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Rimbaud

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Oxenhandler, Neal.

Rimbaud: The Cost of Genius.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

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5

What Happened in Babylone?

“*Le Coeur du pitre*”;

Survival of the Object in “Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . . ?”

1. “Le Coeur du pitre”

There are two great mysteries in Rimbaud’s biography.¹ The first of these is his reputed enlistment in the Commune and his sojourn in the Babylone barracks, where he may have been victim of a sexual attack. The primary source is a letter from Delahaye to Verlaine, who, in 1887, was gathering material for a book on Rimbaud. In this chapter I have, by and large, followed the interpretation of Jean-Jacques Lefrère, who has abundantly documented Rimbaud’s adventures in the pivotal year of 1871. Although Lefrère does not positively affirm the hypothetical gang rape of Rimbaud at Babylone, he does give a vivid (though fictive) depiction of it by Colonel Godchot, who knew all there was to know about barracks life.² This was Rimbaud’s fourth escape from Charleville, following the third in February 1871. The first, in August 1870, ended with his arrest at the Gare du Nord (no ticket) and his confinement in the Mazas prison. The second in October 1870 took him to Douai, where he was welcomed by the Gindre sisters, aunts of his teacher, Izambard. His goal in the trips to Paris was to meet the poets of the Parnassian movement, whom he had been reading, memorizing, and imitating.

His motive for the third escape was different—the college was going to reopen and *la mother* had given him an ultimatum: either go back to school or find a job. He left sometime around April 17 and returned to

Charleville around May 13. In the capital Rimbaud met a sense of moral deterioration that he found appalling. He instinctively shared the popular hatred for the Government of National Defense that was soon to capitulate to the Germans.

A SERIES of decisive events had led up to the declaration of the Commune on March 18. The conservative Chief Executive, Thiers, grew weary of trying to run the country with half the government in Bordeaux and the other half in Paris. He made the mistake of moving the entire government to Versailles, a place with fatal monarchist associations. The Parisian National Guard, now swelled to 300,000 men, created a Federation of radical delegates who, increasingly, assumed authority. On February 28, the so-called "army of Paris" united for action and was, very soon after, ranged against the government. Edward Mason writes that the primary motive of the communards was revenge for France's defeat by Germany: "The Commune was a revolution against the 'capitulards' (the capitulators) of Bordeaux and Versailles. All the radical groups of Paris, the Blanquists, the Proudhonists, the Jacobins, and the members of the International were chauvinist in their attitude. Their opposition was directed against the supposed military weakness and the executive incapacity of the war leaders of France. Without the defeat, there would have been no Commune."³

IF DELAHAYE'S account of a fourth escape is to be believed (and Lefrère sees no reason to consider it a fabrication), Rimbaud left for Paris around April 19, hitchhiking and walking by turns. He arrived on or around April 23 and was stopped at the city gates, where the soldiers took up a collection for him (21 francs), and sent him off to the National Guard barracks on rue de Babylone. There he was attached to a volunteer group of *franc-tireurs* or "freedom fighters." Petitfils writes: "Paris bristled with barricades, and was plastered with white posters issuing brief orders. . . . Frightening disorder reigned in the barracks: soldiers from various regiments that had been dissolved . . . national guards, sailors, *zouaves* [indigenous Algerians serving as light infantry]—All were thrown together pell-mell" (82). During this period Rimbaud continued writing poetry, notably "Chant de guerre parisien" and a famous but enigmatic poem written in the musical form of the triolet:⁴

Le Coeur du pitre⁵

Mon triste coeur bave à la poupe,
Mon coeur est plein de caporal:
Ils y lancent des jets de soupe,
Mon triste coeur bave à la poupe:
Sous les quolibets de la troupe,
Qui pousse un rire général,
Mon triste coeur bave à la poupe,
Mon coeur couvert de caporal!

Ithyphalliques et pioupiesques
Leurs insultes l'ont dépravé!
A la vesprée, ils font des fresques
Ithyphalliques et pioupiesques.
O flots abracadabranques
Prenez mon coeur, qu'il soit sauvé:
Ithyphalliques et pioupiesques
Leurs quolibets l'ont depravé!

