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Poem of the Uncanny

“Le Bateau ivre”

“Le Bateau ivre” opens like a classic horror film. The adverbial phrase “comme je descendais / as I fled down . . .” plunges the reader into an action manifestly *against nature*—down “fleuves impassibles / impassible rivers”; but it is the passive position sustained throughout the poem that most clearly identifies it with horror. The boat is no longer “guidé par les haleurs / guided by the haulers” but loosed into the waves. To be held and cradled is reassuring for an infant, but for a small craft in redskin country, passivity is an invitation to danger. The poet makes the infantile reference and introduces a note of anxiety:

Dans les clapotements furieux des marées,
Moi, l'autre hiver, plus sourd que les cerveaux d'enfants,
Je courus! Et les Péninsules démarrées
N'ont pas subi tohu-bohus plus triomphants.

In the furious surging of the tides,
More heedless than babies' brains, last winter
I ran! and no Peninsulas set loose
Have known such carnivals of triumph.

This “tohu-bohu” is more violent than any invented by earlier Romantic or Parnassian poets, for “Bateau ivre” is meant to be a new kind of

poem, written for Verlaine and the Parisian poets Rimbaud was soon to meet. It is also an indicator of a psychic process—the uncanny—at work in the poem.¹ Indeed, the basic format of the poem—the *speaking boat*—corresponds to the first feature that Freud ascribes to the uncanny, the uncertainty as to “whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton [or an inanimate object].” Freud adds that the reader’s “attention is not focused directly on the uncertainty, lest he should be prompted to examine and settle the matter at once, for in this way, as we have said, the special emotional effect can be easily dissipated.”²

“VOILÀ CE QUE j’ai fait pour leur présenter, / Here is what I wrote to show them,” Rimbaud told his friend Delahaye. And he added, after reading the poem aloud, “Ah oui, on n’a rien écrit encore de semblable, je le sais bien / Yes indeed, nobody has ever written anything to equal this, I know for a fact.”

The poem is astonishing in many respects; for one thing, it is the first major work of Rimbaud’s to put into effect his notion of *Voyance*. When he wrote “Le Bateau ivre,” he was living out his self-imposed system of personal and moral hygiene, and the poem is in effect a report on the results obtained by that devastating regimen. In the preceding two years, Rimbaud had undergone a process of intellectual and spiritual conditioning, under the influence of great post-Enlightenment thinkers, such as Victor Hugo, Jules Michelet, and Edgar Quinet. At the time he wrote his “Lettres du voyant” to his friend, Paul Demeny, and his teacher, Georges Izambard, Rimbaud had added a moral dimension to his program.

During the winter of 1870–71 his whole appearance changed. His hair had been long, but now it reached his shoulders; he slouched and scowled, his face broke out with acne. This was the time he chalked “Mort à Dieu!” on the town benches and muttered insults whenever he met a priest. He walked like a robot, talked to himself, used drugs when he could get them, and bragged to Izambard of his debauchery: “Je me fais cyniquement entretenir; je déterre d’anciens imbéciles de collègue; tout ce que je pouvais inventer de bête, de sale, de mauvais, en action et en paroles, je le leur livre, on me paie en bocks et en filles / Cynically, I’m being kept; I dig up old imbeciles from school; I feed them with anything I can invent that’s stupid, filthy, bad, in act and words, I dish it out to them and they pay me in beer and in whores” (Pléiade xxi). He surrendered to the addictive power of “l’absomphe” (absinthe), the way the drunken boat surrenders to the waves. All this with the aim of unleashing the power to *see*:

Je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple: je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine, une école de tambours faite par des anges, des calèches sur les routes du ciel, un salon au fond d'un lac . . .

