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Rimbaud

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“Nocturne vulgaire” and the Paranoid Position

This poem, probably written under the influence of hashish, combines four visions: the poet is not only in a phantasmagoric theater where sets rise, collapse, and combine: “Un souffle ouvre des brèches opéradiques dans les cloisons, / —brouille le pivotement des toits rongés,—disperse les limites des foyers” / “A breath opens operatic fissures in the walls,—blurs the pivoting of the rotting ceilings,—dispels the limits of the hearths”; but he is also staring into the flames of a fire: “Un vert et un bleu très foncés envahissent l’image / A very deep green and blue invade the image [second vision].” Simultaneously, he seems to be in a dream state, witnessing his own funeral: “Corbillard de mon sommeil, isolé, maison de berger de ma niaiserie, le véhicule vire sur le gazon de la grande route effacée; et dans un défaut en haut de la glace de droite tournoient les blêmes figures lunaires, feuilles, seins / Hearse of my hidden slumber, shepherd’s hut of my silliness, the vehicle swerves on the grass of the obliterated highway [third vision]; and in a blemish at the top of the right hand window [fourth vision] swirl pale lunar figures, leaves, breasts.” And finally, he is Jack of the Beanstalk, who climbs through the jagged holes in the ceilings (“toits rongés”) and then down again: “Le long de la vigne, m’étant appuyé du pied à une gargouille [the giant]—je suis descendu dans ce carrosse . . . / Down the length of the vine, leaning with one foot against the gargoyle, I came down into this coach. . . .”

What psychoanalytic paradigm can account for this unity in difference? Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black make this comparison that provides an appropriate template for the poem:

For Freud the psyche is shaped through the oedipal conflict into stable and coherent structures, with hidden recesses and illicit designs. In an increasingly dramatic although unannounced fashion, Klein substituted for Freud's vision a portrayal of mind as a continually shifting, kaleidoscopic stream of primitive, phantasmagoric images, fantasies, and terrors. For Klein, the psyche, not just of the small child but of the adult as well, remains always unstable, fluid, constantly fending off psychotic anxieties. For Freud, each of us struggles with bestial wishes, fears of retribution, and guilt. For Klein, each of us struggles with the deep terrors of annihilation (paranoid anxiety) and utter abandonment (depressive anxiety).¹

A Kleinian reading of this poem seems feasible when we realize that drugs—and this is a hashish trance—can produce transient psychotic states. The breast imagery is also Kleinian: “—je suis descendu dans ce carrosse dont l'époque est assez indiquée par les glaces convexes, les panneaux bombés et les sofas contournés— / I landed in this coach whose period is apparent in the convex windows, the swelling panels and the rounded sofas. . . .” Later in the same paragraph, the poet explicitly uses the word “breasts.” The breast is the child's first object, and he expends his early instinctual emotions upon it (greed, anxiety, etc.).² The ambivalence of infantile desire, which sees the breast as generous and refusing, good and bad, is present throughout the poem in various couplings: “vert et bleu / green and blue,” “les Sodomes, et les Solymes / Sodoms and Solesmses,” “les bêtes féroces et les armées / ferocious beasts and armies.” His appetites can be gauged by the penultimate verset—reminiscent of “Le Bateau ivre”:

—Et nous envoyer, fouettés à travers les eaux clapotantes et les boissons répandues, rouler sur l'aboi des dogues . . .

—And send us, whipped over the splashing waves and spilled drinks, to roll over the barking of the bulldogs . . .

The poem ends as it begins, with a breath, an act akin to the suckling of an infant: “—Un souffle disperse les limites du foyer / —A breath dispels

the limits of the hearth." The final line recalls other such downbeats of the conductor's bow, as in "Conte," where "La musique savante manque à notre désir."

One question about "Nocturne vulgaire" that has not been adequately addressed concerns the second word of the oxymoronic title. Suzanne Bernard attributes it to the fact that this highly musical "Nocturne" is the product of a hashish dream. I think it is not the "vulgarity" of hashish, a bizarre attribution, but rather the fact that it is outside a theater or concert hall, in the poet's room, either a day-by-day rental or a hotel room in London or Paris. How many great poems have been written in such vulgar surroundings?

