Rimbaud, the anarchic demiurge

by John Simon

On the legacy of Arthur Rimbaud.

Arthur Rimbaud was the begetter of modern poetry. For it to come to pass, a Rimbaud was required. It did not have to be A. Rimbaud; it could have been a Rimbaud of some other name, in some other place. But in the event, it was this Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, born in Charleville in the Ardennes on October 20, 1854, and dead on November 10, 1891—in pain and wretchedness, with one leg and all his hopes amputated—that is the fountainhead of modern poetry as we know it. (There is also, to some extent, Stéphane Mallarmé, about whom later.) And he did it all before he fully grew up, after which he rejected literature, his own and everyone else’s, forever.

Between the ages of sixteen and somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, Rimbaud conducted all the experiments, made all the discoveries, raised all the questions modern poetry needed to accost. We are still stumbling along in his deep footprints in this year of 1991, when you cannot walk a few blocks in New York City without seeing the name of Mozart, another Wunderkind and anniversary boy, plastered all over: Mozart this and Mozart that. But where is Rimbaud in evidence—in books or bookstore windows, magazines or newspapers, lecture halls or cabarets—where?

In France, as might be expected, the situation is somewhat better. Thus the April 4-10 issue of Le Nouvel Observateur was a special Rimbaud number, containing several informative articles, critiques, inquiries, and even a quiz and a news story from Japan, where Rimbaud was helping advertise Suntory whiskey. One of the most useful pieces was the last one, a selection of quotations from nine distinguished and concerned writers looking back at Rimbaud—or, in the case of Mallarmé, across, for the two were contemporaries. The quotations are suggestive, although short and, in most cases, undated, which makes it harder to assess their literary-historical significance. I shall, however, use them as points of departure and reference in a further survey of Rimbaud’s achievement and influence, both from my own and other observers’ vantage points.
The best way to start, however, is with another item in the Observateur, a mini-interview given by Michel Butor, “le maître du nouveau roman.” Butor tells how, already as a lycéen, he was inspired by Rimbaud first to write “spontaneous poetry,” later also “constructed texts.” “My verbal alchemy [alchimie du verbe, Rimbaud’s famous phrase],” Butor says, “stems from the Illuminations. Thanks to it, I wrote what I would never have dared to write before.”

Rimbaud has, indeed, been an influence not only on subsequent poets, but also—and this is extremely rare, perhaps unique—on prose writers. His contribution was to go from formal verse, often in alexandrines, to newer and looser forms of rhymed verse, thence to vers libre, which was an innovation even though, in America, Walt Whitman had published Leaves of Grass, his version of free verse, as early as 1855. But though samples of this had been published in French by the 1870s, Whitman did not make himself felt as an influence in France till after Rimbaud. Finally, Rimbaud moved on to his most important achievement, the poems in prose of Les Illuminations, putting the prose poem as an art form indelibly on the map.

To be sure, the prose poem as a conscious poetic genre had existed since Baudelaire’s Le Spleen de Paris, published posthumously in 1869; as an unconscious manifestation, it dates back to the works of Louis (Aloysius) Bertrand and Maurice de Guérin, from circa 1830 and 1835, respectively. But what Rimbaud produced, most likely between 1873 and 1875, was something very idiosyncratic and different even from Baudelaire’s well-behaved little poetic anecdotes and sketches in their only slightly heightened prose. For —need I remind you?—Rimbaud set out to realize a bold literary and existential program that he formulated in two famous letters of May 1871—at age sixteen! According to it, the poet has to turn himself into a voyant (seer) by “a long, immense, and systematic dérèglement [derailing, disarray] of all the senses,” whereby, at enormous personal cost, he becomes “the great invalid [malade], the great criminal, the great damned soul [maudit]—and the supreme Scientist.”

Why scientist? Because, delving into the unknown, the poet brings back what he has seen there, formed or unformed, as he found it. The goal would be nothing less than a universal language of soul to soul. The program included the liberation of women, too, into poet-seers; and poetry would no longer merely translate action into rhythms: it would be out ahead. (Italics Rimbaud’s.) While awaiting this, we should demand from the poet the new in ideas and forms, but not the way the Romantics understood this. As Rimbaud said in Une Saison en enfer, “One must be absolutely modern.”
The last and most mature works of Rimbaud’s, then, are the prose poems of *Les Illuminations*, a title that did not mean for him mystical illuminations (he had gotten over that stage), but, as in English (he was in England then), medieval illuminated initials, or simply colored plates. Just how did Rimbaud work this, his last and best *alchimie du verbe*, to use the term he coined in his autobiographical and transitional work, *Une Saison en enfer*? The easiest way to convey it is by transcribing one of the shortest and loveliest poems from the *Illuminations*, “Départ” (Departure).

Assez vu. La vision s’est rencontrée à tous  
les airs.  
Assez eu. Rumeurs des villes, le soir,  
et au soleil, et toujours.  
Assez connu. Les arrêts de la vie.  
—O Rumeurs et Visions!  
Départ dans l’affection et le bruit neufs.

I translate:

> Seen enough. The vision met itself in all airs.  
> Had enough. Rustle of cities, in the evening,  
in the sunlight, and always.  
> Known enough. The stoppages [decrees?]  
of life.—O Rustlings and Visions!  
> Departure amid new affection and noise.

