarre epilogue to the Surrealists' “paranoia criticism” and fascination with doubles, Artaud's fantasies fixed in particular on Breton, who he believed had actually died defending him from the police at Le Havre in 1937. The other Breton, the one who refused to visit him in the asylum and took Ferdière's side after his release from Rodez, remained for Artaud the most sinister of foes during his last days.

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*To Have Done with the Judgement of God*

**Antonin Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu: Émission radiophonique enregistré le 28 novembre 1947*, Paris: K Editeur, 1947.**

**K: *Revue de la poésie*, no. 1/2 (June 1948).**

**Antonin Artaud, *Autre chose que de l'enfant beau*, Paris: Louis Broder, 1957.**

Arranged by his artistic and literary friends, Artaud's release from Rodez on May 26th, 1946 brought on shocking performances in the venues of Paris that left a lasting mark on the postwar avant-garde. Among the most controversial was the famous *Tête-à-tête* Conference at the Vieux Colombier on January 13th, 1947, where Artaud launched into howling tirades of “orphic delirium” (as André Gide put it) after losing his composure on stage. While Breton denounced the spectacle and its organizers, others discovered a new art form in Artaud's wild and disjointed performance, which has been described by some as the first true “Happening.” Accompanied by

a colored eau-forte of Picasso, Artaud's recollections of the evening are recounted in this privately-printed artist's book, *Something Other than the Beautiful Child*.

The screams, howls, chants, and barks of Artaud's new art still echo in the recording of a banned radio broadcast, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*. Originally scheduled to air as part of the series *The Voice of the Poets* on French public radio in February 1948, the broadcast was canceled, even after a jury of 50 writers, critics, musicians, and other celebrities urged releasing a mildly censored version after listening to a private airing in Paris. Artaud's friends at the literary review *K* quickly arranged for a publication of the text, but it would be thirty years before the program was publically broadcast in France. Still, the performance found an underground audience among avant-garde poets like Henri Chopin, founder of the "Sound Poetry" movement, who testified again and again to the impact of Artaud's final howls.

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*Fifty Drawings to Assassinate Magic*

**Antonin Artaud, *50 dessins pour assassiner la magie*, edited by Evelyne Grossman, Paris: Gallimard, 2004.**

**Antonin Artaud, *Portraits et dessins*, Paris: Galerie Pierre, 1947.**

Magical drawings, spells, and incantations were for Artaud the only means of defense (aside from heroin, which he desperately craved) in his struggle with the demons and doubles that haunted him in the asylum. Encouraged as part of his "art therapy" under Ferdière—who supplied Artaud with books about magic for inspiration—the eerie configurations of text and image he produced at Rodez quickly found space in Paris art galleries after his release, where they made a strong impression on the postwar avant-garde.

After a successful showing at the Galerie Pierre, Artaud selected pages from his latest notebooks for a second exhibition, "50 Drawings to Assassinate Magic," which was not shown until decades after his death. Recreated by the *Bibliothèque nationale*, which holds the original notebooks, the posthumous exhibition also included the preface Artaud composed in verse:

"... these drawings,/ are not/ the representation/ or figuration/ of an object/ of a state/ of mind or heart,/ of an element/ or an event/ of a psychological kind, / they are purely/ and simply/ the reproduction on/ the paper/ of a magical action/ that I have performed/ in true space/ with the breath of my/ lungs/ with my hands/ with my head/ and my two feet/ with my torso and my/ arteries, etc.—"

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"*Outsider Art*"

**Jean Dubuffet, *Vous êtes invités à visiter l'exposition de dessins et peintures de Jean Dubuffet ... du samedi 17 au mercredi 28 décembre 1949*, Brussels, 1949.**

Among those waiting on the train platform to greet Artaud's return to Paris was Jean Dubuffet, the founder of *Art brut*, who had visited the playwright at Rodez as part of a three-week tour of psychiatric hospitals in July 1945. Dubuffet had been introduced to asylum art in the 1920s, when he read Hans Prinzhorn's *Pictures of the Mentally Ill*, but it was not until the Second World War that he turned to it in earnest. Corresponding with patients and doctors, Dubuffet began his own collection in the quest for true "Oustider Art." Shortly after founding the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* in 1948, Dubuffet organized a one-man show in Paris featuring the work of Adolf Wölfli, a mental patient in Waldau, Switzerland, whose paintings inspired many postwar artists and also helped revive an interest in asylum art on the part of professional psychiatrists.

