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Rimbaud

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## *Sublimation in Une Saison en enfer*

To take up again the Rimbaud/Verlaine saga, let us recall the date of early April 1872, when Rimbaud, full of anger, wrote “Honte / Shame.” Not long after that, Verlaine called him back to Paris where he spent a summer of solitary drunkenness, “made to feel,” Petitfils writes, “that he was in quarantine, like some plague victim” (146). He wrote very little. The summer was stifling. Deciding he’d had enough, he hand-carried a letter to Verlaine, saying he was leaving for Antwerp. He met Verlaine on the way, going out to fetch a doctor for his wife who was ill. Verlaine blurted out: “I’ll go with you!” They conferred hastily. It would be Brussels, not Antwerp. To fund this escapade, Verlaine would tell his mother that he was threatened with arrest for having been a Communard; she would give him money.<sup>1</sup>

Mathilde, Verlaine’s wife, followed him to Brussels; there were horrible scenes and a police report that called Rimbaud “a monster.” Eventually, Verlaine chose freedom from a job he hated as well as from his wife and child; on September 7, 1872 the two poets sailed for England.

*UNE SAISON EN ENFER* is dated April–August 1873. It was begun in Roche in April, entitled at that point “Livre païen / Pagan Book” or “Livre nègre / Negro Book.” Rimbaud was deeply invested in his literary

career and he wrote Delahaye, à propos this work in progress, "Mon sort dépend de ce livre. / My fate depends on this book."

*Une Saison* is not a seamless work, but it has proven impossible to date and identify the various segments. A sketch by Verlaine titled "Comment se fit la *Saison en enfer* / How *Season in Hell* was written" shows Rimbaud in a London public house working on the manuscript. This is a second stage in the book's development. What had begun in Roche as a series of "histoires atroces / atrocious stories" became in "Mauvais Sang" a frantic search for identity that seems discontinuous with later segments.

In London the couple's existence, never idyllic, became more fraught and it was almost impossible for either to work. There were violent quarrels, drunken rages, often they came to blows. Terrified of legal proceedings undertaken by his wife, Verlaine was hysterical. Mathilde Mauté was asking for separation on ten grounds, including acts of violence perpetrated against her; also desertion, and homosexuality. Rimbaud was deeply involved in all this. Petitfils writes:

At this time, therefore, Rimbaud was partly aware at least that the experiment [to make Verlaine "un fils du soleil"] had failed. It was a failure of which he would be the principal victim, for he would not go unscathed by that legal business: in accusing Verlaine of having run away with a young man, Mathilde was aiming at him, and her lawyers would unmask him; the authorities would probably intervene, since he was still a minor. Inevitably, one day or another, his mother would learn of the unspeakable insinuations being leveled at him. On top of everything else, it would be the ruin of his literary career. (162)

The strain became unbearable and on July 3, 1873, Verlaine abandoned London and fled back to Brussels, hoping that his wife would join him. But in fact he would never see her again. It was Rimbaud, penniless and abandoned, who made the trip to Brussels. It was there, despite the presence of Verlaine's mother, that the relationship degenerated into a violent argument, provoked by Rimbaud's stubborn insistence on returning to Paris. The drunken Verlaine, who had bought a revolver to commit suicide, fired two shots at his companion, wounding Arthur in the left wrist.<sup>2</sup> Out on the street Verlaine threatened Rimbaud again and was arrested by a policeman. Rimbaud was briefly hospitalized, Verlaine was booked on a charge of assault and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. After those decisive events Rimbaud returned to Roche and threw himself with new energy into what now became *Une Saison en enfer*. His brush with death

is the crux around which the entire work implicitly turns. This incident, not part of the original plan, accounts for the sense of catastrophe that hangs over the work like a black cloud. And there is Rimbaud's own guilt for Verlaine's situation—his insistence on returning to Paris, then the call for help that provoked his friend's arrest.

The act of violence was the climax of a relationship that dominated Rimbaud's life for two years. His finest poetry was written with Verlaine serving as both inspiration and mentor.<sup>3</sup> Rimbaud reached sexual maturity in this relationship, which brought him both intense rewards and a commensurate sense of degradation. It is no wonder, then, that his whole life, past, present and future, is distilled into the work that he wrote while still under the emotional influence of that season in hell. André Guyaux finds the work "grandiloquent"; Paul Valéry belittled the work's style: "It consists only of direct statements, ejaculations, intensity."<sup>4</sup> The strongest negative judgment of *Une Saison* is that of Leo Bersani: "The *Saison* is a desperate and confused surrender to the inevitability of both personal and cultural history. The very repudiation of the past is an act which *gives* a significant past to Rimbaud" (emphasis in original). He adds, "But in *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud's repudiations of his past are made in a language which undermines the effectiveness of the repudiations themselves" (*Astyanax*, 238).

In my view, Rimbaud is not "repudiating" his past in *Une Saison*, nor is he trying to justify it; he is too honest for both those forms of self-delusion. Rather, he is restaging that past in imagination, trying, first, to understand its deeper meaning, and second, recast it in a form that will reconcile him with some version of moral rectitude and allow self-acceptance. Although the work may at moments appear chaotic, it is nonetheless powerfully directed toward a cathartic outcome.

Given the various negative evaluations of the book, I want to pose two questions: What is the form of *Une Saison en enfer*, a book that has too often been seen as chaotic and confused? And then, what psychic process is at work here, giving—indeed *mandating*—the form that the work possesses?