This, by the way, is one of the tamer and easier pieces of the collection. Its *versets* (as the French call lines that are longer than single verses normally are, but shorter than prose paragraphs) are brief enough for *vers libre* rather than prose poetry. But we can see here clearly some of the Rimbaldian strategies and innovations. First, a very stripped-down language, a sort of telegraphese. (The opposite—baroque—can also be found in Rimbaud.) Second, a prevailing ambiguity because words in a vague, even cryptic, context do not have single indisputable meanings. Thus the *airs* of line one can mean (1) weather, breeze, atmosphere; (2) tune, melody; (3) facial expression, demeanor. In this particular instance (1) seems likeliest, but even here one cannot be sure; besides, Rimbaud may have wanted to play on two, or all three, meanings. In line three, *arrêts* is a word with four principal meanings: (1) stops, stoppages; (2) decrees, judgments; (3) seizures, impoundings; (4) arrests. Given the rather nebulous context, any one may be right, though, again, (1) seems likeliest.[1]

Clearly, this is a poem that creates more mood and music than meaning. Still, as an example of the things people project onto Rimbaud, consider Robert Greer Cohn in his *The Poetry of Rimbaud* (Princeton, 1973): “The title has the transparent sound of ar, echoed in the ‘airs’ … It is like the airy space over railroad tracks as one is about to go away,” etc., all of which is pure hogwash. Wallace Fowlie (*Rimbaud’s Illuminations*, London, 1953) thinks that the poem is “the announcement of the new mystical experience, the ‘affection’ … that of pure being, and the ‘noise’ … the wings of the new power of movement.” Unsupported and arbitrary daydreaming. Far more sensible is the view
of H. de Bouillane de Lacoste (Rimbaud et le problème des Illuminations, Paris, 1949) that the poem “in its laconism, announces a change of existence on which the poet congratulates himself.” The late scholar Suzanne Bernard merely observes that the poem seems to mark Rimbaud’s trip to London; this time, let me add, not with the tiresome old lover Verlaine, but with a new friend—perhaps platonic, perhaps not—the painter-poet Germain Nouveau.

But for all the “reality” in the poem, there is also a great deal of deliberate obscurity. What is this vision that has met up with itself in all airs? And just what would make an inveterate city dweller say he has had enough of the murmur of cities? Why, in fact, is sound described as a possession? Although the poem seems deceptively simple, Suzanne Bernard is quite right to insist (in her splendid doctoral thesis, Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu’à nos jours, Paris, 1959) that this poem, for all its relative coherence and conformity, is still much closer to the rest of the collection than to academic poetry: “The concentration, the terse formulations of ‘Départ,’ its sudden cessation with two accented monosyllables [most unusual in French], all this displays Rimbaud’s trademark—and what stylist would dare write ‘Assez eu,’ would dare bracket ‘l’affection et le bruit neufs?’”

In the same year (1959) that Mme Bernard submitted her thesis to the Sorbonne, I handed in my much more modest one to Harvard’s Department of Comparative Literature. Mine, The Prose Poem as Genre in Nineteenth-Century European Literature, was a mere typewritten pages, and was not published until 1987, by Garland Publishing, in facsimile. Mme Bernard’s Royal Octavo pages in ten-point Long Primer (not to mention the proliferating footnotes in seven-point Minion) were published immediately and deservedly. About “Départ,” she doesn’t have much to say, yet this piece, to return to the Observateur, is clearly what inspired Butor. In the Illuminations, he explains, “it is not the end that repeats, but the beginning: rhyme is reversed…. This repetition, combined with a perfect typographical alignment, produces a strong visual impression. Sentences are thus concatenated, like variations. Like Schoenberg. … In Passing Time, to frame the text and facilitate its reading, I introduced a system of versets. I divided every sentence into several paragraphs that begin the same way, like Rimbaud…. One can even say that Mobile was one single giant sentence…. The composition of Mobile, then, is inspired by the prosody of Illuminations.”

But about that initial rhyme: it does not occur anywhere in the forty-odd pieces of the Illuminations except in “Départ.” Even anaphora, the repetition of an opening word or words, is rare, occurring only in three or four other poems here. Yet this device so impressed Butor that he perceived it as a major component of Rimbaud’s style. But, then, such is Rimbaud’s spell that even his less frequent strategies can deeply affect a sensitive reader. Certainly those -u rhymes are striking; I’d like to think that they inspired Mallarmé’s “A la nue accablante tu.” And, as Mme Bernard notes, “Assez eu” is very much out of the ordinary.

Most immediately striking about “Départ,” though, is that it contains no imagery. There is no simile, no personification, no metaphor even, unless “La vision s’est rencontrée à tous les airs” is one. But it must be grasped that vision can mean “my faculty of sight” or sight in some general
sense, involving all the people of the city or, just as readily, some manner of hallucination (but what, exactly?), or it can be Rimbaud’s visionary capacity as such. It is safest to paraphrase the opening sentence as “I have had enough of seeing: there has been so much of it that the air has become stale from all my looking, that my own eyes are looking back at me from every point.” This would constitute hyperbole; but is it really what Rimbaud meant? There is not enough context to corroborate or negate it.

Next, could “rumeurs de la ville” have a relatively positive value, as in the English “babbling” of both brooks and people content at their outdoor badinage, the latter being the metropolitan equivalent of country sounds: in the evening, at sidewalk tables; in the sunshine, as the citizenry rattles about; and then that casual afterthought, “et toujours,” and always, anytime. (But certainly not Fowlie’s poeticizing “forever,” which, in any case, would presuppose “à jamais” in the original.) This could then lead into “les arrêts de la vie”—the dawdlings of life, the evenings of getting drunk, the noons when one is sacked out. And then the capitalized “O Rumeurs et Visions!”—perhaps glimpses of a new life elsewhere with a deeper meaning.

And the new affection and sounds? Well, yes, it could be Germain Nouveau, a new companion with whom Rimbaud was uncomplicatedly comfortable, rather than sadomasochistically embroiled, as with Verlaine. Thus far in the poem sounds were rumeurs; now they are bruits, something more assertive and virile—a more masculine relationship perhaps. And affection of any kind might well be a new thing for Arthur, whose strongest emotion hitherto had been his hatred for his strict, miserly, fanatically pious mother, a hypocrite and worldly-success-craving peasant, Rimbaud’s curse and—muse. For without the need to escape Vitalie Cuif Rimbaud, as his father did when Arthur was still a small child, and without the equally compelling urge to flee the oppressively bourgeois atmosphere of Charleville, Rimbaud might still conceivably have become a poet, but not this poet.

Now to an early voice in the Observateur’s collage. In 1912, writing the introduction to an edition of Rimbaud’s poems, Paul Claudel, who was converted to Christianity by his reading of Rimbaud, calls him “Un mystique à l’état sauvage,” a mystic in the savage (primitive) state. For most of the Catholic literati—Claudel, Mauriac, Rivière, Daniel-Rops—Rimbaud’s deathbed conversion to Christianity was a fact, on the authority of Isabelle, who nursed her big brother Arthur through his final phase. But Isabelle was, like her mother, a peasant, as Rimbaud, though he once called himself so, was not. And Isabelle, pious like her mother, was desperate to whitewash Arthur in the eyes of God and the world.

