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Abreaction in Three Poems

“*Honte*”; “*Angoisse*”; “*Aube*”

Only emotion can cure emotion.

—Spinoza

1. “Honte / Shame”

“*Honte*” was probably written in Charleville in spring of 1872, after Rimbaud’s ignominious return from Paris, where Verlaine had been supporting him. He had caused scandal at the traditional banquet of the Parnassian group, *Les Vilains Bonshommes* / *The Nasty Goodfellows*, and was told never to return.¹ Verlaine (who would remain bisexual all his life) had briefly reconciled with his wife. So Rimbaud came home, his heart full of shame and anger. There is an obvious reference to Verlaine (“*Lui*”) and their quarrels, when Verlaine blamed “*l’enfant/Gêneur*” / “the intrusive child” for breaking up his marriage. My reason for putting “*Honte*” here is that it is one of only three poems of Rimbaud titled with an affective word.

In this section I want to study the way Rimbaud elicits emotion and then resolves it using a kind of homeopathic process, according to which “like-cures-like.”² Here the poet’s overwhelming “*Shame*” is released by a second dose of shame (he stinks like a Rocky Mountain wildcat, a non-existent beast) and an ironic turn, the prayer for God’s mercy.

A large number of poems in the lyrical tradition exhibit this basic way of dealing with emotion, which will be called here by the psychoanalytic term “*abreaction*.” Freud and Breuer developed the term to explain the

cure of hysterical symptoms under hypnosis. Freud writes of the theory developed in *Studies on Hysteria*:

. . . it introduced a dynamic factor, by supposing that a symptom arises through the damming-up of an affect, and an economic factor, by regarding that same symptom as the product of the transformation of an amount of energy which would otherwise have been employed in some other way. . . . Breuer spoke of our method as *cathartic*; its therapeutic aim was explained as being to provide that the quota of affect used for maintaining the symptom, which had got on to the wrong lines and had, as it were, become strangulated there, should be directed on to the normal path along which it could obtain discharge (or *abreaction*).³

Honte

Tant que la lame n'aura
Pas coupé cette cervelle,
Ce paquet blanc vert et gras
A vapeur jamais nouvelle,

(Ah! Lui, devrait couper son
Nez, sa lèvre, ses oreilles,
Son ventre! et faire abandon
De ses jambes! ô merveille)

Mais, non, vrai, je crois que tant
Que pour sa tête la lame,
Que les cailloux pour son flanc,
Que pour ses boyaux la flamme

N'auront pas agi, l'enfant
Gêneur, la si sottre bête,
Ne doit cesser un instant
De ruser et d'être traître

Comme un chat des Monts-Rocheux;
D'empuantir toutes sphères!
Qu'à sa mort pourtant, ô mon Dieu!
S'élève quelque prière!

Shame

So long as the blade has
 Not sliced that brain, that
 Green-white packageful of grease
 And stinking steam

(Ah! He should cut off his
 Nose, his lips, his ears,
 His belly! and spread
 His legs! O miracle!)

But no; truly, I swear
 That for his head, the blade
 The stones for his side,
 For his bowels, the flame,

Unless they act, the troublesome
 Child, the very stupid beast,
 Will never for a moment stop
 His cheating and betraying,

And like a Rocky Mountain cat,
 Will reek to the very spheres!
 Yet at his death, O Lord,
 May some prayers be said!

The conjunction “Tant que / So long as” plunges us into the death sentence Rimbaud pronounces on himself. It is gruesome and involves carving up his brain: “Ce paquet blanc vert et gras, / A vapeur jamais nouvelle. . .” The butchery continues with the rest of his body. The short (seven-syllable), highly segmented lines give a staccato beat to this death sentence and also add a colloquial quality, as if people are gossiping. Rimbaud is the speaker but this is not his voice; he is mimicking the voices of his critics. These include Verlaine’s wife, in-laws, and friends, several of whom he had insulted and one of whom he had attacked, also his mother and her circle of acquaintances.

To read the poem emotionally, we have to put ourselves in the mind of the poet as he mimics the critics of his behavior. He asks: *Is this what*

you want? Will this satisfy you? Clearly his "shame" is tinged with self-righteous indignation. The images of butchery reach their climax in the third stanza. In the fourth stanza, the clause introduced by the repetition of "Tant que" concludes the conditions that must be fulfilled before the culprit can be properly punished. The culprit's identity is emphasized by the position of "l'enfant" at the end of a line and "Gêneur" at the start of the next. This marks the pivot between guilt and punishment. And here we begin to see how shame is abreacted: first, by the evocation of a mythical beast, "un chat des Monts-Rocheux," whose stench fills the world, to make him seem less than human.⁴ The irony of the comparison is heightened by the hypocritical call for prayers to save his soul in the final distich.