IN HIS STUDY of the *Saison*, Yves Bonnefoy claims that the poet is writing only for himself: "He must find himself, collect himself, proffer to his will a pact for years to come, and someone who writes under such severe constraints does not consider how he will be read" (111). Certainly Rimbaud is writing out of his own deep distress and a corrosive guilt; but it

is impossible to ignore the fact that he had become a pariah, despised by the Parisian literary world as principal cause of the breakup of Verlaine's marriage and imprisonment. Already in London the exiled communards sniggered at their relationship. After Verlaine's departure, Rimbaud went to visit Jules Andrieu, a man he admired, and was roughly thrown out of the house in front of witnesses (Petitfils, 174).

When he returned to Paris, hoping to win recognition for *Une Saison*, he found that he was far better known for his adventures with Verlaine than for his poetry. People refused to associate with him, and, some months later in July 1873, when Germain Nouveau went to London with Rimbaud, Nouveau's friends expressed consternation and warned him of disastrous consequences.

Rimbaud is writing for himself, but this apologia is also directed at the society he affected to despise because it had rejected him. Rimbaud wants to have mastery over his life, but instead he has encountered his own nullity, the fact that he almost died—and that one day he will die. For the first time in his life Rimbaud, at age nineteen, must face the inevitability of death.<sup>5</sup>

In *Une Saison* he is asking himself why everything in his life has gone so disastrously wrong and what he can do to redeem himself in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world. He is both confronting his experience and sublimating it; that is, in the words of Hans Loewald, reconciling "on a higher level of organization, the early magic of thought, gesture, word, image emotion, fantasy." He is recasting as a cultural (and hence socially acceptable) artifact the instinctual drives that empowered him during those wild and intoxicating years with Verlaine (Loewald, 80–81).

The months spent writing *Une Saison en enfer* represent a period during which Rimbaud undertook his own psychotherapy; and it is in this work that we find the rudiments of a Rimbaldian psychology.<sup>6</sup> The path he charts for himself is not based on "a psychotechnology for self improvement" (Guignon, 220), but rather in the search for a new life, based on commitment to a radically different future that recuperates the mistakes and failures of the past. Not only does he accept sublimation and repression ("pas une main d'ami / no friendly hand"), but he can honestly accept his homosexuality, bringing to bear a clear-sighted lucidity that condemns him to a lonely existence, outside the social norms of his time and place.

SUBLIMATION in the *Saison* occurs under the guise of fiction, but it is never given the substitutive value that sublimation attains in Proust. Leo

Bersani writes of the redemptive role of art in Proust, where the art we prize requires a devaluation of the very life out of which it arises. Proust represents an extreme case of the depreciation of life against art. Bersani summarizes Proust's aesthetic, "Experience destroys; art restores" (14).

While Bersani sees Proustian sublimation as repression and loss, Loewald makes the case that sublimation is "a separation that is not a separation but a form of union, a reconciliation of polarities" (23). The cultural product or symbol (the transitional object) redeems the trauma of the separation of infant and mother. In other words, Proust's vast work becomes the symbol in which he restores "lost time," i.e., the time of the child's separation from his mother. Sublimation, therefore, is not tragic because through it separation is magically healed. Bersani argues that the notion of redemption (i.e., healing, restoring) through art is excessive in the case of Proust and also in Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer*.

IN *UNE SAISON* ellipsis and understatement replace representation. Instead of the inflating Proustian sublime, Rimbaud's tone is ironical and deflating. In sharply controlled sentences, Rimbaud details the three major failures of his life: failure of the *Voyance* experiment; failure of his effort "to reinvent love"; and finally, related to the second point, the failure of his relationship with Verlaine. After Brussels he returns to Roche, shuts himself up in the attic, and attempts to write his way out of this triple impasse. The "way out" is sublimation; and it takes the form of the rhetorical figure known as chiasmus, based on the Greek letter X, chi. Chiasmus is a dynamic arrangement of two sets of terms that press against each other and seek to cross or change places. It can be represented by the formula ABBA. The *Saison* involves a struggle to formulate the problem of happiness in this trope where good A—A' subdues evil BB'. The problem to be resolved is the *transformation* of youthful happiness across degradation and back into moral worth.

*UNE SAISON* is composed of a preface followed by eight parts. There is an internal logic and the progressive unfolding of an argument. Rimbaud is using his considerable poetic and intellectual gifts to argue his case before a hostile public. He argues that he is not a reprobate, a demon, a *rejeton* who should be cast into the bonfire. He needs to convince us that, though he has passed through hell, he should not be condemned to stay there. *Sublimation* is implied by the fact that he feels the need to plead his case. While this goes on, there is a back current of desublimation,

in which he expresses his anger, frustration, and aggression. It comes out most openly in "Délires I, Vierge folle," at the midpoint of the work, where he punishes Verlaine in a blistering parody, the product of rage too long contained.

The work begins with a series of metonymic terms for lost childhood happiness, ending with the wine metaphor: "Jadis, si je me souviens bien, ma vie était un festin où s'ouvraient tous les coeurs, où tous les vins coulaient." To sit Beauty on his lap like a child continues the metonymic chain, but because the speaker is no longer a child, no longer participant in the feast, he feels bitterness and anger:

Un soir, j'ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux.—Et je l'ai trouvée amère.—  
Et je l'ai injuriée.  
Je me suis armé contre la justice.  
Je me suis enfui. O sorcières, ô misère, ô haine, c'est à vous que mon  
trésor a été confié!

One evening, I sat Beauty on my knees.—But I found her bitter.—and I  
cursed her.  
I took arms against justice.  
I fled. O witches, O poverty, O hate, it's to you that I have confided my  
treasure!

