

*Alex Fancy*

*More Than Child's Play: Victor, or the Children are in Power*

Only poetry is certain. . . . We live on cataclysms.

— Roger Vitrac (*Victor*)<sup>1</sup>

I HATE PRECOCIOUSLY WELL-BEHAVED CHILDREN.

— Antonin Artaud (Director's Notes for *Victor*)<sup>2</sup>

There have been very strange opening nights in Paris theatres, and one of them took place at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées on Monday, 24 December 1928. *Victor, or Power to the Children* would be something other than Christmas entertainment: a German critic, Paul Block, considered *Victor* to be ". . . the strangest theatre performance (he) was privileged to experience during (his) eight post-war years in Paris."<sup>3</sup>

The script for the performance staged on a Monday, when most Paris theatres are dark, was written by a certain Roger Vitrac who had escaped from a repressive provincial *petit bourgeois* family and had sought refuge in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Vitrac had flirted with the surrealist movement until he was excommunicated from that circle because of his interest in theatre.<sup>5</sup> He had allied himself with Antonin Artaud, the colorful iconoclast and

theoretician who originated the concept of "theatre of cruelty" and initiated a systematic attack on bourgeois institutions and conventions. Together with Robert Aron they had formed the Alfred Jarry Theatre, named after the visionary whose outrageous *Ubu Roi* had given Parisian audiences a preview of "theatre of the absurd" as early as 1896. Ubu, a tyrannical and childlike king whose creator indulged himself in a comprehensive parody of bourgeois hypocrisy and appetites, was indeed a worthy ancestor for Victor.

Artaud and Vitrac had neither a company nor a permanent performance space, but the curious had very good reasons to come to their fourth production on Christmas Eve. Previously they had produced Vitrac's *The Mysteries of Love*, a dream-like evocation of lovers who reveal their innermost criminal thoughts, whose two performances on 1 and 2 January 1927 had caused much discussion but were a financial disaster;<sup>6</sup> one performance of *Partage de midi* by Paul Claudel, the Catholic playwright and diplomat, a text produced without the author's permission in order to contest the notion of copyright (14 January 1928); and two performances of Strindberg's *Dream Play* at which spectators of the surrealist persuasion rioted in protest against the exploitation of dreams for financial purposes (June 2 and 3, 1928). It is little wonder that the opening of *Victor* attracted people like the legendary filmmaker Abel Gance and the novelist André Gide who almost never went to the theatre.<sup>7</sup>

A glance at the list of *dramatis personae* might have suggested to some spectators that this fourth production was a bedroom farce like so many others that played on the *grands boulevards* of Paris at the time—realistic plays which reflected the bourgeois milieu and offered complex plots but facile psychology, and which also catered to public taste by offering comic characters whose misfortunes and lack of wit amused their viewers. *Victor* would not be such a production.

For some spectators the very specific time prescribed for the dramatic action—12 September 1909 from 8:00 p.m. until midnight—might have been a hint that realism was being parodied.<sup>8</sup> Others might have suspected parody when they entered the theatre and saw a set conceived in outrageously bad taste—a bourgeois living room containing a huge birthday cake covering an entire table, with the so-called fourth wall

between the stage and the audience comprised of picture frames making the spectators feel like *voyeurs*.<sup>9</sup>

Victor is the son of Paul and Emilie Paumelle and he is celebrating his ninth birthday. Children rarely figured prominently in the theatre, and never this prominently. Perhaps no child actors were available, but why choose one who was close to six feet tall? Victor's first line contains an outrageous error which dispels any anticipation of normality: "Blessed is the fruit of your *wound*."<sup>10</sup> The first scene is a catalogue of provocations, as Victor manipulates Lili, the Maid. Her frustration gives way quickly to annoyance, then to rage, and ultimately to violence when her charge suggests that she provides sexual favors for her employer. A series of slaps only elicits more insults from Victor, who consummates his disrespect for his bourgeois milieu by breaking a Sèvres vase. This opening scene no doubt provided only momentary surprise for those who had seen the Alfred Jarry Theatre's production of *Dream Play*: at its outset Artaud had crossed the stage declaring his company's determination to "vomit on the motherland, on all motherlands, on society" (Béhar, "Textes" 767). Victor's solution for the material crisis he has provoked is to suggest that 10,000 francs be deducted from his inheritance. The unpredictable child then dismisses the incident by resorting to entertainment as he imitates his father imitating a child who has mistaken the vase for a horse egg.

Who is this monstrous child who has both the stature and the language of an adult? The answer is suggested by the end of the first scene. Driven to distraction, the Maid wants to leave because "Victor has gone mad. He's not a child anymore." Victor's answer is prophetic: "There are no more children. There never were any children" (I, ii, 13). Not by chance was this imaginary child born in 1900, for he is the first real child of the twentieth century: old long before his time, extremely aware, apprehensive and even anxious, the omniscient observer who lives in the shadow of "The Great War," suspended now between it and "The Great Depression," who is ready to question every institution, convention and diversion invented by his childish parents.

Of all the conventions called into question by Victor's creators, none were subjected to greater scrutiny than those which governed attendance at the theatre in an age of hypocrisy when people who had known the horrors of the Great War continued to deny that theatre could have any vital role to play in society. Artaud and Vitrac believed that most

spectators expected theatre to be little more than a mirror, and they held artists partly responsible for the fact that "In Europe no one knows how to scream anymore" (Artaud, "Theatre and its Double" 106, note).

