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Rimbaud
*The Double Life
of a Rebel*

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When I was sixteen, in 1956, I discovered Rimbaud. I was a boarding student at Cranbrook, a boys' school outside Detroit, and lights out was at ten. But I would creep out of my room and go to the toilets, where there was a dim overhead light, and sit on the seat for so long that my legs would go numb. Outside, the wind was driving the snow into high white silencing drifts; inside, the dormitory was eerily quiet. I would read and read again Rimbaud's poems. Even though I had won a local prize in French, Rimbaud's vocabulary and grammar were too difficult for me and I was always peeking from the left page of the French original to the right page of the 1952 English translation by Louise Varèse. Buoyed up by the sensual delirium of the long poem "The Drunken Boat," I would float off into daydreams of exotic climes.

As an unhappy gay adolescent, stifled by boredom and sexual frustration and paralyzed by self-hatred, I longed to run away to New York and make my mark as a writer; I identified completely with Rimbaud's desires to be free, to be published, to be sexual, to go to Paris. All I lacked was his courage. And genius. I crammed all my homework into the afternoons, when most of the other

boys were playing sports. That way I was free during the two-hour compulsory study hall in the evening to work on my novel. I wrote one novel, then a second. My mother, ever indulgent, asked her secretary to type them up from my neat, handwritten pages. My idea was that I would send them off to a New York publisher, have them accepted, make a fortune—and flee. I'd cast aside both my parental households (my parents were divorced), liberate myself from their money, quit my school—and move to New York! I imagined an older man would fall in love with me and do everything for me.

For some reason, I never sent off my manuscripts. Maybe I didn't know where to mail them; after all, I'd never met a published writer, nor did such a fabulous creature seem to inhabit our Midwestern world, any more than a unicorn might suddenly gallop past my dorm windows. Or maybe I was afraid that my book would be accepted, that it would be published, that I would have to live out all my fantasies—and the notion of answered prayers I found even more alarming than a continuation of my dependence and frustration. After all, in Rimbaud's nineteenth-century Catholic village, a homosexual might have been a sinner or a criminal, but in the Freudian 1950s in America, he was sick and in urgent need of treatment. A sinner might insist he wanted to be a Prodigal Son, a criminal might want to be irredeemable, but no one could fight for the right to be sick.

I found the Rimbaud myth to be at once puzzling and exciting. In a slim volume about Rimbaud by Wallace Fowlie, published by New Directions in 1946, just a

decade previously, I read these fascinating words: “A relationship between two poets of the same sex, even if there is a physical basis, may provide an intensive intellectual comradeship and stimulation. Homosexuality, in its highest sense, is founded on intellectualism. It represents fundamentally an aesthetic conception of love, in which the beauty of a young man seeks the wisdom of an older man, and in which wisdom contemplates beauty.” Fowlie then went on to trot out Plato and the ideas of the *Symposium*. Only recently did I discover that Fowlie was both a champion of modernism and a Catholic who remained celibate for forty-five years—and went on to write a last book in the 1990s about Rimbaud and Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors!

These ideas about homosexuality “in its highest sense” were heady indeed, “even” if physical—and rhymed with the life of the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, and his tragic affair with his impresario lover, Sergei Diaghilev, the founder of the Ballets Russes. My mother had given me a biography of Nijinsky just before I discovered Rimbaud, and there, too, I read,

Diaghilev’s boundless admiration for Nijinsky the dancer was even overshadowed by his passionate love for Vaslav himself. They were inseparable. The moments, in a similar mutual relationship, of dissatisfaction and ennui that came to others, never came to them, as they were so intensely interested in the same work. To make Sergei Pavlovich happy was no sacrifice to Vaslav. And Diaghilev crushed

any idea of resistance, which might have come up in the young man's mind, by the familiar tales of the Greeks, of Michelangelo and Leonardo, whose creative lives depended on the same intimacy as their own.

To read that the two men "were one in private life" thrilled me, just as I was half-convinced by Diaghilev's argument that heterosexuality was an animal necessity for breeding, "but that love between the same sex, even if the persons involved are quite ordinary, because of the very similarity of their natures and the absence of a presupposed difference, is creative and artistic." Oddly enough, this strange and questionable homage to homosexuality had been written by Nijinsky's wife Romola (not so odd, perhaps, since Romola, as I only recently learned, was a lesbian).

The only problem in the case of Rimbaud, however, was that the boy, Rimbaud, dominated the older poet, Verlaine. Rimbaud was the top, the "Infernal Bridegroom," and Verlaine, ten years older and married, was the passive "Foolish Virgin." For a while I referred to this book as "Rimbaud: Teen Top." To be sure, Rimbaud enjoyed shocking his older straight male friends by claiming otherwise. He once said about Verlaine in the presence of Alphonse Daudet, the macho Provençal novelist, "He can satisfy himself on me as much as he likes. But he wants me to practice on him! Not on your life! He's far too filthy. And he's got horrible skin."