Irony was always Rimbaud's best instrument for turning away wrath. The double viewpoint (of speaker and imagined personae) is maintained throughout the poem, reaching its climax in the last two stanzas. Just to the degree that the punishment is excessive, to that degree the speaker feels shame and resentment; but he doesn't plead to be pardoned. When he asks for prayers in the last two lines, it is evident that his accusers are the guilty parties, those who need divine intervention to forgive their hard-heartedness. It is this ironic reversal, casting shame back on his accusers (his mother? Verlaine? others who commiserated with Mme Rimbaud?) that produces abreaction.

II. "Angoisse / Anguish"

Every scansion is as much an act of interpretation as it is of description.⁵

"Angoisse" is the second poem of Rimbaud's titled with an emotive word.⁶ The poem opens with a hypothetical that begins in the first paragraph, is interrupted by a parenthesis in the second paragraph, and concludes in the third paragraph with a question mark. Here are those paragraphs, aptly described by Lawler as "surges" (176):

Se peut-il qu'Elle me fasse pardonner les ambitions continuellement écrasées,—qu'une fin aisée répare les âges d'indigence,—qu'un jour de succès nous endorme sur la honte de notre inhabileté fatale,

(O palmes! diamant!—Amour, force!—plus haut que toutes joies et gloires!—de toutes façons, partout,—Démon, dieu,—Jeunesse de cet être-ci; moi!)

Que des accidents de féerie scientifique et des mouvements de frater-

nité sociale soient chéris comme restitution progressive de la franchise première? . . .

Can it be that She might allow forgiveness of my ambitions continually crushed,—that a wealthy old age might compensate my years of poverty,—that one day's success might blind us to the shame of our fatal awkwardness,

(O palms! diamonds! Love, power!—higher than all joys and glories!—of every kind, everywhere,—Demon, god—Youth of this being here and now; myself!)

Can accidents of scientific magic and movements of social brotherhood be cherished as the progressive restitution of ordinary freedom? . . .

Lawler notes that the poet is seeking “a possible redemption,” but who is it that holds power to redeem a life; who is “Elle”? The last two paragraphs tell us more about her:

Mais la Vampire qui nous rend gentils commande que nous nous amusions avec ce qu'elle nous laisse, ou qu'autrement nous soyons plus drôles.

Rouler aux blessures, par l'air lassant et la mer; aux supplices, par le silence des eaux et de l'air meurtriers; aux tortures qui rient, dans leur silence atrocement houleux.

But the Vampire who makes us behave commands us to enjoy whatever she leaves us, or otherwise we'll end up even more laughable.

Let us roll in our wounds, through the heavy air and the sea; in our torments, through the silence of waters and the murderous air; in our tortures which jeer us, through their fiendish billowy silence.

Suzanne Bernard comments on the poem's structure: “This is one of the most disturbing poems of the *Illuminations*; we feel a lift (élan), then a fall (une retombée), anguish follows excessive hopes; but these impressions are veiled, allusive, hard to interpret” (*Oeuvres*, 565). Bernard reads “Elle” (la Vampire) as death, characterizing the poem's affectivity as a struggle with the last things. The poet asks what life holds for him, what are his chances for success after almost twenty years of indigence and failure. Will he one day be in a position to forget “la honte de notre inhabileté fatale”? Note the return of “shame,” a too familiar state of mind for

Rimbaud. I think he refers to his social *gaucherie*: his never-to-be-forgotten arrival at the home of Verlaine's in-laws; his tongue-tied awkwardness in expressing gratitude to Izambard; his rude behavior at meetings of Les Vilains Bonshommes; his embarrassed relations with women and girls. Use of this word (*honte*/"shame") rules out any interpretation that sees his failure as involving poetic creation. Rimbaud knew well that he was not "inhabile" as a poet. Failure or success then must be read in a broader sense as "savoir vivre."

Also underlying the association of "Angoisse" with death is the fact that, as Lawler points out (181), the fourth "Spleen" of Baudelaire is the principal intertext for Rimbaud's poem. The last stanza of Baudelaire's poem reads:

—Et de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique,
Défilent lentement dans mon âme; l'Espoir,
Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique,
Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir.

—And long funeral convoys, without music or drums,
Defile slowly in my soul; Hope,
Vanquished, weeps, and atrocious Anguish, despot,
On my bent skull plants her black banner.