In 1926 Artaud's first manifesto had appeared in the prestigious *Nouvelle Revue française* ("Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry" 643-44); it prescribed what Victor Corti has called a process of "de-identification":<sup>11</sup>

Audiences coming to our theatre know they are present at a real operation involving not only the mind but also the very senses and flesh. From then on they will go to the theatre as they would to a surgeon or dentist, in the same frame of mind, knowing, of course, that they will not die, but that all the same this is a serious business, and that they will not come out unscathed. . . . They must be thoroughly convinced that we can make them cry out. (Artaud, II, 17)

The concept of theatre as "a real operation" was inconsistent with conventional bourgeois theatre:

Plots dealing with money, money troubles, social climbing, the pangs of love unspoilt by altruism, sexuality sugar-coated with eroticism yet shorn of mystery, are not theatre even if they are psychology. This anxiety, debauchery and lust, before which we are only Peeping Toms gratifying our instincts, tends to go sour and turn into revolution. (Artaud, "The Theatre and its Double" IV, 58)

Artaud's personal rebellion resulted in the production of *Victor* in 1928; it would also lead, five years later, to the articulation of a revolutionary aesthetic code.

Artaud's "Theatre and its Double" would prescribe an event where spectators no longer reacted in complicity with their neighbors; the experience would isolate them from each other as it elicited a personal, but total response. In this new theatre the mind could not remain in neutral, just as the body could not be relaxed. In a "real operation" the mind is engaged and the body cries out as the spectator-patients confront an anguish which is both physical and metaphysical: "For whether we like it or not, true poetry is metaphysical and I might say it is its metaphysical scope, its degree of metaphysical effectiveness, which gives it its proper value" (IV, 30-31). Theatre of cruelty is a surgical process, one which is vital, cuts deep and leads to self-discovery.

Such theatre is not a business but "a true work of magic." Its objective is not to appeal to the eyes but to expose "the heart's most secret movements" and to throw bombs at "the majority of present-day habits of thought" (II, 23-25); it will be a "true culture" imbued with a new vitality, one that ". . . acts through power and exaltation, while the European ideal of art aims to cast us into a frame of mind distinct from the power present in its exaltation" (IV, 4). In this anti-realist theatre hallucination will be "the main dramatic method" (IV, 26-27). The new theatre must be visceral rather than simply intellectual, and it must question all ideologies. Artaud and Vitrac dreamed of a kind of theatrical virtual reality<sup>12</sup> which would triumph over the linearity which characterizes so much of Western thought—and art. This prescription for a "virtual" theatre was intended to be "a reaction against theatre" and would never be mistaken for music, mime or dancing, or "especially literature" because it would be an "integral theatre" (IV, 3), one which would unify the actors' skills and require of them an "affective athleticism" (IV, 100-106) as they engaged in "gestural metaphysics" (IV, 40). Performance would become what Catherine Amiard-Chevrel has recently called "a polyphonic construction" involving all the arts, skills and technical aids which the director, cast and crew had at their disposal. The objective of performances would be to create a festival atmosphere where the masses would participate in meaningful rituals both intellectual and physical in character, whose purpose was to promote nothing short of revolution (*Théâtre et cinéma* 10-18).

The spectators would confront "violent, physical images" which would "pulverize, mesmerize (their) sensibilities" and they would become "caught in the drama as if in a vortex of higher forces" (IV, 63). Such theatre would lessen the status of speech (IV, 54), and of the playwright (IV, 43). It would begin to undo the error of Shakespeare, whom Artaud held responsible for "an isolationist concept of theatre" and for the idea of art for art's sake (IV, 58-59). The new theatre would have a vital impact on spectators: it would revolutionize their thinking, and its physical and aesthetic violence would be "at the service of violence in thought" (IV, 62). Revolution is a visceral experience, and Artaud argued that theatre was "the last group means we still have of affecting the anatomy" (IV, 61). Like the plague, whose effects are profound, pervasive

and contagious, the new theatre would be "an active culture, a kind of second wind growing from within us like a new organ" (IV, 2).

Artaud left no doubt why he thought *Victor* would help him to achieve his revolutionary objectives. In a brochure circulated in advance of the production he promised a play which would be theatrical: Vitrac "keeps the stage before him in his mind"; iconoclastic: "The title alone indicates a basic lack of respect for established values"; disconcerting to the eye as well as to the mind: "The play expresses the disintegration of modern thought in scathing and at the same time *rigid actions*";<sup>13</sup> sure to leave the spectators in a state of existential nausea: ". . . here is the problem the play corresponds to: What do we think with? What's left? There are no longer any yardsticks or scales of value"; and engaging: "All this is expressed in a lively, tangible, but not at all philosophical way, as thrilling as a horse-race or a game of chess . . ." (II, 26-27). In short, Artaud expected "everything" from *Victor* (II, 174).

*Act I. In the dining room.* After the first, expository scene the Paumelles, and their friends, Antoine and Thérèse Magneau and their daughter Esther, celebrate Victor's ninth birthday in an atmosphere of nervous hysteria and incongruity marked by mechanical speeches, novel language and long silences. The puerility of the adults, their repressed violence, the hints of adultery and the incongruity of both form and content contribute to the emergence of a Victor who seems alienated from his milieu. An eccentric general who comes to dinner asks Victor patronizingly whether "we're still growing in height and wisdom." The tragic child's reply is prophetic: "Alas, yes, General" (I, viii, 29). This is a world where adults quote long passages from the Larousse Dictionary, speak in chorus and experience the kind of sudden mood swings one might expect from small children. It is not surprising that the act concludes with a role reversal, as Victor trains and rides the General who has become a horse.

