6 WHITMAN, RIMBAUD, AND JULES LAFORGUE

POEMS WITHOUT METER

1886

According to English and American literary histories, Modernism in poetry was created in the years 1910–1913 by some "little magazines" edited by Ezra Pound, and four men with initials—T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, F. S. Flint, and T. E. Hulme—inspired by Walt Whitman. But almost all of these initiators denied it. Their mentors, they said, were all French, except for Whitman. To Whitman's invention, free verse, they even gave a borrowed French name, *vers libre.* As Pound himself put it in *Poetry,* in 1913, "Practically the whole development of the English verse-art has been achieved by steals from the French."[1]

They were right. Unlikely as it sounds, Modern (modernist) poetry was launched in France, a generation before, in a single year—1886. That spring, Léo d'Orfer, a critic; Gustave Kahn, an adventurous minor poet; and Félix Fénéon, an editor of genius and the art critic who would first explain Seurat, began publishing a new literary weekly in Paris. It was called *La Vogue.* In April, the first issue was confiscated for obscenity. Regular publication, which began in May, ceased in January 1887, never to resume. There were only about twenty numbers all told, and only a few hundred copies of each one, but they contained multitudes. Most importantly, this "little magazine" contained the most powerfully influential work of the three "onlie begetters" of Modern poetry: Walt Whitman, Arthur Rimbaud, and Jules Laforgue.

None of the three lived anywhere near *La Vogue*'s editorial offices on the rue Laugier in Paris, but Laforgue was close enough to visit. In 1886 he was in Berlin, serving as French reader to the old Empress Augusta of Germany. The previous year, 1885, had been endlessly encouraging. Victor Hugo had finally died, removing the weight of his colossal authority from the future of poetry; and Laforgue himself had finally succeeded in getting his first two books into print, one volume of fifty-two poems called *Complaintes* (Complaints) and another of twenty-two called

L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune (Imitation of Our Lady the Moon). Of course, Laforgue had had to pay Vanier, his publisher, for this pleasure; but for his next two books he was negotiating the kind of contract where the publisher paid the writer. Both of the new books, a third volume of poems and his first collection of stories, were well under way. Meanwhile his old friend, Gustave Kahn, was publishing the new poems and stories, one by one, in *La Vogue.* In those same pages, Fénéon was editing, under the title *Les Illuminations,* poems written a decade ago by Arthur Rimbaud, the *enfant terrible* whom everyone in Paris thought was dead. Somewhere else on his desk Laforgue kept the translation he was working on: *Brins d'herbe* (Leaves of Grass), an old book of poems by a bearded patriarch in America named Walt Whitman. Always slightly ahead of fashion, Laforgue had shaved his beard. Twenty-six, and in love with his English teacher, a black-eyed, chestnut-haired Devonshire beauty named Leah Lee, Jules Laforgue's large confidence in his own future was not misplaced. Today there are readers in half a dozen Western languages ready to name Laforgue as the most modern of the three great poets of *La Vogue.*

Laforgue's unusual job had been found for him in 1881 by indulgent friends, including the suave art historian Charles Ephrussi (Proust would later take Ephrussi as a model for Swann), because the pay was comfortable and regular, and the demands were both limited and pleasant, including, for example, long summer vacations in Paris. Laforgue was a handsome cigar-smoking dandy who relished the opportunity to wear frock coats, toppers, and morning dress when he went over to sit with the old empress and read her the tony *Revue des deux mondes* in the language she preferred to German. Just the thing for an artist whose parents weren't rich.

Laforgue's parents were not really poor, just good bourgeois in straitened circumstances. His father had done well as a bank manager, but he had also fathered eleven children. The Laforgues were also, in a curious way, immigrants. Both parents had been born in France, but they had grown up, married, and begun their family in South America. Born in Montevideo, Uruguay (like his predecessor Lautréamont), Jules Laforgue had not come to France until he was six years old, just in time for the French humiliation in the war with Prussia and the Red revolt in Paris.

He had had school problems, too. Although his intelligence had been obvious in the *lycées* of Tarbes and Paris, he had failed his baccalaureate examination in his senior year of high school—twice—while his schoolmate Henri Bergson, who had won lesser prizes, went on to academic glory. That was in 1877, the year his mother died bearing her twelfth child. Ineligible for college, Jules took to hanging out over at the Beaux-Arts School, where his brother Emile was learning design.[2] He audited courses, doodled portraits in his notebook, and showed up at public lec-

tures on art history given by the fashionable positivist Hippolyte Taine. When he tried to continue his education by reading on his own, he found himself turned down for a reader's card at the Bibliothèque Nationale, France's Library of Congress, on the grounds that he had no diploma.

On his second try in 1879 Laforgue managed to get his library card by pleading literary ambition; but by then he was increasingly alone in Paris. He still sorely missed his mother. His widowed father had taken sick and returned to the provinces. His oldest sister Marie, who inherited the job of keeping house for the children still in Paris, moved soon after from the old house on the Right Bank, near Montmartre, to newer but even more crowded digs on the Left Bank. Jules helped by staying out as much as possible. Eventually he got an airless little room of his own, not far from the Luxemburg Gardens. There he read and wrote, publishing occasionally in a provincial paper in Toulouse. "Two years of solitude in libraries, without love, without friends, fearing death."[3] "When I read my journal of that time I ask myself with shudders how I didn't die of them."[4] Among his earliest readings were the German ironist Heinrich Heine, "who sobs and smiles, with a bitter smile,"[5] and Charles Baudelaire, whose single book of "indecent" poems, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Flowers of evil), was beginning to be thought worthy by a few young people to replace the twenty volumes of Victor Hugo as the most powerful French poetry of the nineteenth century.

