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Rimbaud's Ontology

"Villes II"

Do we really know today the *horizon* that Rimbaud 'saw'? [. . .] Perhaps we can say this: the proximity of the *inaccessible* remains the region where only those rare beings who become poets arrive.

—Martin Heidegger¹

In an important book, first published in 1981, Marjorie Perloff named Rimbaud as initiator of “a poetics of indeterminacy,” in which “the free play of possible significations replaces iconic representation.”² The notion of the poem as enigma, in which signifier is detached from signified and word from referent, represents, in Perloff’s view, a distinct lineage of High Modernism.

She summarizes the principal feature of this lineage as one in which: “forms can exist ‘littéralement et dans tous les sens’ [‘literally and in all meanings’], an oscillation between representational reference and compositional game. To put it another way, William Empson’s famous ‘seven types of ambiguity,’—that is, the multiple layers of meaning words have in poetry (and by analogy, images in painting)—give way to what we might call an ‘irreducible ambiguity’—the creation of labyrinths that have no exit” (34).

Perloff also makes this statement: “. . . the attempt to find consistent psychological themes in the *Illuminations* is repeatedly blocked.” I think it is possible to show, as we have already seen in preceding chapters, that, while acknowledging an *apparent* cognitive indeterminacy of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, we can also find a specific emotional quotient. Rimbaud’s poems are always Barthesian “figures of desire.” In “Villes II,” Perloff’s

proof text, Rimbaud expresses the joy of poetic creation, "le plaisir du texte," with rhapsodic exuberance; but—to return to Perloff's central point—there is indeed a *cognitive* and *conceptual* obscurity that characterizes this poem. What I will attempt to show is that this indeterminacy or obscurity can be resolved by a radical change in perspective.

"Villes II"

"Villes II" opens: "Ce sont des villes! . . ." Perloff asks: "And where are we?" The description, she observes:

. . . is neither that of a recognizable cityscape like Eliot's riverfront London [in *The Wasteland*] nor an ideal city of the imagination like Yeats' Byzantium. Rather, Rimbaud evokes "cities" that are, from the start, impossible to locate in "real" space. . . . In the course of the poem, the sense of place becomes more and more elusive . . . land and water finally merge in an hallucinatory image: the stags being suckled by Diana have their feet "in the waterfall and the brambles." From this point on, the mood of the poem becomes increasingly frenzied. (50, 51)

In conclusion, Perloff offers a statement from Todorov: "The *Illuminations* have established discontinuity as a fundamental rule. Rimbaud has made the absence of organization the principle of organization of these texts" (54, n13).

IF WE look for the reasons behind this turn toward obscurity in Rimbaud, I think the best way of accounting for it is by reference to the ontology of Martin Heidegger, who found in Western metaphysics a

progressive masking or concealing of what was revealed in that *primordial experience*," i.e., the discovery of *physis* or being by the early Greeks.³ Heidegger took as his philosophical task the unmasking of the substance ontology, that is, the view of reality as "what endures, what is permanent, what is always there. . . . To the extent that metaphysics focuses on 'beingness' and is blind to the conditions that let anything whatsoever show up, metaphysics has been dominated by 'error' or 'going astray.' . . . It follows, then, that the entire history of Western thought consists of variations on the initial answer to the question, What are entities? (18; emphasis added)

The issue for Heidegger—and for Rimbaud—is not what things are in and of themselves (the question of reference as posed by “indeterminacy”)—but *how things are disclosed by consciousness*. And if Heidegger is to be our guide we will expect that things will become known in “the proximity of the inaccessible,” that is, in a state of suspension between the seen and the unseen, the disclosed and the undisclosed.

We could then say that Rimbaud anticipated Heidegger, and gave us a poetry (the *Illuminations*) in which “entities” are put at question and their “way of showing up” becomes the real issue of the poems. Poems are not about things themselves but about how they are masked, revealed, transformed, recreated by consciousness.

Rimbaud's known is our unknown; his horizon is what we normally consider indeterminate or inaccessible. This is yet another way of reading the famous dictum: “Je est un autre / I is another!”⁴ Rimbaud's pursuit of *Voyance* can be taken as the precursor of the course that led Heidegger to his attempt—both as arduous and conflicted as Rimbaud's poetics—to show how the being of entities is disclosed in *Dasein* (human consciousness).

How then does Rimbaud see “entities” and how does he enact their manner of presentation to consciousness?

In “Villes II” it isn't the “chalets de crystal / chalets of crystal” nor the “palmiers de cuivre / palm trees of copper” nor “les passerelles de l'abîme / the gangplanks of the abyss,” etc., that are at issue, but rather how these images arise, how they surge into consciousness impelled by the mounting and descending rhythms of *poesis*. And concurrently, how do they reach us, act upon us, confuse or enlighten or motivate us? They are not grasped by the will to power but given in the “clearing” (*Lichtung*) of poetic consciousness.⁵ Here they manifest what Heidegger calls “the Open of their paths.” Meeting the resistance of the world, beings struggle for intimacy and, as they attain it in the poetic work, there occurs “the rise of the lighting of beings.”⁶

Rimbaud's texts arise as seeming *non sequiturs*, as nonsense, as sparks of fire, as lies. . . . For after all, we live in a world of conventions determined by “the substance ontology”—often confusingly identified with “the metaphysic of presence.”⁷ However we may choose to reconfigure the poem, we know that we are reading words that are illusory; that, in other words, are referentially anomalous. Further, an emotional issue—*being lied to*—problematizes the way *knowing* takes place in Rimbaud's poems.