*Act II. In the living room.* Distraught because "everyone has gone mad," Thérèse Magneau seeks refuge in the arms of Charles Paumelle (II, i, 39). They are surprised by Victor who delivers a soliloquy which expresses his confusion and guilt. "Am I the incarnation of vice and remorse? Ah! If this is the case, let me die rather than be dishonoured!" (II, iv, 44). Victor's father laments their inertia and stagnation: "We can't possibly spend the entire evening this way" (II, iv, 46). His call for a

miracle is answered by the arrival of Ida Mortemart who, despite an infirmity which causes her to break wind uncontrollably and frequently, is greeted with delight by Victor. She inspires him to be lyrical, he climbs on her knees and she tells him secrets which even the spectators do not hear. This symbol of putrefaction has been described by Bettina Knapp as "one of the most extraordinary and ingeniously constructed characters in French theatre" (56). In this lady's presence Victor becomes preoccupied with death. When she has left, everyone is disoriented and we seem to be in a world no longer based on reason, where human behavior is no longer predictable and language has become inoperative or delirious. As the act ends Victor's father calms his wife by reading newspaper extracts aloud; as he reads from the serial novel one of its characters enters the Paumelle living room. Such unorthodox events in a realistic setting can convince us that life really is a dream.

*Act III. In the bedroom.* The final act takes us from dream to hallucination. Everyone seems to suffer from insomnia, and the adults exhibit even more peculiar behavior than before. Artaud's theatre of cruelty takes on a literal meaning as Charles does carpentry in the bedroom while his wife tries to sleep. There are frequent visits from Victor who suffers extreme stomach pains and talks of his guilt and imminent death. Charles becomes delirious, there are references to the odor of death, and it is Victor's mother who declares that children are "the inevitable witnesses and bearers of redemption" (III, xiii, 80). Esther appears. Strange as this intervention may seem, it is little wonder that she has fled her insane father. She is soon joined by her mother who bears an extraordinary suicide note from him. He has decided to die as a *tricolore*, in a red and blue uniform partly hidden by a white nightshirt, suspended from the family flagpole and accompanied by military music on the gramophone. Victor utters a piercing shriek and loses consciousness, whereupon his mother delivers a mock-heroic tirade of self-conscious grief. When Victor regains consciousness her grief turns to recrimination, violence and remorse. Her son pardons her, remembers famous child prodigies who have gone before him, experiences paroxysms of pain, tells us he is now a full two meters high, says he has found "the secret of the Uniquat" and dies. A black curtain falls and rises again to reveal two other corpses and a smoking revolver. The Maid has the

last word and it is suitably ambiguous: "Now isn't this a drama!" (III, xx, 90).

There can be little doubt that those who saw the three performances of *Victor* experienced what Artaud and Vitrac had envisioned: disorientation, participation in "attempts at mysticism" (Artaud, II, 24) and a visceral event which exposed raw nerves and would leave them feeling that they had engaged in revolution. The press responded with excitement: *Victor* was "an unbelievable play, an unbelievably impudent play, with unbelievable comic details" (*Berliner Tageblatt*) which "encourages the disapproval of the coach-trip audiences" (*L'Intransigeant*). It was "a continuation of *Ubu Roi*" (*L'Avenir*) and it questioned "the entire significance of theatre" (*Les Nouvelles littéraires*).<sup>14</sup> However this excitement does not seem to have been shared by the general public which was probably not at all ready for *Victor*. In 1930 Artaud published *The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility*, a brochure which did not hide his disappointment at his failure to stage more than three performances of *Victor*, a play "aimed at the middle-class family unit" and which "featured adultery, incest, scatology, anger, surrealist poetry, patriotism, madness, shame and death" (II, 34). His comprehensive list of difficulties encountered by the Alfred Jarry Theatre reminds us that a good play can be a box-office failure: ". . . raising capital, choosing the right location, difficulties over a company, censorship, the police, organized sabotage, competition, audiences and critics" (II, 35). Ever the visionary, Artaud also lamented in letters to his friend Vitrac, following the failure of *Victor*, the absence of "theatre for an age of trauma" and their inability to "reconcile theatre with the new realities" (Jan. 1930).<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most judicious comment regarding the failure of *Victor* was made by the reputable critic Jean Prévost who reminded readers of *La Nouvelle Revue française* that "All the evil remarks which have been said, and can be said, about the play must be weighed against its qualities and promise" (16.184 [1929]: 280). Promising as *Victor* may have been, the French cultural establishment waited for two decades before repaying its debt to Roger Vitrac.

