

Arthur Rimbaud: Beyond Language

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There are two well-known images of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). He is depicted in a painting by Henri Fantin-Latour called *Coin de Table*, painted in 1872 and now in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. It shows eight men belonging to the so-called Parnassus group of leading poets of the time. Rimbaud is seated on the left, next to his friend and lover the poet Paul Verlaine. The second picture is even more famous: it is the second of two photographs taken in 1871 by the celebrated photographer Carjat and now an iconic image of the young genius. For a short while, Rimbaud was so much praised and admired in Paris that he was painted alongside renowned Parisian poets and a famous photographer wanted to take his picture. It was just one moment before his fall from grace. Already when Fantin Latour painted his picture the poet Albert Merat refused to join the group because he did not want to be portrayed together with the young troublemaker Rimbaud. A vase of flowers was substituted for him.

Rimbaud's biographer Enid Starkie describes the well-known photo as "Rimbaud during his mystical period". It shows a young man who looks a little shy and unwordly, with a shock of unkempt hair, his gaze fixed on something in the distance. But what is most striking in the picture is how young Rimbaud was when he surprised and shocked the literary establishment and the Parisian bourgeoisie with his innovative, daring poetry and his outrageous behaviour.

Arthur Rimbaud started writing poetry when he was 15 years old and by the time he was 21 he had completed his entire poetic oeuvre, stopped writing and left everything and everyone behind to start a new life. He wandered through Europe and eventually settled in East Africa. From an early age, Rimbaud led a restless and turbulent life, which is clearly reflected in his poetry. He was an essentially original poet: someone who creates a new language for his poetry and who creates himself in language, so much that both his biographers and critics were often at a loss reading it. And he was a poet and a man who was always in motion, always on the run, it seems.

In his book *A Philosophy of Walking (Marcher, une Philosophie)*, which has been translated into many languages, the French writer Frédéric Gros includes a chapter on Arthur Rimbaud entitled *The Passion for Escape*. For much of his life, Rimbaud was travelling. As a teenager, he ran away from his strict, religious mother, from the school system that offered him no freedom, from the oppressive bourgeois environment in which he grew up, from the Parnassians who were the ruling poets' clique in Paris and who ordained how poetry should be written, from his lover Paul Verlaine, and in the end from poetry itself. And poetry was always closely linked to his flight. He wrote poems to make the escape (financially) possible, to articulate what he was fleeing from and why, and then it was poetry itself that he had to get away from. Paul Verlaine called him 'l'homme aux semelles de vent' (the man with soles of wind) because of his restlessness and his eternal urge to run away and go on. At the same time, his escapes were not always successful and were only temporary. Rimbaud, the anarchist, the adventurer, the icon of rebellious youth, returned again and again to his mother's house, even when he was dying, at the age of 37.

Rimbaud is a poet who continues to fascinate biographers and analysts. It is indeed astonishing how young he was when he began to liberate poetry from its rigid rules. He was just a teenager when he started, and by the time he was 21 years old, he had finished. In those years, his work had evolved from traditional rhymed verse, through blank verse and free rhyme, to poetic prose. His work developed so rapidly in those few years that, in order to indicate this development, his poems are dated by critics not by the year in which they were written, but by the month. However, Rimbaud did not always himself record the date on which a poem was written, which sometimes makes it challenging to indicate how he matured as a poet.

Rimbaud was an innovator of French literature and of poetry in general, and is often regarded as an exponent of Symbolism. Two letters he wrote when he started as a poet, the *Lettres du voyant*, have later been published. In these letters, he expresses his views on what poetry is, or what it should be, and what the poet requires and needs to do in order to write true poetry. Although there were not meant as an official manifesto, they are often quoted to clarify what Rimbaud saw as his mission.

When he was 20 Rimbaud went to East Africa to work there as a trader and from that moment on he wrote only business letters and letters to his family about the ups and downs of his life. One of the questions that continues to preoccupy biographers, and to which they seek answers in the letters he wrote and in his (later) poetry and poetic prose, is why Rimbaud decided to stop writing poetry. Was it because he wanted a different kind of life, a practical one, did he want to earn money? Had he already said all he wanted to say, or were poetry and poetic prose not the right medium to convey what was important to him after all? To answer these questions the dating of the work is important too: at what point did Rimbaud decide to stop and leave, in which poems did he say goodbye?

Critical reflections on Rimbaud's work always focus on his disorderly life and his erratic behaviour. Especially his later experimental works cannot be understood without a certain knowledge of the situation in which they were written. There are strong autobiographical undertones in all of them. Rimbaud's poetry reflect his rebellious nature and his restless life, but on the other hand he chose to live a disordered life in the service of his poetry. The result has inspired generations of poets and artists. As his biographer Graham Robb says about him: "In his posthumous career as Symbolist, Surrealist, Beat poet, student revolutionary, rock lyricist, gay pioneer and inspired drug-user, Rimbaud has been treated by four generations of avant-garde as an emergency exit from the house of convention." (p. xiv)

Life

Arthur Rimbaud was born on 20 October 1854 in Charleville, in the French Ardennes, near the border with Belgium. His mother, Vitalie Cuif, came from a peasant family that owned a farm with its own land in nearby Roche. In 1853 she married Frédéric Rimbaud, an army officer. The marriage was not very happy and Captain Rimbaud left his family after a few years. Thereafter, Vitalie went through life as the widow Rimbaud. Arthur had an older brother, Frédéric, and two younger sisters, Vitalie and Isabelle. Mother Rimbaud raised her children, especially her sons, sternly, and later an image of her has emerged of toughness and intransigence, for a large part due to what Arthur told others about his mother and the way he wrote about her. Yet Arthur always returned to his mother's house and when he was ill, she nursed him. His complicated relationship with his mother became one of the recurring themes in his work.

