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# 10

## *Killing Me Softly'*

“Conte”

The price of Genet’s fantastic power over reality is a parodistic simplification of reality.<sup>2</sup>

In its compactness and symmetry, “Conte” has a jewel-like quality; different facets sparkle plausibly in this polyvalent poem. “Conte” is often characterized as an enigma poem, that is, a puzzle to which there is a key. In her deconstructive reading of the poem, Barbara Johnson sees the enigma as the identity of the Prince. After showing that this identity is not a question of reference—the Prince is not Verlaine, Hamlet, Vathek, or Nero, etc.—she reaches the conclusion that everything in the puzzle refers back to itself: “Le Prince était le Génie. Le Génie était le Prince / The Prince was the Genie. The Genie was the Prince.” Her reading sees the poem as a labyrinth of mirrors, where each entity reproduces itself in reverse: the assassinated wives reappear, the slaughtered pets revive, etc. The Prince and the Genie fuse into one.

There are innumerable readings of “Conte.” Perhaps the two most diverse readings are those of André Guyaux, who finds the poem no more than a “brainwashing” for the typical Rimbaud devotee,<sup>3</sup> and that of James Lawler, who deciphers many levels of meaning in “Conte.”

Lawler’s study of Rimbaud is designed around the metaphor of theater, and his book reaches a high point in the lengthy and intricate analysis of this much discussed poem. I for one am convinced that, as Lawler argues, Baudelaire’s “Une Mort héroïque” is the intertext that inspired Rimbaud’s poem, even though “Conte” is lacking in several important features found in the prose poem by Baudelaire.<sup>4</sup> “Une Mort héroïque” presents us with

a stage upon which Fanciulle, the supreme comic actor—specifically called “le génie”—reaches his sublime thespian peak and then, mortally wounded by a prank engineered by the Prince (a pageboy blows a whistle offstage), suddenly expires. There is no literal theater in “Conte,” yet the poem might best be described by borrowing the title of Lawler’s book, *Rimbaud’s Theater of the Self*.

Baudelaire’s explicit narrator is lacking in Rimbaud’s poem. This narrator is the vehicle of emotion and, by his comments, adds a crucial dimension. So for instance the narrator writes, at the peak of Fanciulle’s performance, “Ma plume tremble et des larmes d’une émotion toujours présente me montent aux yeux pendant que je cherche à vous décrire cette inoubliable soirée / My pen trembles and tears of an emotion still present flow from my eyes as I try to describe for you that unforgettable evening” (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres* I, 452).

IF ONE reflects on Baudelaire’s story, it is apparent that both Fanciulle (Fanciullo, “boy” in Italian) and the Prince must have held a strong attraction for Rimbaud. The Prince was “Amoureux passionné des beaux-arts, excellent connaisseur d’ailleurs, il était vraiment insatiable de voluptés / A passionate lover of the arts, besides that a man of excellent taste, he was an insatiable lover of pleasure.” Fanciulle is an artist “avec une joie qui l’empêche de voir la tombe / with a joy that prevents him from seeing the tomb.”<sup>5</sup> He has the exuberance of a powerfully charismatic actor. Rimbaud’s own narcissism is captured by the resemblance to himself of both the Genie and the Prince, and so, at the end of the poem, it is not surprising that he fuses them into one being:

Un soir il [le Prince] galopait fièrement. Un Génie apparut, d’une beauté ineffable, inavouable même. De sa physionomie et son maintien ressortait la promesse d’un amour multiple et complexe! d’un bonheur indicible, insupportable même! Le Prince et le Génie s’anéantirent probablement dans la santé essentielle. Comment n’auraient-ils pas pu en mourir? Ensemble donc ils moururent.

Mais ce Prince décéda, dans son palais à un âge ordinaire. Le prince était le Génie. Le Génie était le Prince.

La musique savante manque à notre désir.

One evening, when he was proudly galloping, a Genie appeared, of ineffable, inexpressible beauty. His appearance and his bearing gave promise of a multiple and complex love, of an unspeakable even unbearable

happiness. The Prince and the Genie destroyed each other, probably in the prime of life. How could they not have died of it? Thus together they died.

