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Rimbaud

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Overview

Rimbaud and Psychocriticism

The language of desire is veiled and does not show itself openly. To read its indirections, to account for its effects, is no simple matter. What is at issue?

—Elizabeth Wright¹

C. A. Hackett's book *Rimbaud l'enfant* (1948) opened a new era in Rimbaud studies.² Hackett took as his point of departure this citation from Baudelaire: "Each of a child's minor troubles, each small pleasure, excessively enlarged by an exquisite sensibility, these later become in the adult man, even when he is unaware, the origin of the work of art."³ Applying this to Rimbaud, Hackett writes: "Incapable of understanding him, his parents transformed him into a monster. They crushed a life that, by the very marvel of its blossoming, terrified them" (162).

Yves Bonnefoy's *Rimbaud* (1961, 1994) went on to illuminate Rimbaud's relationship with his mother and its psychic cost.⁴ Bonnefoy writes:

His mother, who should have been drawn closer to her child by affection and informed by his mere physical presence, became opaque, a being of sinister mystery. And so it is the entire daily world, everything humanized, all that the social group employs for its goals, presumably goals of love—it is places, dwellings, objects that become hostile—and grimace. The grotesque, the sordid, the excremental will appear among these ruins. (14)

Rimbaud was condemned by his own lucidity: "He can try by travel to rediscover the land of marvels; by *the reasoned disorder of all the senses*

to awaken in his flesh its natural immediacy, [yet] he will always carry with him the self disgust spoken in 'Honte,' and with it the unsolvable contradictions of his soul and his body" (19; emphasis in original). Bonnefoy's insights into the life and spirit of Rimbaud manifest the empathy of one great poet for another.

The "contradictions" of Rimbaud continue to solicit new approaches to his life and work since the pioneering role of C. A. Hackett and Yves Bonnefoy. Other critics, of a newer generation, have taken Rimbaud's hermeticism and indirection as features that call for an approach through depth psychology. The most adept American psychoanalytic critic is Leo Bersani.

In an influential essay, "The Simplicity of Rimbaud," in his book *A Future for Astyanax*, Bersani writes of "Rimbaud's self-negation."⁵ He adds: "Rimbaud seems to have wanted to do away with his own personality as a historical self and to make of this the basis of a universal revolution." Bersani sees the poems, especially the *Illuminations*, as hallucinatory scenes unified only by the disembodied voice of the poet. In a critical discourse, whose mobility almost equals that of the poet, Bersani states: "What Rimbaud's theatricalizing bias eliminates is the sort of continuity—the psychological inferences—provided by a reflective subjectivity" (255). A less cogent view of Rimbaud's psyche as shattered and dispersed—based on the dazzling polyvalence of the *Illuminations*—crops up again when George Steiner writes of "Rimbaud's pulverization of psychic cohesion into charged fragments of centrifugal and transient energy."⁶ Finally, the biography of Rimbaud by Graham Robb, published in the year 2000,⁷ tends to reinforce this extreme view of the poet as a man lacking equilibrium and out of control, an exhibitionist, a man headed for what Pierre Brunel calls, in his study of Rimbaud, "l'éclatant désastre / the dazzling disaster."⁸

Against these dispersive views of Rimbaud, I place the position of psychoanalyst Daniel Lagache, who singles out certain dominant individuals as possessors of a *constituting* ego, as opposed to the defensive or *constituted* ego, victim of unconscious forces and automatic behaviors. On both the conscious and unconscious levels, Rimbaud was able to dominate the centrifugal forces of his personality. Lagache's position, an outgrowth of later Freudianism, has served to ground my analysis of the dynamic and affirmative aspects of the *Illuminations*.

In a later book, *The Culture of Redemption*,⁹ Bersani explores sublimation, repression, and reaction formation in commentaries on Melanie Klein, Marcel Proust, and, above all, Freud. These are themes that must

come into play in any psychoanalytic consideration of Rimbaud; hence, even when he is discussing another writer, such as Genet or Bataille, Bersani remains a major contributor to the critical tradition started by Hackett. Beyond this, the fact that he treats psychoanalytic discourse (“the language of desire”) as a subset of literary expression serves to buttress the position taken here, namely, that the language of psychocriticism is always to some degree a type of figurative language. Or, to put it another way, there is a powerful reciprocity between aesthetic form and psycho-critical analysis, between psyche and text.¹⁰

IN HIS *L'Horizon fabuleux* (1988), Michel Collot, following Husserl's initiative, explores the notion of horizon as constitutive of the entire field of memories, perceptions, experiences out of which any cognitive act arises.¹¹ Besides the cognitive grounding given by Husserl, Collot also points to the ontological grounding demonstrated by Heidegger. For Arthur Rimbaud anticipated in his life and work a number of the fundamental assumptions that animate the ontology of the German philosopher.

As I continued in this project, probing the poems of Rimbaud and the personality behind those poems, I began to see, in a tentative way, that the radical character of “meaning” in Rimbaud's work *might* be resolved if Rimbaud were to be viewed in a Heideggerean perspective. In “la lettre du voyant / letter of the seer” (*Oeuvres*, 364) Rimbaud begins by praising those same Greek poets in whom Heidegger found the original and authentic description of being (“*physis*”). Rimbaud continues in “la lettre du voyant”: “En Grèce, ai-je dit, vers et lyres *rhythmment l'Action.*” (“In Greece, as I've said, poems and lyres *give rhythm to Action.*”) Like Heidegger, he sees the poet as involved with the world (the word “Action” is crucial), not simply submitting to it. Rimbaud's poetic vision embraces the same world-constituting concern (*Sorge* or Care) in which Heidegger was to find the generation of meaning.