At school, Arthur proved to be an outstanding pupil; he had a particularly good memory and excelled in Greek and Latin, his favourite subjects. He wrote poems in Latin and proved capable of copying any style in his poetry. As the best pupil, he won many awards, frequently book prizes, which raised the expectations of his teachers and his mother. At first he enjoyed being admired and outshining his fellow pupils but when he grew older school began to bore him. He soon found that life outside school was far more interesting to him.

One of Rimbaud's teachers at the Collège de Charleville was Georges Izambard, who was only 21 when he became a teacher at Charleville. He was deeply interested in literature, had a fine library and wrote poetry himself. Izambard took the young Rimbaud under his wing and encouraged him to write poetry in French. They became friends, had long conversations about literature and politics and, like Izambard, Rimbaud soon became a fervent republican. Because now he could read as many books as he liked from his friend's collection, Rimbaud was able to study many works of Greek and Latin literature that he had not previously had access to, as well as numerous French authors. He

seized the opportunity. This introduced him to the poetry of the *Parnassiens*, the group of contemporary poets who followed strict rules of metre and rhyme and were in vogue in Paris at the time. Poets such as Leconte de Lisle and Théodore de Banville were well-known Parnassiens who were initially admired by Rimbaud, but whom he opposed when he began to develop his own ideas about poetry and wanted far more freedom of expression than their view of poetry offered. He thought their works were too rigid and the rules they followed oppressive.

At the age of 15, Rimbaud ended his school year with first prizes in many subjects, and these marked the end of his school career as well. The direct cause was war. The Franco-German war had broken out, which took up more of the attention of the inhabitants of Charleville and its twin town Mezières than any events at school, but a solemn prize-giving ceremony could still be held in August. Arthur's friend Izambard was absent, having gone to join his family in Douai, but the widow Rimbaud was present. After that, the school had to close for a while because of the war.

During his final year at school, Rimbaud had started writing poems regularly and sending them to poets and publishers. Shortly after the award ceremony, Arthur decided to leave for Paris, the centre of culture where all the great poets lived, wanting to join them and become a poet himself. It was the first time he ran away from home but the venture was not a success. He had no money for a train ticket and was arrested at once on arrival in Paris for travelling without having paid. The runaway was taken to Mazas prison, from where he wrote a letter to his friend Izambard asking him for help. Izambard could not come to his rescue himself, but he did send money so that Arthur could travel to Douai, where his family lived. There Arthur was looked after by Izambard's aunts for a while, but the boy soon had to return to his mother. The war also meant that the Rimbaud family stayed in Charleville for the summer, rather than spending the summer at the family farm in Roche. In the autumn, school still remained closed because of the war. For weeks, Rimbaud had nothing to do but read and walk and have long discussions with his friend Ernest Delahaye, who would later write a book of his memories of Rimbaud. In april 1871 the Collège de Charleville could open again in its own buildings and Rimbaud's mother begged him to return to his studies, but Arthur did not want to have anything more to do with scholastic learning. He preferred to go to the library and see to his own education.

Meanwhile, besieged Paris had surrendered to the Germans, prompting a popular revolt that led to the Paris Commune, which was bloodily crushed after a few months. For Rimbaud's rebellious spirit, the news of the uprising was very attractive, but the story that he joined the insurgents is probably not true. Rimbaud sold the watch he had won at the Concours Académique and now had money to leave for Paris again. When he got there he did not quite know what to do and rambled the streets and he may have stayed with the National Guard for a while. After wandering around the city for two weeks, he returned to Charleville. When he got back he wrote the poem *Coeur Supplicié*, which some commentators read as a reaction to a short stay in the barracks of the National Guard, where he was allegedly raped by soldiers. He never mentioned his experiences to anyone and did not write about them in his poetry explicitly, so there is no way of knowing what really happened. Rimbaud sent *Coeur Supplicié* to Izambard on 13 May 1871, together with a letter setting out his ideas on poetry, the first of the *Lettres du Voyant*; two days later he sent a letter on the same subject to a friend of Izambard's, Paul Demy. Rimbaud had acquired an increasingly clear vision of poetry in general as well as himself as a poet and now planned to become a seer (voyant) and a poet. In his two letters he described his ideas of what it means to be a poet and what poetry can achieve.

