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# INTRODUCTION

*"Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle, a man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself."*

—W. B. YEATS

LONG BEFORE it was recognized that the art of painting goes beyond the imitation of nature, poets were aware of the same truth regarding poetry. "The tendency of metre," said Wordsworth, "is to divest language in a certain degree of its reality, and thus to throw a certain half-consciousness or unsubstantial existence over the whole composition." Who will deny that both artist and audience were in a happier relation to art when unconscious of this truth? The artist, like the oyster, secreted his precious element only when sufficiently moved by a force outside him (an emotion-bearing thought). The public, for its part, could take the pearl of poetry or leave it; there was always the story, or at least the shell of an idea, to adhere to.

But in the age of specialization, the artist became an expert. As recently as the Renaissance, it was possible for the physicist Galileo to be a poet, and for the painter Leonardo to know all there was to know about physics. Not only was their speech enriched by the transfusion, but communication, which is based on analogy, was facilitated. The physicist of today speaks in a language that can be understood only by his fellow-physicists. And the artist, for the most part, speaks only to other artists.

## PRIMITIVISM IN MODERN POETRY

How did this come about? And why, in the arts, has it been particularly true of poetry? In the beginning the arts served

to illuminate the truths of religion—the established interpretation of man's relation to the world about him—and the artist had a functional place in society as interpreter, wise man and magician. Once out of the primitive era in which artist and priest were one, the artist dropped his overt role as a soothsayer but continued to interpret between the gods and men. But with the division of the arts into painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, etc., the business of being such a mediator fell more and more upon the poet—the other artists having already tended toward specialization in their respective fields—and for some centuries the poet was expected to be (and often *was*) as learned in science, religion, psychology, politics and morals as he was in metrics. Dante is generally considered to be the last poet who assimilated the common wisdom of his age in his art. But a case may be made for Shakespeare, whose characters assert their heroic individuality in tragic but articulate defiance of all the conventions of their time; and even, though by this time on an extremely self-conscious level, for Goethe.

Long before Goethe's day, however, the poet was on his way to becoming a specialist. Shakespeare was the last great writer of modern times who found it possible to interpret the whole of life for an audience of common men without raising his voice—or lowering it. Through him, for the last time, poetry spoke "publicly" without sacrificing any of the richness of language, ambiguity, and associative "magic" which must always serve to distinguish it from "prose." After Shakespeare, poets were obliged to make the unnatural choice between poetry and communication. The dividing line was not absolute as yet, but it was visible. It may be said that Dryden, Pope, Byron and Tennyson sacrificed a great deal of the special character of poetic language in order to converse directly with their contemporaries—on even the moral-political level. And it may be said as truly that Donne, Coleridge, Blake and Hopkins had already chosen the narrower path, electing to limit their audience, if not to poets, then at most to connoisseurs of poetry.

In terms of the development of poetry as an art, in terms of the course poetry has taken in our time, Donne, Coleridge, Blake and Hopkins were on the side of the angels. These English poets were among the first to recognize, perhaps unconsciously, that in the industrial age the so-called common man does not go to art for magical communion with the racial subconscious, or even for the resolution of inner tensions, *but for escape*. They recognized as well that poetry was in

danger of losing its special character as poetry if it endeavored to compete with the increasingly popular novel, with the lay sermon, with the political tract, with journalism. Each of them in his way sought to mediate between religion and psychology, between the ancestral memory and the various rational philosophies of his day. Yet each of them retreated from the "real" world of his time into an "ideal" world of personal fantasy, and in so doing widened still further the gap between the artist and his public.

It was not, however, until the last years of Hopkins' life in the seventies and eighties—and then with far greater tempo in France than in England—that poets took the final leap, ushering in the "modern" period.

Under the Bourbon monarchs, France *vis à vis* England had been politically and socially retarded. The Romantic movement in English poetry somewhat preceded its counterpart on the Continent. But with the French Revolution and the wave of popular revolts that followed it in 1830, 1848 and 1870, poetry developed at a far more rapid pace in France than in Victorian England. In order, therefore, to understand why the significant verse of the last five decades has separated itself so radically from the prevailing tastes of the public, what it has sought to project, and the extent to which the latest generation of poets is undertaking to reestablish contact both with the pre-revolutionary history of poetry and with an almost vanished public, it is necessary to go back to that French poet who almost single-handed invented the idiom of modernism and all of whose poetry was written in France between the years 1870 and 1873.

