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Rimbaud

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Appendix

The Death of Rimbaud

“We remember him and he travels on.”

. . . la Vampire qui nous rend gentils
(. . . the Vampire who makes us be nice)

—“Angoisse”

In July of 1949 I stood on the Place Jean-Jaurès in Marseilles under a blazing sun and stared up at the yellow walls of the Hôpital de la Conception, where Arthur Rimbaud died on November 10, 1891.¹ He was thirty-seven years old, afflicted with cancer that had eaten into his right knee and metastasized through his body. Amputation of the leg came too late to save him. I remember the heat, the vertigo brought on by two days of travel, and a sense of awe realizing this was the place that the poet I first encountered two years earlier in a University of Chicago classroom had died. It was a three-story building with a central courtyard. There was a dry, metallic taste in the back of my throat. Earlier that spring, I had accompanied my teacher, Wallace Fowlie, to Charleville-Mézières in the Ardennes. We saw Rimbaud’s statue, the Collège de Charleville, the Meuse River where he and his brother used to daydream on an old rowboat anchored in the mud. In the hotel w.c. some transient G.I. (perhaps in retreat from the Battle of the Bulge) had scrawled “Kilroy was here.”

Fowlie told me details of Rimbaud’s two hospitalizations in Marseilles. He first arrived in Marseilles on May 21, 1891:

Je suis arrivé hier, après treize jours de douleurs. Me trouvant par trop faible à l’arrivée ici, et saisi par le froid, j’ai dû entrer ici à *l’hôpital de la Conception*, où je paie dix francs par jour, docteur compris.

Je suis très mal, très mal, je suis réduit à l’état de squelette par cette maladie de ma jambe gauche [should read “droite”] qui est devenue à présent énorme et ressemble à une énorme citrouille. C’est une synovite, une hydarthrose, etc., une maladie des articulations et des os.² (Pléiade, 665)

I arrived here yesterday, after thirteen days of pain. Since I was very weak on arriving, and racked by the cold, I had to register here at the *Conception Hospital*, where I pay ten francs a day, doctor included.

I'm sick, very sick, reduced to a skeleton by this disease of my left [should read right] leg which has become enormous and looks like a giant pumpkin. It's a synovitis, a hydarthrose, etc., an inflammation of the joints and the bones.

His mother came from Roche at the time of the amputation, then left again quickly despite all his pleading. Instead Isabelle, his sister, thirty-one years old, came to be with him. Still fighting his immobility, Rimbaud insisted on returning to Roche. The trip up on July 23, 1891, the brief sojourn, then the return trip a month later, was a nightmare. He again checked into the hospital, this time under the name "Jean" Rimbaud.³ And the agony began.

The days were hellish, he cursed the nuns and orderlies, drove out the hospital chaplains who came by twos. He fought the pain and the proximity of death tormented him. This was the traveler who had written his mother, only a year earlier: "D'ailleurs, il y a une chose qui m'est impossible, c'est la vie sédentaire / Anyway, there is one thing impossible for me, that's a sedentary life" (*Pléiade*, 641). He was now glued to his hospital bed, reduced to total dependency on his sister. He existed with the unremitting terror that she would desert him, as his mother had done. Isabelle wrote her mother:

. . . quand il dort le jour, il est réveillé en sursaut, il me dit que c'est un coup qui le frappe au coeur et à la tête tout à la fois qui le réveille ainsi; quand il dort la nuit, il a des rêves effrayants et quelquefois quand il se réveille il est raide au point de ne plus pouvoir faire un mouvement, le veilleur de nuit l'a déjà trouvé en cet état, et il sue, il sue jour et nuit par le froid comme par la chaleur. Depuis que la raison lui est revenue il pleure toujours, il ne croit pas encore qu'il restera paralysé (si toutefois il vit). Trompé par les médecins il se cramponne à la vie, à l'espoir de guérir, et comme il se sent toujours bien malade et que maintenant il se rend compte de son état la plupart du temps, il se met à douter de ce qui lui disent les docteurs, il les accuse de se moquer de lui, ou bien il les taxe d'ignorance. (*Pléiade* 699) [22 Sept., 1891]

. . . when he sleeps during the day, he wakes with a start, he tells me it's like a blow that strikes him in the heart and the head both at once that wakes him; when he sleeps at night, he has terrifying dreams and sometimes when he wakes up he is too stiff to make the slightest movement, the night guard has often found him in that state, and he sweats, he sweats day and night whether it's cold or hot. Since becoming rational he cries constantly, he isn't yet ready to believe that he will be paralyzed (if he lives). Deceived by the doctors, he hangs onto life, to the hope of a cure, and since he still feels very sick and since he is aware of his condition most of the time, he has begun to disbelieve what the doctors tell him, he accuses them of mocking him, or he considers them ignorant.