The debt was repaid in five instalments:<sup>16</sup> (1) In 1946 *Victor* was staged a second time, at the Agnes Capri Theatre by Michel de Ré<sup>17</sup> who chose the script because it was, in his words, "revolutionary at a time when revolutionary theatre is neither written nor produced" (*Combat* 9



Nov. 1946). (This was four years before Eugène Ionesco entered the theatre scene with *The Bald Soprano*, then acclaimed as the first comedy of the absurd.) In the same year the script was published by Gallimard, the most reputable editor of literature. (2) The brilliant young director Roger Planchon chose *Victor* for the 1955 season of his Théâtre de la Comédie in Lyons. (3) In 1962 the play was directed by Jean Anouilh, recognized by then as a major twentieth-century playwright, in the Théâtre de l'Ambigu which contained 900 seats. The production ran for a full season and, in the opinion of Gilles Sandier, "repaired the injustice of 1928 and vindicated Antonin Artaud."<sup>18</sup> Anouilh declared his enthusiasm for the script in *Le Figaro littéraire*: "*Victor* is one of three or four plays I would exchange for half of what I have written myself. . . . It should have been a turning point. People did not listen, so we waited thirty years for Ionesco." He also stated that Vitrac "probably invented the new comedy" (6 Oct. 1962). The production was very successful; it was also filmed for television and broadcast on radio. Anouilh's initiative also led to publication of the script in the popular *L'Avant-Scène théâtre* (15 Nov. 1962). (4) The play was produced, quite appropriately, in 1968, the year of "the Second French Revolution." Guy Lauzin's production at the Comédie de Bourges was called "*the play about the events of May*" (Copferman); "the best dramatic commentary" on the students' and workers' protests that paralyzed France and threatened to bring down the government, a play whose significance people were just beginning to understand (Lemarchand); and a play which demonstrated how the young had moved from "the ante-chamber" to "the living room" of society (Rabine). (5) In 1983 *Victor* entered the repertoire of the Comédie Française and Vitrac's child became part of the literary heritage, the *kleros* from which he had been excluded for over half a century.<sup>19</sup>

Vitrac was not the first young visionary to be misunderstood in his time. What is unique is the remarkable extent to which he anticipated the literary concerns and dramatic forms of writers in subsequent generations.

*Victor* is more than a child's play. The character whom Jacques Lemarchand recognized in 1962 as "the perfect satirical hero"<sup>20</sup> is one of those literary and dramatic creations which capture the anguish of an age and inspire other artists who are struggling to give expression to our very humanity. *Victor* has been compared more than once to Hamlet:<sup>21</sup> like Shakespeare's tragic hero and the visiting actors, *Victor* questions and

then repudiates the amorality of his elders. In fact Victor's "games" suggest the dramatics of actors who mirror, with intelligence, imagination, energy and unpredictability, the world in which they find themselves. He is never didactic but allows his spectators to reach their own conclusions; he does not make value judgments, but his very presence illuminates the moral vacuum which is inhabited by his parents. He is an actor for the modern age, a marginalized stranger for whom life is "absurd": a forerunner of Camus's "outsider," he finds himself in a world where he does not belong. His understanding of the absurdity of his condition allows him to be creative in the manner defined by D. W. Winnicott: he formulates personal attitudes which will allow him to confront a hostile world (65-85).

Victor's attitudes are extreme, for the cure must be equal to the illness experienced by a child whose elders display puerility, stagnation and an absence of moral values. His final dramatic gesture is to succumb to an intense pain which seems to have been induced by his parents. In the 1946 production Victor was a silent observer visible behind a door during the entire third act and his cries and moans intensified as his parents' arguments descended into hallucinatory entropy (Heed, *Le Coco de Dada* 76-77). When he dies he embraces the ultimate absurdity of life, which is death. Victor's demise precedes by more than a decade Camus's absurd Caligula who becomes a teacher and kills his subjects in order that they might learn that "people die and are unhappy." A moment before Victor's death his confused and ineffectual father asks the doctor to explain the reason for this untimely event; Victor interrupts the specialist: "I am dying of Death. It is the last secret of the Uniquat" (III, xx, 89). The child who embraces death has a precocious understanding of life. He can also be viewed as the absurd character *par excellence*: he did not choose Charles and Emilie Paumelle to be his parents, just as he did not choose to live in their rotting and hostile world. His acceptance of death is a recognition that in a world bereft of moral values life is ultimately absurd; it is also his ultimate attempt to frustrate his parents and to repudiate their lifestyle.

By his own admission Victor is "terribly intelligent" (I, ii, 15) and this point has been made often by his teachers and parents (I, vii, 25). His mother accuses her husband, during one of their many domestic scenes, of being jealous of their son's habit of winning every prize at school (II,

iv, 45). One might say that Victor possesses "a terrible intelligence" for he understands the failure of his parents and the hypocrisy of his age. His systematic repudiation of his elders' lifestyle allows him to celebrate his alienation, to embrace the absurd and to view life as a game. In other words he is an eternal child whose playing space is that of art, which lies outside the confines of both good and evil. His insolent behavior anticipates the views of Johann Huizinga, who argues that play is not extraneous to culture. In his view play *is* culture and "only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determination of the cosmos" (Huizinga 3). Victor teaches us that play is rooted in intelligence, an assumption which would eventually motivate the theatre of the absurd.

Victor is a model player, a "terribly intelligent" observer of our world who disengages us from our Sèvres vases, our morality and our ideological roots. He celebrates Artaud's view of the actor as an "affective athlete," a person who is both intelligent and naïve and who uses strong dramatic images and outrageous gestures to shake us free of our rituals and our reason. Jean Anouilh explains that he chose to have Victor play for audiences in 1962 because this remarkable child showed spectators that realism had become inoperative and that they needed a new playing style which could evoke "the sinister and grotesque games *that adults really play*."<sup>22</sup> Unlike Caligula who was in possession of the same secrets as Victor, this tragic hero whom Anouilh considers "a giant in short pants" is a victim rather than an executioner. Anouilh's 1962 program included notes which the author had provided for the first revival in 1946: "Who is Victor? A myth. The myth of the precocious child. . . . When such a child dies prematurely we say 'You see, he just couldn't live, he was too intelligent'" (Vitrac, "Par Vitrac"). His extreme alienation is confirmed by the doctor in attendance who has an immediate explanation for his death: "That's what happens to stubborn children" (III, xx, 89). The insensitivity of others only serves to confer upon him the status of hero, and we seem to be witnessing an act of child sacrifice by adults who express their frustration and hostility in a world where there are no longer any transcendent values, heroes or identifiable enemies.