Lawler argues that *Les Fleurs du mal* was Rimbaud's immediate model. The parallel with Baudelaire is apparent; but it is important to insist that the Christianity of Baudelaire was conventional; that is, Baudelaire believed in God, he considered himself a sinner,<sup>7</sup> while Rimbaud had undergone the influence of persuasive anticlerical thinkers such as Helvetius, d'Holbach, Michelet, and Renan. Moreover, as a homosexual, Rimbaud felt himself excluded from the Christian communion by the doctrine of natural law.<sup>8</sup>

His childhood memories are laced with ceremonies, once embraced, which now he sees as priestcraft and superstition. And he'll remember whispered confessions to a grim profile behind the grill of the confessional, parodied in his avowal to witches, to poverty, and to hatred. In Michelet's book, *La Sorcière*, the witch becomes symbolic of all who are rejected by the social order. Those lost souls are, as Rimbaud knows himself to be, pariahs. Yet he has swung the censer to honor the Blessed Sacrament; he has prayed Novenas and knelt before the statue of the Blessed Virgin; he has fasted and huddled on bruised knees while the celebrant walks up and

down the aisle sprinkling holy water and blessing the parishioners. On Ash Wednesday he has felt the priest's thumb scrape his forehead with ashes and intone: "Memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem revertetis / Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you shall return." When you have lived all this for your first fifteen years of life, it is in the proteins of your brain, it is engraved on your soul forever.

THIS PREFACE to the poem proper breaks neatly in two. The first section runs from "Jadis" to "folie." It is a succinct account of the joys of childhood and the horrors of his adolescent revolt after he found Beauty to be bitter. The second section begins with his brush with death—the two shots from Verlaine's revolver: "Or, tout dernièrement m'étant trouvé sur le point de faire le dernier *couac!* / But, quite recently, on the verge of giving my last *croak!*" Here the tone is ironic, self-mocking. In that instant, during the struggle in the hotel room, the two shots from Verlaine's revolver bring the nineteen-year-old Rimbaud face to face with his own death. At this point Rimbaud avoids the realization that death is constant and all-pervasive; instead, he turns back and tries vainly to reinvent his childhood joys: "Or, tout dernièrement . . . j'a songé à rechercher la clef du festin ancien, où je reprendrais peut-être appétit." He finds that the key to lost happiness is just what the Church says it is—*charity*. "Cette inspiration prouve que j'ai rêvé! / That inspiration proves that I've been dreaming!" When you have luxuriated in mortal sin, when you have denied God's love, when you have betrayed your baptismal vows, there's no going back. Satan judges him irrevocably lost: "Tu restera hyène . . . / You'll remain a hyena. . . ."

Rimbaud is afflicted with some of his mother's Jansenism. He doesn't think he can regain God's grace; or maybe he doesn't want to. Baudelaire, who had known a mother's love, could live in the Church.<sup>9</sup> Rimbaud, rejected by his mother, alienated by his very sexuality, could not.

### *"Mauvais sang"*

"Mauvais sang," the first of the six sections, asks the question: "Who am I?" He is proud to claim a Gallic heritage:

Les Gaulois étaient les écorcheurs de bêtes, les brûleurs d'herbes les plus ineptes de leur temps.

D'eux j'ai: l'idolâtrie et l'amour du sacrilège;—oh! tous les vices, colère,  
luxure,—magnifique, la luxure;—surtout mensonge et paresse.

The Gauls were flayers of beasts, and the most inept grass burners of  
their time.

From them I get: idolatry and love of sacrilege;—oh! all the vices,  
anger, lust,—magnificent, lust;—but especially deceit and sloth.

Here he seems to parade his sexuality (luxure), to take pride in it; but there is a move toward sublimation nonetheless. He gives it a genetic origin: he can't deny his heritage! Back there in Paris, when he behaved in uncouth fashion, when people saw him as a loutish peasant, he was simply acknowledging his origins.<sup>10</sup>

There follows a long passage of denials. He lists all the things he is not: not an aristocrat but a primitive. Uncivilized, perhaps the lowest laborer in a Crusader caravan, not even a Christian but a superstitious changeling dancing a witches' Sabbath.

The antithesis to the above is a paean to science: "Oh! la science!" Here is the avowal of Rimbaud's commitment to "social illuminism," the belief that modern science (the substitute religion of Michelet and Quinet) will unlock the wonders of the universe and bring eventual freedom to all mankind. "La science, la nouvelle noblesse! Le progrès . . . / Science, the new nobility! Progress . . ." But what does this have to do with the sins for which he is on trial? Implicit in the paean to science is the understanding that, in a truly modern society, homosexuality will be acceptable, the invert will not be exposed and humiliated.

After "science" he reasserts his paganism:

Le sang païen revient! L'Esprit est proche, pourquoi Christ ne m'aide-t-il  
pas, en donnant à mon âme noblesse et liberté. Hélas! l'Évangile a passé!  
l'Évangile! l'Évangile!

My pagan blood returns! The Spirit is near, Why doesn't Christ help me,  
by giving my soul nobility and freedom. Alas! the Gospel has gone by!  
the Gospel! the Gospel!

After he left Verlaine, penitent and converted in a Belgian prison, Rimbaud himself thought of conversion. On the back of the drafts of *Une Saison* are scenes from the Gospel of Saint John. These show the influence of Renan's *Vie de Jésus* and are parodic and ironical. He wavers, now invoking the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, now reverting to sarcasm and

sacrilege. His comment on those Gospel sketches is: “*De profundis, Domine, suis-je bête! / De profundis, Lord, how stupid I am!*”<sup>11</sup> Also in “*Mauvais Sang*” he writes sarcastically: “Je ne me crois pas embarqué pour une noce avec Jésus-Christ pour beau-père / I don’t consider myself embarked for a wedding with Jesus Christ as father-in-law.” D. W. Winnicott speaks of a patient who experienced an “unpredictable compulsion to blaspheme against the Holy Ghost.” Rimbaud’s blasphemy is a common reaction to early religious indoctrination; but he resembles Winnicott’s patient in another respect: he suffers “from an environmental pattern in which the inadequacy was of the nature of a weak [or absent] father and a strong mother” (Winnicott, 236). Even when we take into account Rimbaud’s real problems with nineteenth-century French Catholicism, we need to remember that “the inverted Oedipus complex” (strong mother, absent father) is everywhere in *Une Saison en enfer*.

