

Arthur Rimbaud: Two Poems

The Sleeper in the Valley

Arthur Rimbaud, trans. Wallace Fowlie

It is a green hollow where a river sings
Madly catching on the grasses
Silver rags; where the sun shines from the proud mountain:
It is a small valley which bubbles over with rays.

A young soldier, his mouth open, his head bare,
And the nape of his neck bathing in the cool blue watercress,
Sleeps; he is stretched out on the grass, under clouds,
Pale on his green bed where the light rains down.

His feet in the gladiolas, he sleeps. Smiling as
A sick child would smile, he is taking a nap:
Nature, cradle him warmly: he is cold.

Odors do not make his nostrils quiver;
He sleeps in the sun, his hand on his breast,
Quieted. There are two red holes in his right side.

When I was in college, I read a poem about vowels – how each had a color – by Arthur Rimbaud. I did not like the poem then, and I do not particularly like it now.

But recently I had occasion to re-read the poem (which is how I know I do not like it now) and, fortunately, I decided to keep reading Rimbaud. He is, as I have often thought, close to incomprehensible to me. And yet there is something about him that is immensely important. And several of his early poems, which I will discuss in this letter, are absolutely wonderful.

Here's where we want to start with Rimbaud. No one in the history of poetry has done what he did. He wrote almost all his poems between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. By twenty, he was done writing poetry. He ultimately became a trader in coffee (and ivory, and guns) in what is now the Sudan, and died early of cancer at the age of thirty-seven.

I never taught Rimbaud, although I would mention him in class: “If you want to feel inadequate, students, he is something for you: the great poet Rimbaud was done writing poems by the time he was your age.” Hm. That represents a problem for adult readers: who wants to recognize that the words of a sixteen year-old might have the deepest of resonances with us? Shouldn’t life experience and maturity have something to do with poetry? Yes, yes, I know that John Keats died at 26, and Wilfred Owen at 25. Sylvia Plath was 30 when she died, and Percy Bysshe Shelley was 30 as well. But to start at 16 and end at 19? Unheard of. Even Mozart, who started composing music when he was five, lived and composed until he was 35.

At the start of the four years when he was prolific, Rimbaud was a student in what we might call a high school. Shortly after, he began a close liaison with another great French poet, Paul Verlaine: tempestuous, passionate, and of course homosexual. (It did not end well: Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the wrist, and thereafter Verlaine was sentenced for deviance and spent two years in prison.) Rimbaud drank to excess, loved the supposedly hallucinogenic alcohol *absinthe*, and smoked large quantities of hashish.

Rimbaud would write several great masterpieces which are fragmented and almost incomprehensible: *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*. These are filled with gnomic sayings, as is the case with these lines from *A Season in Hell*: “My wisdom is as neglected as chaos is. What is my void, compared with the stupefaction awaiting you?” Many lines can be strange and yet stupendous, as this passage from that book: “I became a fabulous opera. I saw that all beings have a fatality for happiness. Action is not life, but a way of spoiling some force, an enervation. Morality is a weakness of the brain.”

It is hard to know what he means, but then, well, consider these lines from *Illuminations*:

When we are very strong, who draws back? Or very happy, who collapses from ridicule? When we are very bad, what can they do to us?

Dress up, dance, laugh. I will never be able to throw Love out of the window.

I may not get all the connections, but happiness, dancing, laughter, love: what is there not to like? And maybe to gain a happiness we should ignore conventional moral strictures: what ever punishment there may be, happiness overwhelms.

[Although Rimbaud did not try to explain this to Verlaine in the two years he was in jail...]

Rimbaud, in his late writings, is inventing surrealism and plunging toward the deeper levels of the self. A few years before he wrote, Emily Dickinson, ended one of her greatest poems “I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl” with these lines, proclaiming how very hard it is to stay sane, to stay reasonable, to avoid the catastrophe of descending into madness: she said that each day she, and we, must strive

With scrupulous exactness—
To hold our Senses—on—

But what if the self is built on a flimsy or uncontrollable foundation? Dickinson, to give her credit she is due, considers that. But the young Rimbaud considered it even more deeply. In May of 1871 he wrote two letters, one two days after the other, first to his teacher and then to his teacher’s friend. They have become, justly, famous.