On October 4 Isabelle writes that when he wakes in the morning:

Il se met alors à me raconter des choses invraisemblables qu'il s'imagine s'être passées à l'hôpital pendant la nuit; c'est la seule réminiscence de délire qui lui reste, mais opiniâtre au point que, tous les matins et plusieurs fois pendant la journée, il me raconte la même absurdité en se fâchant de ce que je n'y crois pas. Je l'écoute donc et cherche à le dissuader; il accuse les infirmiers et même les soeurs de choses abominables et qui ne peuvent exister . . . (Pléiade, 703)

He begins to tell me incredible things that he imagines to have happened in the hospital during the night; it's the only vestige of delirium that remains, but he's stubborn to the point where, every morning and several times during the day, he tells me the same absurdity and gets angry because I don't believe him. So I listen to him and try to talk him out of it; he accuses the nurses and even the sisters of abominable things that can't possibly happen . . .⁴

Then comes the "miracle" of Rimbaud's change of heart. After having twice refused the hospital chaplains, on Sunday, October 25, Rimbaud agrees to receive the Sacrament of Confession. There are three versions of the letter in which Isabelle announced the "miracle" to her mother. Jean-Jacques Lefrère, who gives the three versions in his compendium of Rimbaud's correspondence,⁵ concludes that the original, written on October 28, 1891, no longer exists. Instead, the letters that bear witness to Rimbaud's "conversion" are a patchwork, composed by Isabelle ten years after her brother's death, when she was being courted by Patern Berrichon, who foresaw a chance for fame and fortune in the dead poet's estate.

Claudé and perhaps Mauriac were the only major authors who accepted Isabelle's account of her brother's conversion. The rest denied and continue to deny that the nearly lifelong atheist, who wrote "Les Premières Communions," "Un Coeur sous une soutane / A heart beneath a soutane," "Nos fesses ne sont pas les leurs / Our buns are not like theirs" could have died "le chapelet aux pinces / the rosary between his fingers." The truth of this mystery will never be known.

THE FOLLOWING narration is based on a suggestion by Lefrère that perhaps Rimbaud made his confession to please Isabelle, who spent her days by his hospital bed, terrified of his rages and delusions, unable to sleep at night, sustained by her religious faith and her devotion to Arthur. It was the one thing he could do to please her, the one expedient that might persuade her to stay. She writes her mother on Wednesday, October 28:

Dimanche matin, après la grand-messe, il semblait plus calme et en pleine connaissance: l'un des aumoniers est revenu et lui a proposé de se confesser; et il a bien voulu! Quand le prêtre est sorti, il m'a dit, en me regardant d'un air troublé, d'un air étrange: "Votre frère a la foi, mon enfant, que nous disiez-vous donc? Il a la foi, et je n'ai même jamais vu de foi de cette qualité!"

[. . .]

Quand je suis rentrée près de lui, il était très ému, mais ne pleurait pas; il était sereinement triste, comme je ne l'ai jamais vu. Il me regardait dans les yeux

comme il ne m'a jamais regardée. Il a voulu que j'approche tout près, il m'a dit: "Tu es du même sang que moi: crois-tu, dis, crois-tu?" J'ai répondu: "Je crois; d'autres bien plus savants que moi ont cru, croient; et puis je suis sûre à présent, j'ai la preuve, cela est!" . . . Il m'a dit encore avec amertume: "Oui, ils disent qu'ils croient, ils font semblant d'être convertis, mais c'est pour qu'on lise ce qu'ils écrivent, c'est une spéculation!" (Pléiade, 704–5)

Sunday morning, after the high mass, he seemed calm and fully aware: one of the chaplains came and offered to hear his confession; and he agreed! When the priest left, he told me, "Your brother has faith, my child, what were you telling us? He has faith and I have never before seen faith of that quality!"

[. . .]

When I came back to be with him, he was very moved, but he wasn't crying; he was serenely sad, in a way I've never seen him before. He looked me in the eyes in a way he's never done before. He wanted me close to him, he said, "You are of the same blood as I am: do you believe?" I replied: "I believe; others, much wiser than I am have believed, do believe; and now I'm certain, I have the proof, once and for all!" And it's true, I have the proof today!—He said to me with bitterness: "Yes, they say they believe, they pretend to be converted, but it's so that people will read what they write, it's a speculation!"

