Artistic Self-Consciousness
in Rimbaud’s Poetry

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Modern criticism has become increasingly aware of its own methods, like the centipede that started to watch its feet. “Je suis étant, et me voyant me voir” might be its byword. Depending on whether it is projected toward artist, work, or audience, this newly self-conscious critical vision projects an ever self-conscious artist, one wrestling with the angel of influence, or weaving his signifiers into a Penelopean tissue; a hermetically self-referential work, like the worm ouroboros; or a search for meaning governed by the personal myth of the reader (e.g., Norman Holland’s “transactive criticism”). These versions of the current fashion all give short shrift to the artist’s development over time, as a meaning for him and a model for us. So critics reading Rimbaud’s poetry as the chronicle of a psychic or spiritual itinerary have come to appear old-fashioned, if not merely self-indulgent. Where Rimbaud is concerned, the uncertain dating of the texts makes diachronic studies all the more problematical. Synchronic views seem to have won the day. I shall nevertheless attempt to mediate between them and the older diachronic ones, for I believe that the Rimbaldian self-consciousness itself evolves and has a history.

Self-consciousness, as distinct from self-awareness, implies a generalized sense of inhibition experienced in the presence of a mocking, disapproving, or enslaving other, real or imagined (as in Rimbaud’s poems “Roman,” “Le Cœur volé,” “Le Bateau ivre,” “Mauvais Sang” of Une Saison en enfer, and others). To say “artistic” self-consciousness limits such inhibition to the communicative axis of sender/message/receiver. The lyric self experiences either himself as poet, or his language, or both as inadequate; he may also imagine his potential public as hostile or uncomprehending, so that the poetic message is sent at the risk of rejection. All of the many forms that artistic self-consciousness assumes foreground the act of writing and communicating poetry. (1) Dramatized or implied social disapproval of the role of poet, as opposed to the warrior or producer (“Le Bateau ivre,” last stanza and passim; the “soupirail” as metaphorical intrusion of the outside world at the conclusion of “Enfance”). (2) Rivalry with other intellectuals (“Les Assis”) and poets (“Ce qu’on dit au poète à propos de fleurs,” Album zutique, and so on). The desire to surpass the
achievements of one’s literary forebears—Bloom’s “anxiety of influence”—may lead to self-defeating satire; even when successful, the effort to subdue and to expel one’s rivals fills poems with their corpses’ reek—the stranded, rotting monster in “Le Bateau ivre,” for one. (3) Inadequacy of the verbal vehicle, expressed by overt discrepancies between signifier and signified (the dead soldier boy in the idyllic pastoral setting of “Le Dormeur du val”; “Clara Vénus” engraved on repulsive buttocks in “Vénus Anadyomène”; the love of poor, preliterate orphan children communicated in the form of an ornate medallion inscribed “A Notre Mère” in “Les Étrennes des orphelins”). (4) Inadequacy of the verbal vehicle, expressed by self-negating or self-canceling formulas such as the refrain “(elles n’existent pas)” in “Barbare.” Frequently the conclusions of Rimbaud’s poems say or imply “This was an imaginative construct.” Thus he simultaneously calls into question his fantasies, by exposing them as a mere semblance of reality, and reaffirms them by asserting their willed and autonomous origin. Yet from birth they are bound by the systems of language that embody them. The paradigmatic explosion of metaphor falls promptly back toward the syntagmatic axis of convention. I speculate that Rimbaud attempts to transcend the inadequacy of the verbal medium through exuberant self-referential punning (“le lit”—“lire”; “corbeaux”—“corps beau” [with a buried metonymy: the body is muse, inspiring the song of the raven-poets]; and perhaps “pis”—“udder” in “je pisse . . . ‘Accroupissements’ . . . ‘tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon’”). Finally, Rimbaud may make the insubstantial materials and products of writing (letters, paper, pen, and ink) autonomous by transmuting them into the external décor that they ostensibly represent (as in “Voyelles”) and by personifying them (the sentence becomes muse in “Phrases”). (5) Rejection of the message through a retort by its receiver (“Les Reparties de Nina”); evasion of such rejection through prosopopoeia, actual or implied (“Le Buffet,” “Les Corbeaux”).