RIMBAUD’S UNCLE was called “L’Africain,” because he had spent many years as a soldier in Africa before returning to assume control of the family farm. Whatever Rimbaud’s relationship may have been with this taciturn and withdrawn man, the vision of the dark continent as a possible escape hatch always intrigued him:

Oui, j’ai les yeux fermés à votre lumière. Je suis une bête, un nègre. Mais je puis être sauvé. Vous êtes de faux nègres, vous maniaques, féroces, avarés. . . Le plus malin est de quitter ce continent où la folie rôde pour pouvoir d’otages ces misérables. J’entre au vrai royaume des enfants de Cham.

Yes, my eyes are shut to your light. I’m a beast, a negro. But I can be saved. You are fake negroes, you maniacs, killers, usurers. . . My best bet is to leave this continent where madness lurks to provide these wretches with hostages. I’m entering the true kingdom of the children of Ham.

Throughout “*Mauvais Sang*” the speaker imagines himself in roles that set him apart and make him dramatically different from his family, his countrymen—the “vous” to whom the poem is addressed.

This monologue, Rimbaud’s “examen de conscience,” is driven by a furious dialectic. Though many steps in the dialectic are elided, he arrives at an exculpatory (if only provisional) conclusion:

La raison m'est née. Le monde est bon. Je bénirai la vie. J'aimerai mes frères. Ce ne sont plus des promesses d'enfance. Ni l'espoir d'échapper à la vieillesse et à la mort. Dieu fait ma force, et je loue Dieu.

Reason is born in me. The world is good. I will bless life. I'll love my brothers. These are no longer a child's promises. Nor the hope of escaping old age and death. God gives me strength and I praise God.

But this is all phony, the same "false conversion" he attributes to Verlaine. The dialectic drives on and he finds himself playing cowboy and Indian with the Devil. The next section is "Nuit de l'enfer" ("Night of hell"). Here *Une Saison en enfer* reaches a feverish crescendo of conflicting emotions.

### "Nuit de l'enfer"

There are several views of "une fameuse gorgée de poison / a famous mouthful of poison" in the first line of "Nuit de l'enfer." But the "mouthful of poison" can only mean one thing—baptism. A born and bred Catholic like Rimbaud understands that baptism entitles you to heaven; if rejected, baptism makes you a prime candidate for hell. And (though he had "entrevu la conversion au bien et au bonheur . . . des millions de créatures charmantes, un suave concert spirituel . . . / half-seen the conversion to goodness and happiness . . . millions of charming creatures, an exquisite spiritual concert . . .") it is given that he will choose hell. Why? Out of pride. "*Orgueil*." The word is isolated; it blocks all the charming images of salvation ("Ah! l'enfance, l'herbe, la pluie, le lac sur les pierres, le clair de lune quand le clocher sonnait douze . . . / Ah! childhood, grass, the rain, the lake over the pebbles, the moonlight when the bell-tower struck midnight . . ."). But the devil is in the bell-tower. "Nuit de l'enfer" involves a subtle form of sublimation. He hides his sense of guilt through mockery. He is an Inquisitor conducting his own *auto-da-fé*. Making accomplices of his readers, he invites them to enjoy the torments of his "sosie," his double, a not entirely fictitious character:

Ah! remonter à la vie! Jeter les yeux sur nos difformités. Et ce poison, ce baiser mille fois maudit! Ma faiblesse, la cruauté du monde! Mon Dieu, pitié, cachez-moi, je me tiens trop mal!—Je suis caché et je ne le suis pas.

C'est le feu qui se relève avec son damné.

Ah! to rise again to life! To cast eyes upon our deformities. And that poison, that kiss a thousand times accursed! My weakness, the cruelty of the world! Dear God, have pity, hide me, I'm losing control!—I'm hidden and in plain sight.

It is the fire that rises with its damned one.

The poet is ostensibly telling us what it feels like to be damned; but his emotional template for damnation is that horrible moment, back in the hotel room, when Verlaine fired two shots from his revolver. Rimbaud writes of the emotions he felt when Verlaine backed him up against the wall, pointed the revolver at him, and shouted, “Je t'apprendrai à vouloir partir! / I'll teach you to try and leave!”

SINCE EVERYTHING in *Une Saison en enfer* is antithetical to something else, we should ask here: what is the antithesis to death and damnation? Here we encounter the poem's central chiasmus.

In his searching essay on sublimation, Bersani refers to the “attachment of the ego to its own moral worth” (*Redemption*, 38). But what are the criteria for “moral worth”? It is clear that the implicit values of nineteenth-century bourgeois morality form the background against which Rimbaud enacts the drama of his “trial” for moral turpitude and general unworthiness. But these are not his values; for in rejecting the Church, Rimbaud also rejected the “substance ontology” that he had learned as a child. Nothing is given a priori and genius is no excuse in this court, whoever the masked judge may be—Satan or God himself.

Try as he will—by dialectic, casuistry, role playing—he can't convince the “judge” of his innocence. And again, who is the judge? It is the communards in London who snickered at the two lovers, it is Mathilde Mauté (Verlaine's wife) and her lawyers, it is (God forbid!) his mother.<sup>12</sup> But first and foremost, it is Rimbaud himself. This is the moment when Rimbaud begins to understand that moral worth does not preexist, and that is why it eludes him. *He must define his own moral worth*. If Rimbaud starts at A—Salvation and then, as he crosses the space of the chiasmus, encounters B, B'—death and damnation, how can he be sure that, if he seeks farther along this perilous path, he will find A' or moral worth? To open and successfully close the chiasmus is to risk everything on a roll of the dice.

