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“Génie”

Advent of the Ego-Ideal

Bonnefoy writes: “‘Génie’ is an act of stunning intuition, that instant of shadowless intuition when a thought is realized” (144). What thought is realized here, what intuition given material form?

A widely accepted view takes the poem to advance a new form of Love, as propounded by the social romanticism associated with Michelet and Quinet.¹ In his book *Le Génie des Religions* (1842), Edgar Quinet interrogates the human spirit, finding within it a searching, unquiet passion out of which arise the varied forms of the divine. These gods (of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.), gods made in the image and likeness of man, in turn produce the political institutions that characterize each civilization. Rimbaud was attracted by the cohesiveness of Quinet’s approach, this unification of all human culture into a single evolving syntagma. From that point it took only an intuitive leap of poetic insight to transform this impersonal impulse, working its way up and through the amalgam of cultures, into a single individual, to personify the *élan vital*, giving it the shape and characteristics of a godlike being.

The process that Rimbaud follows in poetizing Quinet’s concept is similar to that which, according to Freud, the human individual follows in creating his or her “ego-ideal.” This is the psychic paradigm that we conceive as the object of our dreams and desires, the inner being whose authority we follow, whom we imitate and, as we become adults, learn to

serve, to obey, to respect, and to love. It is indeed our genie, our daemon; an "other" that is also our self. This, according to Freud, is where our highest cultural values come into play:

It is easy to show that the ego ideal answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man. As a substitute for a longing for the father, it contains the germ from which all religions have evolved. The self-judgment which declares that the ego falls short of its ideal produces the religious sense of humility to which the believer appeals in his longing. As a child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal. . . . Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal.²

The ego-ideal (which Freud sees as part of the super-ego³) is the product of the individual's personal history, yet also embodies broader cultural values. Freud writes in another context:

Thus a child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation.⁴

The ego-ideal, then, is the repository of history where traditions breed and reform, giving each community the guidance it needs to survive. It serves each individual to the degree that he or she has had the good fortune to live by the "sacred" values (that which is set apart and worshiped) of a time and place. In the case of Rimbaud, given the rarity of contact with his father and the bigotry of his mother, we must view the formation of his ego-ideal (as exemplified in this poem) as a miracle of inner fortitude, intelligence, and perseverance. To follow our Génie is to live truthfully; this is the ideal to which Rimbaud aspired from the age of seven, when he had to separate himself from the moral dishonesty of his mother; when he began to discover the reality of who and what he was, distinct from the accretions of time, place, and convention, yet conditioned by them.

Il est l'affection et le présent puisqu'il a fait la maison ouverte à l'hiver écumeux et à la rumeur de l'été, lui qui a purifié les boissons et les aliments, lui qui est le charme des lieux fuyants et le délice surhumain des

stations. Il est l'affection et l'avenir, la force et l'amour que nous, debout dans les rages et les ennuis, nous voyons passer dans le ciel de tempête et les drapeaux d'extase.

He is affection and the present since he has thrown open the house to the frothy winter and to the sounds of summer, he who has purified drinks and food, he who is the charm of fleeting places and the superhuman delight of rest areas. He is affection and the future, the force and love that we, standing in rages and boredoms, see passing in the tempestuous sky and the flags of ecstasy.

The poem begins with the triple repetition "Il est . . . / He is . . .", enunciating the Génie's major qualities: "Il est l'affection et le présent . . ."; "Il est l'affection et l'avenir . . ."; "Il est l'amour . . ."

This is a syllogism: if he is affection and the present, but also affection and the future, thus, since he commands all time, he personifies love. Just as Jesus made wine from water and multiplied loaves and fishes, so the Génie has purified all drinks and foodstuffs, because he is the charm of passing sights and the delight of stations.

Repetition with variations is the rhetorical form of litany as are the repeated ejaculations—note the frequency of exclamation marks. Yet the poem does not have the deadening regularity of litany, making it, as Lawler suggests, more in keeping with the form of an inspired sermon. As the god figure develops, we see that Rimbaud has drawn on his experience of Christianity; yet nowhere in his work does he express devotion to the Christ persona. In fact, he writes in "Les Premières Communions": "Christ! ô Christ, éternel voleur des énergies . . . / Christ! O Christ, eternal thief of energies. . . ." This is not any recognizable god; and, as the poem progresses, we understand why certain critics (René Char and Wallace Fowlie, to name only two) have identified the god with the poet himself. No doubt because the god is the *projection* of the poet, the ideal being he might wish to become. Here an important distinction must be made, one that psychoanalyst Daniel Lagache insists upon in his neo-Freudian account of the ego:

Let us return to the problem of the internal structure of the ego [le moi]. The issues considered earlier led us to introduce here the distinction between a constituted ego and a constituting ego. The constituted ego is an agent of defensive behaviors, automatic and unconscious, motivated by the id and the super-ego, and driven by the urgency to reduce

unpleasant affects and painful tensions. The self-constituting ego is differentiated from this by its resistance to tensions and to repetition; it aspires to the realization of the possibilities of the subject; it engages the highest forms of conscious activity, of attention and reflection, of judgment and will; it bases its action on the categories of objective rational thought, on the input of the psychoanalyst; in the final analysis, its external resources allow it to affirm its autonomy in relation to its constituted ego, proceeding then to a restructuring of the psychological field, in an action both destructive and constructive.⁵

Rimbaud's *Génie*, his ego-ideal, was not born passively, out of fear and a consequent defensiveness; it was born out of the child's defiance, the adolescent's searching intelligence. It was born out of love:

Il est l'amour, mesure parfaite et réinventée, raison merveilleuse et imprévue, et l'éternité: machine aimée des qualités fatales. Nous avons tous eu l'épouvante de sa concession et de la nôtre: ô jouissance de notre santé, élan de nos facultés, affection égoïste et passion pour lui, lui qui nous aime pour sa vie infinie . . .

He is love, measure perfect and reinvented, reason marvelous and unforeseen, and eternity; adored machine of fatal qualities. We have all known the terror of his concession and of our own: O rapture of our health, transport of our powers, egoistical affection and passion for him, for him who loves us out of his infinite life . . .

The comparison with a "machine" might surprise, but in the nineteenth century there was a Romantic infatuation with the power and dependability of machines; while behind this contemporary metaphor (e.g., the locomotive and other industrial machines) lies the vast machinery of heaven, the procession of the stars and planets, as charted by the ancient Greeks. Here, the reference points to the overwhelming attraction of the *Génie*. He erases all the vicissitudes of love; in his presence we realize our potential for health and well-being. The phrase "affection égoïste" refers back to the origin of the ego-ideal in childish narcissism, a state left behind as we reach adulthood and learn to love and respect a being both ontologically real—a composite of our life experience—and imaginary, created out of all we have seen as admirable, a being who comes to embody all that is noble in us. This is, implicitly, a justification for religious faith in an idealized being, whose power is multiplied many times over by the numbers of

people who share commitment to him. It is a fundamental human process that shows us how men may create gods; but also, how they may come to recognize their God.

Et nous nous le rappelons et il voyage. . . . Et si l'Adoration s'en va, sonne, sa promesse sonne: "Arrière ces superstitions, ces anciens corps, ces ménages et ces âges. C'est cette époque-ci qui a sombré!"

Il ne s'en ira pas, il ne redescendra pas d'un ciel, il n'accomplira pas la rédemption des colères de femmes et des gaités des hommes et de tout ce péché: car c'est fait, lui étant, et étant aimé.

O ses souffles, ses têtes, ses courses; la terrible célérité de la perfection des formes et de l'action.

O fécondité de l'esprit et immensité de l'univers!

And we recall him and he travels. . . . And if Adoration vanishes, resounds, resounds his promise: "Away with these superstitions, these wasting bodies, these households and these ages. It is this very age that has foundered!"

He will not leave us, he will not come down from heaven, he will not redeem the anger of women or the revels of men or of all this sin: for it is accomplished, he being and being loved.

O his breaths, his expressions, his journeys: the terrible swiftness of the perfection of forms and of action!

O fecundity of the mind and immensity of the universe!

It is apparent that Rimbaud's *Génie* is both a personal and a collective creation. "Il voyage. . . ." He is simultaneously everywhere in the world; "sa promesse sonne. . . ." His revelation is heard throughout the world. Here, Rimbaud is a prophet speaking of the fidelity of this god figure who acquires greater reality as the poem progresses. This is the same process by which Mohammed gave substance to Allah and the Evangelists to Jesus, their Lord and Teacher. Here the poem demonstrates the power of language, its ability to give life to its deepest, most strongly felt visions.

The *Génie* is a figure of great ethical stature: "Arrière . . . Away with these superstitions, 'ces anciens corps' / these 'uncorrupted remains' of saints or other idols; away with 'ces ménages' / couples and their 'family values' . . ." We remember that Jesus said: "I bring not peace but a sword. . . ." And further, we should not be surprised by the fact that the *Génie* shares Rimbaud's personal values, since he is Rimbaud's ego-ideal. He is the idealized figure that Rimbaud would follow into the fiery

furnace; he exists in the here and now, Rimbaud recognizes him in the passions of his own soul; yet he is as immense as the universe. In this way, he is both immanent and transcendent. Throughout history, many individuals have created cults, imagined deities, propounded ethical standards; usually we call them fanatics, zealots, madmen. Yet Rimbaud's poem avoids excess, it is immanent to the poet and makes no demands; the Génie bestows his gift and passes on.