The limitations of the linguistic vehicle of poetry, of which Rimbaud and his critics are keenly aware, pose no greater threat than the binding syntagm of the act of communication itself—sender/messenger/receiver—which is called into being each time one writes. Ineluctably, the poetic voice summons its hearer. And then the eye of the other, turning toward the clamor of the poem, imprisons the lyric self within the categories of that other’s own alien perception. To shield his vulnerability and evade disapproval, “dans certains des premiers poèmes de Rimbaud, on voit le poète-spectateur tenter de s’intégrer directement à son poème, se donnant tantôt comme un observateur commentant le spectacle (‘Et le Poète dit . . . ’ fin d’Ophélie), tantôt comme spectateur et élément du spectacle à la fois.” More subtly in later poems like “Mémoire,” insistent metaphors of the eye transform an element of the décor into a “pur regard” of the poetic consciousness. By contemplating his own message, the poet transforms himself into its receiver. This short circuit obviates the
threatening other and protects the message itself from a hostile or insensitive reception.

The device appears at the end of Rimbaud’s first published French poem, “Les Étrennes des orphelins.” Two four-year-olds, their mother dead, their father absent, huddle in an icy house where they are cared for by an old servant woman. They recall their former happiness in exchanging gifts at Christmastide. And at last they sleep, to dream of their foyer restored:

On dirait qu’une fée a passé dans cela! . . .
—Les enfants, tout joyeux, ont jeté deux cris . . . Là,
Près du lit maternel, sous un beau rayon rose,
Là, sur le grand tapis, resplendit quelque chose.
Ce sont des médaillons argentés, noirs et blancs,
De la nacre et du jas aux reflets scintillants,
Des petits cadres noirs, des couronnes de verre,
Ayant trois mots gravés en or: “A NOTRE MERE!”

Cohn, one of few to pay attention to “Les Étrennes des orphelins,” reacted harshly: “Rimbaud clearly had trouble finishing this poem; the emotion is exhausted and the infinite mystery is not. How familiar this is: all our adolescent poems came a cropper in this way! The medallions engraved with A NOTRE MERE offer an air of monumental (or tomb-like) finality, but, even leaving room for the possible irony, how pathetically clumsy and juvenile!”

That the solemn, elaborate final ecphrasis is quite incongruous with the helpless, inexperienced dramatis personae makes the poem all the more revealing. And (pace Cohn) few juvenilia end in so subtle and rich a way.

To be more precise, the yearning appeal conveyed by the last three words, A NOTRE MERE, is appropriate for the small children of the poem. The vehicle, letters of gold, is not. The children could neither have written nor have read those words. Their feelings have mingled with the poet’s craft. Their joyous cries transmute into the poet’s words, completing the depersonalized frame that was introduced in the first line with the listening “on” (“on entend vaguement” the children’s whispering). Or to put it another way, an adolescent poet offers to his mother a pathetic message of love. Having implied that he feels helpless and bereft as a small orphan child, in the icy climate of maternal indifference, he sends her poetry—not mere raw sentiment, but love refined into a verbal artifact that the precocious Rimbaud knew to be of great beauty and value. A fear of rejection, combined with the guilt of nascent sexuality, has sublimated the feelings lying “près du lit maternel” into chaste words. This entire process of transformation is represented by means of a structure of three nesting layers through which sentiment-as-light (“un beau rayon rose”) becomes mediated through metaphorical representation of words upon the page (black and white), which then become transparent, both sheltering the sentiment and allowing it to shine through, in a now acceptable form. Layering here mimics the movement
of an impression into and out of the unconscious, from which a reaction emerges only after ego defense mechanisms have reshaped it to be socially acceptable:

1. light/feelings: "resplendit . . . argentés."
2. words (black): "noirs."
3. on the white page: "et blancs."
3. "De la nacre."
2. "Et du jais."
1. "aux reflets scintillants."
2. words framing thoughts: "Des petits cadres noirs."
3. the page integrated with feelings, forming a transparent but protective barrier: "des couronnes de verre."
1. plus (2) feelings effectively sublimated as words: "Ayant trois mots gravés en or: ‘A NOTRE MERE!’"

