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Narcissistic Gain in "Solde"

Ultimately for a poet the fence is so high the top is invisible, but it is what we are designed to reach for.

—Jim Harrison¹

This poem is based on anaphora, the repetition of the same initial phrase (“A vendre”) to produce a cumulative effect:

A vendre ce que les Juifs n’ont pas vendu, ce que noblesse ni crime n’ont goûté, ce qu’ignorent l’amour maudit et la probité infernale des masses: ce que le temps ni la science n’ont pas à reconnaître . . .

For sale what the Jews haven’t sold, what neither nobility nor crime has tasted, what forbidden love and the hellish honesty of the masses ignore: what neither time nor science is obliged to recognize . . .

“Solde” can be considered as adjunct to “Génie.” It shows the corrupted world into which the Génie comes and which he must redeem by his constantly reinvented love. It is a world viewed depressively, a commercialized world where everything is for sale. The prejudice of “A vendre ce que les Juifs n’ont pas vendu” is a cliché or an automatism. There is no other trace of anti-Semitism in Rimbaud. “Solde” begins with Rimbaud’s auction of all he most values, as if to say, *Here it is, I’m giving it away!* This tone of feigned self-liquidation explains why the poem is sometimes seen in tandem with “la lettre du voyant,” where he first initiates themes that reappear in “Solde.” So, for example, “Toutes les formes d’amour /

All forms of love" might be considered to appear in the *lettre du voyant* as "l'amour maudit / forbidden love"; "Il est chargé de l'humanité / he is in command of humanity" might appear as "l'éveil fraternel de toutes les énergies chorales et orchestrales et leurs applications instantanées / the fraternal awakening of all choral and orchestral energies"; "le temps d'un langage universel viendra / the time of a universal language will come" as "Les trouvailles et les termes non soupçonnés / the unforeseen discoveries and terminology. . . ." This comparison appears plausible if we consider that Rimbaud's career is just beginning in the letter to Izambard and Demeny in May 1871 (la *lettre du voyant*) but is winding down at the time of "Solde" (precise date unknown). He would then be writing "Solde" out of caustic irony and embitterment. The gratification that accompanies this poetic exercise is not achieved through attainment of an object but is based on the pride Rimbaud takes in being able to say: *I search the ineffable: who is rich enough to buy my talent?*

EARLIER POEMS such as "Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . ." are recalled by the second paragraph:

Les Voix reconstitués; l'éveil fraternel de toutes les énergies chorales et orchestrales et leurs applications instantanées; l'occasion, unique, de dégager nos sens!

Reconstituted Voices: the brotherly awakening of all choral and orchestral energies and their instantaneous applications; the unique chance to disengage our senses!

The last line echoes the "dégagement rêvé . . ." of "Génie": disengagement of our senses from trivial things, from mere appearances. Here we find again the Heideggerian vision of "entities" that I have associated with *Voyance* and Rimbaud's radical poetics. But there is this important difference between the two: Heidegger says that "the poet bids things to come" and while there is "pain" at the threshold where language arises, it is not comparable to the violence and the urgency of *Voyance*.² Rimbaud *looks toward Heidegger*, he anticipates the path and senses the dwelling place that Heidegger will find; he learns the mirror-play of earth and sky, but far too soon; and there is no one to guide him. His suffering is greater; and his solitude, starting in his early twenties, is like that of the ex-convicts he admired as a small boy, a life sentence.³

In the phenomenological reach of Rimbaud's visionary poetics, things are seen with enhanced luster. There is a desperate quality in his grasping for the ineffable and this ratchets up their cost:

Elan insensé et infini aux splendeurs invisibles, aux délices insensibles,
et ses secrets affolants pour chaque vice—et sa gaiété effrayante pour la
foule—

Senseless and infinite leap toward invisible splendors, to delights beyond
sense, and their maddening secrets for each vice—and its terrifying gai-
ety for the crowd—

The poet takes pride in his vision, a gift that can't be sold or given away. Having disengaged from material things, his pride (one of the few things he has left) leads to a deepened sense of self-value; pride helps him to overcome obstacles and frustrations.⁴ And again there is "narcissistic gain" (258) in the delight of words that surpass thought and breath, in the possessing of "splendeurs invisibles" within the very core of self; and there are "délices insensibles / imperceptible delights," hardly felt yet present in the functioning of mind and body, while the pen flies across the page. All this occurs in spite of the shallow commercialism around him. How hard it was to maintain self-esteem, to continue writing in the face of indifference and ostracism, without an audience, without guaranteed publication!

"Secondary gain" is sometimes seen in conjunction with illness or neurosis: it may consist of attracting attention, being loved or, as psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel puts it, "a right to privileges; these privileges may consist of material gains or of more subtle mental gains."⁵ The term is expandable, and one can see the struggles of many literary figures, unsuccessful in their own times, as an effort to attain secondary gain. But Fenichel avers that the search for satisfaction by a display of temper (as in this poem) is not a mature response, i.e., not "in accordance with the reality principle" (453). No doubt Rimbaud's long and painful maturation was one of the factors that caused him to abandon poetry.

HERE, Rimbaud's pride becomes aggressive. He throws his jewels before swine: "Solde de diamants sans contrôle! / Diamonds for sale for the asking!" In offering his own riches, he is also passing judgment on the commercialism of his time. In nineteenth-century France, you can have

it all! Learn how to make your Bodies beautiful, find the partner of your dreams: "A vendre les Corps sans prix, hors de toute race, de tout monde, de tout sexe, de toute descendance! / For sale priceless Bodies, beyond any race, any society, any sex, or any ethnicity!"

