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4

Figures of Desire in "Mémoire"

"Mémoire" is an Ovidian poem of metamorphosis. As the Meuse river follows its course, sketched by the pen of memory, figures emerge in varied shapes, evolve and change, sinking again into oblivion as ". . . l'eau limpide et captive de sa profondeur tourne lentement sur elle-même / . . . the limpid and captive water laps slowly upon itself."¹ Atle Kittang has seen the poem as a flight from meaning: "the withdrawal of the signified and the leveling of the order of meaning"²; or, contrastively, it is read as an exploration of memory by James Lawler.³ My approach here is motivated by the fact that Rimbaud himself linked the poem with *Voyance* in its most deadly phase: "Les hallucinations étant plus vives, la terreur venait! Je faisais des sommeils de plusieurs jours, et, levé, continuais les rêves les plus tristes, égaré partout / As the hallucinations became more intense, terror overcame me! I slept for several days in a row, and awakened, continued the saddest dreams, desperate wherever I turned."⁴ For here memory is not an autonomous process but is linked with the deepest aspects of emotional life; it is inscribed as both character and destiny. In this respect, Ross Chambers's comparison with "Ophélie," written two years earlier in 1870, is instructive.⁵ Chambers sees both texts as based on "l'écoulement / flowing." Yet the literary subject and the Parnassian borrowings of the earlier poem place a filter (Chambers speaks of a "dream"; 25) between the text and the immediacy of sensation. Of the multiple readings of

"Mémoire," Chambers comes closest to capturing the "expressive system of the text" (23) in the limpidity of his interpretation.

The flowing river murmurs in the poem's phonetic structure. In stanza 1 and again in stanza 2, we hear repeated vowel sounds: *eau, assaut, soie, bras; carreau, bouillons, eau, oiseaux*, etc. These suggest that form of song called "*vocalise*," defined as a voice exercise upon one or two related vowels.⁶ Taken with the feminine end rhymes and the interjections (Eh! and ô in Part II, Hélas in III, oh! and Ah! in Part V), the poem has the immediacy of music. It is a "*pensée chantée et comprise du chanteur / a thought sung and understood by the singer*" (Letter to Demeny, 15 May, 1871).

"Mémoire" is as much a word painting as it is a song. It opens with a landscape outlined in broad strokes; upon this ground, figures arise. They emerge from the river and surrounding hills. There are women wading or washing, whose partial nudity assaults the eyes with desire. In the second stanza of Part I the broken rhythm announces a metamorphosis: "l'ébat des anges; Non . . . le courant d'or en marche, meut ses bras, noirs, et lourds, et frais surtout, d'herbe . . . / the play of angels; No . . . the golden current flowing, moves its arms, black and heavy, above all cool, with grass. . . ." The River swells and becomes immense, taking the entire valley for her bedroom (Elle / sombre, ayant le Ciel bleu pour ciel-de-lit, appelle / pour rideaux l'ombre de la colline et de l'arche . . .) / "She, somber, taking the blue Sky for her canopy, calls up / for curtains the shadow of the hill and of the arch"); but then, in Part III, she shrinks to become a familiar figure: "Madame se tient trop debout dans la prairie / Madame stands too straight in the field."

It should not surprise us to find the feminine imago playing a dominant role in Rimbaud's imagination. Using a *pointilliste* technique, "Mémoire" seems to convey the free play of perception; yet this *apparent* freedom actually shows how memory shapes the inner world according to an archtypical matrix, neither hallucination nor dream but a decisive reality.

We can never be neutral observers of life. So the poet, who first speaks as casual dreamer, finds his vision shaped by past experience that he only dimly remembers. In an essay on the *Illuminations*, Leo Bersani discusses "this floating, unanchored quality of objects (or attributes or concepts) in Rimbaud's visions. . . ." Bersani comments: "It seems to me that the floating-asociability of Rimbaud's fragmented world excludes *all* systems of definition. . . . The *Illuminations* point toward a revolutionized consciousness precisely to the extent that Rimbaud substitutes fragmented vision for any conceptualizing definitions at all."⁷ Yet Rimbaud's freedom

and the seeming randomness of memory is only an illusion, even though, by comparison with the earlier poem—"Ophélie"—this work surely inclines further toward fragmentation. The poem begins with images that seem free-floating, autonomous; yet, driven by the habitual patterns of memory, it begins, in Parts II and III, to coalesce into a version of the Freudian family romance.⁸

"MÉMOIRE" OPENS with the emergence of a landscape or background. Water resolves into bright arrows of sunshine from silken bodies. In line three, lilies and banners glorify the Maid. Why "*la pucelle*"? Kleinian psychoanalysis shows how the ego splits its images in order to manage them, dividing them into good and bad, loved and feared, libidinal and aggressive.⁹ The Jeanne d'Arc we first encounter in the poem is merely the first of the many roles played by the feminine persona who dominates "Mémoire." The poet sees her as St. Joan, defending the ramparts. Then she is the water again, gold, moving torpid limbs. This multiple Being (River and Woman) takes the valley for her bedroom, as she calls upon the arching hills to veil her couch. At this point the immense female figure dominates sky and valley, engulfing the drama of her son.