Rimbaud’s artistic vocation is revealed by his ability to step back from his emotions so as to exercise his craft upon them. The medallions, standing for the whole poem as a gift of, and an appeal for, love, form a mise en abyme, the master emblem of the self-contemplating intellect. There is a certain narcissistic gratification in such self-absorption.

The attitude becomes less apparent in the ensuing early poems, but traces of it persist in the closures of many, where Rimbaud invokes a poet-persona, alludes to the raw materials of his art, or introduces a personified audience:

1. “—Les Dieux écoute l’Homme et le Monde infini!” (“Soleil et chair,” last line, p. 45).
2. “—Et le Poète dit . . . ” (“Ophélie,” last quatrain, p. 47).
3. “Bien que le roi ventru suât, le Forgeron, / Terrible, lui jeta le bonnet rouge au front!” (“Le Forgeron,” last couplet, p. 57). The fat king of adult authority is humiliated by the phallic revolutionary message—the thrown cap in one sense symbolizes communication from poet to audience—delivered by the Promethean Worker in Fire.
4. “Les reins portent deux mots gravés: Clara Venus” (“Vénus Anadyomène,” last tercet, p. 61). Here the glass shield of repression has been lifted, so to speak, from the medallions in “Les Etrennes des orphelins”: the naked object of desire comes in view directly, without metonymic displacement (“le lit”—which, coincidentally or not, is a form of the verb lire—replaces the mother’s body with the place where it is found), its fearsome physicality warring with the idealization of the poetic, verbal inscription.
Having thus affirmed and reaffirmed his artistic identity in the early poems ("I am a Poet, sender of messages"), Rimbaud feels confident enough to test it against the identity of others, first among whom is the primal father. "Les Effarés" recreates the situation of "Les Étrennes des orphelins." Wintered waifs wish woman's warmth. But this time stage center is held by the father-as-rival: a large baker putting loaves into and out of the oven enacts symbolically the primal scene, plus a procreation that quite fascinates the watching children ("ce trou chaud souffle la vie," p. 70). Overwhelmed, their own message becomes inarticulate ("grognant des choses," p. 70). But for the implied author, arranging this open confrontation with the powerful father effects catharsis. Oedipal guilt assuaged, the compelling horror of the flesh will ebb.

The phrase "belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus" concluding "Venus Anadyomène" suggests the angel with a flaming sword, barring the gates to an Eden of infantile regression (compare the metaphor "Chanaan féminin" of Les Stupra, p. 328). But now when the loved woman asserts her inaccessible presence, it shall be with words rather than with the body. The advent of those words nevertheless cuts short the poem as effectively as the raw rising rump of the Venus could do. "Les Reparties de Nina" brusquely deflate elaborate poetic dreams: "ELLE.—Et mon bureau?" (p. 68). And when the girl of "Roman" finally deigns a written reply to the poet's sonnets, he promptly returns to the cafés to drink with his friends. One must assume that her words did not match the dream she had inhabited (p. 72). In a rare equilibrium of happiness, however, "Rêve pour l'hiver" and "La Maline" (pp. 75, 78) do reintegrate the woman's words with the poet's dream. This masterful fusion of subject and object, combining the woman-figure with the poet's verbal role, recurs transposed into fantasy with "Le Buffet": "—O buffet du vieux temps, tu sais bien des histoires, / Et tu voudrais conter tes contes . . . " (p. 80; cf. Baudelaire's "J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans"). The medallions from "Les Étrennes des orphelins" are to be found within (line 9). Indeed, when Rimbaud next invokes the traditional properties of muse and lyre, in "Ma Bohème," he knows the persona is doubly regressive—both old-fashioned and split—and excuses himself with the subtitle "Fantaisie."