Letter to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871

Now, I am degrading myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a *Seer*: you will not understand this, and I don’t know how to explain it to you,. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses* [le dérèglement de *tous les sens*.] The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I am a poet....I is someone else. [Je est un autre.] It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin and Scorn for the heedless who argue over what they are totally ignorant of!

Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871

For I is someone else. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me...If old imbeciles had not discovered only the false meanings of the Ego, we would not have to sweep away those millions of skeletons which, for time immemorial! have accumulated the results of their one-eyed intellects by claiming to be the authors!

.....

I say one must be a *seer*, make oneself a *seer*.

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses* [*dérèglement de tous les sens.*] All forms of love, suffering and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences..... Because [thus] he reaches the *unknown!*

.....

Meanwhile, let us ask the *poets* for the *new* – ideas and forms. All the clever ones will soon believe they have satisfied this demand – It is not so!

Unfortunately, extensively quoting a poet's letters is one way of putting people to sleep, or making them feel they are back in an endless class in college. So my apologies. But what is going on here is very, very important. Let's break this down:

“Je est un autre. I is someone else.” Cryptic, right? But maybe no so much. Maybe our self is what we have created, or has been created for us. And maybe there is an otherness (alright, I am sounding downright academic here) to ourselves that is different from what, for want of a better world, is underneath, underneath this seeming ‘self’ we seem to have.

How do we get back to that ordinary self, so we can start over? (That is the aim of all Romantic literature, to go back to what it was before all went wrong and alienation and boredom and anxiety set in: to childhood, to the early years of our civilization [Greece], to nature before trade and factories arrived to make nature distant and keep it penned up in parks and out there in the mountains.)

Here is what Rimbaud proposes: maybe we should screw up those neat senses we have – neat as in controllable, orderly, predictable in what they tell us – and see what happens. Derange our senses. What is there before us if we don't know it already, know how to take it in? What happens if we are bombarded with sensations and don't struggle – as Dickinson reminds us we do – ‘with scrupulous exactness/To keep our Senses on’?.

Going beneath or beyond the rational, to the realm where the irrational holds sway, to where sensations are not already-figured-out, is going to a place that is deep in ourselves, deeper than the ‘educated’ and ‘civilized’ layers of self-awareness which shape things for us so that we live in a world that is not continually chaotic. It is to experience the ‘self’ as an other. This is the path of surrealism, which quite literally means over and beyond the ‘real.’

I am going on at length despite the fact that I am not a fan of surrealism, neither in poetry nor in painting. I think those who first came upon it – Rimbaud in words, Douanier Rousseau in painting – were very powerful visionaries. Those who came after, not so much.

Although I admire Rimbaud a good deal, I am not going to read him all that much. Too large a dose of irrationality, too many attacks on form. He makes me overly unsettled, and that makes me uncomfortable, and that makes me less likely to want to re-read *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*. [Note this: I am avoiding writing about these two works, the height of Rimbaud’s achievement. In an earlier letter, I said I always told my students to notice what their teachers ‘avoided’ in talking about a poem: that is where the unexplainable resides, and often where what is most important and challenging lies.... You’ll like what is to come, as I am choosing to write about two early poems, wonderful and rich poems. Still, the confrontation with what may be madness, and is certainly the irrational which lies beneath consciousness, occurs when we read those two remarkable works I am avoiding in this letter, the *Season* and *Illuminations*. I probably have been enlarged by reading them recently; still, I do not feel like reading them again. But you may wish to plunge into them; you might want at least to sample them....] Confronting the unruliness that is the undergirding of my sense of self is a good thing, I think. Still, maybe I don’t need to be a seer as much as I want to be someone who understands how to live in the world. As Jake Barnes says in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, “I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it.”

I am writing this letter because I do want you, along with me, to confront two poems of Rimbaud which I find extraordinary and wonderful. (*A Season in Hell* is extraordinary, but I am not sure it is wonderful.) Both are early poems of his, both are sonnets, both are written in the classical French meter of the alexandrine, or twelve syllables to the line. Both rhyme beautifully. Both are worth our regard and both are worth remembering. And both – each in its own way – prefigure something vital about the Rimbaud who was to come. And within four years, flare out.

