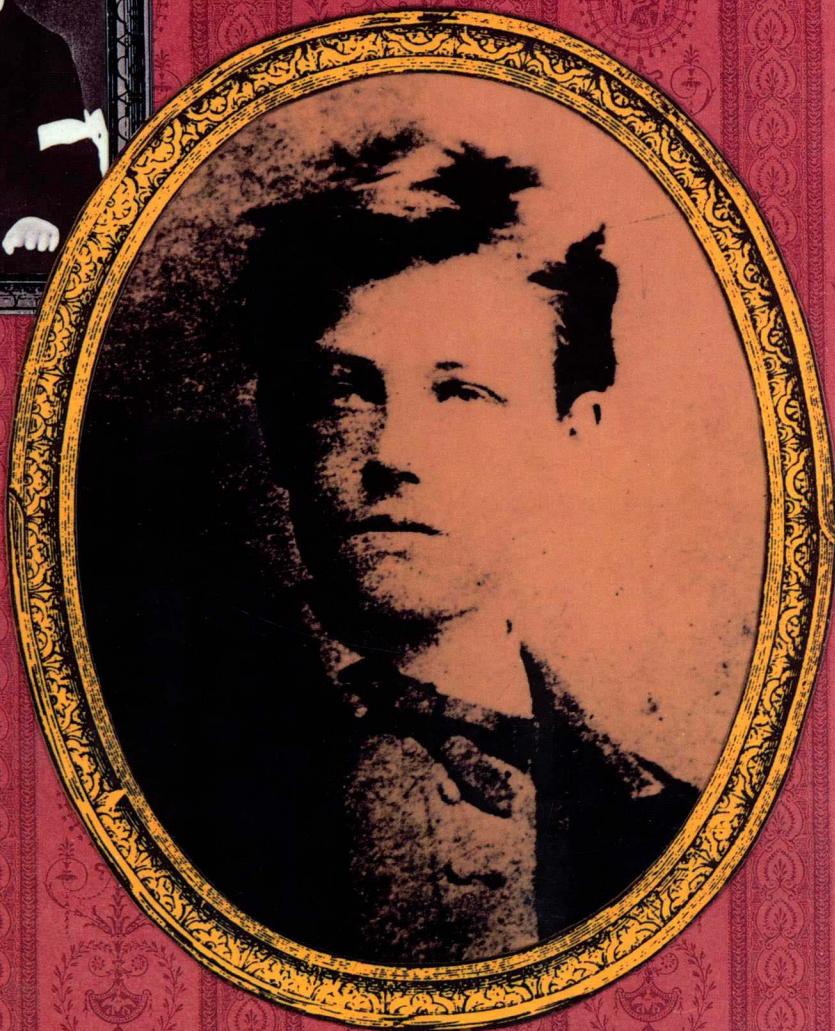


Modern Critical Views

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern criticism available in English on the work of Arthur Rimbaud. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Karin Cope for her aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer*, and attempts an exegesis of the principal rhetorical stances taken up by Rimbaud in that crucial revisionist tract. John Porter Houston begins the chronological sequence by setting Rimbaud's "dialectics of damnation" in the context of French Romantic tradition.

In a reading of Rimbaud's poem, "L'Éternité," Hans-Jost Frey finds it to link the "Lettre du voyant" and *Une Saison en enfer*, and so to represent the exact center of the poet's work.

The hallucination poems in *Illuminations* are analyzed by Nathaniel Wing, after which Enid Rhodes Peschel illuminates Rimbaud's poetics of hallucination, his aesthetics of intoxication.

Georges Poulet, celebrated critic of consciousness, expounds Rimbaud's sublimely outrageous ambition of representing each day as though it were a lifetime. In the first of two essays, the eminent semiotic critic, Michael Riffaterre, argues against current notions of "undecidability" by interpreting Rimbaud's prose poem, "Barbare." Three of Rimbaud's crucial poems about poetry are then read by Marshall Lindsay as combining to present the "poetic doctrine" of the Rimbaud canon.