Having so strongly proclaimed that he is indeed a poet, effectively communicating with others, Rimbaud can now direct his energies toward a struggle against rivals and precursors other than the biological father. "Les Corbeaux" (p. 82) seems a transitional poem, during which this shift occurs. The poet appears in the multiple, fantastic guise of the dark, loud-voiced birds. Wintry indifference still attacks them as it had the orphans, but their harsh cries resist without appeal: "Armée étrange aux cris sévères, / Les vents froids attaquent vos nids!" It is the human speaker of the first apostrophe in stanza one, addressed to the "Seigneur," who takes upon himself the onus of that appeal.
He seeks the blessing of the Father's sanction for the ravens' song, destined to supplant the sweet tyranny of His own melodies: “dans les hameaux abattus, / Les longs anges se sont tus. . . .” A second apostrophe, in stanzas two and three, links the ravens to the poet's words, by being addressed to them. And a third, in the final stanza, assimilates them to a new holiness as “saints du ciel, en haut du chêne.” The poem concludes with a ritual expulsion of the “bons poètes,” the cloying weak voices of tradition:

Laissez les fauvettes de mai  
Pour ceux qu'au fond du bois enchaîne,  
Dans l'herbe d'où l'on ne peut fuir,  
La défaite sans avenir.  

The false mask of the social persona (“fauvettes”—“faux-vêtes”) is rejected in favor of unveiled spontaneous physical self-expression (“corbeaux”—“corps beau”). In comparison, the better-known “Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs” is retrograde in its satirical explicitness. Its being aimed at a concrete human target of resentment fragments and vitiates its imaginative force.

“Les Assis,” continuing Rimbaud's rivalry with the unworthy guardians of tradition, restores a desirable balance between fantasy and satire. The “Assis” function as pharmakoï. As it enumerates their bodily parts, the luxuriant, neologistic, mocking description dismembers them, casts them in shreds upon the ground as seeds for a new poetry. As Kittang’s insightful reading explains, “Cette destruction de l'unité et de la linéarité syntaxiques et sémantiques se réalise, dans plusieurs des textes de jeunesse, précisément comme une destruction de l'unité anthropomorphe. . . . L'accent se déplace de proche en proche du signifié pour se poser au mouvement signifiant lui-même, c'est-à-dire au travail scriptural.” Here Rimbaud employs continual plurals, together with a metaphorical swelling, opening, and excrescence. The “Assis” are swept up in a fecundating creative movement that overmasters them, transforming them willy-nilly into artists and drunken boats. They must play and then dance to his tune:

L'âme des vieux soleils s'allume . . .  
Et les Assis, genoux aux dents, verts pianistes,  
S'écouent clapoter des barcarolles tristes,  
Et leurs caboches vont dans des roulis d'amour.

Ink flowers spit forth pollen commas to cradle them, infants in Rimbaud's new world, as the poem's ending reminds us of its purely verbal status. “Ceci ne constitue-t-il pas une espèce de reflet de la situation du scripteur lui-même, qui est aussi une sorte d'Assis, absorbé, bercé et emporté par le jeu même de son écriture?” Yes. But more. By making the keepers of culture share his delirium, Rimbaud has cannibalistically absorbed them into himself.
As the maturing Rimbaud liberates himself from overt artistic self-consciousness in the poems, it is his body rather than his words that becomes the figurative vehicle of his communication: “Je pisse vers les cieux bruns” (“Oraison du soir,” p. 87); “Fantasque, un nez poursuit Vénus au ciel profond” (“Accroupissements,” p. 94, last line). The celebrated metaphors in Rimbaud's letters to Izambard and Demeny, written near the same time, express the same idea with more decorum: “Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon”; “Si le cuivre s'éveille clairon, il n'y a rien de sa faute” (pp. 344, 345). But the anxiety of influence is very much with the epistolary poet: “Si les vieux imbéciles n’avaient pas trouvé du Moi que la signification fausse, nous n’aurions pas à balayer ces millions de squelettes qui, depuis un temps infini, ont accumulé les produits de leur intelligence borgnesse, en s’en clamant les auteurs!” (p. 345). Soon after this declaration we come in for a strong dose of literary history. Rimbaud remains quite aware of being watched here, by both the past and present. (“He is still a performer,” Frohock demonstrates in shrewd detail.)