Laforgue moved on to even more depressing books, like Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea,* which insisted on the calamity of too long life brought on by a "will to live" that was blind, inhuman, and irresistible. He pored over Buddhist and Hindu scriptures that swept individuals into a transcendental world-soul. Then there was that strange book, *Philosophy of the Unconscious,* by Eduard von Hartmann, just translated from German into French, whose message was that the world-soul (called "the Unconscious") really existed and that it was malevolent through and through, controlling every random event that surged into consciousness, though consciousness could never perceive it. "I was a believer," he wrote later.

> For five months I played at the ascetic, the little Buddha with two eggs and a glass of water a day and six hours of library. . . . At 19 I dreamed of going out over the world, feet bare, preaching the true law, the abandonment of ideas, the postponement of life, etc. (you know the tunes). Alas! at the first stage, the gendarmes would have arrested me as a vagrant—Prophecy is no longer a trade.[6]

It all qualified him perfectly to belong to the French literary-artistic school called *Décadence,* then taking over from *Réalisme* in the first great revolt against the scientism and positivism of the age of industry. In the view of one of its early leaders, Paul Bourget, Décadence was based on

artificiality and dream. It tended in philosophy toward pessimistic idealism, and in art and literature toward the celebration of perversity and luxurious decay. Its progenitors, he wrote, were Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire (who was Poe's French translator), and Count Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Stéphane Mallarmé, who were disciples of both of them. "We accept," wrote Bourget in 1876, "without humility as without pride, this terrible word decadence."[7] Laforgue's acceptance of decadence seems to have been nothing more than a bad dose of adolescent depression. He began a book of poems he called *Le Sanglot de la terre* (The sob of the earth) about how awful it was to go on existing in a meaningless universe.

> The storm beats on my windowpane, the wind exhales
> To bloom the log where my boredom stirs the coals
> Oh! Autumn, autumn!

As he wrote apologetically two years later, "That is by me. My God, yes."[8]

Like most poets, Laforgue was more in need of contemporaries than he was of models. As the winter of 1879–1880 at last began to wane, Laforgue met the three men who were to become his first great literary friends and backers. One was Charles Henry, who knew mathematics as well as he knew poetry and is still remembered as Seurat's mentor on the meaning of lines. Then there was the man who introduced him to Henry, Gustave Kahn, a poet who had published "poems in prose" as far back as 1879, and was thus well on his way to becoming one of the inventors of something the French were to call *vers libre.* In France the rules of prosody were taken much more seriously than they ever were in England. Lines had to have a correct count of syllables, because in French the beat is too fluid to be the basis for meter. Twelve was classic, ten acceptable; but lines with eleven or some other uneven number of syllables were frowned on. Even unrhymed (blank) verse was considered bad form. Baudelaire had written some "poems in prose," and so had a few of his successors like Verlaine, Cros, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud; but until Modernism took over, prose poems were hard to publish in France. As for *vers libre,* it was unknown. Before 1886, the only French poet who had written poems with a different number of syllables in every line was Rimbaud, and this work was still in manuscript.[9]

Laforgue seems to have met Kahn at a meeting of the Hydropathes (it translates as either Water-Haters or Water-Curers), a club where bright young Frenchmen got drunk and entertained each other on Wednesday and Saturday evenings with contentious talk, humor, and poetry. Here he seems also to have met Paul Bourget, the oracle of Décadence, who lived less than a block from the café in the rue Jussieu where the Hydropathes met, and had been among their founders in 1878, together with the caricaturist André Gill, the humorist Alphonse Allais, and the poet Charles

Cros. Cros, who had invented the phonograph and was working on color photography, had a broad curly mop of hair, a generous moustache, and features and coloring that made him look rather like a Pacific Islander. He had been one of the poets Rimbaud had stayed with when he came to Paris in 1871; but when Rimbaud began seducing the poet Paul Verlaine, Cros had dropped him. After all, Cros's close friend, Charles de Sivry, was Verlaine's wife's brother. In the early 1870s Cros had published with Mallarmé, Villiers, and Verlaine in the most adventurous little magazine of 1872, the short-lived weekly *Renaissance littéraire et artistique,* edited by a man named Emile Blémont who had an avant-garde taste for prose poems, monologues, and English literature. Laforgue never did make a friend of Cros, but he must have been pleased to meet him, since he had reviewed a new edition of Cros's only book of poems for the Toulouse *Wasp* the year before, and liked it enough to keep it by him the rest of his life. The Hydropathes kept from drowning in Décadence by making fun of things, and it was Cros's humor that went deepest. "I am the one who got expelled from the old pagodas," one of his poems began, "Having laughed a little during the mysteries."[10] His fellow Hydropathes particularly relished a number Cros would do standing up in the middle of the evening to recite, utterly deadpan, a poem he claimed to have written for Villiers and published as a sort of nursery rhyme in Blémont's *Renaissance* in 1872.

THE KIPPERED HERRING

There was a great white wall—bare, bare, bare,
Against the wall a ladder—high, high, high,
And below, a kippered herring—dry, dry, dry.

. . . .