But this Prince passed away in his palace, at a normal age. The prince was the Genie. The Genie was the Prince.

The cunning music exhausts our desire.

One notable thing about "Conte" is the absence (or perhaps flatness) of emotion. This is not only because Rimbaud has removed the explicit narrator from Baudelaire's scenario, but because of the controlled, symmetrical way the poem is put together. The entire poem unfolds on the same affective level, as if something fundamental is being repressed. This is a feature Barbara Johnson has reproduced in her analysis. It too unfolds on the same level, in a progression of deconstructive clicks. Indeed, she uses "a parodistic simplification of reality" that coincides very closely with the logic of Rimbaud's text. It is a logic that reduces the poem to a *chassé-croisé*,<sup>6</sup> where terms change their meaning and position with the regularity of a dance. Johnson writes: "The Prince's quest, the constitutive *question* which determines the text is in reality an enigma, where the resolution (the Génie) is simply a different way of posing the question. . . . The 'word' [explanation] of the enigma, is nothing other, literally, than a word" (77).

Johnson seems to be saying that the poem involves the search for distraction; the answer to the Prince's search is his own simulacrum, in other words, himself. This puts us on the right track, for the poem is born out of primary narcissism. But there is something lacking in Johnson's analysis; a word is not enough. What can the Prince do, once he has discovered that he loves himself? The answer is closer to Genet than to Mallarmé, one of Johnson's points of reference.

As Rimbaud has told us in "H," masturbation is the refuge of the lonely, the bereft, the friendless. If such an individual has no one else to love, his residual narcissism allows him to love himself. This self-loving always has an accompanying fantasy.

The poem is about fantasies; and it starts with fantasies of destruction. In our discussion of "Après le déluge" the casual destructiveness of a child was seen as motive for the annihilation of the world. In "Conte," we see *destrudo* (the death wish) again, but this time as a feature of a despotic ruler, the Prince. Here it is not "the sudden death" (Fanciulle falls "roide mort") of Baudelaire's genius that Rimbaud's Prince wishes; rather, it is what is poetically known as "the little death." The progression of imperfections, ending with the past definite "Il voulut / he wished," suggests that

we are dealing with a masturbation fantasy that has several near-climaxes but only attains *jouissance* (orgasm) at the end of the poem ("ils moururent / they died"). The word "death" has a long history of poetic equivalence with "sexual climax." This "conte" masquerades as a moral fable by La Fontaine or Voltaire; but it is really an erotic bedtime story. Habitually repeated on the threshold of sleep it becomes compacted, truncated, reduced to "the cunning music that exhausts our desire."

My reading of "H" in the preceding chapter halted briefly on the first line: "Toutes les monstruosités violent les gestes atroces d'Hortense. / All monstrosities violate the atrocious gestures of Hortense." There is general agreement among critics that "H" signifies l'Habitude which signifies masturbation; but where in "H" are the "monstruosités," where are the "gestes atroces," and what is the violation? I think here we are authorized to take a look backward, at "Le Coeur du pitre." That poem, also called "Le Coeur supplicié," is *all* emotion, from the first line to the last. Rimbaud was crushed by Izambard's cruel parody of his confessional work and never walked that path of vulnerability again. Enid Starkie was one of the first critics to remark the complete change in the young Rimbaud, when he returned home from *communard* Paris. She suggests that he was sexually attacked, and that along with the disgust and pain there was sexual pleasure. Later, his cohabitation with Verlaine involved roughhousing and downright violence.<sup>7</sup>

### *Destrudo*

The destructiveness of "Conte" resembles that of "Après le déluge" in one curious respect. In "Après le déluge," the annihilated world is recreated. "Conte" has a symmetry that appears to be its central feature: the Prince, after remarking the beauty of his wives, destroys them; but they bounce back with magical resiliency. He admires, then kills his pet animals ("bêtes de luxe"); but they are resuscitated. Finally, he meets a Génie, perfect in every way; the Prince and this Génie, who promises "un bonheur indicible, insupportable même" ("an unspeakable, even unbearable happiness"), annihilate each other "probablement dans la santé essentielle" ("probably in the best of health" or "in the prime of life"), a euphemism for sexual intercourse. "Le Prince était le Génie. Le Génie était le Prince" ("The Prince was the Genie. The Genie was the Prince").