TO LEARN what Rimbaud thought of untruthfulness, our best document

is "Les Poètes de sept ans"; and our best guide to that poem is Yves Bonnefoy's essay, "Madame Rimbaud."⁸ Bonnefoy sums up his view of Rimbaud's mother in this way:

Mme Rimbaud, in short, is one of the extreme examples, one of the most unbending, fanatical devotees of that cult of convention and propriety that has cast its shadow—and this is a lesson to be deeply pondered—over all realms formerly subject to the commandments of the law of love. In that very civilization that still pays lip service, at Charleville or elsewhere, to the God of the Incarnation, she stood as priestess, among a pious crowd, of a creed of excarnation, cold and gloomy as a crypt, which devotes life to the service of the law and finds its peculiar joy in thus reducing the unknown to the known, the inexhaustible to mere repetition. ("Madame Rimbaud," 72)

This then was the woman, the mother, who inspired Rimbaud's great poem, "Les Poètes de sept ans" where we find these lines:

Pitié! ces enfants seuls étaient ses familiers
 Qui, chétifs, fronts nus, oeil déteignant sur la joue,
 Cachant des maigres doigts jaunes et noirs de boue
 Sous des habits puant la foire et tout vieillots,
 Conversaient avec la douceur des idiots!
 Et si, l'ayant surpris à des pitiés immondes,
 Sa mère s'effrayait; les tendresses profondes
 De l'enfant se jetaient sur cet étonnement.
 C'était bon. Elle avait le bleu regard, qui ment!

Pity! Only those children were his friends
 Sickly kids, eyes draining on their cheek,
 Hiding thin fingers yellow black with mud
 Under worn-out shit-smelling clothes,
 Who talked with the gentleness of idiots!
 And if, catching him in acts of filthy pity,
 His mother took alarm; the deep tenderness
 Of the child fastened on that astonishment.
 So be it. She had the blue stare,—that lies!

Bonnefoy finds in these lines a crux of Rimbaud's childhood, recalled in this poem when he was seventeen. He thinks his mother must love him,

because of her concern ("Sa mère s'effrayait / His mother was horrified"), but she removes him from these pitiable children for a reason that only *masquerades* as love. Bonnefoy writes: "But in fact, as Rimbaud realizes and must quickly have told himself, his mother is afraid only of bad examples in language or ideas that he may have acquired from his undesirable acquaintances, thus revealing yet again that what matters for her is her idea of what he ought to be, not what he is. . . . Her alarm, which ought to have implied love, was motivated solely by conventionality; and that is why her gaze is, as Rimbaud says, a 'lying' one" (79).

RIMBAUD'S AESTHETIC in the *Illuminations* is born in the blinding innocence of a child obliged to cope with his mother's lies. Her relationship to objects, to people, to society is determined by conventions that outlaw freedom, adventure and love; her *blue eyes that lie* project only a semblance of love, for she is motivated instead by propriety and *covenantance*. He sets himself against her and all liars; this is first expressed in "La Lettre du voyant," where, astonishingly, he anticipates Heidegger: "Toute poésie antique aboutit à la poésie grecque. Vie harmonieuse.—De la Grèce au mouvement romantique,—moyen âge,—il y a des lettrés, des versificateurs / All the poetry of antiquity culminates in the poetry of Greece. Life in harmony.—From Greece to the romantic movement,—the middle ages,—there are only scholars, versifiers." What is wrong with these centuries of poetry? "Si les vieux imbéciles n'avaient pas trouvé du moi que la signification fausse, nous n'aurions pas à balayer ces millions de squelettes qui, depuis un temps infini, ont accumulé les produits de leur intelligence borgnesse, en s'en clamant les auteurs! / If those old imbeciles hadn't found only the false meaning of the self, we wouldn't have to sweep away these millions of skeletons that, since time immemorial, have accumulated the products of their stunted intelligence while acclaiming themselves the authors!" (*Oeuvres*, 363–64). A false view of the self (le moi) is to blame. Here, Rimbaud anticipates Heidegger's exploration of *Dasein* by the detour of his own determined search for truth, *Voyance*.

What the poet must do is exactly what Rimbaud set out to do during eight months or more when he tried to make his soul monstrous. *Voyance* was intended as an ascetic discipline, a reasoned detachment from his mother and her world; yet, at the same time, it was viewed and interpreted, by his mother and everyone else, as mere adolescent revolt. It served a double purpose: inner discipline on the one hand, outrage to his mother on the other.

