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Rimbaud

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# *Introduction*

Arthur Rimbaud, the adolescent who revolutionized French poetry in the nineteenth century, was (even more than Baudelaire, whom he called “a true god”) the creator of French literary modernism. Rimbaud has often been seen as unfathomable and his poetry as inaccessible. This was especially the case during the post-structuralist period (late sixties). Writing in *Tel Quel*, as a spokesman of structuralism (“the revolutionary textual science”), J. L. Baudry identifies in Rimbaud “. . . a scriptural practice which marks the struggle against the domination by meaning and expressivity.” Baudry maintains that those who have interpreted Rimbaud are trying hopelessly to fill “. . . the hollow that this text seems to circumscribe or which is inherent in it. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Like any human individual, Rimbaud was mysterious and contradictory; born with the hope and need to love, he was wet-nursed by Mme Cloutier, the wife of a nail-maker, under primitive conditions; his birth mother was a difficult person, unequal to her sensitive and gifted child. She herself had a painful childhood, losing her mother early and becoming a proxy wife and housekeeper to her father, whom she venerated. She lost her first daughter (who lived only three months), born after two boys, Frédéric and Arthur. Two more children, Vitalie and Isabelle, followed. Abandoned by Captain Frédéric Rimbaud, an army officer, after the birth of Isabelle, Mme Rimbaud was afflicted with a constitutional distrust of

the petite bourgeoisie society around her in Charleville, les Ardennes. She found her children a burden. Devoted though she was to her mother, Isabelle Rimbaud was overheard reproving her, “Quand on n’aime pas les enfants, on ne se marie pas.”/ “If you don’t like children, you shouldn’t marry.”<sup>2</sup> Arthur grew up a defiant teenager, both violent and tender. Even if Rimbaud seems at times more and less than a man, he must be accessible to the insights of what has come to be called, since Charles Mauron, psychocriticism.

My approach in this book is to provide original readings of major texts, with the aim of illuminating Rimbaud from within: what he feared and desired as man and poet in the age of Emperor Louis-Napoleon and (after the bloodbath of the Commune in October 1871) the Third Republic. In pursuing this goal I have at many points called on the resources of psychoanalysis. Each poem is also seen from the aesthetic standpoint. Its formal boundaries, its rhythmic patterns, its thematic resonances, its puzzles and ironies, are viewed in relation to a dominant psychic trope. I have tried to keep my readings open to theory, on the one hand, and to the “*envoûtement*” of a great poet, whose “spell” may sometimes be overpowering, on the other.

ALTHOUGH THE preferred approach to the poetry of Rimbaud continues to be aesthetic, Rimbaud’s *oeuvre* remains a privileged nexus of psychoanalytic themes. What else have critics searched for but depth coherence, how else have they read his poetry except seeking to unveil the works’ multiple enigmas?<sup>3</sup> Rimbaud’s poems are, in Barthes’s formula, “figures of desire,” where psyche and text pursue each other, without one suppressing the other. Every text is invaded by fugitive imagos, like the drowned corpses that appear and disappear beside the drunken boat in “Le Bateau ivre.” And how can we explain the critical fortunes of Rimbaud’s work, rivaling the attention previously lavished on Racine and Pascal, except by the play of transference and countertransference in the continuing dialogue of his readers? We survivors and witnesses of “the Freud wars,” as they have come to be called,<sup>4</sup> can never use psychoanalytic terms naively, reductively, for they too are figures of desire—dangerous in their polyvalence and ambiguity. Yet if they are not “scientific” as Freud vainly dreamed, they are validated by a century and a half of interaction through a network of seekers, who have given us a new and powerful revelation of the body–soul relation and a language to help us describe our findings in many fields. Because psychoanalysis uses language as its primary medium, it has a direct and powerful pertinence to literature.

THIS BOOK raises a fundamental question about Rimbaud, a question that arises in respect to any artist of his stature: what price did Rimbaud pay to realize his *oeuvre*, what is the cost of genius? And first, what are the proper conventions for dealing with genius? How is it possible to use psychoanalytic conventions, invented largely by medical doctors, to penetrate the secrets of a man who was one of the greatest literary figures of his century? Freud, of course, wrote about da Vinci; but then Freud was himself a genius. There is an imperative for each critic to consider the task anew: while this book calls on some of the major theorists of the psychoanalytic movement, I have been at pains to fashion their concepts to the specific case at hand.