There is another important feature of "Génie" that reminds us it is a poem and not a revelation; it is the way the poem's rhythm builds to an ecstatic climax, taking the speaker outside of himself, thereby giving the ego-ideal its own separate "existence," while retaining Rimbaud's signature. It is, finally, the poem's ascencional rhythm that makes us participants not in the creation of a god but in a celebration of reverence for human possibilities. Who would not follow such a hymnist, such a master?

Consider the second paragraph, quoted earlier: "Il est l'amour, mesure parfaite et réinventée. . . ." The "il est" litany ends in a cascade of nouns and nominal phrases, piling one upon the other, concluding with the enigmatic "machine aimée des qualités fatales." We saw this as the Grecian vision of the heavens; but Rimbaud's Génie is also part of the inexorable Machine of modernity, driven by Reason. We have been terrified by all this offers to us and all it requires:

Nous avons tous eu l'épouvante de sa concession et de la nôtre: ô jouissance de notre santé, élan de nos facultés, affection égoïste et passion pour lui, lui qui nous aime pour sa vie infinie. . . .

We have all felt the terror of his concession and our own: O rapture of our health, transport of our faculties, egoist affection and passion for him, he who loves us for his infinite life. . . .

Here the "ô" is followed by the powerful word "jouissance" with its three syllables and the lingering triphthong "oui"—the very word speaks affirmation. In this passage he voices a fundamental reciprocity between the supreme being and ourselves. We create our ego-ideal, but it serves us by expanding our own potentiality.

THE GÉNIE is for all peoples, not to adore but to give to each according to his need; his promise echoes the messianism of Proudhon and Marx. But after promise, condemnation. Each short decree is bitten off, show-

ing what he will *not* do; and the verset ends with a solemn judgment, the repeated participle "étant / being" building upon the universality of his existence and his being loved.

Then the litany of Os breaks forth, now song more than chant:

O ses souffles, ses têtes, ses courses; la terrible célérité de la perfection des formes et de l'action!

O fécondité de l'esprit et immensité de l'univers!

O his breaths, his expressions, his journeys; the terrible speed of the perfection of forms and action!

O fecundity of the spirit and immensity of the universe!

The poem builds upon a series of nominal affirmations, where ellipsis shows that the reader is taken into the poet's confidence, since he or she must supply the missing verbs: "Son corps! Le dégage ment rêvé, le brisement de la grâce croisée de violence nouvelle!" ("His body! The dreamed disengagement, the breaking of grace inbred with new violence!")

"Dégage ment" is the balletic move where one foot glides as weight is shifted from the opposite leg; but this contained motion also suggests the radical perspectival change associated with Heidegger, where entities are irradiated by the power of a new consciousness:

Sa vue, sa vue! . . .⁶

Son jour . . .

Son pas! les migrations plus énormes que les anciennes invasions!

His vision, his vision! . . .

His day . . .

His step! migrations more enormous than the ancient invasions!

This is an apparent borrowing from Quinet, who describes how migrating tribes and nations disseminate their gods. We are lifted to a state of lyrical enthusiasm by the serial declaratives, as the poet calls on our intuition to give form and substance to the god seen through the veil of his rapid phrases.

The last paragraph reprises earlier nouns (*ses souffles*, *son corps*) and forces into one complex sentence a last imperative that is also an appeal: "Sachons . . . le héler et le voir, et le renvoyer . . . et suivre ses vues, ses souffles, son corps, son jour / May we know . . . to hail and see him, and

to send him on his way . . . and to follow his visions, his breaths, his body, his day."

Even though "Génie" involves a rejection of Christ ("il ne s'en ira pas, il ne redescendra pas d'un ciel"), it is clear that Rimbaud has a profound, lived understanding of what an authentic religious commitment should be. The god-figure must be greeted (le héler), he must be seen and imitated (suivre ses vues), but he is not the exclusive property of any church: we must always send him on his way. In loving God we possess the whole world ("de cap en cap, du pôle tumultueux au château, de la foule à la plage . . . / from cape to cape, from the tumultuous pole to the castle, from the crowd to the beach . . ."), we take our health from him, our perspective must be as broad as his (ses vues), and he gives us life itself (son jour).

By the power of poetic projection, Rimbaud manifests the god within. His own ego-ideal, formed out of residual religious experiences, expanded by his own moral and spiritual impulses, becomes a numinous figure who shows him the path he must follow in life. To us also the *Génie* stands as a being who calls to the ego-ideal in each of us, who gives us courage to resist "les malheurs nouveaux / new misfortunes" and, while the day lasts, shows us the incarnational power of language. Paul Claudel has first and best expressed our debt to Rimbaud: "Formes, pensée et principes, je lui dois tout et je me sens avec lui les liens qui peuvent vous rattacher à un ascendant spirituel / Forms, thought and principles, I owe him everything and I feel between us such ties as bind you to a spiritual ancestor."⁷