The last line is a chiasmus (a "crossing"), a device that provides a natural rhythmical ending: "La musique savante manque à notre désir." Chiasmus takes the form ABBA: A (Musique) B (Savante) B (Notre) A

(Désir)—the adjectives and nouns reverse position. Sexual energy is expended in orgasm, the story ends, as desire is momentarily exhausted. But soon desire returns, ready to repeat itself. And nobody has died; these deaths are only the effacement of fantasies, not the quietus of substantive beings—or even characters. Yet Rimbaud has given his answer to the enigma of love. There are those who fall in love with their own self-image: the word of the enigma is “Narcissus.” This impels us to return to another feature of the poem singled out by Guyaux, the “casade of negative adjectives” in the paragraph where the Genie meets the Prince: “inéffable, inavouable même . . . un bonheur indicible, insupportable même! / ineffable, even unmentionable . . . an unspeakable happiness, unbearable even!” This is not “brainwashing” but, rather, the description of a happiness that is no happiness, a love that is no love because it is directed at a non-object, oneself.

THERE IS another important issue that remains to be dealt with—the issue of violence. In his essay “Persons in Pieces,” Leo Bersani writes of Genet’s *Pompes Funèbres*: “The brutality of Genet’s sexual fantasies suggests the masturbator’s murderous intolerance of whatever spoils his exciting sexual inventions. The onanist is a rigorous novelistic plotter. He crudely dramatizes the self-projectiveness of all literary invention, and primitively and melodramatically, he reveals the evil of love and literature as a desire to coerce the world into being an exciting replica of the self” (288).

The “rigorous” plot is much more obvious in Rimbaud’s poem of twenty-nine lines than in Genet’s novel. This “symmetry,” as I have called it, is one of the poem’s main features, a feature that points to its character as a sexual fantasy. The “evil of love and literature” is overt in Genet’s novel; in Rimbaud’s “Conte,” the artificiality of the fable negates the attribution of evil. The only immorality we might attribute to it is the egoism of the Prince, his relentless focus on his own pleasure. But isn’t this exactly the mindset of the onanist?

Sartre called his book on the author of *Pompes Funèbres* “Saint Genet”; and this was not only to echo the *Saint Genest* of Rotrou. In his systematic reversal of values, Genet is a saint of evil, a being who, like the Prince of “Conte,” kills before he can love. Lawler’s reading of “Conte” as a parable of mystical love—i.e., a reversal of Genet’s reversal—is a daring interpretation of this polyvalent text. Certainly “Conte” is not, as Guyaux contends, an exercise in brainwashing; but the love at issue here is lacking in the power that we attribute to the great mystical poets, such as Hafiz or John of the Cross, to follow Lawler’s interpretation.

WHY CALL the poem a masturbation fantasy instead of a fantasy *tout court*? Why *this* wish? Perhaps there is ecstasy in destruction, rejuvenation in cruelty, especially when these are figments of imagination. Psychoanalyst Daniel Lagache notes that vitality, sexuality, and love are all linked with aggression, in the "looking-glass self" of the young child.<sup>8</sup> I concur with this comment from Lawler: "ecstasy may perhaps be found in destruction, youthful vigor in cruelty . . ." (149).

Graham Robb's biography, the most recent, the most outspoken in its revelation of Rimbaud's flaunting, outrageous, and often obscene behavior from 1871 when he first took up with Verlaine, until the summer of 1873, focuses on the dark side of Rimbaud's character.<sup>9</sup> As Lawler suggests, the adolescent Rimbaud found pleasure in destruction. Especially when destruction was merely fantasized.