Yet hardly any serious scholar now believes in that conversion. In his agony, with one leg amputated, the cancer spreading through his body, the pain intense, the mind unclear, Rimbaud muttered all sorts of things. As Pierre Petitfils explains in his authoritative Rimbaud, hydrarthrosis was aggravated by remnants of syphilis, and rheumatism degenerated into synovitis, then into sarcoma and, in due time, carcinoma: “It is probable that by the time he left Harar, Rimbaud was already beyond cure: the disease met no resistance in that undernourished, overworked,
exhausted organism.” But Arthur never received extreme unction because, as Alain Borer reminds us in his Observateur essay, he kept spitting and accusing the hospital orderlies and even the nuns of choice abominations.

In any case, as Borer points out, Rimbaud’s life and work radically defied any religion preaching salvation and an afterlife. Yet even the Muslims have made a bid for Rimbaud’s soul because, dying, he muttered some Mohammedan formulas. And it is also true that during his years as a trader in Africa, he adopted some Muslim ways—names, clothes, manners (such as squatting to urinate)—which were the means to prosperity, indeed mere survival, in those parts. Instead of “mystique à l’état sauvage” Claudel should have said “mystique de l’état sauvage,” the mystic of the savage state, the fellow whose passion for naïve and wild ways elevates them into a kind of mystique. The boy who wrote “Merde à Dieu” on the walls and benches of Charleville lost all interest in God when he became a gunrunner in Abyssinia, and indifference is a more potent weapon than hatred.

The Surrealist Tristan Tzara summed it up neatly: “Rimbaud is childhood expressing itself by means of violating [transgresser] its condition.”[2] That transgresser is a superb choice: transgress with a hint of transcend about it. And Tzara elaborates: “He has seen, through the oblivion of each one of us, the possibilities of infringing the laws of gravity of thought, spoiled by the hardening of age … and that only violence can give meaning to freedom.” Such mysticism has no truck with God. One of the Observateur’s nine sages, André Suarès, in a long-unpublished but immediate reply to Claudel & Co. (the date in the magazine, 1955, is that of posthumous publication; Suarès died in 1948), wrote: “When they dare to show us God cutting off Rimbaud’s leg in order to teach him how to walk straight, and to forsake the paths of paganism to enter those of the Church, they are not only caricaturing God, they are also depicting a Rimbaud who was a stranger to Rimbaud.” Which might give yet another meaning to Rimbaud’s most celebrated utterance, “Je est un autre” (I is another). It is revelatory that Michel Drouin (again in the Observateur) quotes a 1966 article by René Etiemble stating that if Suarès had published his views back then in 1912, “I would not have had to write Le Mythe de Rimbaud, I would not have had to spend thirty years of my life fighting against these lies.”

But Etiemble’s work—comprising most significantly the two-volume Mythe de Rimbaud (1952 to 1970, counting various importantly revised editions); Nouveaux Aspects du mythe de Rimbaud dans le monde communiste (1964); the book devoted to the famous “Sonnet of the Vowels,” Le Sonnet des voyelles (1968); and the critical study Rimbaud, co-written with Etiemble’s wife, Yassu Gauclère (1936, but reissued with radical revisions in 1950 and 1966)—is not a mere demolition of the Christian myth. Rather, it is an attack on all Rimbaud myths. That is why Petitfils’s dismissal of Etiemble, “… the ‘Rimbaud myth’ in which nobody ever believed but which a distinguished professor at the Sorbonne saw fit to demolish with the sledgehammer of printed pages,” is not fair. But there is something to it. In his determination to make a kind of rationalist—or, at least, not an irrationalist—out of Rimbaud and deny him any sort of, even lay, metaphysics, Etiemble went too
He and Gauclère speak, for example, of “the influence of choice, of intelligence, of rhetoric at the service of the passions.” And, to give only one typical instance, they explain much of the *Illuminations* as recollections of the theater, “by which we gain access to the imaginary … [T]he multiplicity of possible décor opens up innumerable perspectives.” So if Rimbaud speaks in “Enfance III” of “a lake that rises” (*un lac qui monte*), he is thinking of a stage backdrop, where perspective is achieved by making a painted lake seem to go upward.

True, but Etiemble and Gauclère disregard that *explication de texte* (which I, too, devoutly espouse) proceeds in the opposite direction from poetic creation, and that explaining is not the same as explaining away. In other words, textual explication retraces the poet’s steps back to the mundane beginnings of the poem, the pre-oyster grain of sand. But creation proceeds inversely toward the fabulous, the finished, the pearl. It is helpful to show whence the miracle of the poem came, but that does not do away with the undefinable, inexplicable miraculousness of it.

Which brings me to the first item in the *Observateur*’s chrestomathy: “The *Correspondence* starting with Cyprus [the first place where, having chucked poetry, Rimbaud made a sustained effort at a career in business] appears in general, to lovers of good literature, badly written, disappointing, unworthy of so great a writer…. We find that this style without elegance, niggardly, flat, has the same extraordinary dryness as the other, but on the plane of banality, from which one does not see why he should have deviated in writing, since such, henceforward, was his mode of life.” This is from *La Part du feu* (Paris, 1949), by the important critic and novelist Maurice Blanchot. But though the statement is useful in reminding us that the so-called hallucinatory style of Rimbaud’s poetry is also purposeful, polished (rather than automatic writing), “dry”—and that, in a sense, there is no break between the poet Rimbaud and the merchant Rimbaud—there is something misleading here. For Blanchot, in that same *Part du feu*, also writes, “He has pushed to the farthest extreme ambiguity, which is the essential movement of poetic activity.” And earlier, in *Faux Pas* (Paris, 1943), Blanchot called Rimbaud “he who, par excellence, is the poet whose poetry welcomes the ineffable [inexprimable], who gave language the assurance of not being limited to language. …” If that is dryness at all, it is surely dryness of a very special kind.