The musical instrument metaphors betray this limitation, for all their power: Rimbaud has described his awakening as a poet as the transformation of something inert into something that makes a noise—i.e., into a thing that uses language and believes that language to be its main function, as the essence of its identity, intended to be heard by others.

In a further movement toward artistic autonomy, a part of the now-poet’s (or his muse’s) now-dismembered body becomes not the instrument but rather the audience for the poet’s communication, as he for a time adopts the practice of signing off with an apostrophe: “Comment agir, ô cœur volé?” (“Le Cœur volé,” p. 101); “On veut vous déhâler, Mains d’ange, / En vous faisant saigner les doigts!” (“Les Mains de Jeanne-Marie,” p. 107). This solipsistic short circuit frees the poet’s message from the contingency of a potentially disapproving human audience. Rimbaud can then address his final apostrophes to the absolute of death or divinity, which he wishes to attain. The lyric impulse of the entire poem, reproduced in little by the apostrophe, becomes concentrated in an unmediated movement toward transcendence (see “Les Sœurs de charité,” “Voyelles,” and “Les Premières Communions”). Once this movement has been completed, the poet dramatizes his total merging with an oceanic absolute in the early masterpiece “Le Bateau ivre.” Soon he must realize that the privileged moment cannot be maintained. “Les yeux horribles des pontons” (p. 131), the prison of social expectations, close round him again, with the promise of becoming increasingly disapproving as Rimbaud matures toward nonconformity.

Only then does Rimbaud reach the height of his artistic development as he changes strategies. No longer does he identify himself with his goal, but with his desire. Caught up in the first spontaneous impulse, he nearly transcends artistic self-consciousness, becoming pure hunger, and thirst, and desire for
death. In the poems editorially entitled *Derniers Vers* (pp. 149–81), as later in many of the *Illuminations*, to drink is ultimately to dissolve; or, to put it the opposite way around, Rimbaud tries to transform desire into an accurate description of the world. To forestall its coagulation, he adopts a kaleidoscopic role-changing theatricality in the *Illuminations*. Thus he seeks protection against the conceptualizing force of language and undermines the ontological basis of the coherent self. The freely desiring, evolving theatrical self changes each time it reaches for the momentary object of its attention. But such independence cannot be forever sustained.

The cathartic tears of frustration common in Rimbaud fill the liminal poem of the *Illuminations*. Until he has washed away the old, he cannot leap for the new. The second of the *Illuminations*, “Enfance,” then depicts the life cycle of the imagination. The drama begins on the beach, at forest’s edge; that is, on the border between conscious and unconscious. The exotic idol introduced at the outset suggests a child’s doll. The toy, a small replica of reality, affords the child a first experience of self-definition, through the autonomous control of a world of his own. She comes to life, and then, imaginatively subjected to three hyperbolic fields—exoticism, princeliness, immensity—shatters centrifugally into many women. By the end of section 1 (as at the endings of 3 and 5), imaginative imperialism has conquered too much land to hold against the intrusions of the conventional social world. This tiresome interloper must be rejected: “Quel ennui, l’heure du ‘cher corps’ et du ‘cher cœur’” (p. 255).