As I have read and taught the poems of Rimbaud, I have become aware of a contract underlying each of them: for each poem, Rimbaud paid a price in suffering, in jealousy, in misunderstanding. He paid a price in the extreme difficulty of being Rimbaud. When you reinvent the literature of your time, you do so against the acquired inertia of that literature. It is like the second law of thermodynamics: to each act of poetic genius, there is an equal and opposite negation of that genius. A large part of the price Rimbaud paid for genius lay in the use he made of his own personality during the time he actively practiced *Voyance*, an ascetic discipline that gave rise to his visionary poetics. He was seventeen at the time he began this experiment. We tend to think of these two years as a time of exhibitionistic freedom; yet *Voyance* also involved repression and self-punishment. During Rimbaud's short career, his soaring ambition was constantly abraded by a reality that it was his destiny to change. He was at war with reality in all its conventional forms. During his career as a poet he never entirely abandoned *Voyance*, but allowed it to work itself out within him. It became a new and radical way of being in and knowing the world—an ontology.

And there is something else that cost him dearly: the way art steals from experience. This is one way to read “Angoisse,” with its litany of failures and the burning regret for all he missed in life. The last paragraph spells out his bitter indemnity: wounds, torture, murder, and silence, worst of all.

This is a high price to pay for the privilege of genius and it was compounded by something even more acute: the originality of a poet who anticipated, by more than sixty years, the vision of Martin Heidegger. It is the great poets, Heidegger believed, who renew our history, who act as the guardians of being (*physis*), which, under the pressure of applied science (*techne*), periodically—and the 1870s was such a period—becomes rigid and inflexible. Throughout his entire work, but especially in the *Illumina-*

tions, Rimbaud reveals entities through a poetics that calls forth a world yet to come.<sup>5</sup> Not only was this poetics unfamiliar and suspect to many of his contemporaries; it was a frightening power to Rimbaud himself.

And the cost of genius kept climbing, until Rimbaud had no alternative except to abandon poetry and become the son his mother had always wanted—a merchant, intent on getting rich. He hoped to marry, settle down, become a *rentier*, have a son. Some years after his abandonment of poetry, in Africa, where he was toiling at a thankless job, he met a French traveler who asked him if he were indeed “*that* Rimbaud,” recognized by the decadents as their *chef de file*, their forerunner and model. Rimbaud grimaced and said, “*Je ne pense plus à ça!*” (“I never think about that!”) Had he written poetry? “*Des rinçures.*” (“Dishwater.”) Poetry, it seemed, had brought him nothing but humiliation and degradation.

While Rimbaud’s poetry is intensely private, it is situated in a social context with which he interacted from a young age. The chaos of the historical period into which Rimbaud was born (the end of the Second Empire and the turmoil of the early years of the Third Republic) contributed to his “*désarroi*” or psychic stress. Some critics have tried to make him into “the poet of the Commune.” Some of his poems about that tragic episode are powerful, others strident and immature. He was less the celebrant of the Commune than a frightened seventeen-year-old, marooned in a military barracks in Paris.

Rimbaud had a protected childhood but threw himself recklessly into the world, learning early how to endure hardship and to live among working-class men and women. Where did he really feel at home? From the time of his second escape to Paris (February–March 1871), when he walked all the way back to Charleville through the battle lines of the Franco-Prussian war, home was always his mother, the straight-backed, Jansenistic, blue-eyed Vitalie Veuve Rimbaud. (She began to call herself a widow after Captain Rimbaud’s last departure, in September 1860, even though he was still very much alive, having retired from the army and moved to Dijon.)

THIS BOOK consists of six parts and an appendix. Part I reviews the present state of psychocritical study of Rimbaud. Part II examines three of Rimbaud’s finest poems in regular verse form, “*Les Poètes de sept ans*,” “*Le Bateau ivre*,” and “*Mémoire*.” “*Les Poètes de sept ans*” draws an unforgettable portrait of Rimbaud as a child, needy yet defiant. It is here that I first consider the attribution to Rimbaud (by Yves Bonnefoy) of a Nietzschean

lineage. As the book progresses, the importance of Nietzsche diminishes in contrast to the foreshadowing of Heidegger, which becomes the philosophical focus of the book.

I have aligned “Le Bateau ivre” among those modern literary works (by Kafka, Proust, Borges) motivated by the uncanny.<sup>6</sup> “Mémoire” is read through the splitting of the family triad and the aggrandizing perception of a mother imago who swells to fill the entire Valley of the Meuse.<sup>7</sup>

Part III, chapter 5, begins with a reading of the poetic record (“Le Coeur du pitre”) of what may have been an unwelcome sexual approach in the Babylone barracks of the National Guard during the Commune. Following this, also in chapter 5, is the paroxysmal text, “Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon coeur . . . ?,” probably written during the *Semaine sanglante* (the Bloody Week) that terminated the Commune. Here I use D. W. Winnicott’s way of asking if infantile aggression has been successfully negotiated. In chapter 6, the poem “A Une Raison” is seen as central to Rimbaud’s “social illuminism” and his celebration of a new epoch of rationality, opposed to superstition and obscurantism. The section ends with a study of the *Illuminations* text, of uncertain date, “Démocratie.”