And that leads us to another of the nine quoted views, this one from the poet René Char, in a prose poem first published in 1947 and reprinted in *Fureur et mystère* (1948): “You did well to leave, Arthur Rimbaud! Your eighteen years antagonistic [réfractaires] to friendship, to the malevolence, to the silliness of Parisian poets, as also to the murmurings, worthy of sterile bees, of your slightly demented Ardennes family, you did well to scatter them to the four winds, to throw them under the blade of their precocious guillotine. You were right to abandon the boulevard of the lazybones, the taverns of the poetry-pissers [*pisse-lyres*], for the hell of the stupid [*bêtes*], the commerce of the cunning, and the greetings [*bonjour*] of the simple.” But a second quotation from Char offers only the confirmation that Rimbaud made a complete break with the past. It might have been better to quote the ending of that poem from *Fureur et mystère*: “You did well to leave, Arthur Rimbaud!
There are some of us who believe without proof that happiness is possible with you.” Or perhaps “who believe with you that happiness is possible.”

However that conclusion is to be read, Char is here on the verge of a major insight: that the same pursuit of happiness made of Rimbaud in turn a poet and a gunrunner. Thus Tzara perceived in Rimbaud’s poetry “a fevered desire to fill in une absence”—a lack, absence, void, or deprivation. The consistency that Blanchot detected in Rimbaud’s style Char and Tzara find also in his break with the past. I submit, however, that the consistency, which many who marveled at Rimbaud’s self-contradiction failed to catch at all, is of a rather different nature from what even its perceivers perceived.

Rimbaud, the child genius whose self-expression, freedom, accomplishments were suppressed by his antipathetic mother and milieu, was—always was—in search of power. Power was his true objective—a hunger, a lust for power. Only the method of acquiring that power kept changing. The first tack was that of the poet as seer, as magician or magus, to quote from that famed section of Une Saison en enfer, “Alchimie du verbe”: “Weeping, I saw gold—but could not drink.” The alchemist’s pursuit is gold (potable gold in this case), which is wealth and, in turn, power. The alchemist is the supreme magician, the supreme possessor: “I bragged of owning all possible landscapes.” He becomes “the god of fire,” his life is “a celebration [fête].” Power over words, over poetry is a way to conquer the world.

But when that power was denied him, when the small edition of Une Saison en enfer that he had printed at his expense was destroyed, partly by himself in disgust and partly by the printer for nonpayment of costs, power had to be sought elsewhere. Still, self-contradictory as he was, and under the brief but apparently steadying influence of Germain Nouveau, Rimbaud tried once more to write poetry, hence Les Illuminations. But he gave the manuscripts away and headed for the diametrically opposite method of acquiring wealth and power: commerce. Yet there is a very real sense in which opposites are the same thing—les extrêmes se touchent. Thus Rimbaud’s preparations for material success were similar to his poetic preparations. He studied foreign languages (for which he had a prodigious talent) to make business dealings easier in much the same way he had studied French and classical tongues for his poetry; he studied scientific books and technical manuals the way he had devoured mystical and historical works; and he traveled in search of job opportunities just as he had journeyed in search of experience, discovery, knowledge.

Movement was essential to Rimbaud. Clinically, this has been diagnosed as dromomania. More lyrically, Verlaine called his lover l’homme au semelles de vent (the man with soles of wind), and Mallarmé dubbed him ce passant considérable (this passer-by of parts). But even movement, the title of one of Rimbaud’s vers libre poems, is power: no person, no place, no entanglement can hold you so long as you keep moving. Quite rightly, in another Observateur piece, “Rimb on the Road,” François Cavignoli compares him to real and fictional travelers, Gambetta and Phileas Fogg, and perceives in him the honcho of the Beat generation, the big brother of William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Neal Cassady. He was, we are told, the inventor of hitchhiking, of being publicly
funded (e.g., enlisting in the Dutch army to get to Java, then promptly deserting), of taking on odd jobs to support oneself while bumming around. More important, he taught the Beats a literary style and some thematics. Take, for example, this, from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”: “… who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise…” Doesn’t this remind you of “Aube” (Dawn): “I have kissed the summer dawn…. One by one, I lifted her veils…. Dawn and the child tumbled to the bottom of the woods….” And Ginsberg’s enumeration—the catalogue as a literary device—is very much out of Rimbaud (“Devotion” or “Sale,” for example).

But unlike the Beats, Rimbaud did not keep moving merely to be one jump ahead of failure. Henry Miller, another of the Observateur’s pundits, remarks, “Whatever he did, it was always too good. They seem to have reproached the bohemian for being too bohemian, the poet for being too much a poet, the pioneer for being too much a pioneer, the businessman for being too much a businessman, the gunrunner for running guns too well….” I wonder, though, who were “they”—these carpers who objected to Rimbaud’s excessive skill at everything? Miller’s etiology is off, but there is no doubt that Rimbaud provoked resentment for being dirty and slovenly, though his poverty had much to do with that; for being arrogant and insulting, though being an underappreciated genius could sour your disposition; for being brutal and sadistic, though he had had a pretty rotten childhood.

Rimbaud’s sadism does not come out only in his life—his enjoyment of games in which he could plunge a knife in another player’s outstretched hand, or his carving up his lover’s thighs to the point where Verlaine had to make up stories about his limp on the occasion when he met Victor Hugo. It is there also in his poetry, in the way it mocks, misleads, leaves the reader stranded. Consider the famous verset from “Barbare,” “Le pavillon en viande saignante sur la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques; (elles n’existent pas).” Pavillon has two meanings: pavilion and flag. Since the line, like the entire poem, is obscure, either interpretation makes as much, or as little, sense as the other. Both readings have had their champions. Still, I propose: “The flag made of bloody meat on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers; (they don’t exist).” But there are further ambiguities here. Are both the seas and the arctic flowers silken, or only the seas? Are only the flowers nonexistent, or do neither the flowers nor the seas exist? The line tortures the reader, especially with that palinode that does not make clear just how much it retracts. Yet what a challenge to try to make some sense of it, even if, as Suzanne Bernard warns, in Rimbaud criticism everything is only hypothesis.