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*The International Society for the Psychopathology of Expression*

**Robert Volmat, *Expressions plastiques de la folie*, Paris: Médecine de France, 1956.**

**Theodore Spoerri, *Le monde imagé d'Adolf Wölfli*, *Psychopathologie de l'Expression* no. 5 (1964).**

Dubuffet's correspondence with doctors and patients at psychiatric hospitals, together with his interest in Adolf Wölfli, helped renew the dialogue between modern art and the science of the soul in the postwar period. Organized by the psychiatrist Jean Delay and his assistant Robert Volmat, the International Exhibition of Psychopathological Art drew more than ten thousand to Sainte-Anne to see drawings by Wölfli featured alongside two thousand works of asylum art in September 1950. Founded nine years later, the International Society for the Psychopathology of Expression carried the momentum around the world, holding 14 exhibitions at congresses in Europe, Africa, and the U.S. between 1959 and 1965, and publishing a multivolume "iconography" that included Theodore Spoerri's *The World Imaged by Adolf Wölfli*. Dubuffet and the influential art historian Ernst Gombrich were among the members of the Society, as were Jacques Lacan and Carl Jung.

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*International Sound Poetry*

**Adrian Aeschbacher, original collage, from Henri Chopin, *Poésie sonore internationale*, Paris: J.-M. Place, 1978. Extra-illustrated deluxe edition from the private library of Henri Chopin.**

**Henri Chopin, *Autoportrait*, from Henri Chopin, John Furnival, and Tom Phillips, *Three Artists: Six Images*, Paris: Brunidor, 1973.**

Pushing language beyond the limits of words and textual representation, Artaud's "Happenings" after his release from Rodez had an immense impact on postwar avant-garde movements like

Lettrism, which broke down speech to its individual phonetic components, Concrete Poetry, and above all Sound Poetry. Promoted by Henri Chopin, Sound Poetry resisted the reification of language in writing and included the experimental works of figures as diverse as William S. Burroughs, Brian Gysin, Bernard Heidsieck, and François Dufrêne. In his 1978 survey, *International Sound Poetry*, Chopin repeatedly came back to Artaud's 1947 performances, above all *To Have Finished with the Judgment of God*, as a pivotal moment in the emergence of the new art form.

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*The Voice of the Poet*

**Bernhard Heidsieck, François Dufrêne, and Gil J. Wolman, *Ou* 33. From the extra-illustrated deluxe edition of *Ou*, no. 33 (1968).**

**Henri Chopin, “nihil,” original “dactylopoème” from *Ou*, no. 33. Cassette tape from the deluxe edition of Henri Chopin, *Poésie sonore internationale*, Paris: J.M. Place, 1978.**

**Bernard Heidsieck, “Collage magnetique,” from the extra-illustrated deluxe edition of Chopin, *Poésie sonore internationale*.**

Privileging the living voice over the written word, Sound Poetry defied reification while at the same time embracing the new technology of recording on magnetic tape, which allowed Chopin and others to tease out sounds from the poet's voice, breath, and body that had never been heard before and became an integral part of the art form. Overlays, spliced recordings, manipulated playback in live performances all belonged to Chopin's repertoire. The howls and screams of Artaud's postwar works were important not only because they defied written language, but also because they were among the first to be recorded on magnetic tape. Edited by Chopin, the magazine *Ou* was one of the first to include sound recordings as a regular feature. This 45 rpm record from *Ou* no. 33 (1968) includes works by the “Ultra-Lettrists” Dufrêne and Gil J. Wolman as well as Heidsieck, whose “magnetic collage” is included in the extra-illustrated edition of *International Sound Poetry* acquired from Chopin's personal library.

