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Reinventing Language, Vowel by Colorful Vowel

“Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translation.”

—Walter Benjamin “The Task of the Translator”

“Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself?—*No more words.*”

—Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell”

A Fable of a Fable, or “The Story of One of My Follies”: After he’d invented “the color of vowels,” regulated the “form and movement of each consonant,” the young poet then, applying his “instinctive rhythms” to the task, proudly proclaimed that he had alchemically created “a poetic language accessible, some day, to all the senses.” Notably, with his project in place, this poet, Arthur Rimbaud, tells us that he was then quick to “reserve translation rights.” This legal move on the poet’s part was perhaps thought initially necessary because, as he notes in 1873, the described synesthetic impact of language, one that would indeed be, if achieved, “accessible. . .to all the senses” (371), would only *be* accessible “some day” but not just yet, or at least not yet as translatable to others; this ambitious poetic invention, like an entrepreneur’s prototype, or a just-completed but not yet manufactured “machine made out of words,” would not yet work for all, could not yet be marketed to the masses. In other words, we would have to wait for this new and very modern, this “absolutely modern” invention, to function, for the colored vowels (before seen only in black and white), for the newly regulated consonants (before heard only in rigid formation), to achieve fully their promised potential of unlimited sensorial engagement, for the multiplicities of its enchantments to work their hallucinatory magic upon us.

In the meantime, the poet would make sure that, by having “reserved translation rights” (285), no one else would be able to swoop in, as in a kind of hostile take-over, and endeavor to translate, or pirate, what the poet now legally demanded would be his alone to undertake. After all, this invention was a dangerous one for which the poet had already invested

much capital, and from which he had emerged from a necessary but barely survived “season in hell.” For the poet’s creation would, once available, allow articulations long thought off-limits by language, long thought unthinkable by thought. Applying its “alchemy of the word,” the “nights” would be represented, the “inexpressible” recorded, “silences” would now be written without, in the writing, violating those silences. (Earlier in his poem, the poet, “not knowing how to explain without using pagan words,” had made a kind of anti-monastic vow of silence, insisting—a bit like *Bartleby*—that “I prefer to be silent” (267). Now, however, it seems he’d found, with his new invention, a way out of language’s pagan limits, a way to speak sacredly again.) Even the exhilarating visceral effects of “vertigo” could now, he asserts, be described in words enlivened to enframe that enthralling, falling sensation. Who’d have thought that the distressed feeling of such a fall could be fashioned by language, any language, while allowing the sensation of that fall to keep falling, its words made to fall alongside the fallen; “*je fixais des vertiges*,” Rimbaud wrote, a line of language alternately defined later by a variety of, *en principe*, unauthorized translators as:

- “I defined vertigos”
- or, “I made the whirling world stand still”
- or, “I found the still point of the turning earth”
- or, “I fixed frenzies in their flight”
- or, “I captured dizzying emotions on paper”
- or, by Google Translator, “I stared dizziness”
- (However, one on-line translation site gave the following: “No English translation found for ‘*je fixais des vertiges*’.”)

No wonder the poet felt that his invention had to be protected, its translation rights reserved. For, not only was he wanting to preserve the purity of his alchemical product (like Mr. White in his *Breaking Bad* meth lab cooking the purest of blue crystals), but he also likely understood that, in the wrong hands, someone might get hurt (as he himself had been) by innocently undertaking translations of otherwise “inexpressible” experience, of those silences, of those nights, of those vertigos, that had for so long eluded our heretofore colorless language, its vowels and consonants so fixed, so monochromatic. “Can I describe the vision?” the poet had, prior to his invention, wondered of his “delirium”; “What language did I even speak?” he asked; after all, he continued, “The air of hell does not

permit hymns” (275). Falling into the “lowest depths” of that silent night, unprotected, one might indeed fall flat. It is, therefore, little wonder that the poet felt the urgent need to protect and preserve from errant translation what he had for so long worked upon, what he had sacrificed so much to achieve.