Not only did Rimbaud control and harass and terrorize Verlaine in the bedroom, but he also sought to prevail in

their work, despite Verlaine's established reputation and publishing history. Rimbaud was the exalted revolutionary who thought poetry must break with tradition and usher in a whole new era of human history. As Paul Valéry declared, "Before Rimbaud all literature was written in the language of common sense."

If Rimbaud was the most experimental poet of his day, someone who in the four short years of his career managed to have three utterly different styles, then Verlaine was much more a lyric voice, someone whose superb verses were close to the delicate, rhyming patterns of song (indeed, Debussy set them to music), a poet of melancholy and shadows, of a fragile and intensely personal Catholicism, and of the springtime of love. In 1890, looking back at his entire production, Verlaine said that the constants of his style included "a free form of versification...frequent alliteration, something like assonance in the body of the verse, rhymes more rare than rich, the exact word sometimes avoided on purpose or nearly. At the same time, the content sad and designed to be that way..." In this statement Verlaine accurately emphasized the sadness and the strict formality of his distinctive verse.

In the little Fowlie book, no longer than this one, I learned that Rimbaud had wooed Verlaine away from his wife; that they had fled to London, that there they had almost died of starvation; that they had associated in England with the former Communards; the anarchists who had tried unsuccessfully in 1871 to establish Paris as a free city-state and been forced to flee to England. Verlaine, fearing he'd made a mistake in abandoning his

wife and baby son, rushed back to the Continent, where a distraught Rimbaud joined him. In Brussels they had another fight. Verlaine shot Rimbaud through the wrist—and the older man was given a two-year prison sentence. In prison Verlaine returned to the Catholic faith, wrote pious poetry—but when he was freed he ran back to Rimbaud's side, rosary in hand, just as later Oscar Wilde would be imprisoned for homosexuality, repent, write a pious confession and, after serving his two-year sentence, seek out Lord Alfred Douglas, the cause of his downfall.

Rimbaud, I read, left behind an important body of work but renounced his career at age nineteen, went off to Africa, earned money as a gunrunner, became ill, and died an early death. Verlaine, a genius and a drunk, would stagger on for several years more; he would write a biographical sketch of Rimbaud, see his works into print, and do whatever he could to promote the fame of his lost love. Rimbaud's literary career lasted four years and he died at age thirty-seven; Verlaine published over a period of some thirty years and he died at age fifty-one. Verlaine was a survivor, though he was also a buffoon, lurching back and forth from men to women, from wine to absinthe, from hospital to prison to gutter, all the while turning out pure musical poems that made him the spiritual leader of the Symbolists. While still in school, I read a novel by the turn-of-the-century writer Anatole France called *The Red Lily*, in which a character, based on Verlaine, wrote his best poems on cigarette paper and smoked them in front of appalled admirers.

The contrast between Rimbaud, the short-tempered, willful hellion, prompt to renounce one career after another until he ended up sick and despondent and virtually friendless, and Verlaine, the subtle, self-pitying equivocator, quick to yield even to his worst impulses—this contrast fascinated me. In my early twenties I wrote a play about Rimbaud and Verlaine, which made the rounds but was never put on; as one producer explained to me, “Either Rimbaud is a genius, to whom everything is permitted, or he’s a brat. Genius is impossible to establish on the stage, so by default he comes off as an intolerable troublemaker and ingrate.”

Wallace Fowlie’s meditation on Rimbaud’s life and the longer 1936 biography by Enid Starkie were all I had to go on in my high-school days, but these traces of the Rimbaud-meteor were enough to give me hope—as a desperate, self-hating homosexual, as an aspiring writer, as a sissy-rebel. I, too, wanted to reach out to older writers in New York and have them extend a welcoming hand, as Verlaine had welcomed the unknown Rimbaud (and sent him the money for a train ticket to Paris). I, too, wanted to escape the ennui of my petit-bourgeois world and embrace bohemia. I, too, wanted to forego years of apprenticeship and shoot to the artistic top as a prodigy, not a drudge. I, too, wanted to make men leave their wives and run off with me.

The worst thing I may ever have done in my life was to denounce a teacher at Cranbrook for smoking marijuana. He was eventually fired, and he was subjected for years to the scrutiny of the FBI, whom the school

authorities had tipped off. What I never mentioned to them was that I had had sex with this very teacher—and had denounced him for smoking marijuana the same day. My self-hatred, my desire to have a trapdoor beside the bed where I could toss the “evidence” of my sickness and sin—certainly these played a part in my disgusting behavior, as did my resolve not to be tempted again. And perhaps I was bitter and nursing my disappointment that my teacher wanted to get off with me but didn’t love me (he was married). Now, all these years later, I ask myself whether Rimbaud’s “satanic” example might not have been the decisive influence on my deplorable behavior.