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*Isidore Isou—Tortured by the Psychiatrists?*

**Maurice Lemaître, *Anthologie sonore de lettristes dites par leurs auteurs*, 45 rpm record, in *Ur*, no. 6 (1966).**

**Isidore Isou, “Sur un thème vaudou,” in *Ur*, no. 6 (1966).**

**Lettrist portrait of Isidore Isou, in Isou, *Amos, ou Introduction à la métagraphie*, Paris: Arcanes, 1958.**

Already launched in Paris before Artaud's release from Rodez, the Lettrist movement led by Isidore Isou acknowledged a debt to the chants and howls of 1947 as well. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Isou, Gabriele Pomerand, Maurice Lemaître, and others took the body as instrument into the jazz caves of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where the use of microphones was becoming a source of inspiration, and—like Chopin and the Sound Poets—they occasionally disseminated recordings as part of the Lettrist journal *Ur* the following decade.

Another link between Isou and Artaud was Gaston Ferdière, who treated Isou for a mental breakdown in the midst of the uprisings of Paris in May 1968. Held against his will by Ferdière for 21 days, Isou launched an all-out public assault against the psychiatrist after his release, culminating with the publication of his tirade, *Antonin Artaud Tortured by the Psychiatrists* and a new journal, often published in poster format, *The Review of Psychokladology*.

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*The Lettrist Confrontation with Ferdière and "History"*

**"Isidore Isou déclare la guerre aux psychiatres," *Paris Jour* (November 5, 1969).**

**Maurice Lemaître, handwritten note "1945–1960–1968." Maurice Lemaître, "Pour en finir avec la psychiatrie réactionnaire super-Nazi..." mimeographed flier (September 25, 1970).**

*From the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers.*

Isou's "war" against Ferdière is well documented in the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers, an extensive archive of Lettrism preserved by Maurice Lemaître and acquired by Beinecke in the summer of 2010. Among the early documents on the Ferdière case are Lemaître's flier "To Have Done with Reactionary Super-Nazi Psychiatry," which describes Isou's confinement by Ferdière, and this handwritten note from Lemaître's files on the newly-founded journal, *Review for Psychokladology*, in which the encounter with Ferdière (and the riots in Paris) are included as one of 3 key moments in the history of Lettrism:

"1945 Lettrist Automatism ...

1960 Infinitesimal Art, followed by Works of Aesthetic Poly-Automatism;

1968 History"

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*Psychokladology in the Streets*

***Revue de Psychokladologie et de psychothéie*, nos. 1 (October 1970) and 3 (December 1971).**

**Photographs of Lettrist appeals on the walls of Sainte-Anne and the Salpêtrière (1970–1971). *From the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers.***

The Lettrists took the fight against Ferdière and the psychiatric profession into the streets of Paris. Several issues of the *Review of Psychokladology* were designed specifically to be plastered on walls in Paris, a popular practice among students during the uprisings of 1968. Photographs from the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers clearly show issues 1 and 3 posted in multiple copies on the walls of Sainte-Anne, the target of Breton's polemics in *Nadja* and school to both Ferdière and Lacan, as well as Charcot's old bastion, the Salpêtrière. Both issues contain notices about the publication of *Antonin Artaud Tortured by the Psychiatrists*. The appeals read:

“Punish and Reconvert the Psychiatrists!” (no. 1);

“All Psychiatrists are Demented, Dangerous to Themselves and Others” (no. 3).

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*Association for the Defense of Victims of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Anti-Psychiatry*

**Maurice Lemaître, manuscript draft of the founding manifesto of the *Association de Defense des Victimes de la Psychiatrie, de la Psychanalyse et de l'anti-Psychiatrie* (1971). From the *Bismuth-Lemaître Papers*.**

In addition to posters, tracts, pamphlets, and books, the Lettrists' campaign against Ferdière also involved the founding of a legal defense association. “Fight with us to defend the victims of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and anti-psychiatry,” this draft of Lemaître's founding manifesto reads. Protesting against arbitrary confinement and the practices of lobotomy, electroshock therapy, and drug treatment, the manifesto calls for an official investigation as well as “reparations” for the victims.