In September 1871, on the advice of a literary enthusiast from Charleville, Rimbaud sent a letter to the famous poet Paul Verlaine in Paris, enclosing some of his poems. Verlaine was impressed by the young poet's work and invited him to Paris: "Venez, chère grande âme, on vous appelle, on vous attend." Verlaine added the money for a one-way ticket to Paris. While waiting for his arrival,

Verlaine spread the news of the young talented poet in Paris so that he would be greeted by his fellow poets. It seemed to work, the poets welcomed him with open arms.

After receiving Verlaine's invitation, Rimbaud had left immediately, taking with him his newly written long poem, *The Drunken Boat (Le Bateau Ivre)*, to present to the Parisian poets. The poem was much admired and Rimbaud was widely praised; he seemed to have earned a place in poetry circles. The photographer Étienne Carjat took the two all-too-familiar photographs of him, and Henri Fantin-Latour painted the group portrait *Coin de Table*. For a short while he was a celebrated man. However, Rimbaud soon antagonised many people both by his appearance and insolent behaviour and by his lack of respect for the established poets and their work.

The Parnassians were a group of poets who wanted to restore the rules in poetry after all the liberties of Romanticism. They rejected the excessive sentimentality of Romantic poetry and as a reaction to its lack of discipline they subjected poetry again to rigid rules of rhyme and metre. This was not at all what Rimbaud had come to Paris for, on the contrary. The young rebel pursued ever more freedom and began to oppose the Parnassians openly. He parodied their work and suggested destroying the alexandrine. He was often intoxicated by absinthe and hashish, neglected his clothes, was filthy and behaved rudely towards everyone. He began a relationship with Verlaine, who had recently married Mathilde Mauté, and antagonized her and her family. In 1872 the two friends travelled to London, where many of the Communards had fled after the suppression of the rebellion.

Verlaine and Rimbaud entered into a stormy, and sometimes violent, relationship that was often strained by Verlaine's wife filing for divorce. Verlaine did not want a divorce, especially after the birth of his son, and he felt guilty towards his wife and child. His wavering attitude and sentimentality were a source of irritation for Rimbaud and led to conflicts again and again. Soon it became clear that the relationship could not last, although it proved hard for them both to end it definitely.

In April 1873 Rimbaud was back in Roche, where his mother and sisters were staying. His mother and sisters spent their time working on the farm, but instead of helping them with the work, Rimbaud withdrew in a shed where he started writing his great cycle of poems *A Season in Hell (Une Saison en Enfer)*. When a few months later Rimbaud went to Brussels to see Verlaine, the meeting ended in disaster. There were quarrels again, but this time Verlaine drew a pistol and fired twice at Rimbaud, who got injured at his hand. Rimbaud was so frightened that he went to the police and filed a complaint, which he withdrew later. But the damage was already done and Verlaine was arrested and eventually convicted, not because he had fired the gun, but on the charge of homosexuality. He was sentenced to two years of forced labor. When he was back in Roche, Rimbaud finished *A Season in Hell*, in which he drew on many of the experiences he had had with Verlaine. He persuaded his mother to cover the printing costs of his work and went to Paris again and in an attempt to garner attention for his work, but there was not much interest in him anymore, nor in his poetry. The Parisian poets were fed up with Rimbaud, and criticized and blamed him for his attitude towards Verlaine, who had always been popular in literary and artistic circles.

In March 1874 he returned to England, this time in the company of the poet Germain Nouveau, hoping to be able to teach French there, but he fell ill soon after arriving. His mother and one of his sisters had to come over from France to nurse him. There was nothing left to do but turn back and at the end of the year he was in Charleville again. Not much is known about the years that followed. Rimbaud travelled through Europe, to Stuttgart, Milan and Vienna and then to Brussels, where he met a recruiting agent for the Dutch Colonial Army. At the Dutch Consulate Rimbaud signed up for the minimum term of six years in the army and then took a train to Rotterdam, from where he was transferred to the naval port of Harderwijk for his training. He sailed for Java in June 1876 but he deserted on 15 August and by the end of the year he was back in Charleville. But he had seen the African coast, which seemed a good place for him to settle. In 1878 he worked for some months as a foreman in a stone quarry on Cyprus and after having stayed yet again in Charleville for a while due to

illness, he eventually left for Africa in 1880. He worked for an export company that traded principally in coffee, in Aden and the ancient city of Harar, where he finally seemed to feel at home. Later he also traded in cloths and weapons, he explored the backland of Ethiopia, travelling with caravans, and reported on his explorations to the Société de Géographie.

In February 1891 Rimbaud suffered from a tumor in his right knee and when the malady spread he decided to go to France for treatment. After his leg was amputated in Marseilles, Rimbaud went to Roche to be with his mother and his sister Isabelle, but his condition grew worse. He could not bear the cold of northern Europe anymore and longed for a warmer climate. He died in Marseilles 10 November 1891 on his way to Africa, at the age of 37 and was buried in the family grave in Charleville-Mézières. Soon after, the myth of Rimbaud emerged and his fame and influence only grew in the years that followed.