I practiced simple hallucination: I frankly saw a mosque in place of a factory, a drum school made by angels, buggies on the roads of heaven, a parlor at the bottom of a lake. . . . (*Oeuvres*, 225)

Given the limited resources of Roche and the surrounding countryside, it couldn't have been easy to "s'encrapuler et de rechercher toutes les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie . . . / to crap out and seek all forms of love, of suffering, of madness . . ." (*Oeuvres*, 455). A village in the Ardennes is not the preferred place to engage in world-class dissipation. Still, he pursued *Voyance* so resolutely that his young sisters were terrified and his mother decided he'd gone crazy. His guide to debauchery was Charles Bretagne, an older man who was, in the words of Enid Star-kie, "notorious and infamous for his blasphemous opinions and for being the fiercest and most voracious *mangeur de curés* (priest-hater)"³ (98). It appears likely that there was also what Lefrère calls "un trait de complicité homosexuelle / an element of homosexual complicity" in Bretagne's involvement with Rimbaud,⁴ ending with the eventual recommendation of the teenage poet to Verlaine.

When the famous meeting took place, the second or third week of September 1871, Rimbaud had cut his hair and cleaned himself up, but he still appeared as an awkward rustic, with a heavy Ardennais accent. He managed for a time to control the aggressivity and insolence that defined his behavior in Charleville, but once he settled down in Paris these characteristics reasserted themselves.

The issue is not whether this "dérèglement raisonné de tous les sens / reasoned disordering of all the senses" helped refine Rimbaud's poetic talent or, more likely, had the opposite effect. Rimbaud's genius was an unquenchable daemon, the kind of natural endowment that occurs only once or twice a century. *Voyance* was a form of theatricality, designed to provide a persona to house the genius within. This behavior, that he himself called "effroyablement abject / frightfully abject," was part of the cost of genius.

IN PARALLEL with his own personal doctrine of *Voyance*, Rimbaud combines the theme of the uncanny, already implicit in the work of Victor

Hugo and Baudelaire. The uncanny manifests as the foreign, the dangerous, the haunting; and, indeed, in "Le Bateau ivre" the reader is haunted by echoes from Poe, from Jules Verne, from the Bible, and from Hugo himself. In its simplest sense, the uncanny is an emotion that accompanies the surfacing of a childhood terror. Here it is the fear of being dropped or thrown, poetically represented by the drunken boat tossed on the waves.

JAMES LAWLER'S study of "Le Bateau ivre" emphasizes the many ways in which it echoes and competes with Baudelaire's "Le Voyage."⁵ Baudelaire's masterpiece provides a controlling frame of reference for "Le Bateau ivre"; it is a work to emulate and even surpass. Both are written in alternately rhyming alexandrine quatrains. Both explore the theme of voyage, although to contrasting ends. Baudelaire surveys the voyage of life with a world-weary gaze. Rimbaud invents a nightmare landscape that bruises its hapless victim with forces beyond his control. The poem explodes with images from multiple sources, for, even during this period of dissipation, Rimbaud retained the ability to recall and recast a vast array of readings. Images emerge and fuse into one soaring crescendo after another as the boat, loosened from human agency, rises toward "les cieux crevant en éclairs" ("skies shattering with lightning") only to plunge into "Echouages hideux au fond des golfes bruns / Où les serpents géants dévorés des punaises / Choient, des arbres tordus, avec de noirs parfums!" / "Hideous strands at the bottom of brown gulfs / Where giant snakes ravaged by bedbugs / Tumble from gnarled trees with black perfumes!"

Rimbaud's imagery is not merely exotic or picturesque. The uncanny works at both the narrative and the figurative levels. The boat sees ". . . le soleil bas, taché d'horreurs mystiques / Illuminant de long figements violets / Pareils à des acteurs de drames très-antiques / Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de volets!" / ". . . the setting sun, stained with mystic horrors / Lighting with long violet clots / Similar to actors in very ancient dramas / The waves afar rolling their shutter-like clatter!"

In his essay on Hoffman's *Sandman*, where Freud analyzes the uncanny, "seeing" is at issue; and in "Le Bateau ivre" the poet-boat is both seer and seen by "l'oeil niais des falots / the silly eye of lanterns" and the "yeux de panthères à peaux / d'homme" / "eyes of panthers with human skins."