The first of these two poems headed up this letter. “The Sleeper in the Valley,” it should be acknowledged even though it is obvious, was written in French. For those of you who read French, the original poem will follow this letter. Rhymed, metered, mellifluous. Rimbaud wrote it when he was sixteen! (If you don’t read French, trust me: it is mellifluously gorgeous!) I have given you a

quite literal translation by Wallace Fowlie, which I find satisfying although it does not even attempt rhyme or the twelve-syllable line. Here it is, again:

The Sleeper in the Valley

It is a green hollow where a river sings
Madly catching on the grasses
Silver rags; where the sun shines from the proud mountain:
It is a small valley which bubbles over with rays.

A young soldier, his mouth open, his head bare,
And the nape of his neck bathing in the cool blue watercress,
Sleeps; he is stretched out on the grass, under clouds,
Pale on his green bed where the light rains down.

His feet in the gladiolas, he sleeps. Smiling as
A sick child would smile, he is taking a nap:
Nature, cradle him warmly: he is cold.

Odors do not make his nostrils quiver;
He sleeps in the sun, his hand on his breast,
Quieted. There are two red holes in his right side.

This a pastoral lyric, all about a young soldier sleeping peacefully in a country valley. It is green, there is long grass, the sun is shining. There are blue flowers, here are some clouds in the sky, the sun is shining. The soldier sleeps peacefully among the flowers, ‘taking a nap.’ The poet addresses Nature and enjoins nature to look out for the soldier. The soldier is quiet, sleeping – and yet curiously unresponsive.

Pay attention with me. Brightness suffuses the poem, beginning with the “sun” in line three and its rays bubbling over the valley in the next line. “Light rains down” in line eight, and in line thirteen, “he sleeps in the sun.” Ah, he sleeps. That line occurs three times in this short poem (ok, the first time the subject is the “young soldier” and only later is it the pronoun “he.” In line seven he “sleeps,” in line nine “he sleeps, and in line thirteen “he sleeps.” (Yes, the repetitions are there in the French too: ‘il dort’). “Stretched out.... he is taking a nap,” He is relaxed, in a sort of natural ‘bed,’ “smiling.” Calm, restful.

And then the stunning last line. “There are two red holes in his right side.”

The poem is so simple, so ‘conventional,’ that we are shocked by this ending. Not just surprised, shocked. And that is what is so telling to me about the poem: Rimbaud has learned from Baudelaire that a poet can shock [you can read an earlier letter about a shocking poem of Baudelaire’s [here](#)], that if we want to go beyond boredom, beyond our awareness that sometimes the world makes too much sense for us to feel ourselves [which I wrote about in encountering Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much With Us,” [here](#)], maybe we need to confront the unexpected. [You who have been reading all of these letters know that I am deeply admiring of Wordsworth: the same sense of shock, although here it is downplayed into what seems a lyrical sense of love, is found in the abrupt transition between the two short stanzas of his “A slumber did my spirt seal,” which I discussed [here](#).]

If you pay attention to the Rimbaud poem and reread it after getting shocked by the last line, you can go back and see that the ending is not unprepared. Even the opening, the hollow apart from the world, may prefigure the ending. Certainly, the second stanza where the soldier has his head in flowers and is “pale” suggests when we go back to it perhaps something is amiss. Certainly, the third stanza where his feet seem to –such a strange image! – rest among gladiolas, shows something is wrong. Gladiolas? Other translators avoid this awkward flower. For how, in this calm pastoral poem, far from the civilized world of gardens, can his feet mess up these tall spikes of flowers, flowers we associate with gardens and vases and not rural valleys? Then there is the following the simile – he is smiling, but it is not just a smile of contentedness and joy, not just a happy McDonald’s smile, but the sleeping soldier smiles “as a sick child would smile.”

Then Nature is addressed directly: the apostrophe tells the gentle mother to “cradle him warmly” for “he is cold.” How can he be cold if he is sleeping in the sun? Why is nature suddenly evoked and addressed?

At the start of the last stanza, he does not respond to odors. Not even bodily: not even his nostrils, yet there must be plenty of “parfums” on a sunny day when flowers are blooming. He is oblivious: his body does not respond to natural signals. Yes, the poem gives us lots of warning that not everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

We can see as well the disjuncture between the human and natural world. Four times the sun is shining, and the river moves and sings, and the flowers (two kinds!) blossom, and nature is seen as a mother, capable of cradling and bringing

warmth. Nature goes on, even if human life does not. The last line hammers home that disjuncture.