Baudelaire's elegiac alexandrines are skillfully echoed by the longer prose lines of "Angoisse." A further recurrence is achieved by the abstract nouns ("Amour, force! . . . Jeunesse . . . accidents de féerie scientifique et des mouvements de fraternité sociale . . .") that give both poems their allegorical, reverberative character.

"Angoisse" is an example of the way that Rimbaud deals with negative emotion, by calling forth and then, through rhythm and imagery, resolving or "abreacting" it. The emotion, of course, is "anguish." In the first paragraph the interrogative "Se peut-il . . ." is followed by three taps of the relative "que," expressing self-doubt tinged with bitterness. The élan of which Bernard speaks occurs in the accelerating rhythm (note the rhymes in "pardonner," "écrasées," and "aisée") and the strong tonic and secondary accents of "me *fasse* pardonner," echoed in "qu'une *fin* aisée répare les âges d'*indigence*; the "retombée" comes in the rest of the sentence, after the tonic of "succès," followed by the lengthening of the second syllable of "endorme" and the final double accent on "*fatale*."

The following parenthetical paragraph is composed exclusively of interjections. Palms and diamonds are rewards of the winner, love and strength are higher than joy and glory. Dislocation, occurring in the last expression (“Démon, dieux—Jeunesse de cet être-ci; moi!”) places strong accentuation on the intensive pronoun, lending power to the self-affirmation that follows the self-doubting first paragraph. These features give a rhythmic lift or surge to the paragraph and project the poem into a new dimension, beginning the abreactive process.

The second paragraph then calls up “succès” by a series of invocations, providing a pivot on which the argument turns into the third stanza, here again a relative clause depending on “Se peut-il. . . .” This introjected object (“une fin aisée . . . un jour de succès”) is absent for the poet and doubly absent for the reader, who must fantasize another’s fantasy. Poetic emotion arises in response to the *absence* of its object. The absent object of need must be invoked within a tensional field. In the third paragraph, still doubting of his own strength, he looks for a social-historical agency: “des accidents de féerie scientifique et des mouvements de fraternité sociale . . .” The reference here is probably to Michelet’s “nouvel amour” (new forms of love) and the manifestos of the revolutionary writers of 1848 and 1870. As for “féerie scientifique,” Bernard sees it as a reference to electricity, a novelty of that time. Can participation in these inventions and social movements redeem him? If the Vampire is death, as I think she is, none of these shibboleths can save him.

HOW THEN does Rimbaud release or abreact the emotion that he himself has identified as anguish? By one of his most common and effective escape valves—mockery. In the fourth section, introduced by “Mais la Vampire . . .” he implicitly dismisses the appeal, in the preceding paragraph, to high-minded ideology. It was all very well for Michelet, an old man with a new wife half his age, to blather about his rebirth: “I feel myself . . . full of devotion and fervor, before these gleams of God embodied in woman.”⁷ The Vampire makes us behave ourselves. Rimbaud has seen the hour of Death in peasant families in the Ardennes. The hush, the tears held back, a priest administering the last rites. Death teaches us to be content with what we have (“ce qu’elle nous laisse”) or otherwise we’ll end up even worse off (“qu’autrement nous soyons plus drôles”).

And here are the alternatives, here is the way you might conclude. Using the figure of zeugma, the infinitive-imperative “Rouler” governs three noun clauses: “aux blessures,” “aux supplices,” and “aux tortures.”

All three have an adverbial function, showing exactly how you will "quake" as you undergo these torments. But the mockery is still there, in the oxymoronic phrases "le silence des eaux et de l'air meurtrier; aux tortures qui rient, dans leur silence atrocement houleux."

The poem has the form of a folk tale, a ghost story. It asks a serious question about death (first paragraph). In the second paragraph the teller boasts that he's equal to death—he is a demon or a god! And besides, in this modern world, progress will guarantee the rights of all of us. (Unfortunately, that doesn't include the right not to die.)

Death is a Vampire, so beware, treat Her with respect; otherwise you'll be caught in a punishing swell, your torturers will laugh in their murderous silence as you are carried past on the wave of time. When he wrote "Angoisse," Rimbaud may have remembered the state of exaltation in which he penned "Le Bateau ivre"; but those days are long gone. More likely, he remembers the terror he felt on July 9, 1873, cowering against a locked door in the Hôtel de la Ville de Courtrai, looking down the barrel of Verlaine's revolver.

III. "Aube / Dawn"

"Aube" also enacts the rise and fall of an emotion. This is one of the poems that justify speaking of animism in Rimbaud, or, more simply, of a child's sensitivity to nature. Delahaye writes that when they went on walks together: "He made me look at the trees, the sky, lit by that inexpressible light, the first hour of morning" (*Oeuvres*, 559).