In Rimbaud’s earlier poem “Vowels,” written a couple of years prior in 1871, and to which the poet is likely referring as a part of his later “invention” in his “Season in Hell,” he tells us the actual colors of his vowels, as “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue,” speaking of their “latent birth,” with he himself as their delivering midwife. Each vowel is then richly, thickly described in the poem as a living, material thing, a mortal form that, for instance, quivers and spits, laughs from “beautiful lips,” and from which, finally, a “purple blood [is] coughed up,” attracting flies that then “buzz around” the “stench.” These birthed letters live fleetingly on the page, “their divine vibrations” in temporary formation, breathing and shaping into “green seas,” then metastasizing, decaying, dying entropically, theatrically in front of our eyes. In a kind of reversed alchemical process, what was pure in the word is thus transformed into something base in the letters, taking a once-idealized, untainted language and returning it to its vulnerable, physical form, like changing a bar of gold into a scrap of rusted metal, a “ruin in reverse,” as the earthwork artist Robert Smithson might have called it, a poem “ris[ing] into ruin” before it is written (72). Emerging from the poet’s own spiraling exhalations of life into those previously dormant letters, the words are thus made into abject matter, into a resuscitated substance impermanently present, immanently absent. Such a conjuring act of effervescent destruction makes Rimbaud’s insistence upon translation protections all the more justified. For trying to “translate” the kind of material magic of such a reversed alchemy is not for the faint of heart, and is not to be left to rank amateurs, nor even (or especially) to rank scholars with what Rimbaud calls elsewhere their “heavy studious brows” (141).

Part of Rimbaud’s ambitious endeavor, his self-described act of folly, was we know motivated by, or emerged out of, what he spoke of in lines just preceding his claim of invention as his rejection of “modern painting and poetry,” which he tells us he could not help but find just plain “laughable.” Instead, what he loved was a rich amalgamation of the tawdry and the vulgar, popular products seen strewn about the city, the accidental ephemera of everyday life, such as “stupid paintings, door panels, stage sets, back-drops for acrobats, signs, popular engravings, old-fashioned literature, erotic books with

bad spelling, church Latin, novels of our grandmothers, fairy tales, little books from childhood, old operas, ridiculous refrains, naïve rhythms.” It was, as Rimbaud explains, largely from his eager embrace of the non-canonical and the anti-academic of the time, what he calls his “poetic old-fashionedness” (or, in reverse, his anti-poetic far-sightedness) that his “alchemy of the word” was finally to reversibly arise. From there, its “pure hallucinations” were formed from these cultural impurities lovingly seen on the street and found by the *flâneur*. The teeming life promiscuously extended beyond the narrow confines of the city’s, the academy’s, otherwise “laughable” achievements, what he called the “horribly insipid” and perceptually prescribed “subjective” poetry of the day. In their place, he offered illuminations, hallucinations, in which the now self-described “objective” poet, his subjectivity long ago dispersed into his myriad perceptions, becomes himself an object (or several of them simultaneously), at one point depicting this self, *these selves*, as having metamorphosed into what he called “a disreputable sign for an inn,” while moments later he is transformed again, this time even more fantastically, into “a fabulous opera” (293). Picture that, in the body of the poet: a kind of living, breathing *Gesamtkunstwerk*! As what Baudelaire had described, of the *flâneur*, that “kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness” (400), the poet then sees an array of shifting and disordered events, floating indiscriminantly, fluidly before his own watery eyes: “quite frankly a mosque in place of a factory, a school of drummers made up of angels, carriages on roads in the sky, a parlor at the bottom of the lake; monsters, mysteries. . .the disorder of my mind as sacred” (289).

This “hallucination of words” was to make, as we now know, the poet a “seer,” a *voyant*, one who would, as described in Rimbaud’s famous letters, “lose [through his developed seeing] the intelligence of his visions.” Only then, “bewildered” by the loss, would he know that he had “seen them,” by losing them, dying each time “as he leap[t] through unheard of and unnamable things” (377) transforming unnamably before him. But what had been seen in the leaping but something of seeing itself, and of the seer seeing himself seeing, in that vertiginous falling of sight, in time, through the unheard, the unnamed, and the dissolution of perceptions (and the perceiver) through the concurrent dissolution of the colorful and re-regulated letters that could only ephemerally form as they fell, before they too faded away, falling into a nothing now suddenly seen. Seeing that! . . . Feeling that! . . .the *vertige* of such a leap into loss, into language, causing a capacity of incapacitated sight for which translation must quite

understandably be “reserved.” For this invented language was, Rimbaud writes, “of the soul for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought holding onto thought and pulling” (379). Who but the “objective” poet, the poet as an object set in kaleidoscopic motion, is qualified or capable of being such a seer, of translating such a seeing? Or, is *even he* up to such a task, such a tall order of translation, one who is, after all, “someone else” even to himself. “I am present at the birth of my thought,” he tells us. “I watch it and listen to it. . .,” as that moving thought passes lightly through the air, like a dancer “com[ing] on to the stage in a leap” (375), a leap of language, a leap into its own loss of thought.

A more recent seer, the artist Robert Smithson (known best for his *Spiral Jetty* in Utah), one who looked at rocks in much the same way that Rimbaud looked at words, through what he called “a consciousness of temporality. . .chang[ing] into something that is nothing,” offers potential guidelines for such translation of sight, stating that:

“Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. . . . Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never dead one.”