Isabelle has been accused of lying and downright fabrication. Nicholl, less crudely, thinks she "dreamed" Rimbaud's conversion during her own troubled nights. I believe that the original letter was doctored up but that the Confession actually took place. There is this evidence: First, she would not commit the gratuitous sin of lying to her mother about something both held sacred. Second (and in Lefrère's opinion) the most convincing indication is the following: "One single element—but weighty—points to a judgment of authenticity: the final paragraph, in which Isabelle explains to her mother that she should not count on receiving any money from her son after his death: these lines appear so hard for the mother that they lend a stamp of authenticity to those that precede . . ." (952). Third, the priest's words have the ring of professionalism. It's hard to believe that Isabelle invented them. Fourth, Arthur's statements about profiting from a "false conversion," with its recollection of Verlaine and *Une Saison en enfer*, also have the stamp of authenticity. And fifth, venality, as evoked, for instance, in "Le Mal," was always a sin that Rimbaud associated with the Church. Why would Isabelle invent these things that are so frankly embarrassing for her faith? Writing only a few days after the event, I think Isabelle gives an honest picture of what happened in Arthur's sickroom in La Conception. Besides, hadn't he predicted it when he wrote "Angoisse" and evoked "La Vampire qui nous rend gentils"? The proximity of death brings unexpected changes—even Voltaire died with priests and candles. As in so many other respects, Rimbaud was prescient about his end.

If he began the confession as a gift to his sister, he must have been caught up in this unique opportunity to review his life and see how it added up in the perspective of traditional values: did he amount to something—or was his life a zero-sum game?

LATER, WITH THE connivance of her future husband, the grotesque Paternelle Berrichon,⁶ Isabelle tried to reinvent her brother. Yves Reboul is the sharpest critic of Isabelle Rimbaud: "After her myth about *Voyance*, that other traditional rimbaldian problem, there is the meaning of the *Illuminations*, another problem that owes its existence and most especially the way it is posed to the lies and the legends spread in profusion by Rimbaud's sister."⁷ She painted him as a shaman or a saint; Claudel's more guarded epithet, "a mystic in a savage state," has the echo of Isabelle's influence. She will try, with small success, to fashion this myth after his death.

But it was not just her misguided desire to protect the family that led her astray. The discovery of his work, especially the *Illuminations*, infected her with the poetry virus. Surely she too had inherited some of Arthur's magical powers. This must be the way she justified to herself changing his words, which should have otherwise been sacred.

His suffering, witnessed for weeks on end, commanded her belief in him. Although, as death approached, he lost lucidity more and more frequently, he had a secret magnetism, an authority that caused the priest to comment, "I have never before heard a confession of that quality." This is a professional man, a hospital chaplain, who often ministered to the dying. Almost grudgingly, he bestows his accolade: "une confession de cette qualité." Chaulier was astonished by the intensity of this penitent, moved by his passion for life even as it slipped away in each labored breath.

We can't help wondering what Rimbaud, thirty-seven years old and dying with the atrocious pain of his malignancy, can have confessed or how he confessed. In short, hammered phrases, broken by ironic gasps that turn to sobs. Looking into the past, beyond the priest, who sits by his bedside, he first recognizes the canonical sins defined by Catholic morality: acts of dishonesty, deception, lies (yes, there were plenty of those). Then anger, especially at his mother, a woman of limited intelligence who never understood her son. And his "vice," his sexual preference, to use the euphemism we prefer today. This is something the priest knows at first hand. He has spent years in seminaries; he understands the variety of carnal appetites. But there is something else. This man, with the thin dark face, the cavernous eyes, the graying hair, this young man gripping the sheets, nailed to the bed beside him has a secret. It is a secret that devours him, that won't let him die peacefully or accept this terrible outcome as his burden, his path to follow out of this world. We can only wonder about that secret; but I think it is what Baudelaire expresses in "La servante au grand coeur . . . / the great-hearted servant . . ." where he writes:

Si, par une nuit bleue et froide de décembre,
Je la trouvais tapie en un coin de ma chambre,
Grave, et venant du fond de son lit éternel
Couvrir l'enfant grandi de son oeil maternel,
Que pourrais-je répondre a cette âme pieuse,
Voyant tomber des pleurs de sa paupière creuse?