Chiasmus is dynamic: the two inner terms (B, B') press outward against the enclosing terms (A, A') that press inward with only a slightly superior force. Or, to put this in Freudian terms, the chiasmus enacts the

return of the repressed. What he has repressed (anger, fear, violence) [B, B'] must be held in check by the countervailing force of sublimation [A, A']. Ultimately, of course, there must be a spiritual process that neutralizes BB' and provides stasis, rest, peace, self-acceptance, reconciliation.

### "*Délires I*"

"*Délires I/Delirium I*," "Vierge folle/Foolish virgin," stages Verlaine's plea of nonresponsibility. He tells the Lord that he couldn't help himself, that he was induced to sin by the wiles of "L'Epoux infernal / the infernal Husband." We are in a courtroom, where a weeping pederast is casting blame on his juvenile sexual partner:

—Lui était presque un enfant. . . . Ses délicatesses mystérieuses m'avaient séduite. J'ai oublié tout mon devoir humain pour le suivre. Quelle vie! La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde. Je vais où il va, il le faut. Et souvent il s'emporte contre moi, *moi, la pauvre âme*. Le Démon!—C'est un Démon, vous savez, *ce n'est pas un homme*.

—He was still a child. . . . His mysterious delicate ways seduced me. I neglected my every human duty to follow him. What a life! Real life is somewhere else. We are not in the world. I go where he goes, I must. And often he flies into a rage at *me, poor me*. The Demon! He's a Demon, you know, *he's not a man*. (emphasis in original)

Rimbaud expertly mixes comedy and pathos, and in the process, as Lawler remarks, parodies the very style of Verlaine in such books as *Poèmes saturniens* and *Romances sans paroles*.

How can you blame either of us? Rimbaud implies, it was all such a foolish mistake. My grandiosity, his obsequious devotion—neither of us is to be taken seriously! We were caught up in a delirium brought on by absinthe and subversive books. The intense relationship between the two, with all its ecstasy and madness, is reduced to the stand-up comedy of a drag queen. There is not just comedy here but pathos. We have only to remember Rimbaud's letter from London begging Verlaine to return:

Reviens, reviens, cher ami, seul ami, reviens. Je te jure que je serai bon. Si j'étais maussade avec toi, c'est une plaisanterie où je me suis entêté, je m'en repens plus qu'on ne peut dire. Reviens, ce sera bien oublié. Quel

malheur que tu aies cru à cette plaisanterie. Voilà deux jours que je ne cesse de pleurer . . .

Come back, come back, dear friend, only friend, come back. I swear that I'll be good. If I was sulky with you, it was a stubborn joke, I'm more sorry than I can say. Come back, forget it. What a shame you took that joke seriously. I've been crying for two days . . . (Pléiade, 170)

This was an authentic passion, expressed also in Rimbaud's poetry, in the complex alembics of "Dévotion" as Lawler has skillfully revealed or in the tenderness of "Vagabonds." Yet here, at the heart of his great confessional poem, that passion is parodied and given its *coup de grâce*. Rimbaud never again took Verlaine seriously, though, throughout the years that followed, "le pauvre Lelian" (anagram of Paul Verlaine) continued to publish and praise the younger "poète maudit."<sup>13</sup>

### *"Délires II"*

"Délires II," "Alchimie du verbe / Alchemy of the word" is another matter. Here Rimbaud gives a magical mystery tour of his experiment in *Voyance*. There are also lyrics of casual beauty, "vieilleries poétiques / poetic antiquities"—inn signboards, church Latin, fairy tales, old operas, naïve rhymes—evoking times past or eternity. They do not involve sublimation so we shall pass over them.

### *"L'Impossible"*

The next section, "L'Impossible," opens with recall of a past joy that he was too inexperienced to recognize:

Ah! cette vie de mon enfance, la grande route par tous les temps, surnaturellement, plus désintéressé que le meilleur des mendiants, fier de n'avoir ni pays, ni amis, quelle sottise c'était.—Et je m'en aperçois seulement!

Ah! that life of my childhood, the highway in all weather, supernaturally sober, more disinterested than the best of beggars, proud to have neither country nor friends, what madness it was.—And I realize it only now!

Then he looks at his present state, the company he keeps—they are all people he despises! “J’ai eu raison dans tous mes dédains: puisque je m’évade! / I was right in all my disdain: since I’m escaping!” Guided by intuition, by feeling alone, he takes the cue to cut and run:

Hier encore, je soupirais: “Ciel! sommes-nous assez de damnés ici-bas! Moi j’ai tant de temps déjà dans leur troupe! Je les connais tous. Nous nous reconnaissons toujours; nous nous dégoûtons. La charité nous est inconnue. Mais nous sommes polis; nos relations avec le monde sont très-convenables.”

Only yesterday, I was sighing: “Heavens! there are enough of us damned souls down here! Myself I’ve spent too much time in their troop! I know them all. We always recognize each other: we disgust one another. Charity is unknown to us. But we’re polite; our relations with other people are very-correct.”

He’s dividing society into us and them—the poets and artists vs. the *bons bourgeois*. All that can be said for his “troop” is that they have good manners. Polite, correct, but without charity. But who am I kidding, he seems to say; the believers, the churchgoers aren’t any better. Can it be that “moral worth” is a chimera, out of reach for all of us? Once again Rimbaud is driven to situate himself, to find the place in the moral universe where he belongs; but, no matter how the monologue twists and turns, he can never rid himself of a sense of guilt.<sup>14</sup> Enough of that! He’s talking like a moralist, one of those *raisonneurs* of the eighteenth century.