Rimbaud greatly admired Baudelaire. And Baudelaire is a great poet of shock, maybe the greatest poet of shock who ever wrote. But there is something very different in the shock of Baudelaire and that of Rimbaud. Baudelaire works in an aesthetic realm, and he continually shocks our easy awareness of beauty and appropriateness. In this poem of Rimbaud, the shock is not aesthetic: it is that our senses have led us astray, and we are shocked as we see what is actually before us. Not sleep, but death. Three times in the poem “he sleeps,” but that is because we see and do not really see.

This is a great poem about the implacability of death, about death’s unwelcome intrusion into life, and about the horrible causalities of war. The dead soldier shows us directly that there are consequences to warfare, consequences we do not like and do not foresee. And all amid a world which is out there, and which means us no harm – but does not succor us, either. The sun “shines . . . bubbles over with rays . . . rains down . . . (looks at him) while he sleeps.” That sun finally illuminates the two red holes, bullet wounds, without commentary or response.

What we end up with in this sonnet is shock, and our lack of awareness (until we look closely at what is in the world before us): too often, our senses betray us into seeing not what is there, but what we wish were there: a soldier sleeping in the sun. When he is actually dead, a residue of man’s cruelty to man.

This may be an early poem, but already we see Rimbaud’s desire to shock us, pushing us to see what we in our civilized minds do not want to see. In this case, death, endings, while nature moves ever on.

Emily Dickinson at her most tough-minded, wrote a poem which accords with what Rimbaud sees in this poem before us:

Apparently with no surprise,
To any happy Flower,
The Frost beheads it at its play,
In accidental power.
The blond assassin passes on,
The sun proceeds unmoved,
To measure off another day,
For an approving God.

Undermining the easy sense of the self – “Je est un autre, I is someone else” – Rimbaud shocks us into a new awareness of the world. He also reminds us, with great effect, of what it is to actually pay attention to one’s senses. Here is another early poem; again, it is a sonnet, rhymed, in alexandrines. The translation is relatively literal, by Wallace Fowlie. Ezra Pound translated the poem into a more colloquial English, with some rhymes; Robert Lowell ‘imitated’ the poem in a lyric at once more colloquial and more poetic than Fowlie. The French original, and these two translations, are at the end of this letter.

Here’s the poem. I loved it on first reading. Reading it often has made it even more wonderful.

At the Cabaret-Vert

At five in the afternoon

For a week my boots had been torn
By the pebbles on the roads. I was getting into Charleroi.
—*At the Cabaret-Vert*: I asked for bread
And butter, and for ham that would be half chilled.

Happy, I stretched out my legs under the green
Table. I looked at the very naïve subjects
Of the wallpaper.—And it was lovely,
When the girl with huge tits and lively eyes,

—She’s not one to be afraid of a kiss!—
Laughing brought me bread and butter,
Warm ham, in a colored plate,

White and rosy ham flavored with a clove
Of garlic – and filled my enormous mug, with its foam
Which a late ray of sun turned gold

I think we want to begin by noticing how resolutely physical the poem is: a trait not lost on William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara in the following century. It is about what the poet/speaker senses, about what is given quite directly to a sensory being. The poem begins with boots ripped by the stones over which the speaker has walked.

For a week my boots had been torn
By the pebbles on the roads. I was getting into Charleroi

Both Lowell and Pound have the verb right – it is not in the passive tense (‘had been torn’), but active, ‘I tore up.’ The poet is aware of his journey – ouch, I am using Fowlie but the other translators are right, he has been walking not for a week but for eight days – and with battered boots and feet he is very glad to be seated and about to be fed. Ah, the relief, after the long journey:

—*At the Cabaret-Vert*: I asked for bread
And butter, and for ham that would be half chilled.

Happy, I stretched out my legs under the green
Table.

Bread and butter, ham, stretching out. He is happy. The whole poem is about happiness, satisfaction.

Williams will write poems about the happiness of eating plums [here](#) and [here](#), although both poems are also about other things than plums. Not Rimbaud. He wants bread and butter and ham, and he likes stretching out his legs comfortably. He looks around. The table is green. The wallpaper has simple motifs. The waitress has lively eyes and big tits and signals somehow that she is sexually available. Food, rest, sex (even if he does not avail himself of the latter). Pretty damn wonderful after all that walking.

