



PROJECT MUSE®

Rimbaud

Oxenhandler, Neal

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Oxenhandler, Neal.

Rimbaud: The Cost of Genius.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/27810](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27810).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27810>

# 6

## *Synchronicity*

“*A Une Raison*”; “*Démocratie*”

### *1. “A Une Raison”*

“*A Une Raison / To A Reason*” is one of the *Illuminations*, probably an early one. It stages Rimbaud’s effort to present his political vision. From a broader perspective it represents a poetic statement of the Continental rationalism that reigned from Descartes to Leibnitz. Rationalism proclaims that reason is the unique path to knowledge and right action. The Continental rationalists (in opposition to the British empiricists—Locke, Berkeley, Hume) believed that reason penetrates directly to the essence of things. In “*A Une Raison*” Rimbaud borrows the rationalistic aspirations of various splinter groups of the Commune, for example, the “Hébertists,” a radical fringe movement:

The coming of the Hébertists was the advent of science and of reason in its most energetic and popular form, the form which alone could assure a definitive triumph. The science of the Girondins, of the doctrinaires, was cloistered in a lettered oligarchy; was drawn from the boudoir and exhibited in the market place. The Hébertists addressed themselves to the people and said, “Science is your conquest, science belongs to you, come and take it.” (Mason, 13, n18)

## A Une Raison

Un coup de ton doigt sur le tambour décharge tous les sons et  
commence la nouvelle harmonie.

Un pas de toi, c'est la levée des nouveaux hommes et leur en-marche.

Ta tête se détourne,—le nouvel amour!

Ta tête se retourne,—le nouvel amour!

"Change nos lots, crible les fléaux, à commencer par le temps," te  
chantent ces enfants. "Elève n'importe où la substance de nos  
fortunes et de nos vœux" on t'en prie.

Arrivée de toujours, qui t'en iras partout.

A tap of your finger on the drum releases all sounds and begins the new  
harmony.

You take one step, and it's the rising of the new men and their forward  
march.

Your head turns to one side,—new love!

Your head turns to the other,—new love!

The children sing: "Change our fate, wipe out the plagues, beginning  
with time." They beg you, "Increase anywhere the substance of our  
fortunes and of our prayers."

Always arriving, you depart everywhere.

Reason is a drummer boy, like those twelve-year-old orphans ("ces enfants") who drummed the *pas de charge* to send the armies of Napoleon I into battle. There is an intimacy between the poet and Reason, addressed as "tu." This intimacy becomes mimicry: each gesture orchestrates events, producing synchronicity or "la nouvelle harmonie."<sup>1</sup> Reason (embodied in the poet) possesses total power over humanity "en marche" toward progress:

Ta tête se détourne,—le nouvel amour!<sup>2</sup>

Ta tête se retourne,—le nouvel amour!

This poem is the drumbeat of rationalism in the service of right action, a use of cognition that attracted Rimbaud, despite the deep currents of irrationality that stirred so powerfully in him and inspired his greatest poetry.

The rationality of this poem is primarily political, since the proposed use of reason leads to "des nouveaux hommes / new men" and their "nou-

vel amour / new love." Reason is the faculty in us that connects us to an order of things in the universe, which itself can be called rational. Mind and world coincide; thought and event become synchronous. Reason, the poem tells us, guides us to action in the service of mankind.

BUT DOES "A Une Raison" truly offer us a world? This poem was written in 1872 or '73, around the time of the disillusionment of *Une Saison en enfer*. Rimbaud still wants to believe that a new kind of love will emerge from the chaos of events. But he reduces it to a mere reflex rather than a powerfully motivated act: "Ta tête se détourne: le nouvel amour." Even the use of a favorite metaphor for health and happiness—music—fails to inflate this poem, to lift it above the ground and set it free. There is a certain poignancy in the singing children, who ask the impossible; one might even hear the children of Africa, asking for the end of typhus and malaria ("crible les fléaux") or for a chance, any chance at all to have a decent life: "Elève n'importe où la substance de nos fortunes et de nos vœux. . . ."

The poem calls for a hero, awaited by children, by lovers, by suffering mankind. In the hero's presence we all act as one, our words and gestures are synchronized, together we march out of *always* into *everywhere*. The psychic procedure here tilts between embodied intelligence, where the thinking agent is embedded in a culture, and depersonalization, where the relation of mind to world is given in the dualism of a strict rational science. It is the latter that prevails in this truncated poem.

One can't help but feel that the violence and brutality associated with the Commune destroyed the vibrant political energy Rimbaud had once possessed. He needs to distance himself from the Commune, even while he celebrates it. "A Une Raison" does not have the passionate character of earlier poems written to celebrate the Commune or to decry the terrible massacre that ended it; instead it is chillingly impersonal. It is foreshortened, bitten off like an expletive.

The last line ("Arrivée de toujours, qui t'en iras partout") makes a grandiose prediction. André Guyaux explains: "The last sentence insists on the atemporality and the universality of that Reason: It has always been necessary, and it will propagate itself *everywhere*, in all places" (*Oeuvres*, 540). Yet this ubiquitous Reason distances the speaker from the here and now of his engagement. Rationalism is a mode of thinking that discounts our worldly embodiment, substituting a mechanical model for the plasticity of our bodily and cultural reality. In "A Une Raison" the poet's speech is far more mechanical than it is informal or free.