I composed this simple story—simple, simple, simple,
To infuriate serious people—solemn, solemn, solemn,
And entertain little children—small, small, small.[11]

The Hydropathes did not know it at the time, but the most influential art form they ever sent down into the world below Montmartre turned out to be an extension of "The Kippered Herring." Sometime before the club's founding, Charles Cros's little nursery rhyme had crossed the path of one of France's better-known actors, Ernest Coquelin, known as Coquelin Cadet, or Coquelin the Younger. In the form of a comic lecture in his own voice in 1881, Coquelin Cadet gave his own version of his discovery, calling Cros the "mother" and himself the "midwife" of this "child of bizarre conformation whose first babble was 'The Kippered Herring,'" which Coquelin reports hearing Cros recite at a supper in Batignolles one summer morning at four A.M.[12] Since this was the age of the lecture and the platform performance, Coquelin discovered that there was

both fortune and reputation to be made in reciting "The Kippered Herring." He wanted more like it; but what was it? a poem? a dramatic recitation? a playlet? Today we would unhesitatingly label it stand-up comedy or performance art, but in nineteenth-century Paris such forms had yet to be invented. Over the next ten years Coquelin commissioned at least a dozen of Cros's pieces, gave them the theatrical name *monologues,* and created a rage that spread first to Cros's friends and fellow Hydropathes from Sivry to Allais, and eventually to most of the playwrights and songwriters in France.[13]

The new form was short, but otherwise it resembled the humorous mock lecture with which Americans like "Josh Billings" and "Artemus Ward" had recently learned how to pack houses in New York and London. In 1876, one of the American humorous lecturers—he called himself "Mark Twain"—had begun applying the form to a novel, with the result he described in a letter as "Huck Finn's autobiography." Besides concision, the biggest difference between the monologue and the humorous lecture seemed to be that in monologue the joke was always on the speaker, and also, to some extent, on the universe. Monologue also resembled in more than name something the English called "dramatic monologue," a poetic form that had begun to crowd out the direct lyric back in the 1830s when English romanticism was coming to an end. Dramatic monologue had allowed Robert Browning to avoid being identified with "Porphyria's Lover," and Alfred Tennyson to distance himself from "Ulysses." The difference was that in the best of monologue the distance was harder to assess. Was the man who nails up the herring a moron, a humorist, or the possessor of transcendant wisdom? Was he all three? Was the storyteller any simpler? In any case, could either of them be Cros? The questions are no easier to answer in any of Cros's monologues—for example, "Autrefois" (Yesterdays):

Long ago . . . but long isn't enough to give you the idea. Still, how better to say it?

Long ago. Long, long ago. I mean long ago, long ago, long ago.

So, one day . . . but there was no day yet. Or night either. So. One time . . . but there was no . . . Yes there was, what do you want me to say? So he got it into his head (no, there was no head) He got the idea . . . Yes, that's it. He got the idea to do something.

He wanted to drink. But what to drink. There was no vermouth, no madeira, no white wine, no red wine, no Dréher beer, no cider, no water! It's because you haven't realized they'd have had to invent all that; and it hadn't been done, that there's been progress. Ah! Progress.[14]

But by 1881 the Hydropathes had stopped meeting, and Laforgue and Kahn were following the crowd to Le Chat Noir.

The Black Cat café opened in Montmartre in 1881, and remained for more than a decade the epicenter of revolt in France's artistic life.[15] It was decorated in high and low relief, inside and out, with caricatures, impossible visions, black cats, and symbols in every size of the tabooed and diabolical. The decorators were the emerging geniuses of the poster and the cartoon, like André Gill and Willette; and their employer, Rodolphe Salis, ran Le Chat Noir as if Montmartre were a foreign country. The patrons were anarchists, artists, and professional eccentrics, and a good many of the best minds in Paris. Even the most proper of intellectuals seldom passed up a chance to go slumming up on the Butte. There, along with undistinguished food and drink, they were offered entertainments whose special feature was that no one knew how seriously they were supposed to be taken. From small platforms in different rooms *chansonniers* in eccentric outfits sang devastating satires against anything official or established, and writers from amateur to disreputable read their stories out loud. It became, even when Coquelin wasn't there, the world headquarters of monologue, the place where one could hear Cros himself, Allais and Sivry, Maurice Mac-Nab and Jéhan Rictus, and the extraordinary *diseuse* Yvette Guilbert.

How much of an impression monologue was making on Laforgue may be judged from his "Tristesse de réverbère" (Sadness of a streetlight), a prose sketch he published in September 1881.

> I'm a streetlight getting bored. Oh! You must have noticed me. You know? at the corner of Mouffetard and Pot-de-Fer streets. A lowdown corner, right? To my right a wine shop, to my left a baker.
>
> Have you considered the fate of a being who can only see at night? . . .
>
> In the wine merchant's shop, they bray, they drink, they smoke, and, through the windows of houses, I see the lamps, those sweet virgins who, in modesty, veil themselves with a lampshade.
>
> At midnight, the wine merchant closes up. Behind the illuminated curtains I make out the forms of good citizens going to bed. And other things, but I am a self-respecting streetlight.
>
> Soon, all the windows go out. Then in the great silence of a deserted neighborhood, I listen . . .
>
> A faraway footstep fades away. A sleepy hansom. A drunk who makes monologues. . . .
>
> What a lousy neighborhood.[16]

Within months of the Black Cat's founding, Salis had launched a weekly paper, edited by Allais, featuring poetry and prose by the café's entertainers and cartoons by those who had decorated its bar. In its pages, *Le Chat noir* preserved the best of Salis's Montmartre leftism and his ephemeral entertainments while it satisfyingly scandalized the good citizens of Victorian Paris. The café served as a base for incursions into the city, and for elaborately concocted hoaxes like the Salon of Incoherent Arts that went on yearly from 1882 to 1889. One of the inventors of musical Modernism, Erik Satie, was playing "second piano" there around the time of the 1889 World's Fair, and in 1886 Henri Rivière began projecting fantasies of the past and future on the Chat Noir's walls, something Salis billed as the "shadow-theater." By 1898, the Chat Noir itself had closed, but its style and atmosphere were known all over Europe and copied in every metropolis, from Els Quatre Gats where Picasso met the artists in Barcelona to the Griensteidl in Vienna where Karl Kraus composed his anti-Victorian lampoons. The French even had their own word, still untranslatable, for the combination of the outrageous and the deadpan that constituted the Chat Noir attitude: *fumisterie,* or what we might translate as smokescreening.