There is a typical role reversal when Victor, whose deadly stomach pains have begun, comes to beg his father to make less noise. The latter has taken a break from his nocturnal construction to provoke his wife into

hysteria, first by ranting about his insomnia and then by telling her that their friend Thérèse is his mistress. Victor cannot calm his father and exclaims as he leaves: "Childhood is always guilty in this age. Holy Childhood!" His enraged father declares immediately that this statement is "punishable by murder" (III, iv, 69). He begins to rave incoherently while brandishing a revolver and leaves no doubt that Victor is the sole object of his paranoid rage; in the very short ensuing scene he articulates 14 times the name of the monster child who is the cause of all their problems (III, v, 70-71). The father expresses no emotion during the death scene and responds to Victor's final words in this way: "I never understood a thing about that child" (III, xx, 89). One could argue that the child who compares himself with Hercules, Pascal, Mozart, Chopin and Jesus (III, xviii, 86) does not really die: he leaves a world where he never belonged and his death is the most natural of events, the culmination of revolt and an act of sacrifice. It is also a *mise en question* of the very origins of Western theatre which is rooted in the feasts of Dionysos when it was the old who were sacrificed in favor of the young. Vitrac encourages us to admit that we live in a world which kills its young as it civilizes them and Victor the prodigy suffers from a form of progeria, or premature old age. The play, with its confusion of styles, discontinuous dialogue, incoherent characters and outrageous images, was offered to the public by Vitrac as the best way of telling the truth about society, and about what it does to its children.

Victor's death is both a sacrifice and a victory. It consummates his refusal to accept the cultural, social and linguistic rituals imposed upon him by his parents and ancestors. His spirit of abnegation allows him to accept with serenity the ultimate sacrifice about which, despite the screams of pain which are heard during the final scenes, he does not complain. His lucidity confers upon him an understanding of his Christlike role; the ever-mocking prodigy employs the language of a logician when, close to death, he pardons his disconsolate mother: "Come, come, my good mother. Primo, I am going to die, secondo, I have to die, and tertio, I must consequently pardon you. You are pardoned. (*He blesses her. Emilie sobs and kisses his hand convulsively*)" (III: 86).

The modern-day Christ-figure and scapegoat was also a reminder of the legions of young people who had been sacrificed in the Great War, and the anti-militaristic tone of the play surprised a German critic who

saw the 1927 production.<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that Vitrac had mockery of the military in mind when he created the fatuous and obsessed old General Lonségur who attempts through word, song and dance to relive the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Some of the 1946 performances were interrupted by spectators who viewed the pro-military conservatism of the adult characters as a critique of the "Work, Family, Motherland" motto of the Vichy regime (Heed 164, note 109). A world at war has declared war on its children; in the 1968 production, abuse of children by the older generation was dramatized in a controversial manner when a reading of the dying child's rectal temperature by the family doctor became an act of sodomy (III, xix, 87).<sup>24</sup> This is a loveless and leaderless world where the adults cannot be trusted and will even go so far as to sacrifice a child in order to appease a nameless god who, among the ancient Jews, might have borne the name of Moloch.

Martin S. Bergmann argues that the end of child sacrifice coincided with the emergence of the concept of a loving god. He explains further that, the cult of Mary notwithstanding, this emergence has been compromised by the Oedipus complex: ". . . the sacrifice of children was a collective trauma with which Western religions are still struggling" and both Judaism and Christianity are singularly characterized by "the major effort that they make to repress the Oedipus complex and substitute for it a loving relationship between father and son." It has been demonstrated that such a relationship between Victor and his father seems to be entirely lacking. What is even more interesting is the extent to which Victor satisfies Bergmann's definition of the "oedipal victor": ". . . a male child who succeeds in obtaining all of his mother's love and in abolishing, in fact or fantasy, the sexual relationship between his parents" (Bergmann 1-13).

Victor's blessing of his mother establishes what seems almost to be a mystical bond between her and her son. During the death scene their relationship is thrown into relief by the absence of any expression of love between the child victim and his father, and by a struggle which would surely stimulate the imaginations of Freudian critics: Emilie wrestles away from her husband a revolver which Victor mistakes for a pipe and which will allow her to kill both her husband and herself immediately after their son's death. The demise of the Paumelle's only son<sup>25</sup> consummates his union with his mother, precipitates the latter's seizure of

authority,<sup>26</sup> negates any further procreation and terminates in a metaphorical sense the rotting civilization of which the parents were custodians. The murder-suicide is one of those logical dramatic events which cause shock without surprise. Emilie's murder of her husband can be viewed as an act of revenge and contrition on behalf of her son who had been abused by a phallogocratic society. Her suicide is also logical, in the sense that her *raison d'être*, that of mother, no longer exists.

