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Fantasy and Reality

“*Vies I, II, III*”; “*H*”

A chaque être, plusieurs *autres vies* me semblaient dues.
(To each being, several other lives seemed to me due.)

—*Une Saison en enfer*, “*Délires II*”

A recurrent theme in *Illuminations* is the conflict between fantasy and reality. Rimbaud kept trying to come to terms with the reality principle, but his need for evasion was always stronger. He was always poised for flight—first to Paris, then to London and Brussels, then to Stuttgart or Java, and finally Africa. Jacques Rivière was the first critic to remark his profound need to be always somewhere else: “He shows a positive and even aggressive impossibility to ‘exist in the world.’ . . . He suffocates, he squirms ceaselessly; always in vain. His continual flights are the fits and starts of that metaphysical intolerance . . .” (*Oeuvres*, 87). Rimbaud would start one project, then abandon it for another. When he was at home in Charleville (the place where he felt least at home), he would pick up ever-unfinished studies for his bachot (baccalaureate exam) or begin piano lessons with the upstairs neighbor. This need to be, in Baudelaire’s formula, “Anywhere out of this world” appears in the poems called “*Vies I, II, III*” (“*Lives I, II, III*”).”

“Vie I”

“*Vie I*” illustrates Rimbaud’s recurrent dream of the Orient:

O les énormes avenues du pays saint, les terrasses du temple! Qu'a-t-on fait du brahmane qui m'expliqua les Proverbes? D'alors, de là-bas, je vois encore même les vieilles! Je me souviens des heures d'argent et de soleil vers les fleuves, la main de la campagne sur mon épaule, et de nos caresses debout dans les plaines poivrées.—Un envol de pigeons écarlates tonne autour de ma pensée.—Exilé ici j'ai eu une scène où jouer tous les chefs-d'oeuvre dramatiques de toutes les littératures. . . .

O the enormous avenues of the Holy Land, the terraces of the temple! what has become of the Brahmin who explained the Proverbs to me? From that time and place I can still see even the old women! I remember hours of sun and silver near the rivers, the countryside's hand on my shoulder, and our caresses as we stood on the spice-scented plains.—A flight of scarlet pigeons thunders about my thought.—Exiled here, I have had a stage on which to perform the dramatic masterpieces of all literatures. . . .

Sergio Sacchi says of this poem that ". . . everything in it suggests the slow progress of a daydream . . ." (Sacchi, 111) and Freud sees daydream or reverie as conscious fantasy; but, as we proceed, we will see that there are other types of fantasy in "Vies" as well. Fantasy is always linked with desire, and here we have two of Rimbaud's oldest desires, desire for a teacher and for a sexual partner. Sacchi comments that the rhythm "underlines the slow upward surge of memory . . ." (113). The poet remembers anecdotes and tales that show the Orient as a place where learning is held in high esteem and love is pantheistic, hence guilt-free. The silver of moonlight and the sunshine erase time as the landscape touches his shoulder. Sacchi reminds us that in "Sensation," written when he was sixteen, Rimbaud ". . . dreamed of losing himself in Nature—happy as with a woman . . ." (113). Yet a flight of pigeons interrupts the caress. This break suggests that guilt is present after all. The "ici / here and now" of his exile is not the Orient but the place where he is writing—the banal village of Roche (as becomes explicit in "Vie II"). The "scène," where, to escape from a tedious reality, he stages all the masterpieces of world literature, is in his mind. This image of theater insists on the urgency of his need to fantasize.

Sacchi comments on the passage that follows: "That feverish succession of narcissistic performances is in the first person . . ." (*Je vous indiquerais . . . J'observe . . . Je vois / I will show you . . . I observe, I see*). Sacchi hears an echo of the same intonations found in "Nuit de

l'enfer" in the *Saison*: "Je suis maître en fantasmagories . . . J'ai tous les talents . . . Je ferai de l'or, des remèdes / I'm a master in magic . . . I have every talent . . . I'll make gold, or medicines." Here the poet is a circus barker, trying to attract his audience (116).

But then poetic fantasy takes on the ambiance of a hellish dream. Rimbaud is performing for an audience that has lost interest. He is Mallarmé's "Pitre châtié / Punished Clown." Like Mallarmé's clown he removes his mask and speaks directly to the spectator of his inventions: he assures her he would have liked to show her "les richesses inouïes / unheard-of riches." She teases him, telling him the sequel. He is momentarily thrilled: "Je vois la suite! / I see the rest!" But his enthusiasm freezes. "Ma sagesse est aussi dédaignée que le chaos. Qu'est mon néant, auprès de la stupeur qui vous attend? / My insight is disdained like chaos. What is my nothingness compared to the stupor that awaits you?" The fantasy turns short, images flutter like pigeon wings. Rimbaud's "sagesse," acquired from the Brahman sage, is scorned by his imagined auditor. I read the last line as a veiled threat to her, like Ronsard's sonnet to the lady who had spurned him: "Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle, / Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant / Direz chantez mes vers en vous émerveillant / Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j'étais belle" / "When you are very old, at evening by candlelight, / Seated by the fire, winding and spinning / You will sing my verse and marvel / Ronsard praised me when I was beautiful."