Laforgue's *Sobs* certainly demonstrate a crying need for smokescreening. Laforgue began adopting the *fumiste* style in 1881, and the Chat Noir was one of the places he picked it up. Willette's early panel cartoon, launched by Le Chat Noir in 1881 and starring a clownish character called "Pierrot fumiste," impressed Laforgue so powerfully that by August 1882 he had borrowed the title and the character for a play. Laforgue's Pierrot was an anguished virgin (Laforgue himself may have been one), maintaining his virginity through a comic honeymoon by regular invocations of Schopenhauer. Clearly ridiculous, but curiously heroic. To Sanda Mahali, a fellow poet, Laforgue wrote that "Pierrot" made him laugh "convulsively," but perhaps that is because he was then flirting very inconclusively with Mahali herself.[17]

It was soon after Bourget and Ephrussi got Laforgue away to Berlin in November 1881 that he finally tried applying the tone of monologue to poetry. He put the *Sobs* away in a drawer and began the *Complaintes.* They were in verse, rhymed and with exact syllable counts, but the counts kept changing. Several different verse-forms often appeared in the same poem. Here and there snatches of cabaret songs and street ballads would bubble up and disappear. The mood was ironic, with several tones of voice working against each other:

> Ladies and gentlemen
> Whose mother is no more,
> The old gravedigger
> Scratches at your door.
> Six feet down
> Is a dead man's place;
> He hardly ever
> Shows his face.[18]

A year later, in December, 1882, Laforgue was "working like a slave . . . at night by lamplight" on the new poems.[19] Verlaine had just pub-

lished his advice to poets to "wring the neck of eloquence,"[20] but Laforgue was doing it better than Verlaine himself.[21]

The universe without a doubt
Is inside out! . . .
. . . .
—Ah, if only a woman were to come to me,
Ready to drink from my lips or die!
. . . .
May God grant me leave until that day
To live in the same old compromised way.
Where does human or divine
Dignity begin or end?
Let us juggle entities:
Pierrot trembles, the Almighty leads!
Now you see them, now you don't,
Now you don't, and now you do,
All opposites are the same,
And the Universe will not suffice!
And having adopted as my aim
A life of impossibility,
I feel less and less localized.[22]

As he wrote his sister Marie in May of 1883,

> I've given up my old ideal of Berthollet street, my philosophical poems. I think it's stupid now to put on a big voice and play at eloquence. Now that I am more sceptical and get wound up less easily, now that, on the other hand, I have hold of my language in a more precise and clownlike fashion, I write little poetic fantasies, with a single goal: making something original at all costs.[23]

Ten days later, Laforgue sent one of the *Complaintes,* "Complainte des journées," to Coquelin Cadet as a monologue.[24] There was no reply. Laforgue had gone beyond such mentors. He was now writing poetry instead of performance art.

Laforgue sent *Les Complaintes* off to Vanier, "the publisher of the Moderns," in March 1884, little suspecting that Vanier would sit on it for a year and a half, and began work on a series of verse monologues he eventually called *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune* (Imitation of Our Lady the Moon). As its title suggests, the irony here was even more pervasive and delicate. To a bookstore browser in 1885, the year Vanier finally published it, *Imitation* probably looked like the latest thing in Décadent poetry about ghostly ladies in vaguely medieval settings, but such a browser would have been quickly disabused. Too much playfulness and

colloquial diction—this writer was not, as the French say, serious. In 1886, when the word "symboliste" began to be applied to young poets, Laforgue's work still didn't seem to fit.

Except to the English poet and critic Arthur Symons. In 1899, for a book version of his 1893 article on contemporary literature, Symons would abandon the term "Decadent" and rename the entire era from 1872 to 1898, including Laforgue, as The Symbolist Movement. Symbolism he would define as the literary group that came to the Tuesday get-togethers at Mallarmé's Paris apartment. Mallarmé's "Tuesdays" had begun very informally in 1872, when the hot literary *-ismes* were realism and Parnassianism. They were still going on when Décadence became fashionable in about 1880, and continued when the poet Jean Moréas published his "Symbolist Manifesto" in 1886, and the word *Symboliste* began to replace *Décadent.* By the time Symons and his friend William Butler Yeats appeared there in the 1890s, nearly every French writer under forty was likely to be labelled a symbolist, together with a gaggle of Belgian poets (like Maurice Maeterlinck and Emile Verhaeren) and several painters (like Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau). Mallarmé's poetry, sparse and difficult as it was, served as a standard for the rest; but so did the work of a much stranger person. There was a sonnet by him called "Voyelles" (Vowels) in the October 1883 issue of *Lutèce,* which Laforgue must have read before he sent his *Complaintes* to Lutèce's editor, Vanier. It was the fourth published poem of Arthur Rimbaud.[25]

Rimbaud was poetry's Billy the Kid. Already a vanished legend in 1883, he had crashed into the Paris literary world in 1871, when he was sixteen years old and the Germans were besieging Paris. When the police sent him home as a vagrant, he left, but turned around and walked back. In Paris he had met Cros and Mallarmé, published a single poem in Blémont's *Renaissance littéraire et artistique,* and run off with Verlaine to London. In a Brussels café in 1873, Verlaine had pulled out a revolver and shot him. Rimbaud had survived, and in 1875, in Stuttgart, Germany, he had seen Verlaine for the last time, handing over a handful of manuscripts and saying goodbye. He was barely twenty then, but he was never to write another poem. Blémont and Verlaine kept manuscript copies of "Vowels," which he had written at the age of sixteen when neither he nor anyone else had heard of "symbolism." Now the poem is habitually exhibited as the best illustration of symbolist aesthetics:

Black A, white E, red I, green U, blue O—vowels
Some day I will open your silent pregnancies
A, black belt hairy with bursting flies
Bumbling and buzzing over stinking cruelties

Pits of night; E, candor of sand and pavilions,
High glacial spears, white kings, trembling Queen Anne's lace;

I, bloody spittle, laughter dribbling from a face
In wild denial or in anger, vermilions;

U, . . . divine movement of viridian seas

. . . .

