

FIRE

Beneath The Ink



Setting: A smoky café theatre in a surreal dimension, where time is fluid, and the espresso is existentially bitter. A small stage. Two chairs. One unreasonably angry writer. One feral Frenchman.

Moderator: Welcome, everyone, to *Conversations from the Abyss*. Tonight, we host Harlan Ellison, famed science fiction author and grenade disguised as a man, and Antonin Artaud, father of the Theater of Cruelty and person most likely to stage a play inside your spleen. Tonight's topic: *Is it a moral duty to traumatize your fans?* Harlan, would you like to begin?

Ellison (already yelling):

Fans?! I don't *have* fans. I have *adversaries who read fast*. If you're *comfortable* with my work, you're not *paying attention*. Art should grab you by the throat, slam you into a wall, and then file a restraining order *against you*.

Artaud (cackling in French):

Oui! Exactement! To coddle the audience is to nurse a serpent on your nipple. The theater is not a womb; it is a scalpel! If the audience leaves unscarred, it was not art, it was... a *PowerPoint!*

Ellison:

You know, Antonin, I once mailed a dead gopher to a critic.

Artaud (genuinely impressed):

Mon dieu, you are a poet.

Moderator:

But isn't there value in rewarding appreciation? A little gratitude for your supporters?

Artaud:

Gratitude? I once staged a play where the audience was locked inside a room full of screaming mannequins and then pelted with raw meat. Some said it was too subtle.

Ellison (grinning):

That's cute. I once rewrote a TV script so that everyone died, including the lighting technician. They cut it, so I set my typewriter on fire and used the smoke to spell out my resignation. In Klingon.

Moderator:

But surely, shocking your audience risks alienating them?

Ellison:

Good. Let 'em run. If they're not willing to be shocked, they don't *deserve* the work. I don't write for comfort. I write to make people *question their furniture*.

Artaud (nodding solemnly):

Comfort is the opiate of the bourgeoisie. Shock is the only language they still understand. If you do not spit in their souls, they will redecorate their ignorance with your words.

Ellison:

Exactly. You want applause? Be a trained seal. You want meaning? Be ready to light the podium on fire *and dare the crowd to clap before they burn*.

Artaud:

If I ever write something that makes people feel "seen," I shall impale myself on a velvet curtain rod.

Ellison:

And if I ever give someone a "safe space," it's because I've buried them alive in a padded cell and labeled it *The Comfort Zone*.

Moderator (lighting a cigarette with a scream):

We've heard from Harlan Ellison and Antonin Artaud, both in favor of artistic shock therapy. Now, please welcome our surprise guest, Charles Dickens—resurrected via séance and sheer narrative momentum. Charles?

Dickens (staring at the espresso machine like it might bite him):

Good heavens. I'm not entirely sure how I came to be here, but I overheard talk of "audience cruelty," and felt it my *Christian duty* to intervene.

Ellison:

Oh no. Not a moralist with a ghost story quota.

Artaud (squinting suspiciously):

You... smell like *orphan tears and plot devices*.

Dickens (offended but dignified):

I'll have you know, my stories have moved *millions*. I've brought attention to poverty, injustice, child labor—

Ellison (interrupting):

—With characters named Mr. Slaps-a-lot and Little Dead Billy. Real subtle work there, Chuck.

Dickens (tight smile):

My intent was to move hearts, not dislocate jaws.

Artaud:

Then you are an *undertaker*, not an artist. You embalm your audience in sentimentality. I would rather bludgeon them with a chicken carcass and call it *Macbeth*.

Dickens:

I aimed to uplift the poor!

Ellison:

You wrote novels by the yard to pay off your bar tab. Don't hand me the halo. You milked suffering for serial publication. You were the *Netflix* of Victorian London.

Dickens:

And yet people wept! They *changed*! They built *orphanages*! You lot just set things on fire and call it catharsis.

Artaud (slapping a chair for no reason):

If you want comfort, buy a cushion. If you want *revelation*, I will scream in your ear until you see God in reverse.

Dickens (bristling):

I believe in *resonance*, not raw meat in the face.