Rimbaud's "néant" is a failure of imagination; but it's still not as bad as the "stupeur" that awaits her, an ordinary person, doomed to the banality of bourgeois life.¹

"Vie II"

"Vie II" involves self-definition and ego problems that Rimbaud remedies by fantasy:

Je suis un inventeur bien autrement méritant que tous ceux qui m'ont précédé; un musicien même, qui ai trouvé quelque chose comme la clef de l'amour. A présent, gentilhomme d'une campagne aigre et sobre, j'essaye de m'émouvoir au souvenir de l'enfance mendicante, de l'apprentissage ou de l'arrivée en sabots, des polémiques, des cinq ou six veuvages, et quelques noces où ma forte tête m'empêcha de monter au diapason des camarades. Je ne regrette pas ma vieille part de gâté divine: l'air sobre de

cette aigre campagne alimente fort activement mon atroce scepticisme. Mais comme ce scepticisme ne peut désormais être mis en oeuvre, et que d'ailleurs je suis dévoué à un trouble nouveau,—j'attends de devenir un très méchant fou.

I'm an inventor far more meritorious than all those who have preceded me; indeed a musician who has found something like the key of love. At present, squire of a harsh land with a sober sky, I try to feel emotion in remembering my mendicant childhood, my apprenticeship when I arrived wearing wooden shoes, my polemics, my five or six widowings, and a few binges when my strong head kept me from rising to the same pitch as my companions. I don't regret my old portion of divine gaiety: the sober air of this harsh countryside gives new vigor to my atrocious skepticism. But since this skepticism can no longer be put to use, and, since I am devoted to a new provocation,—I expect to become a very wicked fool.

The descriptive “une campagne aigre et sobre” suggests that Rimbaud wrote this at Roche before it was recopied by Germain Nouveau in 1874, while the pair were in London. He muses on his past, recalling the awkwardness of his arrival in Paris, figuratively “en sabots” (in wooden shoes). Rimbaud never forgot the humiliation of that first meeting, when he dined with Verlaine's wife and her parents. Next he recalls his quarrels and misunderstandings while consorting with Les Vilains Bonshommes; laments five or six unfortunate relationships; and brags that he could hold more alcohol than his comrades. If he does not feel guilty about his frequent bouts of drunkenness, why does he bother to say he doesn't regret “ma vieille part de gaité divine”? Sacchi comments “. . . ‘I don't regret’ serves to exorcise a nostalgia or a regret only too real” (118). This place (and only his home town and the presence of his mother account for such bitterness) enhances “his atrocious skepticism.” Then he predicts his eventual abandonment of poetry: “Mais comme ce scepticisme ne peut désormais être mis en oeuvre, et que d'ailleurs je suis dévoué à un trouble nouveau,—j'attends de devenir un très méchant fou.”

The word “trouble” has a sexual connotation in French; this may be a reference to Germain Nouveau or simply some other commitment—plans to pass the bachot, to travel, and so on. Why has he given up his productive skepticism? I think that Rimbaud's biographers have not sufficiently assessed his guilt feelings, in regard to sexuality, intoxication, and the continuing practices of *Voyance*. His skepticism, his strongest defense against

everything his mother stood for, is undermined by the necessity of playing at being "un gentilhomme." These were all things his mother knew about and disapproved of. Only guilt could produce such an extreme judgment: that he will soon become "a very wicked madman." It is said ironically, but there is a bitterness here that corresponds to the "campagne aigre au ciel sobre."

"Vie III"

"Vie III" recapitulates Rimbaud's fairy tale about his own life. He tells it ironically, with knowing exaggerations: The attic at Roche where he wrote *Une Saison en enfer* becomes "un grenier où je fus enfermé à douze ans / an attic where I was locked up at the age of twelve." The *bildungsroman* progression of *Une Saison* recalls Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. Antoine Adam notes that on a trip to Anvers he saw Rubens's portraits of his wives, Isabel and Helen. For the daydreamer, there is only a step more to actually meeting the wives of great painters. He allows the fantasy to expand to mythic proportions: "Dans une magnifique demeure cernée par l'Orient entier j'ai accompli mon immense oeuvre et passé mon illustre retraite / In a magnificent dwelling surrounded by the entire Orient I completed my prodigious work and spent my illustrious retirement."