In section 2 the artist’s diotic gesture reasserts its power, calling forth the absent and the dead, magic and legend. The upright posture of some dead, however, like any notation of posture in Rimbaud, suggests the continuing presence of some restraint. Section 3, while evoking the successive encounters of a journey, also employs the anaphora in “Il y a” to affirm the creator’s power yet more strongly. This repetition creates a center that asserts the integrity of the self and permits imaginative dispersion. The sinking cathedral and rising lake signify culture submerged by nature, the superego drowned in desire. But the superego dies hard. Its last twitch of repression—“Il y a . . . quelqu’un qui vous chasse”—expels the poet from this adolescent stage of his adventure. He departs in a pluralized form, which maintains his independence, however, for he merges with a troupe of little (child) actors in costume, seen on the road, through the edge of the wood where the poet wanders.

In section 4 he assumes the successive roles of “saint . . . savant . . . piéton . . . enfant,” winning through to a renewed childlike innocence and fully realizing his aspirations in a rising landscape, image of desire. But the triumph of the imagination causes its death. Since it is conquest, when it conquers all, it must then cease to be. Within the whitewashed tomb where he has taken refuge in the final section, convention reabsorbs the poet. He is condemned to the prison of others’ sterile literature: “Je m’accoude à la table, la
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lampe éclaire très vivement ces journaux que je suis idiot de relire, ces livres sans intérêt" (p. 257). Houses, fog, mud, and night settle above him. He conjures up smooth, hard, and gleaming symbols of the self-sufficing personality: "Je m'imagine des boules de saphir, de métal. Je suis maître du silence. Pourquoi une apparence de soupirail blémirait-elle au coin de la voûte?" (p. 258). The implied eye of the other peers in through the skylight; the whole poetic evasion must begin anew in "Conte" (cf. pp. 264–65), which in turn concludes "La musique savante manque à notre désir" (p. 260).

"Parade," however, transforms the momentarily successful climax of "Enfance" (section 4) into an entire, self-contained poem. With a single stroke it calls the troupe of "maîtres jongleurs"—"Des drôles très solides"—into being and then enumerates their powers. Since they are Rimbaud's creation, his naming them flaunts his poetic force, imaginatively transformed into sexual and political dominion. Their theatrical multiplicity deconstructs the social self to create a new overarching self of poetic surges: "The combination of extreme attraction and extreme repulsion [that they inspire] creates a grotesque, baroque vitality." A nest of oxymorons—"Le plus violent Paradis de la grimace enragée"—asserts their metaphorical power, one that the poet refuses to submit to the conventions of communication: "J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage" (p. 261). By divorcing his vivid metaphors from their nonlinguistic source, Rimbaud attempts in exemplary fashion to "create the impression that language is no longer simply the linguistic code but a far richer system of signs." These we never could understand, for the poet is now "réellement d'outre-tombe," this time without a skylight ("Vies," p. 265).

The autonomy of language is perfected when Rimbaud personifies language and makes it speak. Thus its role shifts from message to sender, from passive to active, from adjuant to destinateur. This is what happens in "Phrases," an unlucky poem that has drawn the critical thunderbolts of "incoherent" and "at times irritatingly obscure." Indeed the poem is populated by too many unnamed entities to permit a consistent interpretation. If we invoke the principle of Occam's razor, however, the only available antecedent for most of the feminine nouns and pronouns that pervade the poem, in both singular and plural, is the title word itself. A spokeswoman for all the sentences speaks first as an individual ("je ... celle") and then as a member of a collectivity ("nous"). A dangerous mistress, she promises in the first section a fidelity that menaces fatally to restrict the poet's imagination by actualizing all its dreams within the straitjacket of language: "Que j'aie réalisé tous vos souvenirs,—que je sois celle qui sait vous garrotter,—je vous étoufferai" (p. 270).