O, supreme Trumpet, harsh with strange stridencies

. . . .

O . . . OMEGA . . . the violet light of His Eyes![26]

In a letter to his high school teacher written a little earlier than the poem, Rimbaud explained how he aimed deliberately to unhinge himself in order to become a visionary. The interrelation of different sense experiences, technically called "synesthesia," was part of that unhinging. So was opium and hashish. The assault on positivism—on rationality itself—could not have been made clearer, and included references to everything that could charm a Décadent, including occultism. But "Vowels" is no more Modernist than any of the other poems Rimbaud had written before he came to Paris. To begin with, it's a sonnet that rhymes. In 1873 Rimbaud had gone much further than that in a set of poems he had written about the Verlaine affair and privately printed as *Une Saison en Enfer* (A season in Hell). They were partly in prose, partly in unconventional and simplified verse-forms. If the parts were not formally new, the combination was; and it was well suited to convey the mixture of hallucination and confession with which Rimbaud accounted for a relationship that had gone from exchanging poems to crotch-fondling in cafés and had ended with a public shooting.

But it is the poems he wrote last, the ones he gave to Verlaine in Stuttgart, that are the basis of Modernism's claim on Rimbaud.[27] Over the next eleven years, they passed in and out of Verlaine's hands, ending up with his brother-in-law, Sivry, but no one seemed in any hurry to publish them. As they had no collective title, Verlaine took the word "Illumination" from the bottom of the manuscript of "Promontory," a poem inspired by Rimbaud's visit to an English seacoast resort in 1874, and told Fénéon to call them *Illuminations,* an English word for medieval manuscript paintings.[28] In May 1886 Kahn and Fénéon laid out the first *Illumination,* "Après le déluge" (After the flood) in the pages of the fifth issue of *La Vogue.*[29] Five issues later, in June, they had printed them all, the most unconventional and difficult poems French readers had ever seen.

Rimbaud himself had no way of knowing the fate of *Illuminations.* The news that he was alive had no way of reaching Paris. His only correspondents were his mother, his sisters, and business acquaintances, none of whom knew or cared that *La Vogue* existed. Verlaine couldn't be sure whether Rimbaud was dead or in darkest Africa. Actually, that whole summer of 1886, when *La Vogue* was publishing *Illuminations,* he *was* in Africa, in a native village near the Somali coast, trying to get a camel caravan under way to the interior of Ethiopia with 2,000 rifles and 75,000 cartridges for the rebel army of Menelik, the pretender to the throne. Since the day in Stuttgart when he had handed over his poems, Rimbaud had been living what he had dreamed in them, a kaleidoscope of unreal cities and imperial ports of call. He had been a warehouseman in Egypt, a quarry foreman in Cyprus, an ivory hunter in the Ogaden, a coffee-buyer in Arabia. In the wilds of Java he had deserted the Dutch foreign legion, sent out to quell native "uprisings" in the East Indies. In 1877, in Bremen, Germany, he had tried unsuccessfully to join the United States Navy. Gunrunning in Africa was only the last chapter in the same incorrigible life that had begun when he had run away from home so young. "Allons! the road is before us!" Walt Whitman had called. "Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten."[30] Or, as Rimbaud himself put it, "People aren't serious when they're seventeen."[31]

But the poems were spectacular. Each time he abandoned another rule of poetry-making Rimbaud seemed only to have enlarged his control over the resources of language. As each issue of *La Vogue* came out that spring and summer of 1886, it became clear that *Les Illuminations* were more adventurous than anything in French poetry so far—more adventurous even than *A Season in Hell,* which *La Vogue,* for good measure, reprinted in three of its issues for September. Were the *Illuminations* prose poems? None of them had a consistent meter, only a couple were even presented in lines or verses. And what could they be about? All of them were full of extravagant images that seemed to be resolutely discontinuous and incoherent. In a Mallarmé poem, a reader might slowly succeed in extracting a single poetic subject from the entourage of symbols that suggested it, but in these poems of Rimbaud's the subject was "undecidable."[32] You couldn't tell how the images related or what they all symbolized, unless it was the mind of a maniac. "Mouvement" (Motion), the second free verse poem, which came out in the June 21 issue, seemed somehow to be about passengers on a boat. But was it not also about a city in the artificial light of positivism and industry? Was it not also about a single churning consciousness? What must Laforgue have made of it, arriving in Paris for his long vacation on the day the issue hit the bookstalls?

MOTION

The swaying motion on the banks of the river falls
The vortex at the sternpost,
The swiftness of the rail,
The vast passage of the current
Conduct through unimaginable lights

And chemical change
The travellers surrounded by waterspouts of the strath
And of the strom

They are the conquerors of the world
Seeking their personal chemical fortune;
Sports and comforts voyage with them;
They carry the education
Of races, classes and of animals, on this ship
Repose and dizziness
To torrential light
To terrible nights of study.

For from the talk among the apparatus, the blood, the flowers,
the fire, the gems,
From the excited calculations on this fugitive ship,
—One sees, rolling like a dyke beyond the hydraulic-power road,
Monstrous, endlessly illuminated,—their stock of studies;
They driven into harmonic ecstasy,
And the heroism of discovery.