PART II begins with an exhaled breath "Eh!" joining air and running water in a sensation both seen and heard. Rising bubbles gild the beds of girls, perhaps Vitalie and Isabelle, Rimbaud's sisters, whose skirts are vivid among the willows, where the sunshine diffuses like a flight of birds. The second stanza of Part II begins with pure sensation, then opens into the heart of a drama, monumental in scope to the mind of a child:

Plus pure qu'un louis, jaune et chaude paupière
 le souci d'eau—ta foi conjugale, ô l'Épouse!—
 au midi prompt, de son terne miroir, jalouse
 au ciel gris de chaleur la Sphère rose et chère.

Purer than a gold coin, warm yellow eyelid
 the marsh-marigold—your conjugal faith, O Spouse!—
 at noon sharp, from its tarnished mirror, envies
 in the hot grey sky the bright beloved Orb.

Morning becomes late afternoon, the sky is grey; the river seems to pursue

the setting sun. But there is another drama here. The first line can be read as an evocation of the female genitalia, once intact ("Plus pure qu'un louis"); as such, it recalls the "pucelle" of the first stanza, but here (taking the part for the whole) she is "l'Epouse," a married woman. Following a lead from Hackett, who sees images of flowers as suggestive of the female genitals (Hackett, 129–30), I read the "souci d'eau" as another synecdochal representation of "l'Epouse." I believe that Collot is correct in finding here an echo of the primal scene, for all children are curious about the sexuality of their parents;¹⁰ still it is not conjugal love that dominates but rather its opposite, jealousy. The marsh marigold ("le souci d'eau") is intermediary in the triadic series "louis—souci d'eau—foi conjugale"; its verb is "jalouse," used transitively. Under a tarnished sky she is jealous of the sun, "la Sphère rose et chère." The marriage to Captain Frédéric Rimbaud had begun well enough. "He was a tall good looking man . . ." writes Suzanne Briet.¹¹ Vitalie was twenty-eight, Frédéric was forty and, not long after their marriage, received the cross of the Légion d'Honneur as commendation for his service in Algeria. Although the marriage began happily, it could not last. Briet comments: "The youngest daughter of Madame Rimbaud, Frédérique-Marie-Isabelle, is born June 1, 1860. The conjugal life of the Rimbauts is over. The Captain left never to return, and will retire to Dijon in 1864. The hardships of military life had often separated them, but wasn't there also a stringent incompatibility of temperament for which both were responsible?" (14).

Vitalie Rimbaud was an unsatisfied woman, susceptible, suspicious, jealous even of "the Sun—la Sphère rose et chère. . . ." Briet calls her "authoritarian, imperious, abusive" (14). "Small, strongly built, fierce-looking, dressed in black or grey, she inspired fear, perhaps respect, but never friendship" (9). She is present in Arthur's earliest memories, disciplinarian of his earliest impulses. Face set in disapproval, impatient, threatening. All her children have felt her anger. She knows Frédéric and Arthur are always scheming to disobey her. All men are troublemakers. Her younger brother was a drunken lout, her husband was a better sort, but not to be trusted. Here it becomes apparent that memory is not the pure play of perception. It is directed along predetermined lines. Living figures populate the landscape, taking on the coloration of the unconscious. The background (upon which the specific figures have begun to emerge) is a composite: the women bathing, Vitalie and Isabelle reading books bound in red leather. All except the poet are unaware of the awesome drama that is about to occur:

Hélas, Lui, comme
 mille anges blancs qui se séparent sur la route,
 s'éloigne par delà la montagne! Elle, toute
 froide et noire, court! après le départ de l'homme!

Alas, he, like
 a thousand white angels who disperse down the road,
 vanishes beyond the mountain! She, all
 cold and dark, runs! after the departing man!

Arthur remembers the vehemence of "la mother's" anger at the time of his escape to Paris in August 1870. His own flight merges with the repeated departures of his father and takes on a mythical nimbus (*mille anges blancs*) in the process. "Elle, toute froide et noire; Lui, comme mille anges blancs . . ."

Again, Suzanne Briet:

Conventional, even though brought up at the height of Romanticism, she [Mme Rimbaud] led a blameless life. She never betrayed her rigorous principles or her character. She was strong-willed, allowing her to vanquish every obstacle throughout her "sad life," which in the end even dominated Arthur. She had the misfortune to be abandoned by her husband and the sorrow to lose three children. As a recent member of the rural bourgeoisie, the sense of respectability was strong in her along with scorn of the opinion of others. A strange amalgam. . . . Work, money, religion formed the framework of her personality. Her faith was unshakeable and . . . inclined toward Jansenism. (8)