“Mais je m’aperçois que mon esprit dort. / But I realize that my mind is asleep.” And this admission provides a bridge to truth:

S’il était bien éveillé toujours à partir de ce moment nous serions bientôt à la vérité, qui peut-être nous entoure avec ses anges pleurant! . . . —S’il avait été éveillé jusqu’à ce moment-ci, c’est que je n’aurais pas cédé aux instincts délétères, à une époque immémoriale! . . . —S’il avait toujours été bien éveillé, je voguerais en pleine sagesse! . . .

O pureté! pureté!

C’est cette minute d’éveil qui m’a donné la vision de la pureté!—Par l’esprit on va à Dieu!

Déchirante infortune!

If it were awake then from that moment on, we would be in the truth,

that perhaps surrounds us with its weeping angels! . . . —If it had been awake up to this very minute, I would not have given in to deleterious instincts in a time now past! . . . —If it had always been awake, I would sail in full wisdom! . . .

O purity! purity!

It's this minute of awareness which has given me the vision of purity!—By the spirit one goes to God!

Agonizing misfortune!

Rimbaud is momentarily entrapped by what Valéry called sarcastically his “jaculations”—not simply cries or exclamations but bursts of pious fervor. Here the syntax wraps around itself; he gives up the disguise that sublimation entails and confronts his weakness and moral flaws head on. His defensive irony fails, he speaks the truth when he says: “Agonizing misfortune!”

I can't help but agree with Claudel, who saw *Une Saison* as “an incomparable document,” ennobled by its very defects, as in the stuttering passage cited above.

For a Catholic, “purity” is a sexual reference; and here we are reminded of how bitterly Rimbaud resented his sexual orientation and blamed it for the misadventures of his life. Lawler sees the “impossible” of the title as a reference to the blockage of reason. I see this “Déchirante infortune” as the cry of a nineteenth-century homosexual who laments the impossibility of ever experiencing a socially acceptable form of love. What had begun as a reasoned critique of Western culture (at worst a brash undertaking for a nineteen-year-old) becomes a pathetic expression of remorse. There is a brusque emotional reversal and a consequent desublimation that subverts the original intent of the section. That is to say, he had attacked the womanizers, rakes, and pimps; but now it is his own lack of purity that is at issue. He can never be a blameless spirit.

### “L'Éclair”

“Le travail humain! C'est l'explosion qui éclaire mon abîme de temps en temps.”

(“Human work! It's the explosion that lights up my abyss from time to time.”)

Critic Mario Matucci suggests that Rimbaud sees work as expiation for his almost twenty years of wasted life. Everybody keeps shouting “Work!

work!" In fact, it is Madame Rimbaud who has been preaching work to him for as long as he can remember. Sitting in his attic in Roche writing *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud heard repeatedly from his mother that he should learn a trade, be useful; that he should take part in the planting and the harvesting of the crops. Under maternal pressure he considers the merits of work as opposed to scribbling all day long.

There is violence, impatience, self-contradiction in this section made of stops and starts: "Ah! vite, vite un peu; là-bas, par delà la nuit, ces récompenses futures, éternelles . . . les échappons-nous? . . ." ("Ah! quick, quick; over there, beyond the night, those future, eternal rewards . . . will we miss out on them?").

"La mother" has often chastised him about the danger of losing his immortal soul. "Qu'y puis-je? / What can I do?" he answers her: "Je connais le travail; et la science est trop lente / I know work; and science is too slow." In a tormented dialogue with his super-ego, Rimbaud produces one phony excuse after another:

Ma vie est usée. Allons! feignons, fainéantons, ô pitié! Et nous existerons en nous amusant, en rêvant amours monstres et univers fantastiques, en nous plaignant et en querellant les apparences du monde, saltimbanque, mendiant, artiste, bandit, prêtre! Sur mon lit d'hôpital, l'odeur de l'encens m'est revenue si puissante; gardien des aromates sacrés, confesseur, martyr . . .

My life is used up. Come! pretend, let's be idle, O pity! And we'll exist by having fun, in dreaming monstrous loves, in complaining and arguing about fantastic worlds, clown, beggar, artist, bandit, priest! On my hospital bed, the odor of incense, so overpowering, came back to me; guardian of the sacred ointments, confessor, martyr . . .

Suddenly, out of nowhere, comes a memory of l'Hôpital Saint-Jean in Brussels. Regression to infancy at a time of sickness is a common experience; but why should he recall the Catholic Church, which he has renounced and now despises? The Church that, furthermore, was associated with his pious, bigoted mother. Clearly, his years as a young acolyte in the Church have left their mark. Here, the sacramental (incense) is a screen memory for a period of infancy when he had known, if only briefly, his mother's love. He is lying on a hospital bed, cared for by attentive sisters who are responsive to his every need. The memory restores a deeply buried past. Harsh and controlling figure that she was, Vitalie Cuif

Rimbaud did not leave only that negative impression on her son's character. There was some trace of tenderness, some suppressed memory of infancy that surfaces momentarily, although Arthur himself is not fully aware of it. Here is the true "Éclair," the lightning flash out of his past, an expression of love that he can never avow. In fact he *disavows* it, by identifying with the revolutionary Ruel, who smashed the vase containing the "aromates sacrés / sacred ointments," used in the consecration of French kings at Saint-Denis. Ruel hanged himself a year later. A few years after *Une Saison en enfer* was published (in August 1873), unconsciously mimicking Ruel, Rimbaud immolated his genius.