In the most startling atmospheric accidents,
A youthful couple holds itself aloof on the ark,
—Is it primitive shyness that people pardon?—
And sings and stands guard.[33]

Four years before "Motion" was published, Laforgue had had a premonition of it. In July 1882, he had written to Sanda Mahali, "I'm dreaming of a kind of poetry that says nothing, that is made up of bits of dreaming, without coherence. If you want to say, explain or prove something, there's always prose."[34] In 1886 he could see at least in part what Rimbaud was doing. "Never any stanzas, no finish, no rhymes. Everything is in the unheard-of wealth of confession, and the inexhaustible unexpectedness of the always adequate images. In this sense he is the *sole isomer* of Baudelaire."[35] But Laforgue was not Rimbaud. He never did write a poem whose subjects were plural or undecidable. His work remained essentially lyrical and dramatic, reports on his own feelings and those of others. If anything was undecidable in the poems *La Vogue* was now printing next to Rimbaud's, it was the tone of voice or the cast of mind. Laforgue's choice of words, his diction, had always demonstrated a perfect ear for tone. Each *Complainte* had used several different tones, from the exalted and aristocratic to the colloquial and childlike. Switching from one to another, even within a line or phrase, he created a symphony of mutual ironies. The same symphony would appear in all his future poems, and in his *Moralités légendaires* (Moral tales) in prose. The confessional in Rimbaud is single-minded, like that of the old romantics. Laforgue's is always ironic, like that of the Moderns to come.

If Laforgue were ready to learn anything from Rimbaud, it would have to have been how to write poems in a form of verse with no consistent meter. He had yet to write one himself when Rimbaud's first free verse poem, "Marine," appeared in *La Vogue*'s poetry typeface in the issue of May 29, 1886;[36] but there is another influence, earlier and more probable than "Marine." Sometime earlier that month, Laforgue sat in his sumptuous Berlin apartment, spreading out the turgid pages of the May 1 *Revūe des deux mondes* to prepare for his morning reading to the Empress Augusta. There, on page 112, was a review of E. C. Stedman's *Poets of America* by a certain Thérèse Bentzon, who, the *Revue* noted, had first taken aim at Whitman in the same publication back in 1872. She had mellowed only a little since.

> As for the much-touted originality of form, we know how much that is worth. . . . It is easier to attain success by eccentricity than by any other means. . . . It matters little to those who do not make americanism the object of a cult, like someone for whom this self-described citizen of the universe (whose mind is so essentially narrow) the radical, the iconoclastic Walt Whitman is the high priest.

It was more than enough to send Laforgue out after the latest edition he could find of *Leaves of Grass*. In June he began to translate it, starting with eight short poems from the first section, "Inscriptions," which he sent off to Kahn in Paris under the title "Dédicaces." *La Vogue* published them, "Translated from the astonishing American poet Walt Whitman," on the first page of the last issue for June.[37]

Poètes à venir (Poets to come)[38]

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.

Ten pages later, Gustave Kahn's own first free verse poem appeared to keep it company.[39]

Walt Whitman was sixty-eight in 1886, older than any of these Frenchmen could imagine. He had worked as a nurse during the Civil War (when Laforgue was four years old and Rimbaud ten). Soon afterward he had been fired from a clerkship in the Interior Department because the new Secretary, snooping in Whitman's desk, had found a working copy of *Leaves of Grass*, and decided it was obscene. Whitman had originally published his book in Brooklyn in 1855, two years before

Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil,* and had added to it continually since. Obscene or not, it was certainly as candid as anything in Baudelaire. The sections of it called "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" had succeeded in convincing a whole cadre of Americans, from Emerson to Twain, that Whitman's poetry was obscenely heterosexual, and another cadre of Englishmen, from Swinburne to Wilde, that it was liberatingly homosexual. As for Whitman himself, he seems to have been both—or neither. He was as "adhesive" as his phrenologist had told him he was, but like Rimbaud, he could adhere to anybody.

In France, despite Whitman's ardent wish, only two notices of his work had appeared by 1870, both unfavorable and both unknown to him. He did know about a third one, a rave review, but this one now seems to have been secretly concocted by a friend. Whitman loved France, and liberally garnished his poems with misused and misaccented French words; but his love had almost nothing to do with modern French literature. He couldn't understand French any better than he could speak it. As far as Walt was concerned, France was the home of his lifelong political creed—petty-bourgeois democratic radicalism—fondly remembered and imputed to the French since the 1848 revolution of his own youth and the 1789 revolution of his father's. Among his earliest poems is one in praise of the forty-eighters, and he had since produced similar odes to the Convention of 1792 and the Republic of 1871.[40] The only French poets he identified with were Victor Hugo and the forgotten radical songwriter Béranger. Ordinary French people, he thought, were a little more egalitarian, more healthy-minded about sex, and thus a little less "decadent" than the likes of Baudelaire or Wilde.[41] What he never did understand was that in France, one of the definitions of decadent literature was unrhymed free verse poetry, the kind Whitman had all but invented in the 1850s, and had gone on writing as if he owned it.

In fact, the first big foreign response to the poet of democratic solidarity had come from aristocratic England and occupied Ireland. In 1868, admirers like the poet Swinburne had managed to get an edition of *Leaves of Grass* into print there. Abridged and expurgated though it was, it drew a considerable following. Oscar Wilde had visited Whitman in 1882, to recruit him as a precursor of his "Aesthetic" movement. Whitman was now resisting the role, judging the Aesthetes to be mere literary performers, like the French Décadents from whom they took their cue. With or without his blessing, however, the Aesthetes continued to try to catch up with *Leaves of Grass,* writing more and more candidly and colloquially in verse-forms that stretched the already loose rules of English prosody. What they could not do was sing as Whitman did with the wholehearted subjectivity of early romanticism. Whitman did not imagine monologues (like those of Browning and Tennyson) in the voice of the other. Instead he used his own voice, and not only as lyric but also as

lecture or sermon. The combination of high seriousness and colloquial, democratic diction was unprecedented, except in America. Like Yeats, Whitman was not a Modern, but a late-coming romantic who had somehow learned to wring the neck of eloquence. No wonder the French took so long to discover him.