Many biographies and sketches of Rimbaud's life confine themselves to his life as a poet, up to the age of about 21. Although he participated in several expeditions and wrote long letters about his discoveries and experiences, his later life seems to be somewhat separate from that of Rimbaud the poet and innovator of poetry. Rimbaud's sister Isabelle married Paterné Berrichon, one of Arthur Rimbaud's first biographers, in 1897. Since then, poems, letters and documents have regularly surfaced, shedding new light on his life. New biographies continue to appear, as do new interpretations of his work.

Poetry and Prose

Although especially his later poems (*A Season in Hell/Une Saison en Enfer* and *Illuminations*) are not easy to read and not very accessible, Rimbaud always remained a popular poet, whose work inspired many other artists. In 1940, for example, Benjamin Britten wrote a song cycle to the lyrics of *Illuminations*, which is still performed regularly today.

Rimbaud is regarded as an exponent of symbolism, as an influence on surrealism, and as a source of inspiration for pop artists such as Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan. His life as a (very) young rebel, his drug use, his homosexual relationship with Paul Verlaine, his licentiousness, his desire for freedom and the free associations in his poetry all have a role in this context. In 2023, the Gallimard Gallery in Paris organised an exhibition of works by the American artist and singer Patti Smith, with a special focus on her intense relationship with Arthur Rimbaud, whose *Illuminations* were then published exactly 150 years ago. The exhibition focused on the artistic work of Patti Smith that was inspired by Arthur Rimbaud and his poetry. She wrote a preface to the 2011 reprint of *A Season in Hell*, about which she remarks: "A Season in Hell brought him nothing but misery. In misery's company you will find him, tramping the luminous sewer of his own circular system with all his marvelous contradictions intact." (p. vi)

As already said, Arthur Rimbaud began writing poetry at an early age, though probably not as young as he describes in *Les Poètes de sept Ans*. The first poems are still traditional in metre and rhyme, often written in alexandrines and in the rich rhyme that was back in fashion with the Parnassians. Soon the rebel stirred in him. Rimbaud revolted against the bourgeoisie, against social conventions and religious customs, against the monarchy and against war and he sympathised with the Communards. At the same time, his rebellion was directed against literary conventions, the rigid rhyme schemes, the forced metre. In *Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de Fleurs* (July 1871, dedicated to Théodore de Banville) he ridiculed the Parnassians.

Rimbaud reflected on what he wanted in poetry and wrote what can be seen as his poetic manifesto, the 'lettres de Voyant'. Robb calls the letter to Izambard, dated 13 May 1871 "one of the sacred texts of modern literature." (p. 81) He adds that on a first reading it hardly seems to deserve a grand title like *Letter of a Seer (Lettre du Voyant)*, but it makes clear that Rimbaud is already

developing an idiom of his own. Indeed, the letters do not expose an already completely formed theory, but they look like thoughts Rimbaud wrote down as they occurred to him, meant to persuade the receiver, not to be handed down to posterity.

Enid Starkie states that in forming the *Théorie du Voyant* that was put forward in the two letters, Rimbaud was influenced by the Cabala, books of magic, the many works of occult writers Rimbaud had read, and especially by Baudelaire, in whom he saw a model of what a voyant should be (Starkie 119). Starkie says about this theory:

Poetry was no longer the expression of himself, not the reflection of the sordid world around him, it was no longer to be an end in itself: it was to be the means of exploring the beyond and a vehicle for penetrating therein. Literature was to be closely allied to a prophetic sense and to mysticism, the most sure means of taking possession of *l'ineffable*. (p.97)

To this end a new language must be found:

These visions from another world will, however, be impossible to render in the ordinary outworn language, at the poet's disposal and therefore a new language must be discovered which will be capable of expressing *l'ineffable*, a new language not bound by logic, nor by grammar of syntax. (Starkie, p.125)

In his letter to Izambard, Rimbaud begins by scolding his teacher: "You are a teacher again. You have told me we owe a duty to Society. You belong to the teaching body: you move along in the right track." This is exactly what he himself didn't want at all: "Now I am degrading myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working hard to make myself a Seer...". He wants to achieve this through a disruption of all the senses (*dérèglement de tous les sens*). By a disruption of the senses the ordinary world disappears and the seer can see a world that lies beyond. Rimbaud says in his letter that he has discovered the poet in himself, but this does not mean that he can now say: "I think." It is a process that he cannot fully direct, in fact he has to say: "I am thought" (*on me pense*), resulting in the famous phrase: "I is another" (*JE est un autre*). In a letter to Paul Demeny, which he wrote two days later, he goes into more detail on this subject. The poet must know himself in the depths of his soul and make himself a seer and then he will be great:

Because he reaches the unknown! Since he cultivated his soul, rich already, more than any man! He reaches the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other collapsed.

Therefore the poet is truly the thief of fire.

He is responsible for humanity, even for the *animals*; he will have to have his inventions smelt, felt and heard; if what he brings back *from down there* has form, he gives form, if it is formless, he gives formlessness. A language must be found.