This was a shrinking away of his whole being from her and the seeking of a new horizon, beyond which lay these stunning poems, the *Illuminations*, works that are in a certain sense "inaccessible" (as Heidegger calls that region known only to poets); but we need to narrow, as much as possible, the extent of that inaccessibility or indetermination. "Villes II," for example, is hermetic in image formation, but it arises out of a straightforward affective theme: "le plaisir du texte / textual pleasure." "Ce sont des villes! / These are cities!" is the opening line. It is like the "Fiat lux!" of *Genesis*. He is going to invent cities, a world. In the second sentence a similar indicative with imperative force creates people to inhabit these cities: "C'est un peuple pour qui se sont montés ces Alleghanys et ces Libans de rêve! / This is a people for whom these dream Alleghenies and Lebanons have arisen!" Isn't this exactly what Barthes calls "a paradise of words"?⁹

The emotional force in "Villes II" is a fundamental aesthetic pleasure in the joy of creation, the joy of a virtuoso exploring the resources of his instrument. But there is a further answer to the question about referentiality, i.e., about the cognitive meaning of the display of extravagant descriptive images, following one another in serial fashion, that structures the poem. In these cities, there are celebrations ("des fêtes amoureuses / amorous festivals") and catastrophes ("l'écroulement des apothéoses / the collapse of apotheoses"); divine birth ("la naissance éternelle de Vénus / the eternal birth of Venus") and orphic sounds ("[les] flottes orphéoniques et . . . la rumeur des perles et de conques précieuses / orpheonic fleets and . . . the rumble of pearls and of precious shells"). Varying genealogies of fairies appear ("Des cortèges de Mabs") along with goddesses ("Vénus and Diana"). As in "Le Bateau ivre," there are symphonies of sound: "Les Bacchantes des banlieues sanglotent et la lune brûle et hurle / The Bacchantes of the suburbs sob and the moon burns and screams"). Following the lead of Baudelaire, Rimbaud saw the city as the privileged capital of all that was modern and desirable in contemporary life. And there is an echo of the ending of *Une Saison en enfer*, where he imagines himself, together with a chosen companion: "Et à l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes / And at dawn, armed with an ardent patience, we will enter the splendid cities." These cities are the site of poetic imagination, where Rimbaud takes the path that Heidegger called "letting things come into the openness of human existence as they are."¹⁰ Not as things are given by convention but as they surge up in poetic expressivity. Rimbaud's use of the city anticipates Heidegger's evocation of the Greek temple in his essay on "The Origin of the

Work of Art." Rimbaud too yearns for a symbol that "gathers around the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline, acquire the shape of destiny for human Being."¹¹ This is how "Villes II" (or any great work of art) articulates a culture, manifests the world.¹²

To create a city, as Rimbaud does in his two poems entitled "Villes," is to challenge death, even while he foresees the horizon of his own death. In the poem death is a "present-at-hand" reality, out there, just beyond the horizon. At the same time, his transformational poetics, while it evokes a place of every dream and desire, allows him to postpone the one truth that he cannot doubt—the fact that he will die at a particular moment, in one particular place—a place that is not among the "châteaux bâtis en os / chateaux built from bones" or among the "fabuleux fantômes des monts / fabulous phantoms of mountains" that occur in "Villes II." These magical places are within the poem's horizon; the region of death lies beyond. So his creation of the city includes all those places where he will not yet have to die.

The poem ends with a question: "Quels bons bras, quelle belle heure me rendront cette région d'où viennent mes sommeils et mes moindres mouvements? / What fond arms, what fine hour will return to me that region where arise my sleeps and my least movements?" All his life Rimbaud searched for those arms, that presence, that "other" who would return his love and restore his dreams ("mes sommeils"). This poignant question evokes the realm not only of sleep but of life itself—"mes moindres mouvements"—the circulation of his blood, the beating of his heart, the nervous impulses that control his muscles. Within the circumscription of this desire for love, for holding, for nurture, the adumbrations of his dreams and desires arise; and from them arise the evanescent cities of his poems. Even had he known that love, those arms, he could never have imagined the finale awaiting him at l'Hôpital de la Conception in Marseilles.

"VILLES II" is an alternate world of beauty and mystery set against the conventional "substance ontology" of Madame Rimbaud, who embodied that stance to a grotesque degree. Not only did Rimbaud react against his mother's lies, *he told lies of his own*. He too had blue eyes—that lie. Rimbaud fuses her dishonesty with his own poetic talent and proves he can tell far better lies than she can. His lies become poetry and manifest a world where everything is different from the "cosmorama Arduan," as

he describes his home in the Ardennes (*Oeuvres*, 369). He systematically sets out to undo his mother's inauthentic vision of things and prove that everything is different. We know that on one occasion Mme Rimbaud read some of *Une Saison en enfer* and, bewildered, asked him what it meant. His reply was, "It means exactly what it says." In other words, these *lies and distortions* are my truth: the truth that arises in the mind of genius when it can escape the boundaries of conventional reference and, in total freedom, let new worlds be.