Smithson consequently advised, in ways that might be seen as further illuminating the task of translation: “To reconstruct what the eye sees in words, in an ‘idealized language’ is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one’s inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work. . .and develop a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” (120). And, by extension, from Smithson’s assembled stones to the poet’s written words, to translate what the eye sees into an “idealized language,” *any* language, would likely result in a similarly “vain” endeavor; why not translate one’s inability to translate, submitting a poem “to its own vacuity” where what is most needed is a new kind of vision, seeing negatively now into something unseeable, unsayable.

In Rimbaud’s famous “letters of the *seer*,” he had insisted that the poet must “make himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses*.” This *dérèglement* of the senses would include, or begin with, the

dérèglement of the consonants, the coloration of the vowels, toward, what he called, a “*rational derangement of all the*” sentences accessing those senses (377). To see at all, to see anew, would require such derangements of perception, perhaps a kind of Smithsonian “‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” that would *in the seeing*—even in something as seemingly solid as stone, as trustworthy as a word—see a “something that is nothing”; otherwise, all that would be seen, all that would be written, would be that which had already been written and always been seen before, blindingly repeated, and so blindingly unseen, the same sight, again and again and again. . . , transmitting only what Benjamin called “information—hence, something inessential. . . the hallmark of bad translations” (69).

Leo Bersani, still one of Rimbaud’s most insightful, visionary readers, claimed that the poet’s “most revolutionary ambition for poetry was,” as he notes, “to make it *mean* as little as possible” (230). And so how, one wonders, is one to translate *that*, the ambition of ceasing to *mean*, of writing into a kind of absence, an absence of sense, of visions bewilderingly lost in the seeing? Through what Bersani calls Rimbaud’s various “gestures of renunciation,” he describes the poet as having created with his poetic inventions. . .

a mental mechanism which unfailingly ejects anything that threatens to occupy the mind. . . [for] language is of course a structured system, and as such. . . it is inherently antagonistic to mental life as discontinuous, hallucinated and random identifications with the external world. (247)

In order to represent faithfully the unrepresentability of that “discontinuous, hallucinated” world, might Bersani’s described “mechanism” of “renunciation” be a vital part of Rimbaud’s “absolutely modern” invention? Might the colored vowels, the re-regulated “form and movement” of the poem’s consonants, this poem appear but briefly in all their glorious and multidimensional form, and then for the poem’s that “structured system” to self-destruct? As Bersani continues, speaking further of the language needed for such an alchemical achievement:

The poetic illumination must pass through or ‘cross’ language, but it must also dismiss a medium which both serves it and subverts it value. It should therefore ‘stay’ in language as briefly as possible. . . [making] a single verbal

sequence so impenetrably dense that the reader can
'understand' it only as fragmented bits of vision. (249)

Crossing the language, while also crossing it out, erasing its traces as it goes. . . Is this now the magical task that translators have before them? Walter Benjamin wrote that "Meaning is served far better—and literature and language far worse—by the unrestrained license of bad translators" (78). But what about Bersani's claim of Rimbaud's desire to "*mean* as little as possible," with the reader left to "'understand' only. . . fragmented bits of vision"? There, the "unrestrained license of bad translators" would likely only offer what Benjamin elsewhere characterized as the "inessential," merely "information." Anticipating this inevitable violation of his intended repudiation of meaning, Rimbaud's earlier insistence upon reserving "translation rights" for the eventual application of his colored vowels and reregulated consonants was perhaps thus a repudiation *en avance* of those who might later make his poetry "stay" in place, mean too much (when it was designed all along to keep moving, to resist or reject the "vain exploits" of such singular, such a settled simulacrum of meaning, while giving instead, what Smithson had called, "passing shape to the unconsolidated views").

Might then the only acceptable translation, one that Rimbaud alone was to undertake "some day," be a simultaneous one, but radically, impossibly simultaneous, instantaneous in time, splitting the instant like an atom, with the fissioning words emerging from two mouths at once, from two tongues entangled, two languages brightly entwined in that most immediate of radioactive moments? After all, Rimbaud's colorful vowels and the reregulated consonants were invented to cause a kind of chain-reaction of simultaneous, glutted sensation in which the poem would semantically implode in the reading, its fuses blown in the seeing, breaking down, pictorially dissolving, decaying under the weight of its own dispersed words. Like the "metamechanics" of a self-destroying sculpture by Jean Tinguely, this "machine made out of words" spins and sputters only to wheeze and whisper into its own grinding decline. Limiting the life of such a living and dying language, a well-meaning but "bad translator," with his "heavy, studious brow," might unsimultaneously miss entirely the point of missing *a* point, only to singularly, colorlessly restrict the poet's frenzied multiplicities, rendering static (even if informationally meaningful) a poem intended to create, "some day," its own ecstatic, technicolor collapse.

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