Quand ils auront tari leurs chiques
Comment agir, ô coeur volé?
Ce seront des refrains bachiques
Quand ils auront tari leurs chiques:
J'aurai des sursauts stomachiques
Si mon coeur triste est ravalé:
Quand ils auront tari leur chiques
Comment agir, ô coeur volé?
Mai 1871

The Clown's Heart

My sad heart slobbers on the poop,
My heart covered with wads of chaw:
They splatter it with jets of soup,
My sad heart slobbers on the poop:
Taking the insults of the troop
Who crack up and laugh at it,
My sad heart drools on the poop,

My heart is covered with streams of spit!

Soldier boys with swollen cocks,
 Their insults have raped my heart!
 When evening comes, they pantomime⁶
 Soldier boys with swollen cocks.
 O waves abracadabrantescues,
 Take my heart and wash it clean:
 Soldier boys with swollen cocks
 Their wisecracks have depraved my heart!

When they will have spit their wads,
 How react, O stolen heart?
 There will be Bacchic burps
 When they will have spit their wads:
 I'll have heaves deep in my gut,
 When they will have spit their wads
 How react, O stolen heart?
 May 1871

Antoine Adam in *la Pléiade* edition interprets this poem as an expression of disgust at finding himself in a barracks, surrounded by foul-mouthed, drunken men. Rimbaud had dreamed of action and adventure, but encounters instead disillusionment with the obscene behavior of the troops. The disgust is extended beyond this barracks room to the world and he calls for the sea waves to wash him clean.

Still, Rimbaud knew that poetry could be an instrument of social change. The responsibility he felt during the Commune was apparent in his draft of a constitution (known only through the testimony of his friend, Ernest Delahaye) and his reckless pronouncements at that time; but he never put his genius in the service of freedom. The brutality and obscenity of *Babylone*, which may have involved sodomy, cooled his "social illuminism," as Guyaux calls it. Frustration of those impulses was again part of the price he paid for being Rimbaud. Fortunately, he escaped from *Babylone* and headed back to Charleville, walking and hitchhiking, as he had come. He reached home in early May. Izambard, to whom he sent the poem, wrote a parody of it, wounding Rimbaud to the quick; he was careful not to display his vulnerability again.

*II. Survival of the object in
"Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . . ?"*

This poem begins with militant fervor and keeps building, until the emotion is disproportionate, ending in a frenzy. It is Rimbaud's version of the "Ça ira!" the revolutionary song that was hurled at the aristocrats as they rode in the tumbril on their way to the guillotine:

Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon coeur, que les nappes de sang
Et de braise, et mille meurtres, et les longs cris
De rage, sanglots de tout enfer renversant
Tout ordre; et l'Aquilon encor sur les débris . . .

What's it to us, my heart, if the sheets of blood
And of coals, and a thousand murders, and the long cries
Of rage, sobs of all hell, reversing
All order; and the Eagle still on the debris . . .

The manuscript is not dated, but it seems likely that the poem was written in protest against the *Semaine sanglante* (May 21–28, 1871), when thousands of Communards were executed by government troops, *les Versaillais*. Hundreds of the latter also died in the fighting. This is one of the poems that caused Rimbaud to be acclaimed "the poet of the Commune," but there is a nightmarish nihilism to the poem that suggests the infiltration of primary process into "les tourbillons de feux furieux," rather than straightforward political protest. Here, an essay by D. W. Winnicott will help to clarify the unconscious motivation that drives the imagery, and from which the poet wakes bewildered at the end of his hysterical tirade. Winnicott writes:

. . . one of the integrating phenomena in development is the fusion of what I will here allow myself to call life and death instincts (love and strife: Empedocles). . . . This is what turns up in the baby by natural maturational process. . . .

The drive is potentially 'destructive' but whether it *is* destructive or not depends on what the object is like; does the object *survive*, that is, does it retain its character, or does it *react*? If the former, then there is no destruction, or not much, and there is a next moment when the baby

can become and does gradually become aware of . . . the *fantasy* of having destroyed, hurt, damaged or provoked the object. The baby in this extreme environmental provision goes on in a pattern of developing personal aggressiveness that provides the backcloth of a continuous (unconscious) fantasy of destruction. Here we may use [Melanie] Klein's reparation concept, which links constructive play and work with this (unconscious) *fantasy backcloth* of destruction or provocation. . . . The baby at the other extreme that meets a pattern of environmental reaction or retaliation goes forward in quite a different way. . . . (emphasis in original)⁷

The baby that suffers retaliation can never return reparation for his or her own violence and is trapped by it. Earlier in this same article, Winnicott speaks about the role of the father in forging the child's sense of reality. He states that the baby makes use of the father "as a blueprint for his or her own integration. . . . If the father is not there the baby must make the same development but more arduously, or using some other fairly stable relationship to a whole person. In this way one can see that the father can be the first glimpse for the child of integration and of personal wholeness" (Winnicott, 243).