The masculine plural adjectives of the second section suggest that the poet now speaks of himself and his phrases together, acknowledging their inability, in concert, to act upon the real world: "Quand nous sommes très forts,—qui recule? très gais,—qui tombe de ridicule? Quand nous sommes très méchants,
—que ferait-on de nous.” And then he addresses them: “Parez-vous, dansez, riez. [Despite all your activity] Je ne pourrai jamais envoyer l’Amour par la fenêtre.” And after the dash beginning the third section, the poet replies to the phrase that first spoke alone: “—Ma camarade, mendianté, enfant monstre! comme ça t’est égal, ces malheureuses et ces manœuvres, et mes embarras. Attache-toi à nous [to me, and fellow-poets, and all of humankind] avec ta voix impossible, ta voix! unique flateur de ce vil désespoir.” And so she does. Impressionistic notations in the following section (which some say begins a separate poem) take their point of departure in the real, an overcast July morning. Soon the magic of language allows the poet to capture the universe in a net of harmony: “J’ai tendu des cordes de clocher à clocher; des guirlandes de fenêtre à fenêtre; des chaînes d’or d’étoile à étoile, et je danse.” The mists of potentiality fill the air; it is holiday time; a bell of pink fire rings in the clouds. And when the feast of the imagination is completed, and odors revive in the evening damp, a gentle rainfall of black powder, the matter from which the poet’s sentences have been made, gathers darkness around him: “Avivant un agréable goût d’encre de Chine, une poudre noire pleut doucement sur ma veillée.—Je laisse les feux du lustre [the intensity of poetic creation declines], je me jette sur le lit [lire—mentally, he rereads], et, tourné du côté de l’ombre [the pool of ink from which new sentences shall be born], je vous vois, mes filles! mes reines!” (p. 271). “Je vais voir l’ombre que tu devins.” Rimbaud has just completed one of the loveliest, most convincing statements extolling the joys of writing poetry.

Where linguistic conventions do not stifle the poet, of course, he risks that the imaginative deluge may submerge him. Rimbaud faces this problem in the “Délires” of Une Saison en enfer. “Hell” comes from the poet’s feeling out of joint with his Christian civilization, and his resulting guilt. “Délires” describes his attempted escape. “Délires I” and “II” dramatize the opposites of the creative faculty, its passive and its active modes (thanks here and elsewhere to the poet Steven Katz). The “Foolish Virgin” (meaning, in French, one foolish enough not to remain a virgin) of “Délires I” derives all her meaning from the other who dominates her. She opens her speech with a pathetic appeal to higher authority. “Délires II,” in contrast, begins with the poet as bricoleur, enumerating the concrete raw materials of poetic production. With many broad gestures of taking possession, he proclaims the hyperexpressibility of his art: “J’écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l’inexprimable. J’attais des vertiges” (p. 228). But then “la terreur venait” (p. 233). “Au milieu de cet espace désordonné le Moi poétique perd sa position fixe: lui qui au début du texte surgit comme une espèce de demiurge hyperbolique, se laisse peu à peu absorber et dérouter par la force dynamique de ses matériaux disparates . . . le schéma spatial et non-expressif d’un verbalisme autonome, qui, en passant par la double déformation des ‘hallucinations,’ s’éloigne définitivement du Discours et du Lisible.”

“Je
sais aujourd'hui saluer la beauté," Rimbaud concludes (p. 234)—presumably by replacing art with action, for the last section, "Adieu," declares: "Je demanderai pardon pour m'etre nourri de mensonge. Et allons . . . Point de cantiques: tenir le pas gagné" (p. 241). Like Oedipus, Rimbaud has sacrificed an old vision to gain a new one, as he sets forth to live out the theatrical roles he had evoked with words. Like Persephone he has emerged from the underworld of inadequate love and poetry. He has no wish to repeat the cycle.

As Friedrich neatly summed up, "Rimbaud institutes the abnormal divorce of the poetic 'I' from the empirical self." As he clearly implies both in "Phrases" and in "Délires II," his muse is no longer the conventional guide through a purgatory of language: she has become language itself. Rimbaud exploits her powers by creating the simultaneous presence and absence of denial, a domain peculiar to language, transcending reality (e.g., the repeated "(elles n'existent pas)" of "Barbare"). In this he anticipates the symbolists Mallarmé and Valéry. ("Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu," concludes Mallarmé in Un Coup de dés.) But also he struggles against her, by uniting incompatible opposites and rejecting finite verbs, in a sustained attempt to exalt the purified imagination over syntax. For Rimbaud's historical situation as an adolescent of whom most disapproved made him keenly conscious of the other, one of whose forms is language. Knowing that the imagination can be realized only as language, he experiences an ultimately intolerable constraint. Rimbaud's poetic odyssey ends not as a romance, "a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it," but as a tragedy, "the epiphany of the law governing human existence which the protagonist's [unsuccessful] exertions against the world have brought to pass."