The poet must find a language that contains everything: smells, sounds, colours, a new language, new forms. This becomes his programme and this is what he wants to achieve in his poems. Rimbaud thinks he has invented such a complete new language. The same programme, but still written in the traditional form (sonnet, alexandrines), can be found in the early poem *Voyelles* (written at the end of 1871 or the beginning of 1872):

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,
One day I will tell your latent birth:
A, black hairy corset of shining flies
Which buzz around cruel stench,

Gulfs of darkness; E, whiteness of vapors and tents,
Lances of proud glaciers, white kings, quivering of flowers;
I, purples, spit blood, laughter of beautiful lips
In anger or penitent drunkenness;

U, cycles, divine vibrations of green seas,
Peace of pastures scattered with animals, peace of the wrinkles
With alchemy prints on heavy studious brows;

O, Supreme Clarion full of strange stridor,
Silences crossed by Worlds and Angels:
-O, the Omega, violet beam from His Eyes! (*Vowels*, p. 141)

In this poem vowels are associated with colours. Language steps outside its boundaries, beyond its banks, into realms beyond words and sounds. Critics disagree about the meaning of this poem and the origin of Rimbaud's theory of colours. Rimbaud's well-known poem *The Drunken Boat* (summer 1871) also makes repeated reference to colour, although there rhyme and verse still dominate too. The language is intended to be new and all-encompassing, but here the poetry itself is still traditional.

Rimbaud had grand ideas and an unprecedented ambition as a poet: he wanted to disrupt all the senses through alcohol and drugs, but also through extreme living: through hunger, exhaustion, deprivation. This makes him a seer, he sees what is hidden behind the everyday world, what is beyond ordinary experiences and ordinary descriptions, ordinary language. But he must create a new language to match his vision, a language that appeals to all the senses. This language does not describe the world, it *creates* a world. Rimbaud wanted to create a world in his poems and to create himself as a poet. Just as God created the world through the Word, Rimbaud creates a world through language. It is a world without a subject (*I is another*), but Rimbaud is omnipresent as its creator.

Poetry needs a shake-up, away from the traditional forms people in Paris are so attached to. In doing so, he managed to antagonise everyone in Paris: by his disruptive and upsetting behaviour, his insolence and debauchery, but also by his rejection of the old forms, his contempt for the work of established poets, his terrible arrogance and his ridicule of old and tried ideas.

When he went to Paris for the third time, he took *Le Bateau Ivre* with him as a proof of his skills. It stands out for its original images and metaphors, but the poem moves still within the known framework of stanzas and rhymes. In spite of the traditional form, some regard it as the best work Rimbaud wrote. It is the story of a boat adrift, by Rimbaud who had never seen the sea. Starkie says the point of departure of the poem is Baudelaire's *Le Voyage* but Rimbaud wished to continue from where Baudelaire had stopped (Starkie, p.134). Rimbaud went farther, he had new aspirations and would not be tied down by the limitations of this world. He wanted to escape: "Thus the bateau ivre drifted away without guidance, with all its crew massacred save the poet alone – here he was as solitary as he was to remain all through his life – and the mad adventure began." (Starkie, p. 135)

A Season in Hell

By the time Rimbaud tried to draw attention to *Une Saison en Enfer* in Paris, he already seemed to be forgotten and only much later, when he had begun his second life as a merchant, did interest in his work return. In the end, Rimbaud had carried out the task that he had set for himself, his own poetic programme.

While in London with Verlaine, he began the *Illuminations*, increasingly liberated of form and rules. They are separate poems that were later, in 1886, published together, without his knowledge, by Paul Verlaine, who always appreciated him. It is not known exactly how many of the poems that were included in *Illuminations* were already written when Rimbaud started *A Season in Hell*.

In Rimbaud's life there is a clear split between the young Rimbaud and the later Rimbaud, who, actually, only lived to be 37. The young Rimbaud is the brilliant adolescent, the precocious poet, the boy who resisted his middle-class upbringing and shook up the complacent establishment in Paris. From an early age, he longed for travel and faraway places, but his mother's home remained a safe haven for him. He would continue to feel the pull of his family home throughout his years as a poet and in his poetry he tried to come to terms with this. And then, in his early twenties, having pointed poetry in a new direction, he left it all behind. In fact, he said goodbye to poetry and Charleville at the same time. The older Rimbaud is the wanderer, the trader, who ended up in East Africa, travelling with caravans. This second phase of his life is judged differently: some biographers see it as the ultimate failure of a once promising life, others appreciate Rimbaud as an explorer. It is questionable, however, whether we would ever have heard of Rimbaud the explorer had it not been for Rimbaud the poet. The caesura between the two lives, and the key to understanding the turning point, seems to lie in *Une Saison en Enfer*. This is the account of Rimbaud's own struggle, with himself, the world and his poetry. Some have read it also as his farewell to poetry.

After many conflicts and arguments with Verlaine, Rimbaud went to Roche in April 1873 and began writing *A Season in Hell*; he completed it after the 'Brussels incident', when Verlaine shot at him. It is a crucial work in more ways than one. While many readers see *Illuminations* as Rimbaud's ultimate work, many others regard *A Season in Hell* as the pinnacle of his oeuvre and the key to understanding who Rimbaud was. For Rimbaud himself it must have had a special significance. It is the only work he ever wanted to publish himself. *A Season in Hell* is dated (April-August 1873) and Rimbaud himself put the mostly prose pieces in a specific order and came up with the title. And it is about him, his own life and his poetry. He worked on it intensively.