Rimbaud, without a stable father figure, would have been the second kind of baby described by Winnicott, the one whose fantasies of destruction (*destrudo*) never come to fruition and, therefore, are never realistically tested by his environment. We have only to think of "Après le déluge" or of "Conte." In both those poems, fantasies of destruction expand exponentially; though expressed with a different tonality and a different articulation than in "Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . . ?" they too are never tested by reality. Of special relevance for this poem is Winnicott's reference to the Love-Strife principle, a drive that is inherent in the child at birth and that it must learn to negotiate (Winnicott writes "integrate") in its first years of life. If the "object" retains its character (i.e., if the parent responds lovingly, even when the infant is provocative), then the child will introject its love-strife tendency, retaining it as an unconscious fantasy toward the "libidinised object." By this analysis, Rimbaud is caught in between; the poem fantasizes violence, taking it as true violence, for which he must pay a price; yet at the end, he asks, "Do I wake or sleep?"

THE TURBULENCE of the unresolved oedipal triad of the child and his parents arises (following Winnicott) from the Love-Strife antithesis of

Empedocles, referred to above. Rimbaud never forgot one violent quarrel between his parents when he was six years old. To emphasize his anger, Rimbaud père grabbed a silver bowl from the sideboard and smashed it against the floor. Then, regretting his anger, he picked it up and carefully put it back in place. Whereupon Vitalie seized the bowl, raised it aloft and hurled it down with equal force. A sterling silver bowl, mind you! She too put it carefully back in its consecrated place. Such outbursts were common in the Rimbaud household. Critic Charles D. Minahen finds the poetic equivalent of this parental duel in the “vortical movement” or “turbulence” of “Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . . ?”⁸ Winnicott explains this explosive behavior in infantile experience, by the way that objects are—or are not—assimilated into imagination. In Winnicott’s view it is the push-pull of powerful emotions that sets off these “tourbillons de feux furieux / whirlwinds of furious fire,” which introduce an internal space or geometry into this highly self-reflexive poem. Minahen’s book *Vortex/t*, in which the revised essay on Rimbaud was later published,⁹ makes a unique contribution to our understanding of both Rimbaud and Mallarmé, by demonstrating the production of three-dimensional spaces within the linearity of the poems.

The poem ends with the poet’s seeming to wake from a dream: “Ce n’est rien! j’y suis! j’y suis toujours” (“It’s nothing! I’m here, I’m still here!”). In his poetic fantasy he dreamed the world destroyed, all order broken, the very continents sucked into the maelstrom: “Europe, Asie, Amérique, disparaissent / Europe, Asia, America, disappear.”

The poet, who will later write “Et pas une main d’ami; et où puiser le secours?” (“And not even a friendly hand; and where turn for help?”), dreams of the camaraderie of men at arms, fighting in a desperate cause:

Oh! mes amis!—Mon coeur, c’est sûr, ils sont des frères:
Noirs inconnus, si nous allions! allons! allons!
O malheur! je me sens frémir, la vieille terre,
Sur moi de plus en plus à vous! la terre fond . . .

Oh! my friends—My heart, tells me, they are brothers:
Unknown blacks, what say we leave! Come! Come!
O misery! I feel myself tremble, this old earth,
Melts around me, I’m more and more yours . . .

Yet on his return to reality, after this emotional paroxysm, he finds that nothing has changed: like the silver bowl, the objects of his destructive passion have survived. A tragic bewilderment is implicit in the last

line, "Ce n'est rien! j'y suis! j'y suis toujours." This recalls the end of "Mémoire," where the "bras trop courts / arms too short" encounter another aspect of his characterological destiny.

To summarize the view of Rimbaud that Winnicott's paradigm gives us, we can say that the destructive impulse, or destrudo, is incompletely fantasized, probably because of the father's absence. As a result, the child is caught between action and inaction, between fantasy and deed. These two poems illustrate Rimbaud's deep emotional involvement with the Commune and his paralysis when confronted with an instinctive imperative for action. Whether out of good sense or panic, he avoided any deeper involvement with the Commune; but he hadn't yet finished writing about that traumatic episode in his country's history.