## RIMBAUD'S CONTRIBUTION

It was in the latter year that Arthur Rimbaud, at the age of nineteen, stopped writing poetry altogether. We begin with him, rather than with Baudelaire to whom he owed much of his originality and who was perhaps a greater poet, not merely because his willful renunciation of poetry symbolizes so much of the dilemma of the modern artist. We begin with Rimbaud because in his fierce revolt against all the conditions of the bourgeois world—religious, political and moral—this poet broke also with the conception of language as a rational means of conveying thought, returning rather to its most primitive quality of a medium for arousing irrational emotion through incantation, automatism and magic. All poetry, to be sure, draws upon these resources to a certain extent by

the very nature of its structure. But even in Baudelaire, who took hashish to loosen his inhibitions and deliberately "sinned" in order to be able to identify himself with the sinner and suffer the ultimate in humiliation, poetry retained its classical mold. "To inspect the invisible and hear things unheard, being entirely different from gathering up again the spirit of dead things," Rimbaud wrote, "Baudelaire is the first *voyant,* King of poets, a real God! Unfortunately he lived in too artistic a *milieu* and his literary form, so often praised, is trivial. Unknown discoveries demand new literary forms."

Rimbaud dispensed not merely with grammar and syntax when necessary and with the dictionary meaning of words, writing his most mature poetry in "prose"; he stripped away in so doing all connecting links that stood in the way of the essential vision. Out of his deliberately disordered senses, from the depths of debauchery and self-immolation, rose all the images of a tortured childhood ordinarily suppressed by the censor of the conscious mind. And it was these concrete images, organized by the constructive power of a natural artist, that saved his poetry from drifting off into un-poetic abstraction. In Rimbaud, the fears and unformulated sexual wishes of pre-adolescence are re-created for the first time in art with a terrible precision. His actual adolescence, once he had detached himself violently from the hateful restraints of his mother and her bourgeois world, contributed to his work two other factors that were to be reflected in all subsequent poetry. In the gutters of Paris, Brussels and London, Rimbaud gave voice for the first time to the peculiar horror of life in big cities—the unnatural routine, the restlessness, the nightlife of brothels and bars, the swarming pallor of slums, the smoke of factories, the anonymous gray dawn. From his experience with the Siege of Paris and the Commune that followed it, he developed a disillusionment with political action, an anarchic philosophy of the poet's isolation from and opposition to all forms of democratic organization that has persisted to the present time. "Baudelaire, as a Christian, was not prepared to sacrifice his soul, though this might happen through his inherent weakness. He would never willingly have sacrificed his human personality, his human integrity, his ultimate salvation. To Rimbaud this undue value placed on individual human personality and on the human soul and its salvation was nothing more than the remains of outworn and out-of-date egoism. With an martyr's passion and self-abnegation he was

prepared to sacrifice them and keep nothing for himself of his physical or his spiritual being."[1]

## SYMBOLISTS AND SURREALISTS

The influence of Rimbaud, directly on French poetry, indirectly on the poetry of every other modern language, has been incalculable. Before it began to be felt in the nineties, the field in France had been divided between the Parnassians, believers in a "pure" art detached entirely from sordid "life" who wrote about Greek legend with the craftsmanship of jewellers, and the Symbolists, like Mallarmé and Laforgue, whose similar retreat from reality led them to a preoccupation with the unalloyed music of the Word. The Parnassians were without important issue, but the Symbolists, because they dethroned the classical forms, experimenting as Laforgue did with vernacular, broken rhythms and folk idiom, were later to have a healthy influence on such instigators of a fresh style as Blok, Lorca and T. S. Eliot. Valéry, the last of the Symbolists and possibly the greatest, carried the hermetic style of Mallarmé to a point of technical perfection where, as in the work of the purely abstract painters who were his contemporaries, the bare canvas remained the logical next step.

Into the vacuum created by this withdrawal of flesh and blood, stepped[2] Rimbaud, the apostle of revolt and destruction. Tristan Corbière, who composed his poems in even greater obscurity at precisely the same time, gave voice to a like violence. But Corbière's attempt to reconcile the brutal world of the city with the uprooted sensitivity of the individual artist stopped short with irony. It was Rimbaud's descent into Hell in search of God that was to illuminate both the religious and the social highways into which the road ahead was about to fork.