If, one blue and cold December night,
I found her crouched in a corner of my room,

Solemn, come from her eternal bed
 To nurse the child grown under her maternal gaze,
 What could I reply to that pious soul,
 Watching tears fall from her hollow eyes?⁸

Rimbaud—like Baudelaire—remembers someone who looks at him with mingled love and compassion, someone who asks wordlessly: “What have you done with your life? with your genius? with all the promise of youth?” It is neither his mother nor his sister, neither Izambard nor Verlaine. This questioner is his own *Génie*. It is what he expects from himself, what he has dreamed of, aspired toward. The ego-ideal, though born in the unconscious, is considered by Freud as the representative of reality and serves as a “reference point for the ego’s evaluation of its real achievements” (Laplanche, 144). Even more important than this retrospective function, the ego-ideal defines the goals toward which the individual strives and in terms of which he will make his self-evaluation. Bitterly, Rimbaud concedes that he hasn’t lived up to that standard:

O Lui et nous! l’orgueil plus bienveillant que les charités perdues.
 O monde! et le chant clair des malheurs nouveaux!
 Il nous a connus tous et nous a tous aimés. Sachons, cette nuit d’hiver, de cap en cap, du pôle tumultueux au château, de la foule à la plage, de regards en regards, forces et sentiments las, le héler et le voir, et le renvoyer, et sous les marées et au haut des déserts de neige, suivre ses vues, ses souffles, son corps, son jour.

O he and us! pride more benevolent than all lost charities.
 O world! and clear song of new misfortunes!
 He has known us all and has loved us all. May we know, this winter’s night, from cape to cape, from tumultuous pole to the chateau, from the crowd to the beach, from glance to glance, weary in sentiment and strength, to hail him and see him, and send him on, and under the tides and above the deserts of snow, follow his visions, his breaths, his body, his day.

Can the priest sense what this man will give to generations not yet born? Does he recognize the possibility of misjudgment in Rimbaud’s *examen de conscience*? Chaulier is transfixed by a voice that whispers from a burning heart, carefully aligning its mistakes and failures.

Rimbaud brushes aside the priest’s consolation. He has been brave in the face of danger, he has slaved at bitter tasks in the matted African bush. He has saved gold thalers in a money belt. But, in some deeper, more fundamental sense, he has failed. He tells the priest that he has wasted his life, wasted his gifts, thrown them away on illusions. And he wonders if even this confession is not another illusion.

THIS IS THE ultimate price Rimbaud paid for genius—to believe he had wasted it, thrown it away. Canon Chaulier gives the dying man absolution and a penance

of one Our Father and one Hail Mary. Then he anoints him. It is impossible to return with the Eucharist. Rimbaud cannot hold anything down. He is ready for the journey anticipated in “Le Bateau ivre”—“O que ma quille éclate / O que j’aille à la mer! / O may my keel break / O may I go to the sea!”

RETURNING FOR a moment to Isabelle, it is important to record that she was the tutelary spirit (as the Africans see the ancestral being who accompanies a dying person) or, in the Buddhist tradition, the bodhisattva, who performs the same role.⁹ That was why he asked her: “Do you believe? We are of the same blood! Do you believe, tell me, do you believe?”

Rimbaud took heart from Isabelle’s faith because the source of deep religious belief is not in sacred writings but, more often than not, in the devotion of the companion spirit who delivers us to death’s door.

In his last delirium before death, on November 9, 1891, he dictates a letter to Isabelle. It is addressed to the director of the Messageries Maritimes steamship company in Marseilles. It reads:

ONE LOT: A SINGLE TUSK
ONE LOT: TWO TUSKS
ONE LOT: THREE TUSKS
ONE LOT: FOUR TUSKS
ONE LOT: TWO TUSKS

[Note: The list of elephant ivory was on the already used paper when Isabelle began to write.]

Dear Sir:

I have come to enquire if I have anything left on account with you. I wish to change today my booking on this ship whose name I don’t even know, but anyway it must be the ship from Aphinar. There are shipping lines going all over the place, but helpless and unhappy as I am, I can’t find a single one—the first dog you meet on the street will tell you this. Send me the prices of the ship from Aphinar to Suez. I am completely paralyzed, so I wish to embark in good time. Please let me know when I should be carried aboard . . .¹⁰

Charles Nicholl comments:

Where or what Aphinar is no one is sure. The phrase he uses is “le service d’Aphinar,” which seems to mean “the ship from Aphinar” but could equally mean “the Aphinar shipping line,” so one cannot be quite sure if Aphinar is a place or a company, or even a particular captain. One cannot even be sure that “Aphinar” is what Rimbaud said: it is only Isabelle’s transcription. Was it rather Al Finar, the Arab word for “lighthouse,” and was this the phantom ship which he wished to board “in good time” the one that would carry him away from light and into darkness? (310–11)

Or perhaps from darkness into the light? He died thirteen hours later on November 10, 1891. His former employer, Alfred Bardey, was one of the many who paid

tribute to him (eulogized is too strong a word): “He was one of the first pioneers at Harar, and all who have known him over the last eleven years will tell you that he was an honest, capable and courageous man” (Nicholl, 313).

To answer Heidegger’s question posed in the epigraph to this book, we can say that the poetry gives us clues to the horizons of Rimbaud’s inner life, but what he found on the other shore remains beyond interpretation.