"Poor Arthur's" renunciation of poetry in favor of a preoccupation with profit in North Africa has been interpreted as a total undoing of his revolt, as "his conversion into a money-grubbing son of his mother" after he had resisted her materialism so long. But life is not that simple. The myth of the father guided him too. For he promoted himself from something analogous to the status of the mother—housebound and limited to the use of coaxing, scolding, or admonishing words—to the status of the father-as-autonomous-doer, a status that his previous restless journeying and his domination of Verlaine had only partially achieved. "L'alchimie du verbe," the hope of transforming the world through incantation, gives way in his psyche to an imitation of the father, who as a soldier had been stationed in North Africa. Rimbaud settled on the same terrain, but sold guns rather than firing them. As a sort of director of warfare, rather than an actor, he situated himself at a symbolically higher level of control than the one that his father had occupied. To our regret as readers, he transcended the helplessness of verbal self-expression, at the cost of the loss of its glory.
1. For a more elaborate and methodologically rigorous discussion of this act, see Nathaniel Wing, *Present Appearances*, pp. 11-19 and passim.
3. Ibid., p. 217.
4. Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, p. 38. All subsequent references to Rimbaud’s works will be to this edition.
6. I have provided a formal definition of this concept, and a bibliography, in “Literary Structure and the Concept of Decadence: Huysmans, D’Annunzio, and Wilde,” *CentR* 22 (Spring 1978).
7. Political militancy, precociously augmenting the force of Rimbaud’s self-assertion, leads him to attack the inadequate message of the other in the closing line of an earlier poem, “Morts de quatre-vingt-douze et de quatre-vingt-treize”: “—Messieurs de Cassagnac nous reparlent de vous!” (p. 58).
11. I do not wish to intrude an overt Jungian perspective into the main line of argument here, but Marie Luise von Franz’s characterization of the Puer Aeternus, unwilling to grow up, neatly fits the behavior of the restless Rimbaud, “l’homme aux semelles de vent” (*The Problem of the Puer Aeternus*, pp. 1-7): “belief in one’s hidden genius, refusal to adapt, arrogance towards others, inability to settle down . . . ‘the provisional life,’ that is, the strange attitude and feeling that one is not yet in real life.” Literary works like *Peter Pan*, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, *Le Petit Prince*, and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* reflect the lasting imaginative appeal of this psychological archetype. Cf. Jean-Pierre Richard, “Rimbaud ou la poésie du devenir,” pp. 206-7.
12. This paragraph is inspired by Leo Bersani’s brilliant chapter in *A Future for Astyanax*, pp. 230-58.
15. Cohn, p. 271 n.
16. Wing, p. 146; his pp. 143-46 offer a fine reading of “Parade.” J. Marc Blanchard (“Sur le mythe poétique,” pp. 82-84) makes interesting comments on “Après le déluge” from a similar viewpoint, although he is influenced by Bloom as well. In the light of these readings, one would have to nuance the conclusions of Douglas P. Collins and Herbert S. Gershman (“Romantic Irony in Rimbaud,” pp. 683-86), who find romantic irony in such “highly ambiguous closing sequences” in *Illuminations*. Their essay does provide a useful background for the concept.
17. Frohock, p. 190; Cohn, p. 294.
18. Cohn translates these “que”s as “even if,” but I think it makes more sense to read “if and when.”
23. Cohn, p. 7; cf. the biography by Elizabeth Hanson.

**SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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