The waitress brings him food and drink. That’s the poem. But what food, what drink! You may be wondering why I used the Fowlie translation if two others got the opening lines right and he didn’t. Well, here it is: he knows exactly what Rimbaud was doing in this last tercet about the warm ham and beer on the table before him, describing a

White and rosy ham flavored with a clove
Of garlic – and filled my enormous mug, with its foam
Which a late ray of sun turned gold

I can see the ham, edged with fat, pink surrounded by white, garlic flavored. And a huge mug of yellow foamed beer The traveler we met at the start is about to be sated.

So what is remarkable about this poem? The simplicity with which the senses take things in, the green table, the simple but still distinct wallpaper, the laughingly available waitress, the painted plate, and that delectable pink and white ham. Flavored by garlic. With a mug of foaming beer. Our senses, normally pushed aside in the service of reason, here run riot. We can see, smell, taste, touch (those huge tits!), even hear (“laughing”).

No, it is not yet the “dérèglement de tous les sens, derangement of all the senses” that Rimbaud was already thinking about and would soon write about. But it is very close to it. Rimbaud in this poem is living at the edge of his senses, NOT trying to make sense but rather seeing poetry as in touch with what we sense and not with what we think. This poem may begin with thinking, with considering how comfortable it is to stretch one’s legs as one sits in a rustic bar and order food and drink, but it ends with the food and drink and the waitress who brings them. Pure sensory awareness.

In the coming years, short thought that time might be, Rimbaud would unmoor the senses from reason, and shock us with the assault of what lies beneath our difficult and wearying effort to make order out of what we experience. But we can see, in these early poems, where he is headed. The letters he wrote the next year indicate he knew where he was going. He was going to be a seer, to encounter and to show to us what there is beyond or beneath the carefully constructed self. But in these two early poems, one which shocks us and the other which fills us with sensory pleasure, he already knows where he is going.

Le Dormeur du Val

C’est un trou de verdure, où chante une rivière
Accrochant follement aux herbes des haillons
D’argent; où le soleil, de la montagne fière,
Luit: c’est un petit val qui mousse de rayons.

Un soldat jeune, bouche ouverte, tête nue,
Et la nuque baignant dans le frais cresson bleu,
Dort; il est étendu dans l’herbe, sous la nue,
Pâle dans son lit vert où la lumière pleut.

Les pieds dans les glaïeuls, il dort. Souriant comme
Sourirait un enfant malade, il fait un somme:
Nature, berce-le chaudement: il a froid.

Les parfums ne font pas frissonner sa narine;
Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine,
Tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.

Au Cabaret Vert

cinq heures du soir

Depuis huit jours, j'avais déchiré mes bottines
Aux cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi.
– Au Cabaret-Vert : je demandai des tartines
De beurre et du jambon qui fût à moitié froid.

Bienheureux, j'allongeai les jambes sous la table
Verte : je contemplai les sujets très naïfs
De la tapisserie. – Et ce fut adorable,
Quand la fille aux tétons énormes, aux yeux vifs,

– Celle-là, ce n'est pas un baiser qui l'épeure ! –
Rieuse, m'apporta des tartines de beurre,
Du jambon tiède, dans un plat coloré,

Du jambon rose et blanc parfumé d'une gousse
D'ail, – et m'emplit la chope immense, avec sa mousse
Que dorait un rayon de soleil arriéré.

[Robert Lowell translation]

For eight days I had been knocking my boots
on the road stones. I was entering Charleroi.
At the Green Cabaret, I called for ham,
half cold, and a large helping of tartines.

Happy, I kicked my shoes off, cooled my feet
under the table, green like the room, and laughed
at the naive Belgian pictures on the wall.
But it was terrific when the house-girl

with her earth-mother tits and come-on eyes—
no Snow Queen having cat-fits at a kiss—
brought me tarts and ham on a colored plate

She stuck a clove of garlic in the ham,
red frothed by white, and slopped beer in my stein,
foam gilded by a ray of the late sun.

[Ezra Pound translation]

Wearing out my shoes, 8th day
On the bad roads, I got into Charleroi.
Bread, butter, at the Green Cabaret
And the ham half cold.

Got my legs stretched out
And was looking at the simple tapestries,
Very nice when the gal with the big bubs
And lively eyes,

Not one to be scared of a kiss and more,
Brought the butter and bread with a grin
And the luke-warm ham on a colored plate...

Pink ham, white fat and a sprig
Of garlic, and a great chope of foamy beer
Gilt by the sun in that atmosphere.