The first line is frankly sensual: "J'ai embrassé l'aube d'été" ("I kissed the summer dawn"). It is this desire to possess and be possessed by nature that constitutes the emotional nexus of the poem. The second line sets a fairy tale scene: "Rien ne bougeait encore au front des palais" ("Nothing yet moved on the fronts of the palaces"). In this setting, at such a moment, anything can happen. Yet the next two sentences evoke quiescence, shadows: "L'eau était morte. Les camps d'ombres ne quittaient pas la route du bois" ("The water was deathly still. Camps of shadows still held the road through the forest"). Little by little, as the child enters the woods, emanations rise, life stirs: "J'ai marché, réveillant les haleines vives et tièdes, et les pierreries regardèrent, et les ailes se levèrent sans bruit" ("As I walked, awakening lively yet tepid breaths, the stones looked around, and wings flapped without noise"). The first line is octosyllabic, the second an alexandrine. The third line has four syllables, the following fourteen. As the next verset swells (32 syllables), life comes to the forest.

This poem is Disneyesque long before the existence of the animated cartoon. The very stones look around, a flower utters its name.⁸ He laughs at the waterfall disheveled by the pine trees, then on the hilltop recognizes the goddess. Yves Bonnefoy (no doubt jokingly) found the “lièvre” saying its prayer in “Après le déluge” to be “mièvre” (affected); but isn’t there something a bit cloying in this much-admired poem?

The next event in the poem brings to the surface a sublimated oedipal theme: the child begins to strip off the veils of the goddess, she who stands on the silver summit of the dawn. The immensity of the female figure versus the smallness of the child suggests an infantile memory. This transgressive act makes imagination run riot: “Dans l’allée, en agitant les bras. Par la plaine, où je l’ai dénoncée au coq. A la grand’ville elle fuyait parmi les clochers et les dômes, et courant comme un mendiant sur les quais de marbre, je la chassais” (“Down the path, waving my arms. Across the plain, where I denounced her to the cock. In the city she fled among the bell-towers and the domes, and running like a beggar across the marble quays, I chased her”). Here there is the same rhythmic phenomenon as at the start of the poem, sentences of increasing length as emotion builds to a climax:

En haut de la route, près d’un bois de lauriers, je l’ai entourée avec ses
voiles amassés, et j’ai senti un peu son immense corps.

Where the road climbs, near a laurel wood, I embraced her bunched-up
veils, and I felt gingerly her immense body.

Her veils are up around her waist (perhaps exposing her sex), he feels her divine flesh. . . . Emotion peaks after this profanatory deed and he passes out:

L’aube et l’enfant tombèrent au bas du bois.
Au réveil il était midi.

Dawn and the child fell at the edge of the wood.
When I woke up it was noon.

Rimbaud didn’t need to learn the love of nature (animism if you will) from Hugo or Nerval. This was something he felt deeply, all his life, even years later in Africa. He hated many things about Africa, but the natural surroundings entranced him.

In “Aube” he takes the feelings that well up in that “heure indicible”

and brings them, through personification and an intuitive rhythm, to a climax that ends abruptly, revealing, in that abruptness, its sexual nature. Think of the last line of "Conte": "La musique savante manque à notre désir."

MOST POEMS involve some kind of problem, crisis, conflict, or need. This may be the need to mourn a loved one; the need to speak out in delight; or the need to fill a psychic void. Or there may be the need to create a sense of inner order so that a nameless anxiety is dispelled. Ab-reaction—the impulsive movement away from a negative condition or feeling—is the process by which the problem is solved, the void filled, the anxiety dispelled. It involves the expression of and release from emotional tension through a symbolic activity that mediates the emotive charge and turns it back upon the subject, leading to resolution. In the physician's office abreaction may occur through the transference of the patient's needs onto the therapist, followed by a curative reabsorption of feelings back into the patient's psyche.

Emotion rises up in a psychic field between the subject and its object; but the object's presence is an illusion, just as the therapist is a delusive object, since the transference emotions are directed through him at others. What we desire, or, conversely, what we flee can never be wholly possessed: this is the root cause of affectivity. As Diotima describes it in Plato's *Symposium*, desire (i.e., emotion) is the ever unsatisfied child of Need. Emotion is a product of our contingency, the neediness of "the mewling and puking babe" brought brutally into the world. In this perspective, "Aube" becomes a compelling allegory for literary emotion. The poet seeks to possess the dawn, the gift of daylight that restores him to the world; but possession in its multifarious forms—seeing, stripping bare, describing, copulating—is evanescent, an illusion. He holds the dawn even as she sedates him. When he awakens, his brief emotive episode proves to have been only a dream.