Along with a dose of enthusiasm, we get a sense here of the disenchantment involved in Rimbaud's career. His early successes were accompanied by denunciations both of himself and of his poetry. His checkered rise to fame coincided with a chaotic period in French history. He hoped that the rise of "Reason" would bring not only social progress but his own vindication as a man. Instead, he was assaulted in the Babylone barracks and a savage massacre ended the Commune. *La Semaine sanglante* (Week of Blood), in which more than fifteen thousand individuals were executed,<sup>3</sup> must have seemed like the metaphor for his own dreams and desires. Only a few of his poems were in print; the publication of *Une Saison en enfer* passed unnoticed. Finally, there was the tragedy of Verlaine and his imprisonment. "A Une Raison" seems to mark—inauspiciously—the midpoint in the rise and fall of Rimbaud's career.

## *II. Critic or Accomplice? "Démocratie"*

'Le drapeau va au paysage immonde, et notre patois étouffe le tambour.

'Aux centres nous alimenterons la plus cynique prostitution. Nous massacrerons les révoltes logiques.

'Aux pays poivrés et détrempés!—au service des plus monstrueuses exploitations industrielles ou militaires.

'Au revoir ici, n'importe où. Conscrits du bon vouloir, nous aurons la philosophie féroce; ignorants pour la science, roués pour le confort; la crevaison pour le monde qui va. C'est la vraie marche. En avant, route!'

"The flag moves through a filthy landscape, and our patois drowns out the drum.

"In the interior, we'll feed the most cynical whoring. We'll massacre all reasonable revolts.

"To the sodden lands of spices!—in service to the most monstrous industrial or military exploitation.

"Farewell to here, anywhere else will do. We willing conscripts have a ferocious philosophy; ignorant of science, used to comfort; and let the world explode. This is the true way forward. Double time, march!"

Antoine Adam suggests that Rimbaud wrote this poem after May 1876, when he enlisted in the Dutch infantry, embarked for Java in July, and

then deserted, returning to France. Bernard and Guyaux, however, are reluctant to believe that Rimbaud was still writing poetry at that time. No manuscript of the poem exists, adding to the difficulty of interpretation. In his critical edition of the *Illuminations*, André Guyaux gives a rhetorical analysis of this poem that sheds light on the effect of "mise en abyme," produced by the quotation marks and the ambiguity arising from the fact that poet and fictive speaker are both distinct and the same.<sup>4</sup> Guyaux seems to be saying that what is, on one level, a "political pamphlet" is, on another, a cynical eulogy, in fact a critique, of the exploitation of Third World countries by "democratic" armies. Rimbaud may well be indicting the invasion and colonization of Algeria by Napoleon III.

Kristin Ross adds a useful comment in her study of Rimbaud and the Paris Commune:

The term "démocratie" undergoes a profound modification during the Second Empire when it is appropriated by the imperial regime in opposition to the bourgeois regime—the emperor claiming to have given back to the people its sovereignty. . . . Republicans and Socialists hesitated to use such a tainted word: Blanqui, for example, in 1852 writes, "Qu'est-ce qu'un démocrate, je vous prie? C'est un mot vague, banal, sans acception précise, un mot en caoutchouc." ("What is a democrat, I ask you? It is a vague and banal word, one without any precise meaning, a rubber word.") Rimbaud plays with the ideological slippage of the term when he entitles his parody of colonial discourse "Democracy."<sup>5</sup>

Reading this poem today, in the context of contemporary events, I find that it makes perfect sense. It satirizes the motives of democracies that put down "les révoltes logiques," ravage the resources of Third World countries (" . . . au service des plus monstrueuses exploitations industrielles ou militaires"), all in the name of maintaining "le confort" of their way of life. Its ambiguity perfectly expresses the uneasy conscience of ordinary citizens, who help support the "Conscrits du bon vouloir," sent on missions that are ill defined by politicians "ignorants pour la science."

Rimbaud heard the term "democracy" bandied about in the barracks on the Rue de Babylone, but he had confronted the issue of inequality long before that. He had his first lessons in "democracy" at the age of seven, when he played with the neighborhood children, all from poor families, not up to the standard of Mme Rimbaud, who caught her son engaging in sexual play ("des pitiés immondes / in dirty games") with an eight-year-old ("La petite brutale / The little brute"). She never wore panties and he

bit her ass. Babylone brought a brutality of a different order; there, he was the one with the bloody backside.

In spite of many disillusionments, Rimbaud maintained his political liberalism even in Africa, where he learned the native languages, mingled with the people, and was an exponent of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The anger and defiance that he'd learned in his childhood were alive and well until the very end. He was never a trader in slaves, but the blacks who staffed his caravans were indentured men rented out by avaricious chiefs. He is reputed to have treated them well, but he must have known (and bitterly resented) his complicity in the caravanning that was the principal business of the white traders in Abyssinia. His failed attempt to reward his beloved servant, Djami, when he lay dying in the Hôpital de la Conception in Marseilles was a final irony in this short life (Rimbaud died at the age of thirty-seven), made up of disappointment and contradiction. Djami himself had already died by the time the inheritance reached his family.