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The Child as Thaumaturge

“Après le déluge”

“Après le déluge” is about magic, about the power of childhood, about what Freud called “the omnipotence of thoughts, a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words.”¹ It has little to do with any grievances Rimbaud may have felt, but rather the power of childhood wishes and the knowledge in the young narcissist’s heart that he has power to change the world.

This is traditionally the first of the *Illuminations*, by convention rather than any certainty based on the autograph (by Verlaine) or on hard evidence. Since it is on a separate page of the manuscript, André Guyaux places it together with the other *Illuminations* that are impossible to collate with accuracy.

Rimbaud begins with the adverb “Aussitôt / As soon as,” suggesting the immediacy that characterizes “Après le déluge.” It’s a poem about making things happen by wanting them, a power reserved to dictators, magicians, and children, which is why it is the *idea* of the flood that subsides before everything starts over again: this momentous restoration of the world happens in the mind of a child.

Some critics have seen “Après le déluge” as an allegory of the Commune and its bloody repression. This is suggested by an article quoted in the Pléiade edition:

When the immense hope of the Commune subsided, the bourgeois, timid as a rabbit, takes over again. He gives thanks to God (the rainbow) for having saved him in religious rituals (the spider-web). . . . (Pléiade, 798)

Albert Henry improves on this simplistic interpretation by recognizing a double meaning in the title "Après le déluge" that indicates a time both biblical and contemporaneous. He comments that "After the Flood" contains "the theme of the Biblical Flood through picturesque details found in the rebirth of nature"; but Henry also sees here the "Flood" of the Commune.² I find this interpretation far-fetched; the spontaneity and freshness of "Après le déluge" distinguish it from any of the political poems, such as "Le Mal" or "Chant de Guerre parisien." or "Qu'est-ce pour nous mon coeur . . . ?" There is no hint of an *arrière-pensée* (double meaning) or of the creaky articulation associated with allegory.

LET'S TAKE the poem at face value. You can picture it in your mind's eye. Children are sitting in the parlor reading a book of Bible stories containing colored pictures. They are "en deuil / in mourning" because it is raining outside and they can't play. This adjectival phrase, "en deuil," is an important clue to the psychic mechanism central to the poem's action. Children are hyperbolic beings: a rainy day is worse than a death in the family.

Here we see Rimbaud as animist, displaying his belief that nature is inhabited by spirits. A hare says its prayer to the rainbow, jewels hide in the earth. It's happening so fast you almost miss the flowers looking around (implied by the adverb "déjà / already"). This animistic quality, literal for the child-protagonist, is seen by some critics as a display of artifice, a "magic-lantern show," or as Sergio Sacchi puts it: ". . . from a certain point of view 'Après le déluge' is no more than a series of illustrations, of vignettes, of brief tableaux, of figurines, of icons . . . in short, Rimbaud is experimenting with a whole range of different techniques of representation" (Sacchi, 44). But this reading, as a display of poetic virtuosity, distracts us from the child's-eye viewpoint that is central to the poem.

The poem has opened *in medias res*. We must reach the line that starts "Dans la grande maison . . . / In the big house . . ." before Rimbaud draws a frame around the action that's already begun. We hear a door slam, a child stands in the village square twirling his arms, a classic protest against boredom. This boy, with his short pants and knobby knees,

is a thaumaturge, possessed of magical powers. The church-towers and weathervanes understand that he can work miracles.

It is a miracle of destruction, begun while he (“l’enfant de colère / the child born of anger,” as Rimbaud has been called) was in the parlor, reading about the Flood. He calls on free-floating fantasies of destruction, enshrined inside him since before he was born. Melanie Klein offers this amazing insight as a fundamental axiom of her practice:

In attacking its mother’s inside . . . the child is attacking a great number of objects, and is embarking on a course which is fraught with consequences. The womb first stands for the world; and the child originally approaches this world with desires to attack and destroy it, and is therefore prepared from the outset to view the real, external world as more or less hostile to itself, and peopled with objects ready to make attacks upon it. Its belief that in thus attacking its mother’s body it has also attacked its father and its brothers and sisters, and, in a wider sense the whole world, is, in my experience, one of the underlying causes of its sense of guilt, and of the development of its social and moral feelings in general.³

If we accept this theory of universal infantile destructiveness, which is akin to the notion of original sin, it accounts for the déluge which *precedes* the start of the poem; but what about the consequent guilt?⁴ Is that the motive for the rapid resurrection of civilization? There is no evidence of guilt in the brief notations, like stage directions in a play, that accompany the rebuilding of the world:

Dans la grande rue sale les étals se dressèrent, et l’on tira les barques vers la mer étagée là-haut comme sur les gravures.

Le sang coula, chez Barbe-Bleue,—aux abbatoirs,—dans les cirques, où le sceau de Dieu blêmit les fenêtres. Le sang et le lait coulèrent.

Les castors bâtirent. Les “mazagrans” fumèrent dans les estaminets.⁵

In the filthy main street stalls were erected, and boats were hauled toward the sea situated up above as in engravings.

Blood flowed at Bluebeard’s,—in slaughter-houses,—in circuses, wherever God’s seal blemished the windows. Blood and milk flowed.

Beavers built. Glasses of black coffee steamed in the cafes.

These are mere statements of fact with no emotional quotient (such as

guilt); or, to use another analogy, they are like quick notations in a painting. We remember that Verlaine, in his preface to the 1886 edition of the *Illuminations*, explained the title as a reference to "gravures coloriées / colored plates."⁶ The poet is an artist whose rapid brushstrokes design the fall and rise of a civilization, albeit a pretentious one (the piano in the Alps).

