Republic Pub. Co.
The New Republic 20 Aug. 2001: 29

The Late Letters of Arthur Rimbaud

Michael Theune

From the edge of a Cyprus quarry, from Harar,
sacred city guarded by roving packs of dogs,
from the midst of swarms, from fevers, he composed
the correspondence of a hellish motto:

We go where we do not want to go,
we do what we do not want to do--
then sent those letters home to recount
his misery and beg some relief, some scrap

of redemption: money, family news, or books,
The Pocket Book of Carpenters, engineering
dictionaries, leaflets and handbooks for candle-making
and tunneling, the word-material for schemes nothing

came from--no dwelling and no escape--save distraction.
Then, another journey, another mishap--weather and injury--
another letter and its crave: money, news, another book...
How unlike his early letters, those exquisite battle cries--

O mad ambition! A language must be found--
yelled on his rush to the glamorous and severe, those pitiless,
pure incantations, those manifestos like suicide notes
demanding others' lives--even their pleas were commands:

to his loves he cried, Come back, but leave your other loves behind...
In their frenzy the new language crackled and buzzed, hooked-up,
fully loaded, future-ready...
for any future except the one received,

stunning only in its petty demands, a bad venture
along cruel routes where death approached
without fame's long shadow, where all the meetings
were disappointments, all the excess waste,

where the toll was paid with platitudes of misery--
I have no idea what to do. I can't sleep. Why do we exist?
Send me news--scribbled on a small, hot desk, hunched-over,
then sent--dark and mute, in bundles, heaved upon

and strapped to the back of some slowly dying beast,
loaded on a creaking craft, launched on sharp,
sawing waves, passed through a hundred hands,
smudged and cut, faded to near-anonymous,

slipped silently into the dark mouth of a chute--
to speak its brief prayer, to say its sigh--
This is who I am, and this is what I need--
the perfect poem of a distant, human cry.