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*Psychiatry Outside the Establishment: The Green Tree*

***Psychothérapies*, no. 1 (January–March 1971).**

**Société Internationale des Techniques d'Imagerie Mentale, Invitation to SITIM exhibition, June 1971.**

Responding to calls for alternatives to official clinical training, a group of psychology students at the University of Paris began offering courses in non-Freudian techniques (Jung, Adler, and depth psychology), focusing on creative expression as an effective therapeutic tool. Founded in April 1968, the International Society for Mental Imagery Techniques (S.I.T.I.M.) established a base at *The Green Tree*, a vaulted cellar near Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where psychologists and psychiatrists interested in alternative methods could conduct experiments and hold exhibitions. Pulled from Lemaître's files, this invitation to an exhibition of drawings, collages, and paintings was laid into the new SITIM journal, *psychothérapies*. Alongside well-known figures of the avant-garde like Roger Blin, Jacques Prévert, and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, the show also

featured the work of one of the founding members of the alternative student group, André Virel, whose name Lemaître has circled.

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*Ferdière v. Isou (and Lemaître)*

**Press notice on verdict in Ferdière-Isou trial (April 21, 1970).**

**Court summons in Ferdière-Isou case.**

**Mock-up title page for Isidore Isou, *Antonin Ferdière torturé par les psychiatres* and Maurice Lemaître, *Qui est le docteur Ferdière?***

*From the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers.*

The Lettrist campaign prompted Ferdière to sue for libel and defamation of character. The press notice indicates that Isou was fined 500 francs. The editor of *Pariscope*, which published Isou's first polemical text in 1969, was fined 2000 francs. Ferdière received a total of 20,000 francs in the final settlement.

After the founding of the Association for the Defense of Victims of Psychiatry, Ferdière sued Lemaître in May 1971. The suit revolved in part around a meeting between Ferdière and the Lettrists that took place shortly after Isou's release from confinement in June 1968. After a general discussion of psychiatry, the conversation had turned to Ferdière's treatment of Artaud. Asked why the poet had called him "a swine ... who takes heroin," Ferdière had responded "Yes, it's true." Isou then speculated that he had taken drugs to improve his mediocre poetry, a claim that Ferdière did not deny until Lemaître repeated the claim in his propaganda for the Association.

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*Bad Company*

**Jean-Bernard Arkitu, *Hommage lettriste à Artaud I. From the Bismuth-Lemaître Papers.***

**Gaston Ferdière, *Les mauvaises fréquentations: Mémoires d'un psychiatre*, Paris: J.-C. Simoën, 1978.**

Ferdière's encounters with the avant-garde continued to haunt him for the rest of his life. The title of his memoirs—*Bad Company*—published as the Lettrist assaults in *The Review of Psychokladology* were still in full swing, reflects the bitterness of a psychiatrist who had started his career with the hope of reconciling modernism and the science of the soul. In an eloquent biography of 2006, Emanuel Venet had the following to say about the strange case of Dr. Ferdière:

“Ferdrière, guilty? Yes, if it’s a sin to leave language intact and to die without an *oeuvre*, not curled up inside his own enigma, but offering himself up on a plate for all who are burned or nourished by poetry. Guilty of keeping to a human stature, despite the temptation to become bigger than life and the desire to make himself hated.”

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*Anti-Psychiatry and Cultural Revolution*

*Contre la Psychiatrie (1970).*

*Cahiers pour la folie, no. 5 (April/May 1971).*

*Partisans, no. 46 (February/March 1969).*

By the time Isou and the Lettrists “declared war” on Ferdrière, the psychiatric profession was already besieged by a rising tide of cultural rebellion that reached fever pitch with the student uprisings in Paris and around the world in 1968. Led by R. D. Laing and David Cooper in Britain and Franco Basaglia in Italy, the anti-psychiatry movement found strong resonance and indeed much of its inspiration in the anti-establishment currents of resistance in France. Pulled from Lemaître’s files on the Ferdrière case, these magazines are just a tiny sample of the assaults on psychiatry and psychoanalysis that pervaded the underground press.

An angry young man bearing a revolver underscores the messages of this underground magazine, *Against Psychiatry*, while the crowds of young protesters depicted on an early issue of the *Notebooks for Madness* brings back the still fresh memory of the Paris uprisings of May 1968. A special issue of *Partisans* the winter after the riots declares: “Psychiatry as it is constitutes one of the fields of application for the dominant ideology of class.”

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