Riffaterre's second essay explores hermeneutic models by way of a verse and a prose poem of Rimbaud's. The ambition to undo the ego, Rimbaud's most extraordinary enterprise, is investigated by Karin J. Dillman, after which Edward J. Ahearn brings together the poet's literary and political subversions. In this volume's final essay, published here for the first time, we return to Rimbaud's vision of his season in hell, chronicled by

Kristin Ross as a social vision in an apocalyptic sense. Rimbaud's poetic longing for a mode of work as yet unknown in our history is thus given an emphasis very different from the Gnostic interpretation it receives in my introduction.

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Introduction

I

Rimbaud, heir of both Hugo and Baudelaire, was potentially a stronger poet than either, just as Hart Crane, influenced by Eliot and Stevens, possessed poetic gifts that could have transcended the work of both precursors. Crane's identification with Rimbaud takes on a particular poignancy in this context, reminding us of imaginative losses as great as those involved in the early deaths of Shelley and of Keats. The scandal of Rimbaud, which would have been considerable in any nation's poetic tradition, was magnified because of the relative decorum in terms of form and rhetoric of French Romantic poetry, let alone of the entire course of French poetic tradition. A crisis in French poetry would seem a ripple in the Anglo-American tradition, which is endlessly varied and heterodox.

Except for Rimbaud, and a few more recent figures, French poetry does not have titanic eccentrics who establish entirely new norms. Rimbaud was a great innovator within French poetry, but he would have seemed less so had he written in the language of William Blake and William Wordsworth, of Robert Browning and Walt Whitman. *A Season in Hell* comes more than eighty years after *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and the *Illuminations* do not deconstruct the poetic self any more radically than do the Browning monologues and *Song of Myself*. One must be absolutely modern, yes, and a century after Rimbaud it is clear that no one ever is going to be more absolutely modern than the poet of *The Prelude* and the crisis lyrics of 1802. I once believed that the true difference between English and French poetry was the absence of French equivalents of Chaucer and Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. A larger difference, I now believe, is Wordsworth, whose astonishing originality ended a continuous tradition that had gone unbroken between Homer and Goethe.

Rimbaud had strong precursors in the later Hugo and in Baudelaire,

but so great was Rimbaud's potential that he would have benefited by an even fiercer agon, like the one Wordsworth conducted with Milton, and to a lesser extent with Shakespeare. The strongest French poets, down to Valéry, finally seem to confront a composite precursor, Boileau-Descartes, part classical critic, part philosopher. That develops very different urgencies from those ensuing when you must wrest your literary space from Milton or Wordsworth. The difference, even in the outcast Rimbaud, sets certain limits both to rhetoric and to vision.

Those limits, critics agree, come closest to being transcended, in very different ways, in *Une Saison en enfer* and *Les Illuminations*. Leo Bersani, impressively arguing for the "simplicity" of the *Illuminations*, affirms that Rimbaud's greatness is in his negations. Making poetry mean as little as possible is thus seen as Rimbaud's true ambition. If Rimbaud's "The I is another" is the central formula, then the *Illuminations* becomes the crucial work. But since poetry, like belief, takes place between truth and meaning, the Rimbaudian-Bersanian dream of literary negation may be only a dream. What would a poem be if it were, as Bersani hopes, "nonreferential, nonrelational, and devoid of attitudes, feelings and tones"? Bersani is the first to admit that the *Saison* is anything but that; it overwhelmingly reveals a coherent self, though hardly one of durable subjectivity. The trope and topos we call "voice" is so strong in *Saison* that we must judge it to be a High Romantic prose poem, whatever we take the *Illuminations* to be.

Saison, far more than Blake's *Marriage*, is always in danger of falling back into the normative Christianity that Rimbaud wants to deny, and that he evidently ceased to deny only upon his death bed. Kristin Ross, in a brilliant exegesis, reads *Saison* as opening out onto a sociohistorical field of which presumably Marcuse, in the name of Freud, was a prophet. I hear *Eros and Civilization* in Ross's eloquent summation of Rimbaud's stance as: "I *will be* a worker—but only at the moment when work, as we know it, has come to an end." If Bersani beautifully idealizes Rimbaud's aesthetic ambition, then Ross nobly idealizes his supposed socialization, though in a post-apocalyptic beyond. I am condemned to read Rimbaud from the perspective of Romanticism, as does John Porter Houston, and the poet I read has all the disorders of Romantic vision, but much of the meanings as well, and they hardly seem to me social meanings.