Just as the cult of the Virgin Mary is, in the view of Bergmann, the closest Western civilization has come to realizing the concept of a loving god, so Victor's relationship with his mother in the final scene is the closest he comes to being loved. It is possible that Emilie has some understanding of her son's destiny, for she asks him to pardon her on his deathbed after "this cursed night, an entire life" (III, xviii, 85), and it is interesting to note that a televised version of the play broadcast in 1970 finished with an image of the Holy Family (Heed 157). However, any allusion to the Holy Family can only be a parody, for Emilie's plea for pardon comes after an incident where she has slapped her ailing son. In fact, Vitrac's script prescribes 18 incidents of slapping, a gesture which diminishes the Paumelles and their friends and leaves no doubt of the intense frustration and repressed violence which characterizes their family relationships.

If Victor is invested with power, as the play's title suggests, it is because he has been able to precipitate the destruction of an institution which, in the view of Vitrac and many of his contemporaries, had survived in name only.<sup>27</sup> When Harold Clurman, the American director and critic, saw the 1962 production he was struck by "the horrible aptness of the domestic scenes," particularly those of Act III where the parents retire to their bedroom for the night,

... a night in which their insomnia, sense of guilt, violent recriminations, miserable attempts at amatory reconciliation, and self-asphyxiating venom mount to a torrent that could be bound to cripple—even if it did not kill—the child witness upon whom it pours. I have rarely seen anything more dreadful or . . . more true in any realistic play. (Quid. in Heed 121)

Artaud would have been delighted to hear of Clurman's visceral and total response to Vitrac's spectacle of bourgeois rot, a bedroom farce which turned into a "bedroom tragedy."

*Victor* is perhaps the first and only bedroom tragedy, a form which was more than simple evidence of Vitrac's desire to confuse his critics. It was a forerunner of the "metaphysical farce" invented a generation later by Eugène Ionesco as a mirror of our human condition at a time when, after another world war, the only honest way to present humanity was in a spirit of derision.<sup>28</sup>

It can be argued that the child's repudiation of the family was an act of revenge which was long overdue. Richard N. Coe, an ardent spokesperson for the marginalized child, explains that our long tradition of rationalism has helped in "devaluating the experience of childhood" and that thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau argued the child's need for sensual contact with the world (Coe 11, 16). *Victor's* series of provocations in the dining room (Act I) are an attempt at engagement, to establish physical and emotional contact with his milieu. In the living room (Act II) the marginalized children observe their milieu from which love, curiosity and fear of death have been quarantined. In Act III, in the bedroom, *Victor* re-enacts the circumstances that produced his anguish in the preceding acts. Re-enactment by the child of abandonment by the older generation is a "play-structure" which, in the view of Freud, is known as "tragedy" (Coe 243). The tragedy of *Victor* unfolds during a fête; the passage from innocence to experience happens in the midst of the meaningless rituals of an uncomprehending world.

*Victor* seems to experience love for a moment just before his death when he pardons his mother. Otherwise he is alone. He is alienated from his father, has contempt for the latter's mistress, and terrifies the Maid. He dismisses his friend Esther from the outset because, unlike him, she is a child. In other words she is not unique but is susceptible to the process of socialization: "Listen, Esther, don't concern yourself with me. Leave me alone. Look after your dolls. Lick your cats, love your neighbour as yourself and be a docile child as you wait to become a good wife and mother" (I, iii, 16). *Victor's* advice to Esther is informed by precocious wisdom, by the realization that children die at that point when they discover the truth about the world they have inherited from their parents. It can be argued that the truth is brought to *Victor* by Ida Mortemart, the only other woman he encounters.

The mysterious visitor who seems to suffer from terminal flatulence came onstage in the 1962 production accompanied by the first eight notes

of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played on a tuba (Heed 119). Anouilh included the following documents with the program for this production: a photograph of the famous "Pétomane," the gaseous virtuoso who had attracted wealthy and sophisticated people to his "concerts" at the turn of the century;<sup>29</sup> a letter of refusal from Alexandra Pecker, an aspiring young actress who had declined the role in 1928 for fear that it would compromise her career; and Artaud's *Letter to Ida Mortemart* whose appearance is "the highlight of the play." When he describes this intriguing character Artaud reminds us of Baudelaire who saw both spleen and ideal in the people of Paris, or of Pascal who tells us we are but a reed floating on the water and adds that we are nevertheless a thinking reed. For Artaud she represents better than any other character ". . . the deep eternal antithesis between the bondage of our condition and our physical faculties and our capacity as pure intellect and pure mind." She is "the heart of magic . . . in the midst of human decay" (II, 63).

Ida Mortemart is wealthy and beautiful (I, v, 50) yet she is a victim of her bodily functions.<sup>30</sup> This character fulfils Artaud's desire for outrageous symbols of our humanity which would have a visceral impact on their audience. She also fulfils Victor's need for a *confidante*; although she has sent Esther screaming into the garden she has a mesmerizing effect on Victor who tells her: "You have fallen into our midst like a jewel into mercury." The precocious child is sensitive to her beauty, her status and her anguish, and he evokes these attributes in what could be either a child's game or an incantation: "Votre pâleur, votre peine, vos perles, vos paupières, vos pleurs, votre privilège" (I, v, 51). A critic might add *polyvalence* to the list, for Ida Mortemart is a remarkably appropriate and interesting character, for several reasons: on a literal level this person whose name suggests "death" (*morte*) and "disgust" (*marre*) can represent society, even high society, in a state of putrefaction; in a realistic sense she is, in the words of Vitrac himself, "A modern-style sphinx, the image of a world viewed from the first airplanes, threatened by anarchy, marked by (adultery), with the disturbing memory (of war). . . . A stinking and revengeful world that has not yet accepted its defeat" ("Par Vitrac"); she is the representation of our humanity which appealed to Artaud; and she is an essential dramatic protagonist who shares with Victor the most horrible truth of all, a devastating revelation which is



communicated to him, in true classical tradition, at the very middle of the play.