For this brief moment ("l'éclair") he is unconsciously reconciled to his mother; he accepts her love, he makes amends (by the detour of a screen memory) for all the years wasted in revolt and disobedience to her: "Alors,—oh! chère pauvre âme, l'éternité serait-elle pas perdue pour nous!" ("Then,—oh! poor dear soul, wouldn't eternity be saved for us!"). This last line is both question (am I condemned?) and assertion/denial (I am/am not condemned). Rimbaud keeps all his options open.

### *"Matin"*

"Matin" echoes "Jadis" at the beginning of the *Saison*, where life was a "festin où s'ouvraient tous les cœurs, où tous les vins coulaient." Here he writes: "N'eus-je pas *une fois* une jeunesse aimable, héroïque, fabuleuse, à écrire sur des feuilles d'or—trop de chance! / Did I not once have a lovely youth, heroic, fabulous, to be written on leaves of gold—too much luck!" Those first years of happiness are the one thing he knows for sure, the one thing he can wager on. And by the way, Pascal is present throughout *Une Saison*. He is one of Rimbaud's interlocutors and one of his judges. Time and again, the poet seems to wager, now for eternity, now against it. While we began with *Les Fleurs du mal* as the principal intertext for *Une Saison en enfer*, it becomes clear, as the work evolves, that Rimbaud wields with increasing skill a kind of Pascalian ratiocination.

WHAT THEN accounts for his present misery? "Par quel crime, par quelle erreur, ai-je mérité ma faiblesse actuelle? / By what crime, by what error, have I merited my present weakness?" Here sublimation is drawn thin, as Rimbaud opens his heart to the jury in this act of summation. He says in effect: "You who pity slaughtered animals and dying men, explain my

fall and my sleep. I can't explain it any more than the beggar with his continual *Our Fathers* and *Hail Marys*." "*Je ne sais plus parler. / I have forgotten how to speak.*"

And on this confession he ends: "Pourtant, aujourd'hui, je crois avoir fini la relation de mon enfer. C'était bien l'enfer; l'ancien, celui dont le fils de l'homme ouvrit les portes / Yet today, I've finished the account of my hell. It was really hell; the ancient one, the one whose gates were opened by the son of man." Then comes an evocation of the three wise men, who followed the star of Bethlehem, seen as allegories of heart, soul, mind. He asks:

Quand irons-nous, par delà les grèves et les monts, saluer la naissance du travail nouveau, la sagesse nouvelle, la fuite des tyrans et des démons, la fin de la superstition, adorer—les premiers!—Noël sur la terre!

When shall we go, beyond the shores and the mountains, to salute the birth of the new work, the new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, and be the first to worship Christmas on earth!

With this transliteration of the Nativity Gospel, Rimbaud sublimates his hatred of the Catholic Church. He allegorizes Christianity. We are all beggars who cry out for redemption, "Christmas on earth!" I was in hell, the same hell that Christ harrowed. Now I wait for my rebirth. I await: "*Le chant des cieux, la marche des peuples! Esclaves, ne maudissons pas la vie.*" ("Heaven's song, the marching of peoples! Slaves, let us not curse life!").

Here again we have the crossing of terms: Christmas versus the cursing of life, which equals hell on earth. Waiting, working, watching; all this keeps the argument in suspense, yet emphasizes an *affirmation* of life by use of a negative ("Slaves, let us not curse life!"). Is this a sign of failure, to have come so far, through a forest of dialectic, only to arrive at this negative affirmation? I think not; and one has to admire the poetic and ratiocinative genius that can pose his personal enigma within the centuries-old enigma of Christianity.

We understand why Paul Claudel took Rimbaud as model for his spirituality. Here, as he establishes a final order among his memories of past events and future anticipations, Rimbaud squarely faces his own abjection and, like Job on his bed of pain, refuses to curse his hard lot. Instead, he celebrates it in some of the most memorable poetry ever written. He will continue on through the high desert solitude of Abyssinia, still searching

for that horizon Heidegger speaks of. In a certain sense Rimbaud rose from his fallen state to become a new man. Here Rimbaud parts company with Baudelaire, who posited the fallen nature of humankind as the chief tenet of his theology. Considering this courageous reversal of perspective, Claudel wrote of *Une Saison en enfer* that it was “tout entière pénétrée par l’âme / entirely penetrated by soul.”<sup>15</sup>

“Matin” is a final masterstroke of sublimation/transformation. By the psychic medicine of poetry, Rimbaud has exorcised his demons—his infantile sexual drives, his bitterness toward Verlaine, his rage against his mother and her church. He has renewed himself and is prepared to face the hostility of Paris and whatever hard luck the future holds. Now, at last, he can affirm life instead of cursing it. This is sublimation in the most positive meaning of the term. He has achieved A’—faith in his own deepest self. This is possible because he has recognized all that is negative, selfish, grasping. It is possible now to accept his own life experience, what he was, what he is, what he will become. He comes very close to the “ego-ideal” that he will celebrate a year or two later in “Génie.”

Yet is it necessary to say that—no matter how much he sublimates—he can never be the conventional “bon bourgeois”? Everything that is best in his writing subverts that cliché. From “Le Bateau ivre” to “Aube,” from “Barbare” to “Nocturne vulgaire,” it is the breakthrough from fantasy to primary process that accounts for the stunning brilliance and mystery of his poems.