All the eyes that he passes by, of buoys and panthers and birds, threaten him as do the incredible sounds of "Le rut des Béhémots et les Maelstroms épais . . . / "The rutting of Behemoths and the density of Maelstroms. . . ." The eyes of the poet-boat are threatened by these other-

worldly sights and sounds; though it is, along with the threat of castration, as in Freud, the equal threat of being thrown out of the cradle, of being catapulted into the "brumes violettes / violet fogs" or the "ciel rougeoyant comme un mur / the sky reddening like a wall." Here Rimbaud has captured in image and rhythm the primal images that haunt a human child, images that surpass the fears they name—castration, rejection, ejection—and encompass the fundamental terror of the species.

The poem can be seen as one wildly varied repetition compulsion—the tendency of an instinct to manifest (albeit in disguise) over and over again. The passive boat, surrendered to the forces of nature, represents the pre-oedipal child at that moment when he is most vulnerable to terror. The boat is tossed and threatened by sea monsters and wild animals, driven to far horizons where it glides past glaciers, while sounds crash around it, as if intoned by some unearthly chorale. Here, in this powerful music, is the "omnipotence of thought," defined by Freud as yet another element of the uncanny.

The poem's sea monsters and wild animals, its far horizons, its Saintes Maries de la Mer, its glaciers and its drowned cadavers, all contribute to the verbal-visual chorale that engulfs the boat and threatens to overwhelm it as frail craft and sea together follow their frenzied course. The sensation is not so much that the boat will be swamped or crushed by the waves; for the chaos is obedient to the disembodied voice—like a conductor's baton—that leads its orchestra of mad players. The voice is the boat but also the frenzied conductor who seems to rise out of the watery element that he leads through its roiling exertions. For this is the "Poem of the Sea"—but also the "Sea of the Poem"—where language becomes (to use Conrad's phrase) the *destructive element*. It is here, as nowhere else in all of Rimbaud's poetry, that we find his verbal magic unleashed to its full diapason. It was Verlaine's favorite among all his friend's poems. He wrote of it: ". . . ce maître morceau vous prend par sa toute-beauté de forme et vous courbe sous sa toute-puissance d'originalité. Est-ce bien l'âme de l'homme ou la libre fantaisie du poète qui est en jeu, qu'importe! C'est d'une suprême grandeur dans la plus neuve des mises en oeuvres . . ." / ". . . this masterful piece seizes you by its entire-beauty of form and bends you to its entire-beauty of originality. Is the soul of the man or the poet's unbounded fantasy at stake! no matter! The work is one of supreme grandeur in the newest of presentations. . . ."6

RIMBAUD'S IMAGINATION has its tender moments, as in "Mémoire," its lyrical moments, as in "L'Éternité." It is capable of many effects, but in "Le Bateau ivre" it reaches a crescendo like that of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. In such a work the closural question arises: how bring it to an end? Can "Le Voyage" serve as a guide? Baudelaire's poem lacks the metaphorical exuberance of "Le Bateau ivre." An important difference between the two is that Rimbaud, following the program of *Voyance*, seeks to communicate auditory and visual sensations through the play of language, while Baudelaire's visual scenes are interspersed with ironic intellectualization, until the final diptych recapitulates: "Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe? / Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*" / "Plunge to the bottom of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter? / To the bottom of the Unknown to find *novelty!*"; emphasis in original) In this conclusion, the jaded hedonist asks no more than novelty. Baudelaire's traveler might be sitting in a well-appointed bar room, gazing into his cocktail glass. When asked: "Dites, qu'avez-vous vu? / Tell me, what have you seen?" he replies:

Nous avons vu des astres
 Et des flots; nous avons vu des sables aussi;
 Et malgré bien des chocs et d'imprévus désastres,
 Nous nous sommes souvent ennuyés, comme ici.

We have seen stars
 And waves; we have seen sands as well;
 And in spite of many shocks and unforeseen disasters,
 We have often been just as bored as we are here.

"Le Voyage" lacks the accelerating rhythm, the breathless suspense as we leap from one image to the next, the hallucinatory frenzy of "Le Bateau ivre." The principal difference between the two poems is that Rimbaud reaches the domain of the uncanny—dismemberment, death—while Baudelaire prefers the lower key of irony.

HOW ACHIEVE closure, how descend from such a pitch of emotion? This brings us to the central problematic of "Le Bateau ivre"—the unexpected "dissolve" that occurs in the last five stanzas. Tossed high on the waves,

spectator of hallucinatory sights and sounds, the talking boat—"Fileur éternel des immobilités bleues / Eternal spinner of blue immobilities"—announces abruptly: "Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets!" ("I miss Europe with its ancient parapets!")