Nothing that Rimbaud wrote or did was as much resented as his irruption on the Verlaine household, taking Paul away from his young wife and baby, and flaunting his relationship with the older poet as the two wandered, drank, and fought all over western Europe. This brings us to the much disputed question of Rimbaud’s homosexuality, which some commentators revel in, others reject, and still others embrace with major reservations. It is a matter relevant both to his poetry and to his posthumous influence.
The rejecters don’t have much of a case; there are too many texts by both Rimbaud and Verlaine that spell things out. Most outspoken is Verlaine’s sonnet ending with “Vers toi je rampe encore indigne. / —Monte sur mes reins et trépigne!” (I crawl toward you still unworthy. / —Mount on my loins [back] and prance!) As Petitfils ironically comments, “M. André Fontenas has some difficulty persuading one that this sonnet describes a stained glass window in which the Archangel Michael is—temporarily—brought to the ground by the devil.” This is the same Verlaine who wrote to Rimbaud imploringly from London: “Je suis ton *old cunt, open ou opened, je n’ai pas mes verbes irréguliers*.”

The tendency nowadays is to assert that, whereas Verlaine, however clandestinely, was a true homosexual, Rimbaud threw himself deliberately, programmatically into homosexuality by way of practicing the seer’s disorder of the senses. Whether this is so, or whether (as I and many others believe) he was truly homosexual—and in Africa either heterosexual or bisexual—doesn’t much matter. The nineteenth century was no more ready to forgive reckless displays of homosexuality in Rimbaud’s France than, a bit later on, in Wilde’s England. It is shocking to read that a man and writer as enlightened as Anatole France voted against admitting a submission from Verlaine to the new *Parnasse contemporain* of 1875: “the author is unworthy,” France declared.

On Rimbaud’s homosexuality, the *Observateur* quotes the prominent contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy, specifically his monograph *Rimbaud par lui-même* (Paris, 1961; English translation, by Paul Schmidt, New York, 1972): “It is certain that his homosexuality was deep-seated, and although it is also true that he did not consider it a moral flaw, he nevertheless described it, not without distress, as the fiasco [catastrophe] of the other [i.e., heterosexual] love… . Homosexuality remains, in his view, a negative passion, a deprivation, a defeat.” (My translation, slightly different from Schmidt’s.) If Bonnefoy is right, we have yet another factor that skewed Rimbaud’s vision—felicitously—even as the need to escape his background did: the sense of dissatisfaction with the self, and so the urge to flee from the enemy within as well as from the one without. To the need for power is added the need for flight, the two combining into some of Rimbaud’s richest poetry.

One escapes from oneself into poetry and hopes it will make one famous, rich, and powerful; when this fails to happen, one escapes from poetry—into commerce or science—with the same expectations. Or, as Bonnefoy puts it elsewhere in his book (known simply as *Rimbaud* in English): “Rimbaud stopped writing when the end of childhood, more compelling than any intellectual decision, deprived him of the hope that he could *change life.*” (Translation Schmidt’s, italics Bonnefoy’s.)

No, he couldn’t change life, but he could and did change poetry. The Surrealists recognized him as their precursor, mentor, and presiding divinity until André Breton, their pope, reversed himself in that famous encyclical, the Second Surrealist Manifesto, in a passage included among the *Observateur*’s critical texts: “Rimbaud erred, Rimbaud tried to trick us. He is guilty in our eyes of
having allowed, of not having rendered wholly impossible, certain tarnishing [déshonorantes] interpretations of his thought, of the Claudel variety.” This is misleading. For a long time, Breton revered Rimbaud. It is possible, though, that just as the poet’s annexation by a rival church infuriated Breton, Arthur’s manifest homosexuality also displeased the very heterosexual Surrealist. Ironically, the pope’s new god, Lautréamont, may well have been even more homosexual. But he was discreet about it: the celebrated passage about pederasts in Maldoror is grotesque and elegiac by turns, and not at all realistic like certain passages in Une Saison en enfer and Les Illuminations.

It is entirely possible that the radical loosening up of French poetry by Rimbaud—like the analogous process initiated in America by Whitman—has much to do with the poet’s sexual orientation. If one studies “Délires I” in Saison and “Vagabonds” from the Illuminations carefully, one can see the connection between the “drôle de ménage” Rimbaud-Verlaine and the kind of poetry that emerged from it. It didn’t have to, of course; Verlaine’s was never radical. But it could—did—from Rimbaud’s particular genius. Consider this from “Vagabonds,” about Rimbaud’s escaping from one of Verlaine’s late-night recriminations to the window, where “Je créais, par delà la campagne traversée par des bandes de musique rare, les fantômes du futur luxe nocturne.” (I created, beyond the countryside streaked with scrolls of rare music, the phantasms of a future nocturnal splendor.) This, the poem continues, constitutes a “distraction vaguement hygiénique.” Unless one interprets the passage as a mere scene of masturbation, one can view it as an escape from sexual problems into a hygienic activity, a relaxation and release—the creation of the poetry of future splendor, of vers libre and the prose poem, of the freedom of unfettered self-expression and damn all conventions, social, sexual, or poetic.

Sure enough, Rimbaud was to be, in times to come, often taken up by poets precisely because of his homosexuality (just as Whitman was)—most obviously by the Beats. A number of scholars and critics, too, have been drawn to him for that reason, most conspicuously those who carry on about his supposed “angelism.” Some angel, Arthur Rimbaud!

Yet Rimbaud cannot reasonably be blamed for what others, imitators or interpreters, do to him, although even Claudel, as he wrote Gide, was to be revolted by the detritus littering Rimbaud’s heritage—“like a beautiful, artistic place,” Claudel complained, “where one finds empty sardine cans.” But, as I have said on many an occasion, Claudel was just as guilty of leaving not a few empty holy-water bottles lying about. Nevertheless, the work of sundry commentators is not unhelpful, especially if one admits with Blanchot—that my thesis—that, on top of the obscurity, there is much deliberate ambiguity in Rimbaud. This was also recognized by Gide in the Feuilles d’automne, where he endorses not only divergent but also downright contradictory interpretations. Etiemble promptly takes issue with this, there being among the French a great need to believe in rationality, Cartesian clarity, unequivocalness even in their poets, even if such a belief in Rimbaud’s case requires Olympian mental gymnastics. Thus Yves Bonnefoy, years ago, after sympathetically exploring my then views on Rimbaud, disagreed, claiming that ambiguity
was something very un-French, and had not entered French poetry until Valéry, who got it from foreign sources. More recently, during a very brief chat with Bonnefoy, he seemed to indicate that he had somewhat modified his position, though we did not get a chance to pursue the matter.