Move into your dream house:

A vendre les habitations et les migrations, sports, féeries et comforts parfaits, et le bruit, le mouvement et l'avenir qu'ils font!

A vendre les applications de calcul et les sauts d'harmonie inouïs. Les trouvailles et les termes non soupçonnées, possession immédiate.

For sale habitations and migrations, sports, fairylands and perfect comforts, and the sounds, the movement and the future they contain!

For sale applied arithmetic and the shifts of unheard harmonies. Discoveries and terms never suspected, immediate possession.

Buy now, pay later—it's the refrain that rhymes our days and nights; but, to hear this poem and to judge the spurious luxury it proposes, we have to understand the misery in which Rimbaud lived most of his life, the lack of comfort and often of necessities.

"Vagabonds" describes his life in common with Verlaine, often wretched, lacking in most necessities: "Pitoyable frère! Que d'atroces veillées je lui dus! 'Je ne me saisissais pas ferveusement de cette entreprise. Je m'étais joué de son infirmité . . . ' / Pitiful brother! How many atrocious vigils he cost me! 'I wasn't fervently committed to this enterprise. I exploited his weakness. . . .'"

It was so easy to push Verlaine's buttons, to turn him from a sensible comrade into a raving hysteric.⁶ A poor sort of life for a nineteen-year-old boy who wanted friendship, nurture, love. Rimbaud's life as a poet was marginal. The story of his travels back and forth between Charleville, Paris, and Belgium, his scandalous behavior and the humiliation it brought on him, this was only part of his life during those years. He was unemployed, scraping by tutoring French in London, often hungry, hung-over, consumed by anxiety and doubt. During his two years on and off with Verlaine, they lived in a love-hate relationship aggravated by absinthe and hashish. He never speaks of new clothes and rejects "féeries et comforts parfaits."⁷ Public baths were available but are never mentioned; probably the vagabonds could only rarely afford them. His will never be "le Corps sans prix / the priceless Body."

"Vagabonds" ends:

J'avais en effet, en toute sincérité d'esprit, pris l'engagement de le rendre à son état primitif de fils du soleil,—et nous errions, nourris du vin des cavernes et du biscuit de la route, moi pressé de trouver le lieu et la formule.

I had in all sincerity, pledged to restore him to his primal state as a child of the sun,—and we wandered, nourished by the wine of caverns and wayside biscuits, I hard pressed to find the place and the formula.

Bonnefoy sees the phrase "fils du soleil" as a sign of Rimbaud's Gnosticism, his harking back (like Nietzsche) to ancient occult sources; and perhaps indeed this is an example of the Nietzschean will-to-power, a self-surpassing that Rimbaud tried to impose upon his friend. Suzanne Bernard puts it more simply: ". . . to restore Verlaine to his state of child of the sun, was to restore the superiority that should have been his (understood on the poetic and spiritual level), to allow him to share the magic of the poet-seer" (*Oeuvres*, 552). Verlaine's hysteria, his mood swings, his alcoholism made him a dangerous companion, as Rimbaud often observed and confronted to his terror in Brussels.

The end of "Solde" is ambiguous:

—A vendre les Corps, les voix, l'immense opulence inquestionable,⁸ ce qu'on ne vendra jamais. Les vendeurs ne sont pas à bout de solde! Les voyageurs n'ont pas à rendre leur commission de si tôt!

—For sale the Bodies, the voices, the immense unquestionable opulence, which will never be sold. The sellers aren't out of merchandise! The travelers won't have to turn over their commission for some time to come!

Guyaux comments on the way the anaphora undoes itself:

And the formula itself, breathless from repetition, loses its tone. It becomes its own negation. From now on it only denotes the absurd. *The sellers haven't sold out!* when it concerns *selling what can never be sold*. The anaphora is caught in its own trap: repetition produces the negation of what it continues to shout. . . . Finally, the word of the title, present in the orality of the second-to-last sentence, thereby expressing its very contradiction, reveals the spokenness of its object: *solde* is speech, a

promise, like "For Sale," both speech and parody of the spoken word.
(*Illuminations*, 271; emphasis in original)

Does Guyaux imply that Rimbaud becomes a ventriloquist for the world of commerce, selling only empty words? Or does he make the point that "Solde"'s irony turns on the fact that the great themes of poetry are not for sale? To me, "Solde" anticipates his strange words to Isabelle, a few days before he died: "Yes, they say they believe, but they only do it for the money." If there is "narcissistic gain" in the poem, it is at the expense of all the rhymesters and the "avachissement et gloire d'innombrables générations idiotes" ("the muck and glory of innumerable generations of idiots") that he savages in the "Lettre du voyant." Rimbaud stayed true to his original inspiration and in this late work (Guyaux places it last among the *Illuminations*) proudly confirms the fact that he never wrote for hire. There is bitterness and pride in "Solde," the ambivalence of a man who'd given everything that was best—his youth, his imagination, his passion—to an ephemeral and seemingly empty cause, poetry; and to a spineless lover, who'd proved unworthy of his devotion; and, as in so many other instances, there is prescience, as he looks ahead to a life on the road, a life of savage arguing over his accounts, until that last rendering with the Canon Chauvier in the Hôpital de la Conception in Marseilles.