Why this nostalgia, this sudden return to reality? It is not simply a convenient way to end the poem, an interruption to the paratactic litany of tumultuous images; it is too sudden, too unexpected. It breaks through from a region totally outside the poem, with the force of revelation of the inner life of the poet. Here the poet himself becomes aware of the presence of the uncanny. Neil Hertz writes: "The feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being-reminded-of-the-repetition-compulsion, not by being-reminded-of-whatever-it-is-that-is-repeated. It is the becoming aware of the process that is felt as eerie, not the becoming aware of some particular item in the unconscious, once familiar, then repressed, now coming back into consciousness."⁷

The uncanny intrudes on the margin of consciousness as the poem builds to its climax. The repressed memory of being shaken, dropped, or thrown away—or perhaps all of these at once—returns in the first verse of the twenty-first stanza:

Moi qui tremblais, sentant geindre à cinquante lieues
 Le rut des Béhémots et les Maelstroms épais,
 Fileur éternel des immobilités bleues,
 Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets!

I who trembled hearing at fifty leagues off
 The rutting of Behemoths and the dense Maelstroms,
 Eternal spinner of blue immobilities,
 I miss Europe with its ancient parapets!

At this point the *passive* suffering of the poet-boat breaks the boundary of consciousness and it is stricken with a nameless sorrow: "Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets!"

This world traveler, this "homme aux semelles de vent / man with shoes of wind," as Verlaine called him, always returned home to the family farm at Roche, to his mother and his siblings. Whenever he was sick, broke, discouraged, this banal countryside, so often disparaged and insulted ("Charlestown, un sale trou / a filthy hole," etc.), drew him back. In "Le Bateau ivre," within the imagined space of the boat's drunken journey, he hears the summons again. In the *fictive* time of the poem, the

speaker dreams of home; in the *psychic* time of the poem's composition, he turns back from the excess of *Voyance*.

Est-ce en ces nuits sans fond que tu dors et t'exiles,
Million d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Vigueur?—

Is it in these endless nights that you sleep exiled,
A million golden birds, O future Vigor?

The poet has just displayed great vigor in his ability to generate the powerful images of the poem; but this is not enough even though he had dreamed of it, punished himself to achieve it. Vigor with a capital "V" means the future energy of mankind put to productive use in a new democratic society, as envisaged by the ideologues of the century. But even that is not enough; and the next stanza moves us into an entirely different context:

Mais, vrai, j'ai trop pleuré! Les Aubes sont navrantes.
Toute lune est atroce et tout soleil amer:
L'acre amour m'a gonflé de torpeurs enivrantes.
O que ma quille éclate! O que j'aïlle à la mer!

I've wept too much, it's true! The Dawns break my heart.
Every moon is atrocious and each sun is bitter.
Acrid love has pumped me with drugged torpor.
O let my keel burst, let me go to the sea!

Several critics have remarked that it is no longer the boat speaking, but Rimbaud himself. It is as if he steps out of the frame of the poem and into a black and white photograph of a small boy, who launches a paper boat into a puddle. He is inexplicably sad: "Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses . . . / A crouching child full of sadness. . . ." He longs for the love (like a million golden birds) that he may once have known fleetingly but will never know again. That memory fades as threatening eyes watch him: "Je ne puis plus . . . nager sous les yeux horribles des pontons / I can no longer . . . swim under the horrible eyes of prison scows."⁸

He has faced the uncanny yet cannot sustain a prolonged confrontation. But at least he has encountered the reality principle and rediscovered his own world. Reassured by this familiarity, there is also sadness at the magic that he must relinquish. We will encounter other poems where the

restoration of the real is accompanied by sadness; this is a sign of loss, and of the tragedy of Rimbaud's life as a man. We also meet in "Le Bateau ivre" a powerful new way of describing objects, a way that reveals both their illusory character (i.e., they cannot satisfy desire), and the way in which they reveal the human self as what, some sixty-five years after Rimbaud, Heidegger called "the being toward death."⁹