On June 1, 1872, the stodgy *Revue des deux mondes* published what was certainly the worst review Whitman would ever get in France. According to Thérèse Bentzon, the *Revue*'s resident expert on American literature, *Leaves of Grass* was a mess. The long, long line with its varied, natural metric, in which rhyme appeared "as if by chance," was irregular, capricious, barbarous, and ungrammatical. "If you are," she wrote, "imbued with old prejudices against poems in prose, if you take account of the laws of versification, beware of reading what has been compared with too much indulgence to the poetry of the Bible and the rhythmic prose of Plato." Gross in execution, Whitman was equally indecent in theme and in detail. He had no literary culture. His favorite subjects—"egoism and democracy"—were "essentially modern" and equally unsavory. Rough translations Bentzon had made of some of the *Leaves* showed an "excess of energetic bad taste" leading to a confusion of "muscles with genius" and the raw "iconoclasm [and] titanic temperament" of the worst of Hugo or Baudelaire.[42]

Exactly one week later, Emile Blémont, still fascinated by the newer voices in English poetry, began his own series of three articles on Walt Whitman's poetic revolution in his *Renaissance littéraire et artistique.*[43] Here at last was Whitman's French rave. What Bentzon called defects, Blémont simply defined as virtues. If critics made fun of Whitman, "the poets defended him." He was "original," more "American" than the great Poe. His poetry was Wagnerian, his philosophy Hegelian, his aesthetics as revolutionary as Hugo's had once been. A lover of "liberty," "science," "equality," freedom of religion, "the flesh," and "simplicity," Whitman's glory was that he made poems alone in nature, without books. It was his advantage that he had no rhyme or preordained meter. His synthesis of good and evil, self and mass, love and lust was a harbinger of a radical utopia. "Walt Whitman," Blémont apostrophized, "you have addressed to Paris and to France moving words, grand words! You have also addressed yourself to the first comer." Well, he went on, "I am today that first comer, and over the seas I answer to the signal that you have given. . . ."

Whitman had never seen either of these reviews, nor would he have been able to read them if he had; but one person who might well have done so is Rimbaud. Though Rimbaud never, after 1871, acknowledged reading anything but books on science and engineering, we know him as one of the most avid and polymathic readers ever born. In June 1872 he was in a Paris walk-up overlooking the Lycée Saint-Louis playground, seventeen years old and dreaming of being the greatest poet in the world.

Since only two of his poems had ever been published, he was now sending work like "Vowels" to Blémont's *Renaissance,* hoping to break into print in the company of Cros, Mallarmé, and Verlaine. "Don't forget to shit on the *Renaissance,*" he wrote a friend, and indeed, the review only printed one of his poems, "Les Corbeaux" (The crows), holding it back until the September 14 issue, when Rimbaud was long gone.[44] Rimbaud must have made an effort to find and read the poems about which Blémont and Bentzon disagreed so thoroughly. The same 1868 English edition of *Leaves* Blémont and Bentzon had used was being read and talked about when Rimbaud got to England in 1872, and in 1873, when he had secured a British Museum reader's card, learned English thoroughly, and taught it for a living in London. Was that edition—or a less expurgated American one—pressed into Rimbaud's hand by a fellow Décadent, perhaps someone who had heard it said that Whitman was gay? One of the unreal cities Rimbaud names in *Illuminations* is Brooklyn, which, until the Bridge was built, Europe hardly knew except as Whitman's former home town and the subject of one of his greatest poems.[45]

We know one of the places Whitman got his prosodic revolution, his amorphous stanza, and his long poetic line. It was the rolling versicles of the King James version of the Hebrew Bible. We also know that although nineteenth-century France, both Catholic and secular, was largely ignorant of the Bible, Rimbaud wasn't. He was the only major French writer of the time for whom the Bible had been a childhood book and who knew firsthand the rhythms of prophecy.[46] Besides the Law and the Prophets, Rimbaud and Whitman shared a dithyrambic democratic mysticism, and here too they had read the same book: *The People,* by the French historian Michelet. They even shared a forlorn hope of somehow weaning the century of its scientific materialism by wedding it to its contrary, visionary idealism.[47] In any case, out of a whole generation of French poets who eventually threw themselves into free verse, Rimbaud is the only one who left no acknowledgment of the influence of *Leaves of Grass.* Those who happily recognized and used the Whitman legacy included the pioneers Kahn, Krysinska, Moréas, and Maeterlinck; the Modernist galaxy Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Vielé-Griffin, André Gide, Charles Péguy, and Paul Claudel (who learned from both Whitman and Rimbaud); and their successors from Larbaud and Cendrars to St.-John Perse. Besides the French, there were Italians like Gabriele D'Annunzio, Spanish-Americans like José Martí, Germans like Stefan George, English like D. H. Lawrence, and Russian poetic geniuses from Khlebnikov to Mayakovsky. Of all of them, only Emile Verhaeren and Stephen Crane ever claimed they had learned to write free verse before they found out about Walt Whitman.[48]

Laforgue made no such claim. His third Whitman translation, "Une femme m'attend" (A woman waits for me), from the most controversial

section of *Leaves of Grass,* called "Children of Adam," appeared in *La Vogue* for August 2, 1886.[49]