### *“L’automne déjà!”*

“L’automne déjà! / Autumn already!”—So begins “Adieu,” the last section, recalling, by its adverb of temporality, “Jadis” at the start of the poem. He is resolute, his face turned toward “la clarté divine / the divine light” and the task ahead. The future is London, “la cité énorme au ciel taché de feu et de boue / the enormous city its sky stained by fire and mud.” He joins in spirit with the ordinary people of this teeming city: “Ah! les haillons pourris, le pain trempé de pluie, l’ivresse, les mille amours qui m’ont crucifié! / Ah! the rotten rags, the rain-soaked bread, the drunkenness, the thousand loves that have crucified me!” He sees himself as he was, penniless, sick, alone:

Je me revois la peau rongée par la boue et la peste, des vers plein les  
cheveux et les aisselles et encore de plus gros vers dans le coeur, étendu

parmi les inconnus sans âge, sans sentiment. . . . J'aurais pu y mourir. . .  
L'affreuse évocation! J'exècre la misère.

I see myself skin pitted by mud and pestilence, worms in my hair and  
armpits and still bigger worms in my heart, stretched out among strang-  
ers without age, without feeling . . . I might have died there . . . Horrible  
thought! I detest poverty.

But he must be on guard against bourgeois temptations: "Et je redoute  
l'hiver parce que c'est la saison du confort! / And I dread winter because  
it's the season of comfort!"<sup>16</sup>

Then comes a sustained passage in which he effortlessly summarizes  
all his visions, all his magnificent creations—everything that he must  
renounce:

—Quelquefois je vois au ciel des plages sans fin couvertes de blanches  
nations en joie. Un grand vaisseau d'or, au-dessus de moi, agite ses pavil-  
lons multicolores sous les brises du matin.

—Sometimes I see in the sky endless beaches covered with joyful white  
nations. A great golden ship, up above me, waves its multicolored pen-  
nants in the morning breezes.

This nautical image is not the drunken boat of "Bateau ivre," but the tri-  
umphant vessel of his *oeuvre*, his poetic works moving triumphantly into  
the future:

J'ai créé toutes les fêtes, tous les triomphes, tous les drames. J'ai essayé  
d'inventer de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux astres, de nouvelles chairs, de  
nouvelles langues. J'ai cru acquérir des pouvoirs surnaturels. Eh bien! je  
dois enterrer mon imagination et mes souvenirs! Une belle gloire d'artiste  
et de conteur emportée!

I have created all festivals, all triumphs, all dramas. I tried to invent  
new flowers, new stars, and flesh, new speech. I believed I had acquired  
supernatural powers. Well then! I have to bury my imagination and my  
memories! A great glory as an artist and storyteller swept away!

Now, in a return to his roots, he dismisses *Voyance* and other forms of  
grandiosity; he realizes that the cost of poetry (his kind of poetry) is too  
great; it requires withdrawal from the world. He resolves:

Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre!  
Paysan!

I! I who called myself shaman or angel, exempt from all morality, I'm restored to the earth, with a duty to seek, and rugged reality to embrace!  
Peasant!

Briefly he looks back with regret:

Suis-je trompé? la charité serait-elle soeur de la mort pour moi? Enfin, je demanderai pardon pour m'être nourri de mensonge. Et allons.

Mais pas une main amie! et où puiser le secours?

Am I mistaken? would charity be the sister of death for me? Anyway, I'll beg pardon for having subsisted on lies. Now let's go.

But not one friendly hand! and where find help?

What exactly did he mean by “charity”? The Church defines “charity” as love of God and other human beings—but no matter. He told himself lies about that and many other matters that he resolutely sets behind him. Here, in asking forgiveness, he explicitly makes reparation for nourishing himself with lies.

The hour (of judgment? of action?) that he faces now is harsh, but the sounds of hell (“grincements de dents, sifflements de feu / grinding of teeth, whistling of fire”) abate. Even his disgusting memories grow dim. And no more regrets! “Il faut être absolument moderne. / We must be absolutely modern.” (Live in the present, face whatever comes down the pike: “tenir le pas gagné . . . / keep holding the advantage . . .”): “Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la justice est le plaisir de Dieu seul” (“Spiritual war is as brutal as human combat; but the vision of justice is God's pleasure alone”).

Rimbaud elides many steps in the argument as he pushes toward his conclusion. The secret of chiasmus is that the outer terms contain and restrain the inner terms that, so to speak, “dwell” within them. This explains the psychic wholeness attained at the end of *Une Saison*, where he asks for “une ardente patience / a *burning* patience” in order to go forth and confront the “splendides villes / the splendid cities.” As Heidegger says: “The poetic is the basic capacity for human dwelling. . . . Man dwells in that he builds . . .” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 226, 225).

Rimbaud concludes, "il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps / I will be allowed to possess truth in one soul and one body." Writing the *Saison* in the isolation of the farmhouse in Roche, he invests his "burning patience" in the creation of a work that will allow him, at this critical juncture in his life, to possess the truth of who and what he is. Armed with this knowledge, he can return to the teeming cities that draw him into the magnetic field of their myriad lives.

After the release of this spiritual battle, where he has exorcised the demon, sublimated his terror and aggression, affirmed his belief in mankind, he opens his heart to tenderness and his body to the surge of vigor that he feels as he marches toward the splendid cities of his future. Alone, no friendly hand, scornful of the delusive passions of "ces couples menteurs . . . / these lying couples . . .," he affirms:—et il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps / —and I shall be allowed to possess truth in one soul and one body." The achievement of *Une Saison en enfer* is this act of self-acceptance. Finished the war between mind and the senses, finished those tormented doubts about the validity of love as he has known it. Finished self-hatred and self-disgust. Finished by the trope of chiasmus, where the positive includes and subdues its negation.

Rimbaud has been forced by events to lie, to deceive, to repress or disguise his passions, but all that is past. Truth is somewhere in the future but now, as a whole man, without compromise or anxiety, integrated and free, he can find that truth; he will know it when he perceives it, and, whatever it is, he will make it his own. To paraphrase the last sentence of Hans Loewald's book: *Sublimation is both a mourning of lost original oneness and a celebration of oneness regained.*<sup>17</sup>