Ellison:

Resonance is for violins. We write to *disrupt*. If your readers aren't rethinking their entire life after chapter three, what's the point?

Dickens:

Because not every reader *needs* to be flung into an existential meat grinder to grow! Some simply need *hope*.

Artaud (horrified):

Hope? You said the *H-word*?

Ellison (mock gagging):

Hope is the first draft of denial. You don't solve systemic injustice with a plucky chimney sweep and a change of heart. You torch the palace. You salt the earth. You send the king his own kneecaps in a gift box.

Dickens:

That's not revolution. That's *melodrama with explosives*.

Artaud:

And what is theater *but* divine melodrama, *flayed*?

Ellison:

Listen, Chuck. I admire your tenacity. Anyone who writes a thousand pages and *still forgets to include dragons* has a kind of courage. But art isn't therapy. It's *surgery with no anesthesia*.

Dickens:

And I say art is a lantern in the dark.

Artaud (pointing dramatically at nothing):

No! Art is a *molotov cocktail* inside the lantern!

Ellison:

Thank you! Finally something we agree on.

Moderator (leaning in, voice like gravel in a blender):

Let's bring this to a close. Final arguments. You have ten seconds each before the stage becomes bees.

Artaud (frothing slightly):

If your art does not make your audience scream, then *scream is all they deserve*. I will staple their eyelids open until they see the *void*.

Dickens (adjusting cravat nobly):

If your art does not *uplift* at least one soul, you've merely thrown a tantrum in ink.

Ellison (lighting his manuscript on fire):

Good art should leave bruises. Great art should leave *warrants*. I'm not here to soothe your trauma—I'm here to *punch you into a better version of yourself*.

Moderator (now speaking only in riddles and coughs):

And now...from beyond the grave and beneath a pile of allegory, please welcome the fourth combatant in tonight's increasingly unhinged symposium: satirist, clergyman, and literary arsonist—**Jonathan Swift**.

Swift (smiling like he just insulted you in Latin):

Gentlemen. I see we've been debating whether to scald the reader slowly or dunk them directly in acid.

Ellison:

I like this guy already.

Dickens (adjusting his waistcoat, again):

Jonathan Swift! Surely *you*, sir, would agree that literature must *inspire* as well as *correct*.

Swift:

My dear Mr. Dickens, I once suggested we eat Irish babies to solve famine. Does that strike you as *inspirational*?

Dickens (visibly rattled):

Well, I suppose it depends on how they're prepared...

Artaud (sniffing Swift):

Ah! You reek of metaphor and powdered contempt! We could have made *brilliant horrors* together. I would have cast you as a bleeding moon that howls at the audience during intermission.

Swift (nodding approvingly):

And I would have rewritten your playbill as a ransom note to God.

Ellison (chuckling):

See, this is the energy we need. Satire's the *Trojan horse* of cruelty. You make 'em laugh and then punch 'em in the pancreas with truth.

Swift:

Exactly. Satire is the scalpel wrapped in a joke. If they bleed and laugh at the same time, you've done it right.

Dickens (exasperated):

But at what cost?! Isn't there any room for *gentleness* in your philosophies?

Artaud:

Gentleness is how you lull the enemy before you shriek into their pupils.

Ellison:

Gentleness is what you leave behind with your high school poetry.

Swift:

Gentleness is useful... when disarming the weak just before mockery.

Dickens (pleading):

But readers are *people!* They suffer! They need *solace, hope, warmth!*

Swift:

Then let them read cookbooks.

Ellison (snorting):

Or fortune cookies.

Artaud (suddenly climbing onto his chair):

I propose a play! Four authors. One stage. One match. We each set fire to a manuscript and see whose screams echo loudest in the soul of the audience!

Swift:

As long as I get to rewrite the program as a list of edible organs, I'm in.

Dickens:

I—I simply *cannot* abide this madness!

Swift:

Then by all means, write a 900-page novel about it. Include a character named “Morally Upright Bob.”

Ellison (laughing wildly):

Can we please do this every week?