SPLITTING, which is the central feature of "Mémoire," is most pronounced in the roles attributed to "Elle," the main figure in Rimbaud's psychic life. In Part I she appears immense as she makes the entire valley her bedroom ("ayant le Ciel bleu pour ciel-de-lit"). In Part II she changes from virgin Maid to jealous spouse. Realistically drawn in Part III, with her straight back and threatening umbrella, she disciplines the weeds; then loses her dignity as, like Hera after philandering Zeus, she pursues the sun. In Part IV this comic figure is endowed with pathos: "Regret des bras épais et jeunes d'herbe pure! / Or des lunes d'avril au coeur du saint lit! Joie / des chantiers riverains à l'abandon . . ." / "Regret for the thick

young arms of pure grass! / Gold of April moons deep in the holy bed! Joy / of abandoned boatyards. . . ." These lines reveal that, just as the images that represent the mother who dominates his psychic life are split, so too are the impulses toward her—reverence in the "*pucelle*" image, mockery when she wields her umbrella as rigid disciplinarian, then tenderness again when he feels sorrow for her lost love.

THE SECOND stanza of Part IV is transitional. There's a hint of impatience in the imperative of the first line of the second stanza: "Qu'elle pleure à présent sous les ramparts! / Let her weep now under the ramparts!" She cries a river, what a bore! Young Vitalie wrote in her journal in 1874: "Maman is so sad . . . I think about Arthur, his sadness, and Maman who weeps . . ." (Pléiade, 946). The poet refuses to tolerate her sorrow; there is a sharp shift of perspective: "Puis, c'est la nappe, sans reflets, sans source, grise: /—un vieux, dragueur, dans sa barque immobile, peine" / "Then, it's the surface, matte, no springs, grey: /—an old dredger, toiling in his motionless boat." The old dredger, raking the bottom for sand, enters the scene as an image of immobility.

IN PART V we have a movement similar to the "dissolve" that appears at the end of "Le Bateau ivre." Delahaye has written about the old rowboat anchored on the Meuse, where Frédéric and Arthur liked to play, pretending as they rocked from side to side that the leaky scow was carrying them on daring voyages. Here, the focus of the poem is the speaker himself; the conjugal drama is played out. The family members are gone, he is alone like the old dredger who becomes mythical—a figure of wasted time and of blighted hope.

Jouet de cet oeil d'eau morne, je n'y puis prendre
 ô canot immobile! oh! bras trop courts! ni l'une
 ni l'autre fleur: ni la jaune qui m'importune,
 là; ni la bleue, amie à l'eau couleur de cendre.

Ah! la poudre des saules qu'une aile secoue!
 Les roses des roseaux dès longtemps dévorées!
 Mon canot, toujours fixe; et sa chaîne tirée
 Au fond de cet oeil d'eau sans bords,—à quelle boue?

Toy of this eye of mournful water, I cannot pluck
 O motionless boat! O arms too short! neither this
 nor the other flower: not the yellow that entreats me,
 there; nor the blue, friend to the ashen water.

Ah! dust of the willows shaken by a wing!
 The reed-roses long since withered!
 My boat, still attached; and its chain caught
 Deep in this rimless eye of water—in what mud?

His arms are too short to reach either flower. The yellow that summons him might be associated with marriage; the blue flower is ashen, colorless as the water, the color of his mother's eyes.¹² Bonnefoy reads this inability to pluck either flower as Rimbaud's sexual dilemma, his knowledge that the choice of a lover is determined by some fatality that has been imposed on him and that he cannot change. Sexual object choice is always a mystery, but in Rimbaud's case it appears to follow the classic Freudian pattern, deriving from primary narcissism. Laplanche and Pontalis write: ". . . the object is chosen on the model of the little child or adolescent that the subject once was, while the subject identifies with the mother who used to take care of him."¹³ This is spelled out further by Socarides: "In the earliest phase of their childhood, future inverts pass through a period of very intense but short-lived fixation on a woman, usually their mother; after leaving this behind they identify themselves with the woman and take themselves as a sexual object. They proceed from a narcissistic basis and look for a man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them."¹⁴ The true measure of Vitalie Rimbaud's power over her son lies in his unconscious identification with her. Despite all his fugues and all his complaints, he was tied to his mother by the unbreakable bond of mimetic desire.

THE POEM turns on the despairing phrase "Mon canot toujours fixe . . . / My boat forever anchored. . . ." Memory, which begins as the seemingly free play of perception, reveals its link to instinctual drives. The entire last stanza expresses Rimbaud's sadness: the buds of the water lilies are already withered; there are still many years of life ahead of him (*cet oeil d'eau sans bords*), but his destiny (*sa chaîne*) is fixed in a way that fills him with apprehension (*à quelle boue?*).

Years later, in Africa, Rimbaud cohabited with a woman. He treated her with respect and consideration. When finally he sent her back to her people it was with a sigh of relief and the remark, "Quelle mascarade! / What a masquerade!" But he always dreamed of marriage, if not to a bourgeoisie from the Ardennes, then to a high-born black woman. He shared his dream of having a son with Isabelle. But his destiny had been determined many years earlier, by the absence of his father and the dominant character of his mother. Early on it was engraved in his instincts, his deepest desires, his "mémoire."