A Season in Hell can be read both as the story of his life and as a confession, but it is addressed to Satan: "Dear Satan, I beg you, show a less glaring eye! While waiting for the few small acts of cowardice still to come, for you who like in a writer an absence of descriptive or discursive faculties, I tear out these few miserable pages from my notebook of the damned." (p. 265) The descriptive or discursive ('descriptives ou instructives' it says in French) is what is usually lacking in Rimbaud's work, most of all in *Illuminations*, but not here. This is his own story and he wants to make it known, to his family, his teachers, his former friends, and the public.

Rimbaud writes about his ancestors, his own history and about his own life. At the beginning he says: "The Gauls were flayers of animals and the most inept scorches of grass in their time. From them I inherit: idolatry and love of sacrilege, - oh! all vices: anger, lust – lust that is grandiose – and especially deceit and sloth. I loathe all trades." But at the end, in *Farewell* he comes to the conclusion: "I who called myself magus or angel, exempt from all morality, I am thrown back to the earth, with a duty to find, and rough reality to embrace! Peasant!"

The middle section, and in some ways the highlight of *A Season in Hell*, is *Delirium (Délires)*. The first part, *The Foolish Virgin The Infernal Bridegroom (Vierge Folle L'Époux infernal)*, deals with the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine. Here, the foolish virgin takes the floor and describes how she sees the infernal bridegroom and how she experiences their relationship. In this poem, Rimbaud describes himself through Verlaine's eyes. For example, he has the bride (Verlaine) say:

How many nights have I stayed awake beside his dear sleeping body, wondering why he wanted so much to escape from reality. Never did man have such a wish. I recognized – without fearing for him – that he could be a serious danger for society. – Does he have perhaps secrets for *changing life*? No, he is only looking for them, I told myself.

Rimbaud describes Verlaine's folly and his weaknesses, but he does not spare himself, his own ambivalent attitude towards Verlaine and the world, his love and his cruelty. The second part, *Alchemy of the Word*, begins: "It is my turn. The story of one of my follies." This part is also about Rimbaud himself, but now it is about his work, about the poetry he has written so far. It is written almost entirely in the past tense. Rimbaud refers to his sources of inspiration and to poems he wrote in the past. He describes his own development as a poet:

I invented the color of vowels! – A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. – I regulated the form and movement of each consonant, and, with instinctive rhythms, I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible, some day, to all the senses. I reserved translation rights. It was at first a study. I wrote out silences and the nights. I recorded the inexpressible. I described frenzies.

He refers to earlier poems, more or less quotes them (or parodies them) and calls them old-fashioned rhymes (*la vieillesse poétique*), like his poem *Eternity* (*L'Éternité*). Rimbaud thus took leave of his earlier work, the rhyming poems, which were innovative but fell short of his new standard. They did not yet adequately implement the programme he had devised. In the meantime, Rimbaud had already taken the next step with the first parts of the *Illuminations* and with this work, *A Season in Hell*, which he was writing alone in the barn at Roche while his mother and sisters were at work. He takes stock. So he says in *Farewell*: "I have created all celebrations, all triumphs, all dramas. I have tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new tongues. I believed I had acquired supernatural powers. Well! I have to bury my imagination and my memories! A fine reputation of an artist and storyteller lost sight of! ... But not a friendly hand! Where can I find help?" (303). And he ends with: "What was I saying about a friendly hand? One fine advantage is that I can laugh at old lying loves and strike with shame those lying couples – I saw the hell of women down there – and I shall be free to possess truth in one body and soul." (305)

Rimbaud recounts a journey through hell, but it is not an account written in retrospect. The process of writing is part of the journey itself, and we read of Rimbaud completing his journey, escaping from hell. In *Morning*, he says:

I can no more explain myself than the beggar with his endless *Paters* and *Ave Marias*. I have forgotten how to speak!

Yet today I think I have finished the story of my hell. It was really hell; the old hell, the one whose gates were opened by the son of man.

From the same wilderness, in the same night, my tired eyes always awaken to the silver star, although the Kings of life, the three magi, the heart, the soul, and spirit, are not moved.

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

The song of heavens, the marching of nations! Slaves, let us not curse life.

A Season in Hell is one of the most influential works of nineteenth-century poetry. This influence can still be felt today. Although the work is often read as an account, the story of what had befallen the poet, other interpretations are possible, including that of the work as a whole. What is Rimbaud telling us with this poetical narrative? When his mother asked him what it meant, he seems to have replied: "It means what it says, literally and in every sense." (Robb p. 230)

The title refers to Dante's *Inferno*, but then the question arises as to the nature of the 'hell' in which Rimbaud spends some time, but from which he also emerges. It is certainly not just his mother's strict upbringing or the quarrels with Verlaine. Rimbaud goes through 'hell', but it is a season, a temporary stay, and writing is part of going through hell but it seems to be a method of escape as well. Rimbaud wants to go through all the layers of understanding and self-understanding. Biographer Graham Robb says of the work:

In fact, *Une Saison en Enfer* is a brilliant demonstration of the insight that 'I is somebody else', one of the first modern works of literature to show that experiments with language are also investigations into the self. (...) *Une Saison en Enfer* ... is without precedent. Even postcedents are hard to find. Fifty years before *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, Rimbaud at the age of eighteen, had invented a linguistic world that can be happily explored for years like the scrapyard of a civilization. (p.232-233)

Enid Starkie suggests that *A Season in Hell* should be read as the record of disillusionment:

It is a merciless indictment of all his previous hopes and beliefs, the most cruel criticism of his former life. From the beginning to the end of its burning pages he looks back, through his blinding tears, on his plan to change the world, to invent a new language, a new form of art, and realize how fantastic have been his previous pride and arrogance, his spiritual pride – one of the seven deadly sins. (...)

Poetry had been for him, with all his fine hopes and ambitions, what it had been for the others – a mere vehicle for self-expression. And since poetry, his own particular brand of poetry, could not help him to reach absolute truth, 'la vraie vie', then he would have none of it, and he would cast it away.

She maintains that Rimbaud was convinced that he had failed in what he had set out to achieve, and she sees this as the reason why he subsequently gave up poetry. According to Starkie, Rimbaud was more interested in poetry as an expression of his philosophical ideas than as art:

Rimbaud's poetry cannot be understood at all unless his philosophy is understood, for it was his special brand of philosophy which inspired him to write his special kind of poetry, and which made him eventually abandon it when he believed that there were other and better ways of attaining his goal. (p. 18)

When critics of Rimbaud's work want to reflect on the ideas underlying his poetry, they often quote from the *Lettres du Voyant*. The statement "I is another" (*JE est un autre*), which appears in both letters, is one of Rimbaud's best-known and most quoted phrases. This is remarkable because the letters, written in May 1871 when Rimbaud was 16 years old, do not belong to his poetic oeuvre as such and were each addressed to only one person. They are personal letters in which Rimbaud explains to his teacher, Izambard, and two days later to Paul Demeny, his views on poetry, the purpose of his poetry, and the resources he thinks are imperative to achieve his goal. They are not a preface to work that was not yet written and were not intended for publication. What would our

judgement be of the poetry if the recipients had destroyed these letters? The poems and poetic prose carry out the programme Rimbaud had in mind when he wrote the letters: they tell what Rimbaud saw and what his vision of the world is. In *Une Saison en Enfer*, they also help to get an insight into his soul.

Illuminations

A long-running debate in French literature has been the dating of Rimbaud's work, or the order in which the poems were written (see Starkie p. 222ff). In *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud seems to bid farewell to poetry, suggesting that this is his last work. Scholars now agree that at least part of *Illuminations* must have been written after *A Season in Hell*. But even if this is so, *A Season in Hell* sounds like an ending and saying goodbye. The poet is disappointed with what he has achieved. In the end, he is a "peasant", someone who has to go to work, practise a craft, even though Rimbaud always disliked it. But writing poetry cannot be his means of livelihood.

At the beginning of the account of his life in *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud puts Beauty (la Beauté) on his knees and she tastes bitter to him. *The Alchemy of the Word*, in which Rimbaud examines his own literary achievements, ends with: "Cela s'est passé. Je sais aujourd'hui saluer la beauté. The English translation is: 'That is over. Today I can greet beauty', but Rimbaud's 'saluer' can also mean 'say goodbye to', which in the context of the poem, and looking back at the beginning, is more obvious. But what exactly is Rimbaud saying goodbye to? And did he nonetheless continue to write, did he still have specific intentions with the poems he carried around with him like a pile of loose papers?

At the beginning of 1875, Rimbaud arrived in Stuttgart, where he planned to stay for some time in order to learn German and there he was soon visited by Verlaine, who had just been released from prison. Rimbaud wrote to Ernest Delahaye: "Verlaine arrived here the other day, clutching a rosary... three hours later he had renounced his god and reopened the 98 wounds of Our Savior." (5 March 1875, *Letters* p. 80) Rimbaud was not very happy with Verlaine's visit. They quickly fell out again and Rimbaud advised Verlaine to return to Paris. Verlaine left and shortly afterwards began teaching French at a grammar school in England. On his departure, Rimbaud entrusted Verlaine with a manuscript, probably the *Illuminations*, and asked him to pass it on to Germain Nouveau, who could arrange for its publication. It is not entirely clear what then happened to the manuscript, but in any case it was in Verlaine's possession by 1886, when he published parts of it in the magazine *La Vogue*. Soon afterwards the poems were published as a collection. In 1886, publication was done without asking for Rimbaud's permission; in fact, he was thought to be dead. The manuscript consisted of a number of loose sheets of poetry and prose that Rimbaud apparently thought belonged together in some way. They are undated and the order of the poems has changed considerably in different editions. Robb states about this collection of (prose) poems:

Whether or not he wanted to see his poems in print, he had obviously written them as a set. Despite the variety of forms – visions, parables, riddles, isolated phrases, a prose 'sonnet' and the first free-verse poems in French literature – the *Illuminations* have a recognizable stylistic fingerprint: the almost total absence of comparisons and analogies. Every image exists in its own right. Nothing defers to a higher authority. (p. 265)