Moderator (now made entirely of moths):

Final thoughts, before the stage collapses into pure metaphor?

Artaud (holding a bleeding puppet for no reason):

Let the art *howl*. Let the audience *writhe*. Let truth arrive as a *slap in the lungs*.

Dickens (hands folded with grim resolve):

Let the art heal. Let the audience *grow*. Let truth arrive as a *warm candle in the dark*.

Ellison (grinning like a lit fuse):

Let the art *fight*. Let the audience *bleed*. Let truth arrive with *knives taped to its fists*.

Swift (smiling serenely):

Let the art *mock*. Let the audience *choke*. Let truth arrive wearing a powdered wig and demanding dinner guests.

Moderator:

And the surprises keep coming! Ladies and gentlemen, the Inkfather. The Escapist King. The Subcreator Supreme. Please welcome... **J.R.R. Tolkien.**

(The lights dim. A distant chorus of Elvish harmonies rises. Tolkien steps through a glowing door of oak and starlight, holding a pipe and a first draft of the universe.)

Tolkien (mildly, as if he's walked into a slightly unpleasant faculty meeting):

Good evening. I heard there was a debate about what art should *do* to its audience.

Ellison (gritting his teeth):

Oh fantastic. The guy who gave trees feelings and made maps mandatory.

Artaud (hissing):

You... *comfort people*. You build *worlds*. I build *wounds*.

Dickens (relieved):

Professor Tolkien! Finally, a man of *gentle heart* and *moral fiber*!

Swift (eyeing him like a suspicious pastry):

Or perhaps just another illusionist, using dragons to distract from reality's toothache.

Tolkien (taking a long puff from his pipe):

Yes, I offer *escape*. And I'll thank you not to sneer at that word. The critics who call escapism cowardice are confusing the *jailer* with the *prisoner*.

Ellison (snorting):

You think people in cages need *hobbits*?

Tolkien:

I think people in cages need *hope*. And hope is often best found through *imagination*. Not as avoidance—but as *confrontation by other means*.

Artaud (wild-eyed):

But where is the *terror*? Where is the *shock* that makes the soul bleed clean?

Tolkien (quietly):

Terror, too, has its place. But the soul also needs *beauty*. It must drink from the well of *wonder*, not just be waterboarded by *despair*.

Dickens (nearly clapping):

Hear, hear!

Swift (dryly):

Yes, let's all hold hands in Rivendell while the world burns.

Tolkien (with sudden steel):

Better to remind people *what is worth saving* than only to scream that it's doomed.

Ellison (pacing):

You give them Elves and noble kings and happy endings. That's a *lie*, John. The world *isn't* like that.

Tolkien:

Then give them a vision of the world *as it could be*. If you show them only darkness, don't be surprised if they forget how to *walk toward the light*.

Artaud (screaming at the air):

The light is a *lie*! A trick of the stage! The true theater is a *funeral for illusions*!

Tolkien:

And yet your own screams prove you still believe *something* sacred must be buried.

(Silence. Even Artaud stops twitching.)

Swift (raising his teacup with a grudging smirk):

A clever answer. You *do* have a tongue under all that myth and moss.

Ellison (grumbling):

So what's your verdict, professor? Should we horrify the audience? Mock them? Or tuck them in with lembas bread?

Tolkien (stepping center stage):

We must *do all of it*. Art must *challenge, mock, console, wound, and heal*. But if we forget the value of *wonder*—of true escape—we risk turning literature into nothing but a *mirror of misery*.

Escape is not the flight of the coward. It is the *quest of the brave*, the journey of those who still *believe* there is something better, even if it only exists between the pages.

Moderator (suddenly clear, like the voice of an old forest):

And thus concludes *The Final Debate*. Let it be known: horror wounds, satire scars, realism reminds, but *fantasy dreams*. And somewhere between them all—truth hides.

The curtain does not fall. Instead, a great eagle descends and carries the authors off in different directions. Ellison fights it. Artaud bites it. Dickens offers it tea. Swift writes a treatise on its questionable flight paths. Tolkien simply nods, already sketching a map of where it's going.

The End