Poets in the past had assumed the existence of God. Fate, or Necessity, was the adversary with which the Greek hero waged tragic warfare. Since the Renaissance the idea of progress had given meaning to life. But with the decay of these assumptions, came spiritual despair. Reflecting this atmosphere, the modern poet has searched feverishly for a faith. Rimbaud, failing to reconcile God with bourgeois squalor, in fact identifying Him with hated authority, went to the Cabala

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[1] *Arthur Rimbaud,* by Enid Starkie. W. W. Norton, 1947.

[2] Posthumously speaking, Rimbaud's major work was not published before the nineties and did not become widely influential until much later.

and the alchemists in search of an absolute. Paul Claudel has testified that in his own conversion to Catholicism it was Rimbaud's mystical experience of union through pure sensation, more than any other event, that affected him. Guillaume Apollinaire, the son of a Polish mother and a Roman Cardinal, rediscovered God in Blake's "minute particulars," breathing intense life into whole areas of metropolitan existence that had been considered beyond the pale of poetry; it was he who first used the term "surrealism," adapting from Rimbaud the technique of letting verbal (and therefore unconscious) association supply the links in a series of freely flowing reveries. Borrowing in turn from Rimbaud's "prose" *Illuminations,* St.-John Perse, a poet with less appetite for contemporary life than Apollinaire but more subtlety, attempted, by dissociating the raw materials of history, to find an over-all mystical pattern in the rise and fall of civilizations.

## RILKE'S SEARCH FOR A FAITH

The greatest religious poet of the age, however, and one of the great lyric poets of all time, was a German who fastened upon no orthodoxy of belief and whose faith was an outgrowth much more of the Symbolist passion for artistic perfection than of the frenetic Rimbaudian pursuit of absolutes. Rainer Maria Rilke was peculiarly the offspring of the century's will to self-destruction, collective war. His father dressed him as a girl in childhood, then plunged him into military school; the traumatic experience from which he recoiled in his mature years was the first World War—and his poetry in consequence is an inverted image of that experience, a poetry of the religion of Love.

"There is something," wrote Rilke of the *Sonnets to Orpheus,* "in the very nature of these poems, in their condensation and abbreviation (frequently stating lyrical totals, instead of setting out the stages necessary to the result), that makes them more likely to be grasped by the inspiration of one similarly focussed than generally 'understood.'" While the same could be said of many of Rimbaud's poems and of post-Rimbaudian poetry in general, the way Rilke puts it reveals a good deal about Rilke. He was a humorless man, an aesthete with a very German propensity for metaphysics, who spent a good deal of his time corresponding with elderly aristocrats and young romantics about the seriousness of the poet's mission. Nevertheless Rilke was a genuine pioneer, both as poet

and visionary. And because he set great value on tradition (*Orpheus* symbolizes primitive ritual as a key to the future; for Rilke, the "invisible" but *real* world of the spirit could be comprehended and mastered only in terms of the *unreal* world of the visible flesh, i.e. through love of nature and man), his work stands as a constructive beacon amid the crossrips of modern art.

The search for a Faith that drove Rilke to his "terrible angels" and that was to take other shapes in all the essentially "religious" modern poetry from Péguy and T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Yeats, to Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell in the present decade, took a radically different turn in the poets inspired by socialism's dream of an earthly paradise. To Rimbaud, who witnessed the seizure of Paris by the urban proletariat in the winter of 1870, the Commune was only to be welcomed as a symbol of destruction; it was the occasion, in fact, of his first nihilistic poem. The Futurist movement which flourished several decades later, particularly in Russia and Italy, worshipped the machine as the successor to Man, and made a *mystique* of violence and war. The poets d'Annunzio and Marinetti were among the philosophical fathers of fascism; but it is well to remember that Blok, Ehrenbourg and Mayakovsky began as Futurists and that fascism and Marxism have in common a contempt for individualism. Marx, however, saw in the events of the Commune a harbinger of the classless society. "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways," he said, "the point, however, is to *change* it." And in the belief that the proletariat by an historical and dialectical necessity has been ordained to accomplish the transition to a world without hunger or war, the poets of socialism have found their Faith.

## MARXISM—BERTOLT BRECHT

A certain thinness of texture, a certain shrillness of tone, has characterized the spokesmen of this school, whose art is admittedly "transitional." Vladimir Mayakovsky, the first and probably the most inspired poet of Russian Communism, committed suicide in his early thirties, badgered, it is said, by increasing pressure to make him toe the line of Party orthodoxy. His free verse, owing something to Whitman and to Apollinaire (and to Marinetti?) sparkles with genuine revolutionary élan and ironic wit and is said to be as popular with millions of Russians today as when he declaimed it like a