What further clouds the Rimbaud inheritance is that it has often been betrayed by translators, and not only where it is impossible to know just what Rimbaud meant, but also in the instances where his meaning ought to be unmistakable. Thus the poem “Dévotion,” which catalogues various kinds of devotion and dedication, ends with “A tout prix et avec tous les airs, même dans des voyages métaphysiques.—Mais plus alors.” (At all costs, and with all airs [?], even on metaphysical journeys.—But no longer then.) Clearly, these devotions must be pursued to their metaphysical consummations. But then there can be an end to it. Yet Wallace Fowlie translates, “But no more thens,” for which the French would have to be “mais plus d’alors.” And Louise Varèse has “But even more then,” which would require “mais encore plus alors” in the text. There is, to be sure, something obfuscatory about this curious ending with its odd italicization of one word; no wonder the worthy Bouillane de Lacoste exclaimed that it “smells of mystification a mile off.” Still, that is no excuse for mistranslations, which unfortunately abound in renderings of Rimbaud. Etiemble adduces veritable Tartar hordes of them, often on the order of “jalousie pour les mendiant” (envy of beggars) Englished as “venetian blinds behind which beggars are hiding.”

Let us consider one more, short but typical, piece from the *Illuminations*, “Antique,” which can mean antique or antiquity:

*Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes et de baies tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachées de lie brune, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luissent. Ta poitrine ressemble à une cithare, des tintements circulent dans tes bras blonds. Ton cœur bat dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe. Promène-toi, la nuit, en mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette seconde cuisse et cette jambe de gauche.*

The assumption is that Rimbaud is describing the statue of a satyr seen in a museum, and that he mistakenly supposed that, what with their goat’s feet, satyrs were descended from Pan. The revolving eyes seem to prefigure modern sculpture (Pol Bury), but are presumably self-induced hallucinations. “Spotted with brown dregs” suggests, perhaps, a painting rather than a sculpture; but “joues se creusent” may well be an echo effect, a rhyme on “boules précieuses.” Fauns do not have fangs, but Rimbaud’s savage imagination creates them, with the sound of “lie brune” and “creusent” leading into “crocs” and “luisent.” I doubt if a satyr’s chest would look like a zither, but Rimbaud, excelling in classics, may have been thinking of Mount Cithaeron, where Actaeon was torn to pieces by the fangs (*crocs*) of his own hounds, and Cithaeron then suggested “cithare.” The rippling muscles would evoke tinklings; the brown lees, by contrast, blond flesh. The heart (emotion) is to be conjoined with sexuality, hence heart and genitalia meet in the middle ground of the belly. The belly also suggests a drum for the heart to beat on. Is androgyny implied by “double sex”? Or is it that the phallus and the scrotum, sculptured, look like the same organ in duplicate?
If Rimbaud is visiting a museum, he may imagine the statue coming to life after dark, when no one is around. Or he may extend to all-day the god Pan’s famous noontime siesta. The three legs may have to do with Rimbaud’s looking (as Pierre Arnoult put forward) at a statue of a centaur. Or could the third limb be the penis? Some legs don’t tread the ground, they trépignent on someone’s backside.

“Antique” is more characteristic of prose poetry than “Départ,” with which we began: it is printed as an uninterrupted piece of prose. Taken together, the two represent fairly Rimbaud’s technique. “Départ” is disjointed, working by discontinuities or leaps; “Antique” seems to hang together, but conveys a figure, a situation that cannot be fully grasped. Each poem shimmers between lucidity and opacity. As Roger Shattuck observed in his review of two of Fowlie’s works on Rimbaud,[4] “In the Illuminations a totally hallucinated universe becomes indistinguishable from a literally noted sensuous realism.” Rimbaud, Shattuck writes, “welded together popular and poetic language at the precise moment when Mallarmé was carefully taking them apart.” So of the two great founders of poetic modernism, it was Rimbaud who more or less prevailed, because his mode is, or seems, easier to imitate. Perhaps the best definition of Rimbaud’s procedure can be found in Castex and Surer’s manual for nineteenth-century studies: “What Rimbaud sees, he transfigures; what he doesn’t, he creates.”

This isn’t to everybody’s taste. The novelist and traveler Victor Ségalen (1878-1919) is quoted as follows by the Observateur:

Many pages in Rimbaud’s work remain inert for us. Neither the beauty of the vocables nor the riches of cadence [nombre], nor the unforeseen in the thrust [volte] of the images, nothing manages to move us, even though everything in this prose shivers with sensitivity. Why this impotence? Because among the diverse conceptions of a sentient being, only the generalizable givens move us, those to which our own memories can become analogous, attached. The rest, personal evocations, associations of ideas that the life of the mind has created in one brain and never in others, that, in art, is dead letter. And Rimbaud’s writings teem with solipsisms of this kind.

So you can consider our poet fatally inconsistent, or, as the less sympathetic Remy de Gourmont dubbed Rimbaud, “a consistently pustulant toad.”

Mallarmé’s portrait of Rimbaud in a letter to Harrison Rhodes is moving despite the crabbed, tortuous prose Mallarmé unfortunately insisted on. The Observateur quotes fairly liberally from it (though not the references to “the stammerings of the last poems” and Rimbaud’s hands “like those of a washerwoman”). Most important is the mention of his “very classic” effect, and of the “sumptuous disorder one could only call spiritually exotic.” And the image of the “dazzle of a meteor, lit with no other motive than its presence, emerging solitary and extinguishing itself.” But Mallarmé is mistaken in saying that “everything would have existed since without this passer-by
of parts,” though his “special case lives on forcefully.” Of course, Mallarmé could not forgive 
Rimbaud his “frequentation of the cities’ vulgar bazaar of illusions.” But the account is largely 
sympathetic and climaxes in a passage (unquoted) about “a unique adventure in the history of art. 
That of a child precociously and impetuously brushed by the wing of literature, who, almost 
before having had time to exist, exhausted a tempestuous and magisterial destiny [fatalité] 
without recourse to a future.”

