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Rimbaud

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Oxenhandler, Neal.

Rimbaud: The Cost of Genius.

Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

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Defiance in "Les Poètes de sept ans"

This great poem begins with any day in the life of a child:

Et la Mère, fermant le livre du devoir,
S'en allait satisfaite et très-fière, sans voir,
Dans les yeux bleus et sous le front plein d'éminences,
L'âme de son enfant livrée aux répugnances.

And the Mother, closing the duty-book,
Went off satisfied and very proud, not seeing
In his blue eyes and beneath the bumpy forehead
Her child's soul given up to loathing.

The initial conjunction "Et" implies the ongoing nature of a conflict between mother and child, one of which she is not even aware. After all, she has told him his duties, thereby fulfilling her role; and she goes away satisfied, not seeing the defiance in his eyes, the wretchedness in his soul. If he is to reach maturity with an adequate sense of wholeness and self-respect, the loathing must not overcome the defiance. Only if he finds strength to confront this woman whom he called sarcastically "la Bouche d'ombre / the Mouth of shadow" will he be a survivor.¹

D. M. Winnicott writes of ". . . the correspondence between a mother's behavior and the 'cathected internal mother imago. . .'" [*This means*

the identity or the difference between the mother's real world behavior and the mother as construed in the child's psyche and in whom he has invested his psychic energy]. Winnicott argues that when the mother (the child's first object) betrays in some way his love and trust, as does Mme Rimbaud, then the child loses his grasp of the reality principle, his relation with the world. On the other hand: "The capacity for object-relationships having become established, the child can now proceed to such things as obedience, defiance and identification" (472).

Defiance and anger were Rimbaud's refuge, his strength in the daily battle with his mother; and "Les Poètes de sept ans," written when he was seventeen, recounts an early phase of that conflict, when he first began to fight for his very existence and his place in the world as an autonomous being:

Tout le jour il suait d'obéissance; très
Intelligent: pourtant des tics noirs, quelques traits
Semblaient prouver en lui d'âcres hypocrisies.
Dans l'ombre des couloirs aux teintures moisies,
En passant il tirait la langue, les deux poings
A l'aine, et dans ses yeux fermés voyait des points.

All day long he sweated obedience; very
Intelligent: but black obsessions, mannerisms,
Seemed to prove bitter hypocrisies.
Passing through shadowed halls with moldy
Walls, he stuck out his tongue, stuck two fists
In his groin, and squinted till he saw spots.

This is compulsion; obedience makes him sweat, his only reward what he has already heard a thousand times: "What an intelligent child!" But it's all hypocrisy, and after a line about the mildewed wallpaper that gives an unpleasant picture of Mme Rimbaud's house, we learn how the child takes his revenge: he sticks out his tongue and squints till he sees spots in front of his eyes—already at age seven he is practicing *Voyance!* It is during this time, around puberty, that, in Bonnefoy's memorable phrase: "The child experiences the emptiness of signs, their mendacity" (14). This emptiness of signs is a determining factor in the development of Rimbaud's poetry; it accounts for the aesthetic of "indeterminism" that is found in the *Illuminations*. Reacting against "the great emotional lie" of his bigoted mother, Rimbaud finds truth in nature, where the excremental and

the ugly provide a refuge from "the ignoble game of the ideal" (Bonneyoy, 17). But there is a true light in nature that "dissolves the signs of opacity." These two extremes combine in this passage from the draft of *Une Saison en enfer*: "Je restais de longues heures la langue pendante, comme les bêtes harassées: je me traînais dans les ruelles puantes, et, les yeux fermés, je m'offrais au soleil, Dieu de feu. . . / I remained many hours my tongue hanging out, like a tormented animal; I dragged myself through stinking streets and, eyes closed, I offered myself to the sun, god of fire . . ." (Pléiade, 168).

It is here that Bonneyoy finds a Gnostic current in Rimbaud. He connects Rimbaud with Nietzsche, although Rimbaud never read the philosopher, ten years his senior; nor is it apparent that he knew anything about Zarathustra, devotee of Mazda, worshiper of fire, whom Nietzsche chose as his spiritual ancestor.² I suggest that the closest parallel with Nietzsche is that in *Voyance* Rimbaud is exercising a will to power, an "overcoming of oneself," as Nietzsche announced his own program in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

RIMBAUD'S SEARCH for meaning in the reinvention of language is very different from Nietzsche's search for values, although like Nietzsche he came to despise Christianity. In the eyes of Heidegger, Nietzsche is a Platonist; he sees values as preexisting. In the words of Herbert L. Dreyfus:

Once we get the idea that there is a plurality of values and that we choose which ones will have a claim on us, we are ripe for the modern idea, first found in the works of Nietzsche, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that we *posit* our values—that is, that valuing is something we do and value is the result of doing it. . . . As Heidegger says, "No one dies for mere values." (emphasis in original)³

Rimbaud's commitment to poetry, as a transcendent power that must go beyond the seeming emptiness of signs to the hidden reality of things, is akin to Heidegger's "disclosure" of the being of entities as it arises in experience. Bonneyoy finds the parallel with Nietzsche in "Soleil et chair," with its celebration of sensuality; yet that poem is heavy with borrowed allegory and lacks the authentic warmth and spontaneity of poems such as "Au Cabaret vert" and "Ma Bohême." What Rimbaud discovers in his passionate search for knowledge is not the Gnosticism of Nietzsche (the cult of Mazda) so much as a relearning of the relation

between words and objects, a relation falsified for him by the duplicity of his mother.

In this environment dominated by "la mother" (one of his insulting pseudonyms for Mme Rimbaud), Sunday is colorless and oppressive. The children are compelled to read from the Bible, no doubt the seventeenth-century version of Maistre de Sacy, translated from the Vulgate.⁴ This provincial Catholicism, with its soot-coated statues and *ex votos*, its reliquaries and bleeding hearts, amounts to an enforced Gnosis, if we consider Gnosis to be a secret or special knowledge, limited to members of a sect. How could this child, hungry for affection, love the God who is his mother's bogey-man, her second-in-command? Instead he loves his own absent father, incarnate in all the workingmen who return home in the evening, always ready with a greeting or a smile. Here Rimbaud is discovering the solidarity to which he is immediately and intuitively committed: the workingmen, the public square where, amid the crowd's derision, the Emperor's edicts are read aloud. These crowds suggest the swell of Fenimore Cooper's prairies and these in turn the tumescence of puberty. "Les Poètes de sept ans" ends with a retreat to darkness, humidity and again a premonition of *Voyance*:

Et comme il savourait surtout les sombres choses,
 Quand, dans la chambre nue aux persiennes closes,
 Haute et bleue, âcrement prise d'humidité,
 Il lisait son roman sans cesse médité,
 Plein de lourds ciels ocreux et de forêts noyées,
 De fleurs de chair aux bois sidéraux déployées,
 Vertige, écroulements, déroutes et pitié!
 —Tandis que se faisait la rumeur du quartier,
 En bas,—seul, et couché sur des pièces de toile
 Ecrue, et pressentant violemment la voile!

And since he especially savored somber things,
 When, in the bare room with drawn shutters,
 High and blue, with its penetrating damp,
 He read his novel endlessly recalled,
 Full of heavy ochre skies and drowning forests,
 Flowers of flesh dispersed in astral woods,
 Vertigo, collapse, and piteous defeats!
 —While the hum of the neighborhood goes on
 Outside,—he's all alone, stretched on bleached
 Canvas scraps, violently announcing sails!

This is *Voyance*—a concrete act, to simulate his escape to freedom; he lies on scraps of canvas and (an imaginary) wind lifts his sails! There is another anticipation of *Voyance* earlier in the poem:

L'été

Surtout, vaincu, stupide, il était entêté
 A se renfermer dans la fraîcheur des latrines:
 Il pensait là, tranquille et livrant ses narines.

In summer

Defeated, stupid, he liked best
 To lock himself within the coolness of latrines;
 He could think there, in peace and breathe deep.

This is the attraction of "l'immondice / filth," referred to earlier, the factuality of nature as opposed to the false idealism and pretension of his mother. Here Rimbaud anticipates Proust, and how many other pubescent children?

YVES BONNEFOY has shown us that "Les Poètes de sept ans" is a document of central importance for understanding Rimbaud. It shows us *Voyance* in its initial phases and, implicit in those larval beginnings, the origins of a philosophical project that will reach maturity with Martin Heidegger.

It should not strike the reader as anomalous that a nineteenth-century French adolescent pursued the path taken by a mature philosopher some sixty-five years later. Both pursued truth in the dance of existence, the "mirror-play of world"; both fought against the fettering of convention; both were visionaries who, to use the philosopher's words, looked into the "unconcealedness" of beings, "the lighting-clearing of the There," and introduced it "as a place of the sort in which each being emerges or arises in its own way."⁵