Part IV deals with nine poems, examined through a range of Freudian and post-Freudian concepts, beginning with infantile aggression in “Après le déluge” (chapter 7). This is the poem traditionally placed first in editions of the *Illuminations*. It is followed in chapter 8 by readings of Rimbaud’s two darkest poems: “Honte” and “Angoisse.” Rhythm is the vehicle of cathartic resolution—or *abreaction*—in these poems. In order to illustrate the universality of abreaction as a feature of literary response, the gloom of “Honte” and “Angoisse” is followed by the enthusiasm of the much-loved poem, “Aube.” In all three of these poems, the rhythmic aspect is taken as key to the way they call forth and then “abreact” emotion. Chapter 9 studies the play of fantasy and dream work in “Vies: I, II, III” and the obscure poem “H,” generally recognized as an account of masturbation. Chapter 10 presents the greatest of Rimbaud’s enigma poems, “Conte,” seen side by side with its Baudelairean intertext, “Une Mort héroïque.” After reviewing some of the multifarious readings of this seemingly transparent poem, I offer my own solution to the enigma. The section ends with a study of “Nocturne vulgaire,” a poem of light and dark, that uses the Jack and the Beanstalk story to evoke a child caught between the paternal and maternal imagos. Here, I have resorted to the theory of Melanie Klein, on the ambivalence of infantile desires, to account for the poem’s kaleidoscopic vision. What Klein calls “the paranoid position” is a common infantile anxiety. The fact that “Nocturne

vulgaire” is traditionally viewed as a hashish dream supports this reading, since mind-altering drugs often produce psychotic states.

Part V presents two poems from *Illuminations*. Chapter 12 studies “Génie,” held by many readers to be Rimbaud’s finest single work. I propose a new answer to the disputed question of the Génie’s identity. Chapter 13 is a discussion of “Solde,” a poem that echoes, in a negative register, the high moral tone of “Génie.” In it, Rimbaud cries, “A vendre! / For sale!” and offers all that he most values. He mocks the commercialism of the age and the cheapening of art and love. In nineteenth-century France, you can have it all! If there is “narcissistic gain” in the poem (a possible motive for writing it), this is attained by mocking the venality of “the muck and glory of innumerable generations of idiots” whom he had savaged in the “Lettre du voyant.” Rimbaud stayed true to his original inspiration and in this late work (André Guyaux places it last among the *Illuminations*) proudly affirms that he never wrote for hire.

Part VI contains two chapters. The first of these (chapter 14) reviews the concept of indeterminacy in the *Illuminations*, as highlighted by Marjorie Perloff in her 1981 book.<sup>8</sup> Perloff finds that Rimbaud “no longer believes in the efficacy of the symbol” (65) and denies that his poem “Villes II” has any stable meaning. My own analysis of the poem uncovers a jubilant “plaisir du texte / textual pleasure” that intersects with a Heideggerean way of seeing “entities”—Rimbaud’s ontology.

Finally, my longest chapter reconsiders *Une Saison en enfer* as a working through by sublimation of Rimbaud’s conflicted life—his failed cohabitation with Verlaine, the “folly” of *Voyance*, and the burden of his parents and his past, notably his indoctrination as a Catholic child. Out of this comes a hard-won reconciliation.

An appendix, seen from the perspective of my visit to Marseilles and L’Hôpital de la Conception in 1949 (the hospital has been largely rebuilt since that time), recounts the long agony of Rimbaud’s illness and death. I see Isabelle Rimbaud, later the fabricator of distortions and downright lies about her brother, as the tutelary spirit or *bodhisattva* who accompanied him during this time; and I try, in a frankly novelistic excursus, to reconstruct Rimbaud’s deathbed confession to the hospital chaplain, Canon A. Chaulier.<sup>9</sup>

### *A Note on the Texts*

Page numbers to works cited are given in the text after the first endnoted occurrence.

While writing this book I have kept in mind André Guyaux's seminal work on the *Illuminations*.<sup>10</sup> Guyaux shows that there are vestiges of order in the manuscripts, although Rimbaud's aim of making a fully collated collection was never realized. The poems remain "fragments" and are therefore susceptible to the thematic presentation I use here. All texts are from the reedited version of the *Oeuvres* (2000) by Suzanne Bernard and André Guyaux.

All translations from the poetry of Rimbaud are my own. Excerpts from theoretical and critical works are given in English. Most translations from the French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