RESONATING powerfully against the poet's rapid notations is the Book of Genesis, known to any mindful nineteenth-century reader. Indeed, Rimbaud's poem might well be seen as sacrilegious by someone overly pious, like his mother, who genuflected twenty times a day before a statue of Our Lady in the farmhouse in Roche.

In his comparison of "Après le déluge" with the Book of Genesis, Lawler emphasizes the poem's form: "Verse paragraphs, the gravely committed diction, the syntax, the Flood imagery require us to give weight to a ritual poem" (130). The "verse paragraphs" (les versets) are the passages, rarely more than two lines in length, that form a unified whole and can be spoken aloud in one breath. They are an innovation that Rimbaud brought to the prose poem and that became the preferred verse pattern for Paul Claudel. I take Lawler's phrase "gravely committed" as referring to a certain sobriety in the enumeration of events, a lack of adjectival ornamentation. Lawler sees the poem as a direct contradiction of Genesis. This is a plausible reading; but I think it is secondary to the ludic reading that I find dominant. The child-poet has a new toy; he can turn creation off and on, on and off. He builds a castle of blocks, then knocks it down, only to build it up again. The world that appears with its caravans and its Splendide Hotel blazing in the Alps is a miniaturized world.

Some critics give metaphysical weight to the child-poet's destructiveness. Yves Bonnefoy believes that "Après le déluge" was written during a period of sadness and a consequent "spirit of negation" during the autumn of 1873 in London. He sees here "the revolt, the violent denial of all order announced in the *Lettre du voyant*, and evoked again in the prologue of *Une Saison*" (150). For Bonnefoy the Sorceress, with her "clay pot," represents the hallucinatory world of hashish, a frequent indulgence in London. Bonnefoy's way of reading the poem parallels the concept of infantile aggression as theorized by Melanie Klein; but, in my opinion, it violates the reverential spirit of "Après le déluge," conveyed by the biblical repetitions in the first part of the poem ("sur la terre," "sous le ciel," "l'eau du déluge"). This awed enumeration is followed, as Lawler shows, by "a quasi-refrain and phonetic iteration such as the twenty occurrences

of open *e* followed by *r*, which becomes the groundnote that gives accumulative basis to the intrusion of the ‘Sorcière’ at the end of the poem . . .” (132).

Violence interrupts this ritualized discourse with a series of imperatives and a choppy, accelerated rhythm: “Sourds, étang—écume, roule sur le pont et par-dessus les bois; draps noirs et orgues,—éclairs et tonnerre,—montez et roulez;—Eaux et tristesses, montez et relevez les Déluges / Surge, pond—foam, roll over the bridge and through the woods; black palls and organs, lightning and thunder,—rise up and roll;—Waters and sorrows, rise and revive the Floods.”

It is only here, in the poem’s conclusion, beginning again with an adverbial phrase of temporality “Depuis lors, / Since then,” that the emotional quotient increases:

Depuis lors, la Lune entendit les chacals piaulant par les déserts de thym,—et les églogues en sabot grognant dans le verger. Puis, dans la futaie violette, bourgeonnante, Eucharis me dit que c’était le printemps.

He has called for the floods to return—Sourds, étang,—montez et roulez; Eaux et tristesses, montez et relevez les Déluges.” It is his boredom, his sadness (“tristesses”) that demands them. And he explains:

Car depuis qu’ils se sont dissipés,—oh les pierres précieuses s’enfouissant, et les fleurs ouvertes!—c’est un ennui! et la Reine, la Sorcière qui allume sa braise dans le pot de terre, ne voudra jamais nous raconter ce qu’elle sait, et que nous ignorons.

For since then, the Moon heard jackals howling in the deserts of thyme,—and eclogues in wooden shoes grumbling in the orchard. Then in the violet budding grove, Eucharis told me that it was spring.

—Gush forth, pond,—Foam, roll on the bridge and through the woods;—Black shrouds and organs,—lightning and thunder,—rise up and roll;—Waters and sadness, mount up and restore the Floods.

For since they have gone,—oh! the precious stones burying themselves, and the flowers opened!—what a bother! and the Queen, the Sorceress who lights her coals in her clay pot, will never tell us what she knows, and what we will never learn.

Since civilization has recovered, the world has become hostile with “jackals howling in the deserts of thyme.” The phrase “églogues en sabot”

evokes peasants in wooden shoes grumbling in the orchard. And then the insipid nymph Eucharis states the obvious: Spring has sprung! The youthful thaumaturge orders Nature to rise up and erase this pretentious civilization: "Eaux et tristesses, montez et relevez les Déluges!"

Alas, Nature does not respond. The poet mimics the child protagonist by using an infantile voice: "c'est un ennui! / what a bore!"

THE SORCERESS is a borrowing from Michelet, whose book *La Sorcière* influenced Rimbaud at multiple points. As Enid Starkie observes, Rimbaud took over Michelet's view of witches, demons, and criminals (and she might have added "children") as the real creators of the Renaissance that emerged from the Middle Ages. Here, the Sorceress figures the mystery of Nature, whose conduct, though sometimes predictable (e.g., the seasons), is, in the last analysis, beyond human control. Who better than a child to consider this paradox, as he stands forlorn in the empty village square and lets himself be drenched by the "éclatante giboulée / glittering downpour"? Bonnefoy sees *La Sorcière* as a dark temptress, with hashish in her "pot de terre." Rimbaud, this lonely child, was always looking for adventure; but in this poem what he longs for is not the oblivion of absinthe or the illusions of hashish but the moment when the flower opens, the jewels shine, and time (almost) stops—in that split second between the lightning flash and the clap of thunder.