Heidegger saw temporality as the horizon of each individual life and, within that horizon, the confrontation with death as the ultimate challenge. As a young poet, Rimbaud was shot and wounded by his partner, Paul Verlaine. *Une Saison en enfer*, produced immediately after that traumatic experience, is Rimbaud's chief “existentialist” work; but many other poems, especially those that deal with risk and death, fall within that horizon. Rimbaud's life, Collot finds, quoting from the poet's “Soleil et chair / Sun and flesh” is repeated displacement: “Et l'horizon s'enfuit

d'une fuite éternelle!" ("And the horizon flees in an eternal flight!"). Paul Verlaine called Rimbaud "l'homme aux semelles de vent / the man with shoes of wind," for he was always on the move, in pursuit of a constantly receding horizon. He was looking for what Heidegger, speaking metaphorically, called the *dwelling* or the *house of language*, which might be poetry or one of those "splendides villes / splendid cities" through which Rimbaud passed, till death caught him in mid-stride.¹²

Other critics have also explored the Rimbaldian unconscious. The Italian critic Sergio Sacchi is an example of an aesthetic critic whose point of departure is the juvenile elements that survive in the precocious adolescent. As André Guyaux suggests in the preface to Sacchi's posthumous *Etudes sur 'les Illuminations' de Rimbaud*, Sacchi looks for the transplant of early memories in later poems.¹³ He studies the images of dispossessed children, the orphans and vagrants of the early poems, finding in them an oscillation between volition and regret. Sacchi projects into a virtual future Rimbaud's dream of release from temporality. He looks at the narrative gaps and the temporal short circuits that collapse past and present.

Among contemporary French critics of Rimbaud, Jean-Luc Steinmetz is the most Freudian. In an essay on "Mémoire" he writes: "Here then surges up a being (maternal idol, phallic woman, to name her by her ferocious affective titles): *the mother* that Rimbaud can never surrender. It is almost stupefying to see that Rimbaud never truly abandons his mother and that he had *something to tell this woman that he could never get out*" (emphasis in original).¹⁴

In the *Illumination* "Barbare" Steinmetz identifies the mysterious refrain "Le pavillon en viande saignante sur la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques (elles n'existent pas) / The flag of bloody meat on the silken seas and arctic flowers (they don't exist)" with the trauma of birth and the forbidden fantasy of incest.¹⁵ His analyses begin with a Freudian theme but always go beyond it.

SINCE HACKETT'S landmark book in 1948, the field of psychocriticism has expanded with the multiplication of post-Freudian theories. Melanie Klein found her point of departure in Freud's instinct theory, yet elaborated her work in a way that was more totally responsive to the complexity of human personality. D. W. Winnicott, with his concept of the transitional object in the mother-child dyad, brought an original approach to the role of the instinctual life in cultural production. There is also Hans Loewald, who expands in more positive fashion the notion of sublima-

tion, treated summarily by Freud. Loewald's book on sublimation has helped me develop a new reading of *Une Saison en enfer*.¹⁶

THE GREATEST FLAW of psychocriticism is its reductive use of explanatory labels such as "Oedipus complex" or "death wish" or "narcissism," etc.¹⁷ The whole of psychoanalysis can be figured by the trope of "metalepsis," defined as "present effect attributed to a remote cause."¹⁸ Sublimation, as I will suggest in my analysis of *Une Saison en enfer*, is based on chiasmus, the rhetorical figure of crossing. Other psychic tropes will appear as the book unfolds. No matter how reader and writer be construed, the constant of all psychocriticism is the effort to unseal the poetic unconscious by releasing its tropic energy. This happens when a figure from the text reconfigures the term that has been advanced to explain it. By this "transfer," the concept may become a metaphor, that is, a third term combining the other two. So in Rimbaud's "Mémoire," the Valley of the Meuse becomes the conjugal bedroom, with the concept "primal scene" relating the triad back to the poet. This way of reading, with its frequent shifts in register, fuses a psychological reading with the aesthetic.¹⁹ In short, psychocriticism seeks to unlock the energy (i.e., "desire") embedded in figurative language. And it does this in a language that is itself akin to poetry: heavy with myth, redolent with deeds of shame and glory, baptized in violence, dripping with blood; a language that practices the darkest pathways of the soul yet may release the soul from oppression when all hope seems lost.

There is, of course, no way to prove the interpretations of psychocriticism. We can't ask the poet to provide further free associations, we can't interpret the transference and countertransference between the poet and his readers. Psychocriticism, at best, can only *suggest*, basing its inferences on context and repetition of themes and images from poem to poem.

MANY HAVE asked why Rimbaud abandoned poetry and chose instead a life of hardship, the last eleven years spent in Africa trying to make his fortune. He hated Africa; the word "ennui" recurs continually in his letters home. The oppressive heat, the long and dangerous caravans, the tough-minded scoundrels he dealt with, everything conspired against him. Did he abandon poetry because it exacted too great a repressive toll? Or because his concept of poetry involved an unacceptable self-revelation? In the "Adieu" from *Une Saison en enfer* Rimbaud asks: "Mais pourquoi

regretter un éternel soleil, si nous sommes engagés à la découverte de la clarté divine,—loin des gens qui meurent sur les saisons?” (“But why regret an eternal sun, if we are committed to the discovery of the divine light,—far from those who die with the seasons?”) Here he implies that poetry transcends death. Rimbaud’s poetry survived the random scattering of its manuscripts, his own loss of interest (“je ne pense plus à ça / I don’t think about that anymore”), and the repudiation of many of his contemporaries who found him “un homme infréquentable / an intolerable man” (Hackett, 42). A century and a half later, his enigmatic texts still hold the promise of clarity to those who search for “le lieu et la formule / the place and the secret.”