A Woman Waits for Me

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man
  were lacking
Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties,
  delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications of itself.[50]

As he composed a letter to Whitman through an intermediary asking permission to translate the whole of *Leaves of Grass,* Laforgue was reexamining his own poems in its light. Whitman had no irony to speak of, and just one tone of voice; but Laforgue saw no difficulty in using Whitman's open-ended lines of free verse to show off his own mastery of juxtaposed tones and dictions. One of the first to be finished, called "L'Hiver qui vient" (The coming of winter), was sent to Kahn at *La Vogue* in that summer of 1886. Even in translation, the ironies of diction come through:

The Coming of Winter

Sentimental blockade! Cargoes due from the East! . . .
Oh rainfall! Oh, nightfall!
Oh, wind!
Halloween, Christmas, and New Year's
Oh, my smokestacks lost in the drizzle, all
My factory smokestacks!
Where can one sit? The park benches are dripping and wet;
The season is over, I can tell it's true;
The woods are so rusty, the benches so dripping and wet,
And the horns so insistent with their constant halloo! . . .

. . . .

Now is the time when rust invades the masses,
When the rust gnaws into the kilometric spleen
Of telegraph wires on roads where no one passes.[51]

"The Coming of Winter" appeared in *La Vogue* on August 16, Laforgue's twenty-sixth birthday. A famous letter to Kahn went with it, describing his achievement with unconvincing nonchalance: "Roughly what [my next book] will look like is that piece on Winter I sent you. I forget

to rhyme, I forget the number of syllables, I forget to set it in stanzas—the lines themselves begin in the margin just like prose. . . . And I'll never write poetry any different from what I'm writing now."[52] So he resigned his post as reader, proposed marriage to Leah Lee, and returned to Paris in September to become a great writer. In his luggage was the new book, *Fleurs de bonne volonté* (Flowers of good will), a finished sheaf of poems he was now systematically pulling apart and turning into free verse.

Laforgue timed his return to full-time writing to coincide with his own banner year, but in 1886 it was a considerable risk for him to quit his day job. Poetry paid no better then than it does now. *La Vogue* could not give him a paid column. *La Revue indépendante,* which went on the stands a bit before *La Vogue* folded in 1887, picked up some of the slack. It was edited by Édouard Dujardin, who had met Laforgue in Berlin in March 1886, and talked a lot about the relation between writing and music. Laforgue sent him a few more of the poems he was revising from the *Flowers,* plus the last of his *Moral Tales,* which Dujardin promised to turn into a separate book. In December, he crossed the Channel in a winter gale to meet Leah Lee in London; and on New Year's Eve 1886, at Saint Barnabas Church in Addison Road, he married her. Before 1887 was out he and Leah were both dead of tuberculosis. Rimbaud survived him by four years.

Whitman was destined to survive them all. On April 14, 1887, as on other 14ths of April since 1879, Whitman was at Cooper Union, in New York City, giving his bread-and-butter public speech, "The Death of Abraham Lincoln," accompanied as usual by a recitation of "Oh Captain, My Captain!" the only poem he had ever written in traditional form (and just about the only one audiences had ever asked him to recite). At the end of the performance a young American joined the line to meet the old patriot, clutching a paper-covered book. Stuart Merrill had been born in Virginia, but in 1884 Merrill had graduated from the Paris lycée where Mallarmé taught English. Now he was a dropout from Columbia Law School, and an aspiring French poet. *La Vogue* had published one of his first poems, "Flûte," in May 1886, and the book in his hand was the August 2 issue with Laforgue's translation of "A Woman Waits for Me." Awestruck, he offered it to Whitman, who beamed when he learned "they have translated me into French." He asked which poems Laforgue had translated. Merrill told him, "The Children of Adam." With a mischievous look, Whitman replied, "I was sure that a Frenchman would hit on that part."[53] He had in fact given this section a French title to begin with: "Enfans d'Adam."

There is no getting around the fact that the French found Whitman before the Americans did. Pound had a deep quarrel with Walt Whitman's "barbaric yawp."[54] Pound's friend William Carlos Williams, who thought Whitman was the only American poet, didn't discover him until just before the First World War. T. S. Eliot not only didn't think much of Whitman, he once wrote, "I must say frankly that it seems to me you are wasting your time in attempting to relate my work to that of Walt Whitman in this way. . . ."[55] But Eliot did like Laforgue. He discovered him in a chapter of Arthur Symons's book, and mail-ordered his complete works in 1908 during his junior year at Harvard. Eliot's reading of Laforgue that summer changed his style completely, sent him to Paris, and emancipated him from the last traces of Victorian America's genteel style. It may have turned him into a poet. Pound marveled that Eliot was the only writer he met who had "modernized himself on his own;" but if he had tried to do it without Laforgue, it is unlikely he would have been anything other than a professor of philosophy. When he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood rather hastily in 1915, Eliot arranged for the little ceremony to be held in the same Saint Barnabas Church on Addison Road, where he found the names of Jules and Leah Laforgue on the register.

For if Laforgue was not more of a Modern than Rimbaud, or even Whitman, he was at least less of a romantic. After he abandoned *Sob of the Earth,* he embraced, as wholeheartedly as a modern mind can embrace anything, the failure of certainty—even subjective certainty. "Aux armes, citoyens. Il n'y a plus de raison!" as he wrote to Kahn—"To arms, citizens! There is no more Reason." Ambiguity is more than a style, and irony more than an attitude. It is the epistemological principle of Modernism. Emotions superimpose themselves in the minds of poets and succeed each other in the hearts of readers without predictability, logic, or coherence. Modernism discovered that they cannot be rendered by rant, or even monologue, however comic. Probing for that incoherence and evoking it with words has been, since Laforgue, the poet's work.