So much the worse for the wood that finds it is a violin, or the brass that finds it is a bugle, or the French boy of yeoman stock who at sixteen could write "Le Bateau ivre," transuming Baudelaire's "Le Voyage." Rimbaud's violent originality, from "Le Bateau ivre" on, drives not against meaning but against anyone whatsoever, even Baudelaire, bequeathing

Rimbaud any meaning that is not already his own. More even than the later Victor Hugo, to whom he grudgingly granted the poetic faculty of Vision, Rimbaud could tolerate no literary authority. Perhaps, if you could combine the visionary Hugo and Baudelaire into a single poet, Rimbaud would have had a precursor who might have induced in him some useful anxiety, but the Anglo-American poetic habit of creating for oneself an imaginary, composite poetic forerunner was not available to Rimbaud.

Barely two years after "Le Bateau ivre," Rimbaud had finished *Une Saison en enfer*. Blake is supposed to have written "How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field" before he was fourteen, but except for Blake there is no great poet as precocious as Rimbaud in all of Western literary history. Like Blake, a poet of extraordinary power at fourteen, Rimbaud quite unlike Blake abandoned poetry at nineteen. A trader and gunrunner in Africa, dead at thirty-seven, having written no poetry in the second half of his life, Rimbaud necessarily became and remains the mythical instance of the modern poet as the image of alienation. The myth obscures the deeper traditionalism of *Saison* in particular. Despite the difference implicit in the belated Romanticism of France, Rimbaud is as High Romantic as Blake or Shelley, or as Victor Hugo.

II

Une Saison en enfer has been called either a prose poem or a *récit*; it could also be named a miniature "anatomy" in Northrop Frye's sense of that genre. Perhaps it ought to be regarded as a belated Gnostic Gospel, like its hidden model, the canonical Gospel of John, a work which I suspect was revised away from its original form, one where the Word became, not flesh, but *pneuma*, and dwelt among us. Of all Rimbaud's writings, the *Saison* is most like a Hermetic Scripture. Rimbaud had never heard of Blake, who had promised the world his Bible of Hell, but *Saison* in its form always reminds me of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, though it is very different in spirit from that curiously genial instance of apocalyptic satire.

In no way is it condescending to call *Saison* also the Gospel of Adolescence, particularly when we remember that Rousseau had invented that interesting transition, since literature affords no traces of it before him. To think of Rousseau reading *Saison* is grotesque, but in a clear sense Rimbaud indeed is one of Rousseau's direct descendants. Rimbaud doubtless attempted to negate every inheritance, but how could Rimbaud negate Ro-

manticism? His negation of Catholicism is nothing but Romantic, particularly in its ambivalences.

The pattern unfolded in the nine sections of *Saison* would have been familiar to any Alexandrian Gnostic of the second century, A.D. Rimbaud begins with a Fall that is also a catastrophic Creation, abandoning behind him the feast of life, and yet remembering “la clef du festin ancien,” the key of charity. The feast must therefore be a communion table, the *pleroma* or Fullness from which Rimbaud has fallen away into the Gnostic *kenoma*, or emptiness of Hell that is simple, everyday bodily existence. Satan, in *Saison*, is the Gnostic Demiurge rather than the Catholic Devil, but then it is soon clear enough that Rimbaud himself, insofar as there is “himself,” is a Demiurge also, a peasant or serf Demiurge, as it were. Perhaps Rimbaud’s largest irony is his: “Je ne puis comprendre la révolte,” since the serfs rose up only to plunder. The medieval yearnings of the “Mauvais sang” section all resemble the rapaciousness of wolves against an animal they have not killed, and so the wolf Rimbaud, his pagan blood returning, is now passed by:

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

J’attends Dieu avec gourmandise. Je suis de race inférieure de
toute éternité.