Victor spends time alone with this strange surrogate mother and shares quiet confidences with her, seated on her knee, while the hysterical adults look for Esther who has fled into the garden. Their scene together (II, vi, 52-55) is complex and is marked by a variety of forms of communication: four periods of silence, non-verbal behavior which verges on eroticism ("*Silence.—Victor kisses her several times on the neck, slowly.*"), jocular exchanges and both secret and spoken confidences. Victor shows that he has no sense of time ("Nothing proves I'm not more than a hundred years old");<sup>31</sup> he senses his vulnerability to death, a fundamental trait of humanity; and he confesses his distress regarding the one thing he has never learned ("I know everything but that"): the "terribly intelligent" child is terribly ignorant in one sense: he claims to be in love but he does not know how to make love, and "would not like to die without knowing." Victor's problem is both an expression of pre-pubescent anxiety and an affirmation of his very humanity.

In an exchange which a postmodernist would enjoy, Ida Mortemart "*bends over the child and speaks to him for a long time in a low voice.*" Any attempt that the audience might make to hear her secrets is frustrated by hysterical discussion in the garden where Esther has been found, bloodied and slobbering. Confrontation with the impossibility of love is itself made impossible by the ambient noise of life. The child and the confidant linked in a brief erotic relationship are both privileged observers of their absurd world. What they actually say to each other is of no importance for they are linked by a common understanding which is more profound—and more realistic—because it will never be articulated. Victor may love the sulphureous beauty who whispers in his ear but it is inconceivable that he should make love to her. His sphinx-like *confidante* reckes of death but the dramatic context suggests that she reveals to him the secret of life as it is lived by the Paumelle family in Paris in 1928—love is impossible.

It is interesting to note that Victor is also something of a sphinx: as the scene ends he is once again a very ordinary child and asks a final favor: "I would like you to fart for me." His unpredictability and mercurial nature have been conveyed by those who played the character, and contributed to his impact and success. Claude Rich, who played

Victor in 1962, charmed and overwhelmed critics and inspired reactions of a subjective nature which would have pleased Vitrac and Artaud in 1928: "Cruel, tender, cynical, stupefyingly astute, he gives Victor a mysterious dimension, a kind of revengeful vulnerability, a disturbing liberty of spirit which defies all attempts at interpretation. One does not know what is up or what is about to burst out" (Marcabru, *Avant-scène. Théâtre* 276: 29); "A hint of a smile, his eyes retreating, he appears first as the cynical young spy, preparing coldly his monstrous tricks; then, his smile disappears steadily and the actor lets us see a new Victor, tender, bitter, sarcastic, vulnerable, always unpredictable" (Carat, "Brecht et Vitrac" 69); Victor is "... at the same time a hateful Jojo and a Hamlet. He is embarrassing, disturbing and also stifled by his own anguish at the realization of his intelligence." Philippe Clevenot, who played the role in 1968, impressed one critic because he combined "Oxfordian distinction" with the "poetic vulgarity of false angels of innocence," "the confidence of the wealthy" with "the discomfort of the young lad with tousled hair" (Copferman).<sup>32</sup>

Victor charms the spectator, confounds the critic and, like other exceptional dramatic characters, has acquired the autonomy which allows him to exert power and mystery over us all. It is of particular interest that in this instance it is a child who is an agent of revolution and of the "real operation" envisaged by Artaud, for children had rarely appeared on the stage as central dramatic characters before the creation of Victor. This uniqueness prompted the director of the 1962 production to say that it was "given to Vitrac" (Anouilh, "Cher Vitrac"). Robert Abirached confesses that when he saw the play in 1962 "laughter froze in (his) throat" as he watched Victor discover "the leprosy of language, stupidity, ugliness, hypocrisy and the failure of love." This spectator also seems fascinated by the character of Victor above everything else and seems to recognize that Victor's *play* has become the play, "a game of destruction from which no value emerges intact" ("Un jeune auteur" 376-79).

Perhaps no theory can be applied with greater success to this unique character than Carl Jung's notion of the invincibility of the child archetype who reflects both our earliest pre-conscious childhood and our anticipation of post-conscious life after death: "The 'child' is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning and the triumphal end" (Jung and

Kerényi 98). We remember the child-giant in the sailor suit for his strangely existentialist self-awareness. He addresses the Maid: "I must tell you today, September 12, on the Feast of Saint-Léonce, that I will not wait one more year to become a man, which means nothing, and that I am simply determined to be something" (I, II, 11). As sure as existence precedes essence he will be *something* rather than *someone*, a *victor* rather than *Victor*, a metaphor for the person we once were before we acquired an identity and became rational, civilized and inadequate adults. He has also prepared the way for a legion of children and childlike characters who will appear in the French theatre in the twentieth century,<sup>33</sup> children who hold out the promise of the perceptive, truthful, vital and revolutionary character we each might someday become.