Bernard emphasizes the poem's musicality, giving this quote from Rivière: "He [Rimbaud] knows the correct vibrato of every vowel; he takes each as a musical note and writes its harmonics . . ." (*Oeuvres*, 563, n8).

The poem's overture is announced by the rhythmic development of the first lines, where primary accents on four verbs ("ouvre," "brouille," "disperse," "éclipse") mark a complex prosodic unit. The urgent rhythm prepares us for "Jack's" leap to the beanstalk, his bold step on the monster's head, then his mysterious insertion into the funeral procession of his own sleep: "Corbillard de mon sommeil. . . ." This prepares his onirique regression into a mysterious world inhabited by "blêmes figures lunaires, feuilles, seins."

Is the pale moonlike figure the naked father imago, covered by a figleaf? Are the breasts those of Mme Cloutier, his wet nurse, those of his mother, or of ". . . la fille aux tétons énormes / the girl with enormous tits" ("Au Cabaret-Vert")? Maybe he's seen a music hall chorus line? Maybe even the breasts of "Hortense" come to haunt his dreams. The entire section, from "Corbillard" to "seins" has a broken rhythm, produced by secondary or even tertiary relays within the passage. So "Corbillard de mon sommeil" forms the first rhythmic unit; then "isolé" which picks up the rhyme, relays us into "maison de berger de ma niaiserie. . . ." The silliness may be caused by hashish, brought to an abrupt halt by what he sees in the tarnished mirror ("un défaut en haut de la glace de droite"): the father and mother imago. We recall that Klein considers "the earliest anxiety situation of all to be . . . the struggle with the father's penis in the mother."³

There are serious questions about when and how the hallucination becomes a poem. How do infantile drives take on form and integrate with adult perceptions? Here I want to quote from Joseph Pineau's book on

French speech rhythms: "Thus, only rhythm, through whatever form it takes and whatever its amplitude, makes the passage of time bearable for humankind."⁴ Time is indeed an issue in "Nocturne vulgaire." The repetition of "Un souffle" at beginning and end implies that the poem is instantaneous, outside of all temporality. (This use of repetition brings to mind a modern work: Cocteau's film, *Le Sang d'un poète / Blood of a Poet* [1932], which begins and ends with the same crumbling smoke stack.)

Observe the notational style at several points—in the lines beginning "Corbillard de mon sommeil . . .," where in each prosodic unit the verb is deferred; also in "Dételage aux environs d'une tache de gravier / Unharnessing near a pile of gravel"; here, time is slowed if not suspended. The parenthetical question ("Postillon et bêtes de songe reprendront-ils sous les plus suffocantes futaies, pour m'enfoncer jusqu'aux yeux dans la source de soie? / Will the postilion and dream animals return in the most stifling furrows, to submerge me to eye level in the silken wellspring?") is the crux of the poem, the point at which infantile anxiety—paranoia—reaches its peak: the postilion/father, aided by shadowy dream animals, holds the child's head under water and he almost drowns. The parentheses work in two contradictory ways: they both emphasize the event and put it out of play. The dreamer flees, dogs barking at his heels. . . .

The rhythm is managed in such a way as to produce a cumulative effect: dazzlement, self-revelation, and self-withholding. Momentarily we share the dream, we ourselves become phantoms of the opera; we share the poet's impulses which become our own, and in that brief fusion, are taken deeper into ourselves than we have ever been before. Amid these terrors we confront love and destructiveness, till we slide down the beanstalk and leave horror behind; but not so fast—"Un souffle disperse les limites du foyer." The fireplace, the room, the shelter that we call home—all vanish in a breath as quickly as they had come. The aftereffects of paranoia continue while we sleep, submerged to our eyelids in "la source de soie / the silken spring," until we have metabolized the drug out of our system.