Yet that future, posthumously, was to be his. By 1926, Cocteau noted that, “at present, 
Rimbaud was more of an encumbrance than Hugo”—the influence for a young poet to crawl 
out from under. And today Gallimard, France’s leading publisher, reports Rimbaud as the house’s 
number-two seller—after Marguerite Yourcenar! As Suzanne Bernard concludes her chapter on 
Rimbaud, “The man with the soles of wind has truly beaten new paths through the dark forests of 
language, and … the entire poetry of the twentieth century follows in his tracks.” Almost all the 
major French poets of the first half of the century—Reverdy, Jacob, Char, Michaux, and Eluard—to 
mention only the most stellar ones, are his disciples; only the delightfully chameleonlike 
Apollinaire stands apart, and Valéry, of course, is the one true heir of Mallarmé.

And the influence continues. A typical motif in Rimbaud is the melding of earth and sky, of land 
and sea. Now here is Yves Bonnefoy (translated by Richard Pevear): “They walk, barefooted / In 
their absence, / And come to the banks / Of the river earth.” Or consider Rimbaud’s trick of 
converting violence into peacefulness by a sudden leap in moods. Here, again, is Bonnefoy: 
“Summer: / This screech-owl / Nailed to the threshold / By the star’s peaceful iron [Le fer en paix de 
l’étoile].” And in his afterword to Bonnefoy’s Poems from which I have been quoting, Jean 
Starobinsky duly invokes Rimbaud.

Philippe Jaccottet, though Swiss-born, has become one of France’s preeminent poets. Recall 
Rimbaud’s way of intertwining the world of gods and magicians with that of mortals—his. Here is 
Jaccottet: “A brief thing, the time of a few footsteps outside, / but stranger yet than the mages and 
the gods.” Rimbaud has “a white ray, dropping from the high heavens, abolishes this comedy.” 
Jaccottet writes: “a light that leaps over words as if wiping them out.” Isn’t Jaccottet’s “And draws 
from the invisible water / where invisible beasts perhaps drink still” akin to Rimbaud’s “silk of the 
seas and arctic flowers; (they don’t exist.)”?

And what about such an older poet of considerable stature as Francis Ponge? In an early poem 
(1922), “Sunday, or the Artist,” he begins: “Brutally, at noon, the clamor of posters, the publicity of 
advertisers, plants its barbarous hatchet in the body [masse] of Paris. / It severs with one blow a 
hundred great green and red walls. It cleaves streets where nervous rails grind to the quick, it 
quarters wheel-broken, dismembered crossroads. Hoot, discordant trumpets! Collapse, railroad 
stations!” This could almost be a parody of Rimbaud; but here now is a passage from a 1943 text 
included in Ponge’s Proêmes: “Of course the world is absurd! Of course, the meaninglessness of the 
world! / But what’s tragic about that? / … Ontological suicide is the act only of a few young 
bourgeois (incidentally likable). / Let there be placed against it birth (or resurrection), metalogical 
creation
Here is the Rimbalbian repertoire of mysterious italics, orgies of capitalization, exclamation points and parentheses galore.

Clearly, I can provide no systematic survey here, only a spot check, a butterfly’s view. Take Germany and Austria, where Rimbaud’s influence is everywhere. We find it in two of the most prestigious poets of the early twentieth century, Georg Heym and the Austrian Georg Trakl. Both died young and tragically, like Rimbaud. Talking to Heym in a Berlin café in the winter of 1910-11, Paul Zech, poet and translator of Rimbaud, noted “his extraordinary predilection for Rimbaud, who in those days was hardly known in Germany.” Formally, Heym does not resemble Rimbaud, except perhaps the early, rhymed poems, but thematically he is extremely close. Trakl, on the other hand, is close formally, too, as in the beginning of the prose poem “Metamorphosis of Evil”:

Many Rimbalbian touches here! The inconsistent landscape: bare trees and foliage; the strange grammar: *auflauscht die Stirne* (literally: up listens the brow); the summation of a paragraph or sentence in a tacked-on word at the end: “November,” “the forest,” “three.” (Cf. Rimbaud’s “Métropolitain.”) The unstable reference: does “brown and silent” go with the foliage or with the hunter’s eyes? (Recall the *verset* from “Barbare,” where we couldn’t tell where silkiness stopped or how far nonexistence extended.) And these black and red horses à la Franz Marc, relatives of “the great blue and black mares” in Rimbaud’s “Ornières.” Even the crows flying in sonata formation seem not unrelated to the bridges in “Les Ponts” that are “minor chords crisscrossing and taking off.”

It is well known that the young Brecht was influenced by Rimbaud, both in his early poems and in his first plays. In *Baal*, the characters of Baal and Eckart are almost certainly modeled on Rimbaud and Verlaine. And in his journal (October, 1921), Brecht notes: “I thumb through the Rimbaud volume and borrow from it. How glowing it all is! Luminous paper! And he has shoulders of brass.—Whenever I work, when the lava flows, I see the West in lurid fires and believe in his vitality.” And am I alone in encountering Rimbaud in that most magical of later twentieth-century German-language poets, Paul Celan? Take, for example, this from “Windgerecht” (Windrowed): “Later: / Snow-growth through all the casings, free / one single field, / numbered by a light ray: the voices.”
It is no different in Italy, where Rimbaud, again, is much in evidence. A major Italian poet who wandered the earth, went mad, and died young, Dino Campana (1885-1932), was a self-declared Rimbaudian. Consider George Kay’s translation of “Ship Under Way”: “The mast swings, beat for beat, in the silence. / A faint white and green light falls from the mast. / The sky clear to the horizon, loaded green and gilt after the squall. / The white square of the ship’s light on high / Illuminates the night’s secret: from the window / The ropes from above in a gold triangle / And a globe white with smoke / Which does not exist like music / Above the circle with the muted beating of the water.” Here, again, the something that doesn’t exist, the story-book colors, the mighty leaps from the visual to the auditory and back, the sense of mystery without any noticeable straining to be mysterious, the indeterminate references: what doesn’t exist, the globe or the smoke?

