

ANONYMOUS AUTHOR: RIMBAUD AND REVOLUTIONARY
ARTIFICE

INTRODUCTION

Paragraph 1 follows:

Walter Benjamin records, in his ‘Conversations with Brecht: Svendborg Notes,’ the playwright’s interpretation of Arthur Rimbaud’s ‘The Drunken Boat’:

2:

[Brecht] compares [Johannes R.] Becher’s poem to Rimbaud’s. In the latter, he thought, Marx and Lenin, too – had they read it – would have detected the great historical movement of which it is an expression.[See endnote 1]

3:

The ‘stereotype’ Brecht was attacking was that of Becher himself – ‘When Becher says ‘I,’ he believes himself – as president of the Union of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers in Germany – to be exemplary. Only no one wants to follow the example.’[2]

4:

In his short essay ‘Rimbaud as Capitalist Adventurer,’ Kenneth Rexroth records a similar interpretation of the poem, but he is not quite so impressed with the goals of the young poet. Rexroth writes:

5:

He applied to literature, and to litterateurs, the minute he laid eyes on them, the devastating methods of total exploitation described so graphically in the Communist Manifesto. [3]

6:

Though Rexroth has kinder things to say about Rimbaud’s poetry – ‘Rimbaud [is] a sort of magician of the sensibility – of that

specifically modern sensibility invented by Blake and Hölderlin and Baudelaire — and an innovator in syntax, the first thoroughly radical revealer of the poetic metalogic which is the universal characteristic of twentieth-century verse.’ The language of Romanticism is acidly deformed in the poetry of Rimbaud:

Work of man! This is the explosion which lights up my abyss
from time to time.

‘Nothing is vanity; science and onward!’ cries the modem
Ecclesiastes, namely Everyone. And yet the bodies of the wicked
and the slothful fall on the hearts of others. Ah! come quickly!
out there, beyond the night... shall we miss those eternal
rewards?[4]

7:

Rimbaud pens an anthem for the radical nature of Modernist individuality, which involves, among other things, a courting of perversions, a precise but arbitrary overturning of cultural values, and a total refusal to engage in the most minute aspect of practical daily living.

8:

THE ART OF POLITICS

The sentiments of Rimbaud’s poem, which recorded the ‘folly’ of one person’s experience of the historical phantasmagoria, began to be put to political purposes by Modernist artists. A major early Modernist manifesto, written by F. T. Marinetti and published in 1909 in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, is one of the more extreme of these statements. He lists the aims of the Futurist program:

9:

1. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.

10:

2. Courage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry.[5]

11:

This type of outrageousness – not to mention the garrulous optimism – had been already both celebrated and disavowed by Rimbaud; furthermore, the element of youthful joy and personal submission, as expressed in the ‘The Drunken Boat,’ has been lost or suppressed. The Manifesto continues, more ominously:

12:

8. We stand on the promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible?

9. We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.

10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.

13:

The failure of Fascism, and artists in its service such as Pound and Marinetti, was to attempt to destroy anomalies in an effort to institute an overdetermined universe, the inevitable result of which was war.

THE POLITICIZATION OF ARTIFICE

14:

Even if one agrees with Rexroth’s conclusion that Rimbaud was merely a ‘capitalist adventurer,’ one cannot deny that the poet was trading in something impressive.

15:

Veronica Forrest-Thomson in *Poetic Artifice* may shed some

light on how this ‘alchemy’ works. She calls the critical process to which she is opposed ‘Naturalization,’ which she describes in her introduction as

16:
an attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organization by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal external world, by making the Artifice appear natural. Critical reading cannot, of course, avoid Naturalization altogether. [6]

17:
Critics, in Forrest-Thomson’s view, often rush to ‘produce ultimate meaning’ for the poem, ultimately paying the price of blindness.

18:
A poem has an *essence* which we can never truly know or think; we only have access – as we do to all objects – to its accidental *properties*. In the area between these two worlds occurs ‘thematic synthesis,’ which is when the ‘non-meaningful’ levels of the poem which resist Naturalization synthesize with often-inchoate elements of the ‘external’ world, the cultural, semantic elements which must impose themselves upon a poem in order for it to be intelligible at all. Before departing from Forrest-Thomson’s critical vocabulary, it is worth considering her estimation of a poem in which she feels ‘thematic synthesis’ failed to occur. The poem is by the late British surrealist David Gascoyne and is called ‘The Rites of Hysteria’:

19:
The afternoon swallows a bucketful of chemical sorrows
And the owners of rubber pitchforks bake all their illusions
In an oven of dirty globes and weedgrown stupors.[7]

20:
Forrest-Thomson, ever handy with terms, calls this an example of ‘irrational obscurity,’ in which ‘the formal levels exercise no control,

so that one cannot tell how the external world is filtered through the language of the poem.' [8]

21:

The violence, but not the overdetermined consistency, of an aesthetic like Marinetti's, for example, is apparent in the following excerpt from Bruce Andrews' long book-length work poem from 1992, *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)*:

22:

Labial pesto – popeye less of a man
lizards better-equipped beefcake phosphated determinism carries
to the Nth degree: how many of them are junkies? – aristocrats
in pampers
voodooized hit list, preppies sink. Intellectuals learn to make
their own beds; dent of insolvency [9]

23:

This excerpt demonstrates the level of assault that is sustained for the entire three hundred pages of the workpoem.

24:

On its lowest level, the poem brings to the reader's attention the volatile nature that single vocabulary words – 'junkies', 'sanctified', 'aristocrats', 'determinism' – can possess, even when outside a narrative context or syllogistic argument.

25:

The primary mode of the aesthetic of Andrews' project is the complete opposite of what occurs in, for example, Ezra Pound's Canto XLV, in which the poet provides an equally large cumulative view of the materials of culture, but with an attention primarily to 'high' elements, while employing a controversial refrain:

26:

Usura is a murrain, usura
blunteth the needle in the maid's hand

and stoppeth the spinner's cunning. Pietro Lombardo
came not by usura
Duccio came not by usura[10]

27:

Andrews' certainly has the 'love of speed,' the 'love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness,' the 'aggressive action, the feverish insomnia' that Marinetti advocates in the Futurist Manifesto.

Charles Bernstein's reference to the Brecht's theory of the *Verfremden-Effekt* (alienation-affect) – the counter-naturalistic practices in Brechtian theater such as affectless acting and cue cards announcing the plot twists that destroy the seductions of plot and suspense – helps one understand the connection between Brecht's aesthetic and Andrews', which seem initially dissimilar:

28:

Unfamiliarization
is a well-tried
antiabsorptive
method; Brecht's
verfremdumdunden effect
explicitly sets
this as its goal. [11]

29:

Bernstein is essentially stating that Brecht was aware of the role 'melodrama' – the 'bracketed' subject matter in which a basic 'Naturalization' can occur – plays in his theater.

E N D

ENDNOTES

1 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* (Schocken Books, 1978), pg. 204.

2 Benjamin, pg. 203.

3 Kenneth Rexroth, *Bird In Bush: Obvious Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1947), pg. 44.

4 Rimbaud, pg. 205.

5 F. T. Marinetti, *Let's Murder The Moonshine: Selected Writings* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1991), pg. 49.

6 Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), pg. xi.

7 based on its appearance in Forrest-Thomson, pg. 38.

8 Forrest-Thomson, pg. 38.

9 Bruce Andrews, *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1992), pg. 40.

10 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pg. 230.

11 Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pg. 66.