## NOTES

1. "Alfred Jarry" 25-29.
2. Artaud, *Collected Works*, II.
3. "Experience," a translation of "erleben," can suggest that Block was engaged by the event. See also Artaud, *Collected Works* II, 216.
4. The most informative biographies of Roger Vitrac are provided by Henri Béhar: *Roger Vitrac: Un réprouvé du surréalisme; Vitrac: Théâtre ouvert sur le rêve; and Étude sur le théâtre Dada et surréaliste*. See also the following general studies: Christophe Desboulrières, *Le Théâtre au XXe Siècle* (Paris: Bordas, "En toutes lettres," 1989); Jacqueline de Jomaron, ed., *Le Théâtre en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992); Dorothy Knowles, *French Drama of the Inter-War Years* (London: Harrap, 1967); Bettina Knapp, *Modern French Theatre: 1918-1939* (New York: Grove, 1985) and Paul-Louis Mignon, *Panorama du théâtre du XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
5. Theatre people were suspect because they were considered to have pecuniary, rather than purely artistic, motives. See Artaud, *Collected Works* II, 23; and André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* 123-24. Surrealists were also suspicious of actors because they might adopt the surrealists' credo without having a commitment to the movement. See Auslander 357-69.
6. This play was presented with contributions from the two other founding members of the company: *Ventre brûlé ou La Mère folle* by Artaud and *Gigogne* by Robert Aron.
7. The Alfred Jarry Theatre experiment is recounted by Henri Béhar in his introduction to "Textes: Lettres d'Antonin Artaud à Roger Vitrac sur la dernière manifestation du Théâtre Alfred Jarry," 765-76. Artaud had hoped to have the costs of the production of *The Dream Play* paid by the Swedish ambassador who was visiting Paris. However the play was produced in a discontinuous and dream-like manner which

- annoyed the Swedish delegation who walked out. The surrealists' attempts to interrupt the first performance convinced Artaud to obtain police protection and caused the third member of the company, Robert Aron, to withdraw. See also Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, and Orenslein 18.
8. Vitrac anticipated playwrights like Eugene Ionesco who would argue, after the Second World War, that in an absurd world only absurdist theatre could provide genuine realism. For this reason the latter refused to be considered an absurdist writer, arguing in *Notes et contre-notes* that it is life which is absurd, not his theatre (84-85, 179, 297). See also Ionesco, *Entre la vie et le rêve* 129-37.
9. Three photos of the original production are provided by Behar, Vitrac: *Theatre ouvert sur le rêve*. See also Krapp 51-62.
10. "Enlaille" instead of "entailles," Vitrac, Victor 10.
11. See his introduction to vol. 2 of Artaud's *Collected Works* 9.
12. Marlene Audit has examined Vitrac's "virtual stage" (*Theatre et posture surréalistes*).
13. The italics are Artaud's. His prescription of "rigid actions" anticipated the kind of disconnected acting style which would often be seen in the theatre of the absurd.
14. Quotations from reviews are provided by Artaud, II, 214-16.
15. *Quel in La Nouvelle Revue Française* (1 Apr. 1964): 772-74.
16. A comprehensive list of productions of Victor up to 1975 is provided by Behar, *Theatre ouvert* 236-39.
17. Reviews and a photograph are included in Laitour, ed. 272-73.
18. *Acte*, quoted anonymously in *L'Avant-Scène Theatre*, 276,15 (1962): 29, with other *faux reviews*.
19. The decision to include a script in the repertoire of the country's oldest national theatre is a veritable *rite de passage*. Victor was presented at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, another national theatre, from 29 March until 30 April 1983 in a production by Jean Bouchard. There have been other productions of Victor, and we have information regarding productions in Belgium, England and Switzerland.
20. In *Le Figeuro littéraire*, quoted anonymously in *L'Avant-Scène Theatre* 276: 29.
21. See, among others, Anouilh, "Cher Vitrac" 8. Anouilh had published this very flattering article on Victor in *Le Figeuro* on 1 Oct. 1962, two days before the opening of his production of the play.
22. The italics are Anouilh's.
23. "A critique of patriotism. I am surprised no protest was raised in a French theatre" (Paul Bloch, in Artaud, *Collected Works*, II, 216).
24. Heed 148-52. Heed also reports that, in the same production, Victor was abused as well by Ida Morsemart's indignant caresses when he sat on her knees.
25. Vitrac did not resist the urge to pun on the French term for "only son": *filz unique* (III, xviii, 86).
26. This may also be a throwback to Vitrac's family. His father drank away his inheritance, reportedly in spite of hysterical admonitions from his mother (*L'Avant-Scène Theatre* 690 (15 May 1981)).

27. Annette Shandler Levitt reminds us that the surrealists "... regarded the family as an immoral bourgeois institution inimical to the freedom of the individual" ("The Domestic Tragedies of Roger Vitrac" 514).
28. See Jacquart, *Le Théâtre de dérision*.
29. The fame and exploits of Joseph Pujol are examined by Rabkin and Silverman, *It's a Gas* 66-74.
30. She is not unlike Jarry's infamous Ubu (1896) who was both King of Poland and a parody of bourgeois appetites. Other such characters would appear in the New Theatre after 1950.
31. The disintegration of time, the cornerstone of social order, would become common in the New Theatre, and is a major salvo in the attack on Western culture. See in particular the works of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.
32. *Combat* 3.10 (1962), qtd. in Heed 117.
33. A search has produced more than 50 titles.

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