Already as a boy in Alexandria, Giuseppe Ungaretti was reading Rimbaud; here, in a prose translation by Joseph Cary, is his “The Buried Harbor”: “The poet arrives there / and then ventures to the light with his songs / and scatters them // Of such poetry / remains to me / this nothing / of the inexhaustible secret.”[5] As Cary points out, this is really a version of Rimbaud’s lettre du voyant. But even such a very different poet as Eugenio Montale is not unaffected by Rimbaud. In a 1949 essay, he compliments Mozart, Bellini, and Verdi on setting “a clear and neutral discourse to which they could do violence.” He begins another essay, on an old mentor, the poet Camillo Sbarbaro, by quoting him: “Rimbaud was the addiction of my adolescence.” Now read a Montale poem such as “Eastbourne,” and see if you are not reminded of Rimbaud; isn’t, for example, the personalized goodness of una bontà rather like the reason of “A une Raison”?

Moving over to Greece—and remembering that Rimbaud, whomever else he castigated, unfailingly upheld classic Greek poetry—what do we find? Here is “Thanks,” by Yannis Ritsos, as translated by Edmund Keeley: “You heard your voice saying: thanks / (so unexpected, dumb naturalness)—you were certain now: / a large piece of eternity belonged to you.” This, again, is the private incident given over to the poem without mediation, without any care for universality. And, again, the italics, the parentheses, the laconism, even the unorthodox punctuation.

Now over to Hungary, for an actual prose poem (part of a sequence, as often in Rimbaud) by the marvelous János Pilinszky (1921-1981):

Then at night we went on dreaming the battle, and that was like a stage image, which begins by coming to an end. The guests leave the table, the room empties out. A girl sweeps away the crumbs. Makes order. Night falls. From here on in everything attacks and everything flees: the inadmissible fates, the inadmissible situations, the inadmissible species of animals. And in the morning, we wakened to war as to order itself, as if with gunfire eternal peace were nearing the world.
True, this is much more coherent than a Rimbaud poem tends to be, but the theatrical trope, the chamois leaps of the imagery, the sudden changes in sentence length, with a two-word sentence summing up a paragraph, the basis in paradox—these are truly Rimbaldian.

An influence, then, that could be traced in all Western literatures. One could find it in Wallace Stevens, a supposed pure Mallarméan, in Geoffrey Hill, in Thom Gunn as in Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and all the Beats and Beat-derivatives. “Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see” declared Hart Crane in 1926; in 1923, Ezra Pound had already pronounced, “The actual writing of poetry has advanced little or not at all since Rimbaud.” [6]

Mallarmé may be in the bloodstream of all modern poets, whether they know it or not. He gave the word, beyond its meaning or meanings, over and above its sound, its shape on the page. A word became not a pictogram but a pattern in black on a white background that framed it in different ways with more or less surrounding whiteness, with companionship or isolation. More than that: words assumed the character of precious jewelry fitted into sonorous bracelets, necklaces, belts made up of precious stones in precise yet arcane combinations. Phrases became multivalent, forming strange, recondite, chiseled yet unstable relationships, proffering signification with one hand, with- It may be worth a footnote to mention that the intellectually slumming academic of whose protagonist Sylvester Stallone made his second fortune based his hero’s name, Rambo, on Rimbaud. holding it with the other. The high priest was behind each verse, an abstruse smile on his lips, an intoxicating music in his chant. It is the music, in the later poems, of the emperor’s nightingale brought to its highest mechanical perfection, inferior to the warblings of the real one only for those who prize folk poetry above all other, who hold Anonymous to be the greatest poet of all.

Rimbaud, too, is in every poet, and more visibly: like the rabbit inside the python, a bulge in the snake’s middle. He reaches us sometimes through the mediation of the Surrealists, with their modifications; sometimes undiluted, neat. (I realize that this usage is British, but I can’t say “straight,” can I?) His words, individually and in conjunction, seem to be chosen carelessly. They appear to be effusions, gushings; they are a moment’s recklessness caught in amber, a form that imitates formlessness to perfection. As Jacques Barzun puts it in An Essay on French Verse, “The form of these prose pieces … is itself an invitation to giving up the rational mind. … [T]he poem mirrors the unreality of what is.”

Rimbaud is the poet of a world gone irrational—ours. As the Pole Tadeusz Rozewicz (born 1921) expressed it in a lyric, translated here by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh: “… Season in Hell / what a glorious age / hell heaven // The metaphor still living / bloomed within / metaphysics // letters and words / appeared in miraculous color … // Poetry began from that moment / to rave deliriously …” Rozewicz goes on to say that the bedeviling colors Rimbaud assigned to vowels are preferable to the post-nuclear-holocaust color scheme: everything simply white, a white desolation. I agree with Suzanne Bernard that Rimbaud was an anarchic demiurge, and would
add only that he could exult in disorder because he could still feel himself its creator. We are its creations.

Notes
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1. Benjamin Britten has beautifully set eight of Rimbaud’s poems in his Illuminations, Opus I have compared the translations of “Les arrêts de la vie” in the booklets of my four versions of the work. Two have “Life’s decrees,” one “Life’s constraints,” one “Life’s sentences.” Wallace Fowlie, in his trans- lation of the Illuminations, offers “Life’s haltings.” Go back to the text.

2. From the introduction to the 1948 Lausanne edition of Rimbaud’s works. Cf. Bernard’s “the art of Rimbaud consists … in knowing how to preserve his childlike sense of wonder from the sterilizing intellectual work of the adult, who, with his ‘notions,’ kills the fairy world.” Go back to the text.

3. Graceful son of Pan! Around your brow crowned with flowerlets and berries your eyes, precious balls, move. Spotted with brown dregs, your cheeks are hollowed. Your fangs glisten. Your chest resembles a zither, tinklings circulate through your blond arms. Your heart beats in that belly where sleeps the double sex. Walk about at night, by gently moving this thigh, this second thigh, and this left leg. Go back to the text.


5. The double slash indicates one line's space. The period at the end is mine. Go back to the text.

6. It may be worth a footnote to mention that the intellectually slumming academic of whose protagonist Sylvester Stallone made his second fortune based his hero’s name, Rambo, on Rimbaud. Go back to the text.

John Simon was a distinguished critic and a regular contributor to The New Criterion.

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