EACH OF the three "Vies" begins expansively with a swell of poetic ego and then collapses as he reaches the end of his fantasy and returns to reality: "Mon devoir m'est remis. Il ne faut même plus songer à cela. Je suis réellement d'outre-tombe, et pas de commissions / My duty done, my brooding ended. I'm really out of this world and taking no further commissions."

These poems indicate that Rimbaud had painfully learned what Freud also discovered—that, although fantasy plays a major role in the etiology of neurosis, there is no sharp distinction between poetic genius and morbidity. In "Vie I" and "Vie III" in particular, there are grandiose fantasies that are suddenly terminated. "Vie I" ends with admission of his own nothingness. In II, although the fantasy is held in check, there is the threat of madness if he abandons his principal means of defense, fantasy production. In III he mimics the voice of Chateaubriand's *Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, and speaks to us from beyond the grave. All this shows that the abandonment of poetry was not an overnight process but a long

and difficult trial, accomplished at the risk of his mental health. But he also realized that there were perhaps greater risks if he continued.

"H"

Another poem that should be considered in respect to the question of fantasy is "H," a poem generally agreed to refer to the act of masturbation. André Guyaux finds the key to "H" in the pairing *solitude-lassitude* which echoes the nominal pair *solitude-Habitude* in the satiric dizain on the Imperial Prince, "L'Enfant qui ramassa les balles." That poem (jokingly attributed to François Coppée) ends with the line: "Pauvre jeune homme, il a sans doute l'Habitude! / Poor young man, doubtless he has the Habit!" I think "H" deserves to be taken seriously, as an attempt to unwrap the complex imbrication of the mental and the physical involved in the act of onanism.

Toutes les monstruosités violent les gestes atroces d'Hortense. Sa solitude est la mécanique érotique, sa lassitude, la dynamique amoureuse. Sous la surveillance d'une enfance elle a été, à des époques nombreuses, l'ardente hygiène des races. Sa porte est ouverte à la misère. Là, la moralité des êtres actuels se décorpore en sa passion ou en son action—O terrible frisson des amours novices, sur le sol sanglant et par l'hydrogène clarteux! trouvez Hortense.

All forms of monstrosity violate the atrocious gestures of Hortense. Her solitude is erotic mechanics; her weariness, the dynamics of love. Under the supervision of childhood she has been, in numerous epochs, the ardent hygiene of races. Her door is open to poverty. There, the morality of actual beings is disembodied in her passion or her action.—O terrible thrill of novice loves on the bloody ground and in the milky hydrogen! find Hortense.

First, let me propose an answer to the enigma of "Hortense." Even if masturbation is habitual, it is accompanied by fantasy. Hortense Schneider (1838–1920), who starred in Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* (1864), *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867), and *La Périchole* (1868), was also a famous courtesan. She had many lovers, including so many monarchs that she was nicknamed "le passage des princes." Zola took her as model for his heroine, Nana. Many thousands of Frenchmen (though not

le Prince impérial, Napoleon IV, who was not even born when Schneider enchanted *le tout Paris*) must surely have fantasized the sensual soprano during their solitary pleasures.² The poem ends: "Trouvez Hortense!" But how do you find a fantasy? By *l'Habitude*. . . . But this identification, even if correct, still leaves us with a dense and challenging poetic text. So let me push the analysis further.

If Hortense is a figure of fantasy, to whom atrocious gestures are attributed, she herself is violated by the monstrous fantasies of the onanist.³ The second line speaks of "her solitude . . . her weariness . . ."; this is a displacement of the possessive adjective from the actant to the acted upon. It is the onanist whose weary solitude has compelled him to have recourse to this parody of love's dynamic. Yet he will speak in her defense, for, from age to age, she has been "the ardent hygiene of races": masturbation is an outlet for urges that might otherwise lead to rape and violence.

"Her door is open to poverty." Those who cannot afford to buy sex have an alternative that is free to all. The next line is the most difficult in the poem: "There the morality of actual beings is disembodied in her passion or in her action." Once again, we find displacement of the possessive adjective: It is not *her* passion, *her* action, but *his*; and here the question of morality arises. We hear an echo of the confessional. It is Rimbaud who pronounces absolution upon the onanist: *Your action was merely a fantasy of an action, it was disembodied*. And the child leaves the confessional with an image of the bleeding earth, healed by the milky whiteness of semen. "Find Hortense"? A mere fantasy, Hortense has evaporated. Yet there is this *harmonie imitative*: The four expanding syllables of "trouvez Hortense," each longer in duration than the preceding, echo the "ithyphalique" of "Le Coeur du pitre" and are a sonorous embodiment of erection. If the title ("H") is the penis at rest, then the last two words ("trouvez Hortense") present it fully engorged.