The collection of poems is not a whole like *A Season in Hell*, and it was initially unclear exactly which poems should be included and in what order they should be placed. The title *Illuminations* seems to have been chosen by Rimbaud himself (see Starkie p. 214). "Illumination" can mean several things, related to or referring to each other, but the word has a variety of connotations, both material and

spiritual: putting the spotlight on something, decoration using light, act of illuminating, condition of spiritual awareness. Rimbaud's title seems to encompass all these meanings. He illuminates an object or a situation, makes it visible, as in *Seapiece*:

Chariots of silver and copper –
Bows of steel and silver –
Beat the foam –
Raise up the stumps of bramble –
The currents of the moor –
And the huge ruts of the ebb tide
Flow circularly toward the East,
Toward the pillars of the forest, –
Toward the poles of the pier,
Whose angle is struck by whirls of light.

Illuminations deals with several themes: the child or youth, the savage or primitive, the city. Unlike *Season in Hell*, the images sketched here are not narrative. Various scenes are described, but always from the outside, the poet does not seem to be part of it. Only a few times does an 'I' appear. In *Illuminations*, there is no unmistakable identification of the 'I' with Rimbaud himself. He associates freely, describing visions that float on their own language and do not become concrete. The voice constantly changes perspective and tone. We repeatedly hear 'I am...': it is the saint in prayer on the terrace, the scholar in his dark armchair, the wanderer on the main road running through the dwarfish woods, an inventor, a volatile, not too disgruntled citizen. One of the *Illuminations* is entitled *Departure (Départ)* and was used occasionally in earlier editions as a concluding poem:

Seen enough. The vision met itself in every kind of air.
Had enough. Noises of cities in the evening, in the sunlight, and forever.
Known enough. The haltings of life. – Oh! Noises and Visions!
Departure into new affection and sound? (p. 321)

This could be Rimbaud saying goodbye, leaving for a new life, but there is no 'I' here, so we do not know. At the end of *Enfance* Rimbaud says "I am master of silence".

This is how he is sometimes characterised, as if his later silence and his later life gave an extra charge or meaning to his poetry. As if there were something poetic about his later career as an arms dealer, something he wanted to add to his poetic work. One can only guess at Rimbaud's motives for abandoning poetry and settling in East Africa, and with Rimbaud himself keeping silent, the theories of his readers and critics can be no more than speculation.

Perhaps he did not appreciate the value of his work as much as his later readers and admirers did. Perhaps he was tired of the licentious life that had produced great poetry but also made him many enemies. Perhaps he wanted to live outside the force field of his mother's home, without having to return to her again and again asking for money. Perhaps he wanted to earn money after all the hunger and poverty. Or maybe he felt he had said all there was to say, or could be said. He may have felt he had arrived at the limit of language, as Robb says (p. 288):

When Rimbaud wrote the last *Illuminations*, he might have felt in any case that his poetry had crossed the limits of communicability and turned into a simple waste of energy. He was one of the first French poets to reach the logical end of Romanticism. Purged of clichés and common understandings, poems that were based on individual sensibility rather than on

convention were in danger of becoming irredeemably private – at least until they created a readership of their own. Perhaps the words at the end of 'Parade' were not intended as a provocation but as a helpful hint: 'I alone hold the key to this wild parade.'

Rimbaud reached the end of communication with his poetry. His words and phrases no longer have an ordinary reference and lose their normal function and meaning. It is no longer possible to say exactly what a poem means or what thoughts Rimbaud is conveying. His work sheds light on reality, but it is a coloured light, his poems are illuminations, works of art which everybody can see differently and interpret in their own way. In this sense, Rimbaud's poems express nothing, they are transient and say nothing about reality or about the poet himself. He alone has the key, the code to decipher the meaning, and that key is hidden deep within his soul. Those who read the (prose) poems without information about the poet, his life and ideals, will always miss some part of the meaning. This is true of *A Season in Hell*, but also of *Illuminations*.

Rimbaud wanted to convey a vision of the world in his poetry and created his own language to do so. As a result, no philosophy can be extracted from this poetry. The language Rimbaud created for his ideas is perfect for his purposes, so perfect that philosophy coincides with poetry and is completely intertwined with its language. Anyone who wants to understand it must somehow go and see and feel with him. Arthur Rimbaud rebelled against the tradition in which he had grown up, against the traditional social, religious and moral values, against the fixed rules of good behaviour and of poetry. He sought freedom and wanted to create his own world and his own language in poetry, to define himself as the creator of this work, as a poet and as a man. Judging by his work and reputation, one is inclined to say he succeeded. But whether he thought so himself is unclear. By the time he said anything about his work, he was already saying goodbye. After only a few years as a poet, he rigorously stopped writing poetry and chose a very different life, far from home and far from poetry.

In the end, Rimbaud, icon, poet and man, remains an enigma. At the end of his poetry, he found or created a language that is no longer anchored in the world. A language beyond language. His last poetry refers only to itself and can only be explained and understood by repeating it or by using it as material for new creations.

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