The Holy Ghost is near, but the gluttonous waiting-for-God only guarantees Christ’s withholding of charity. Nobility and freedom do not come to the serf lusting for a preternatural salvation. A riot of barbarism is therefore preferable to a supposed civilization in a world bereft of revelation. This is the dialectic of libertine Gnosticism, and reminds me that the American work closest to Rimbaud in spirit is Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, with its superbly squalid version of the ancient Gnostic doctrine that Gershom Scholem grimly called: “Redemption through Sin.” Rimbaud peals throughout the rest of his “Bad Blood” section the iron music of atavism, in a full-scale justification of his own systematic derangement of the senses, only to collapse afterwards into the night of a real hell. Rimbaud’s Hell is shot through with glimpses of divinity, and seems to be married to Heaven in a literal way, very different from Blake’s ironic dialectic. God and Satan appear to be different names for one and the same spirit of lassitude, and Rimbaud thus prepares himself for his deepest descent, into delirium and its memories of his life of intimacy with Verlaine.

When I think of *Saison* I remember first the sick brilliance of Verlaine,

the Foolish Virgin, addressing Rimbaud, the Infernal Bridegroom. If *Saison* has any common readers, in the Johnsonian sense, what else would they remember? Rimbaud, had he wished to, could have been the most consistently savage humorist in the French language. Poor Verlaine is permanently impaled as that masochistic trimmer, the Foolish Virgin, unworthy either of salvation or damnation. The authority of this impaling is augmented by the portrait of the Infernal Bridegroom's forays into poetic alchemy, which are surely to be read as being just as ridiculous as the Foolish Virgin's posturings. So strong is the Rimbaud myth that his own repudiations of divinity and magic do not altogether persuade us. Thinking back to *Saison*, we all grimace wryly at Verlaine as Foolish Virgin, while remembering with aesthetic respect those verbal experiments that Rimbaud renounces so robustly.

To climb out of Hell, Rimbaud discovers that he must cast off his own Gnostic dualism, which means his not wholly un-Johannine Gnostic Christianity. Much of the sections, "L'Impossible" and "L'Éclair," are given to the quest away from Christianity, or rather the only Christianity that seems available. But since the quest involves those two great beasts of Nineteenth Century Europe, Transcendental Idealism and the Religion of Science, Rimbaud discovers that neither God nor Rimbaud is safely mocked. "Matin," following these dismissed absurdities, first restores Rimbaud's Gnosticism, his sense that what is best and oldest in him goes back to before the Creation-Fall. Hailing the birth of the new labor, the new wisdom, Rimbaud moves into his remarkable "Adieu," with its notorious motto: "Il faut être absolument moderne," the epigraph to the life's work of Rimbaud's Gnostic heir, Hart Crane. No longer a magus or an angel, Rimbaud is given back to the earth, a peasant again, like his ancestors. To think of the earth hardly seems a Gnostic formulation, and the famous closing passage of *Saison* abandons Gnosticism once and for all in an extraordinary breaththrough into visionary monism:

—j'ai vu l'enfer des femmes là-bas;—et il me sera loisible de
posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps.

I take it that Rimbaud saw *down there*—in his relation with Verlaine—"the hell of women," precisely the Oedipal romance that he sought to flee. Possessing the truth in a single mind and a single body—one's own—is a narcissistic revelation akin to that of Walt Whitman's at the close of *Song of Myself*. Christianity and Gnosticism alike are rejected, and so are both heterosexuality and homosexuality. *Saison* ends with an inward turning closer to Whitman than to Hugo or to Baudelaire:

Cependant c'est la veille. Recevons tous les influx de vigueur et de tendresse réelle. Et à l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes.

It is a passage worthy of the poet whom the late James Wright called: "our father, Walt Whitman." We can hardly murmur: "our father, Arthur Rimbaud," but we can remember Hart Crane's equal devotion to Whitman and to Rimbaud, and we can be grateful again to Crane for teaching us something about our ancestry.

JOHN PORTER HOUSTON

Une Saison en enfer
and the Dialectics of Damnation

“**M**auvais sang” serves as a general exposition of the theology of salvation and damnation; as we follow the narrator’s metamorphoses, Rimbaud establishes key notions: the spiritual vacuity of nineteenth-century Europe with its false Christianity, the yearnings of the soul for salvation of some sort, the possibility of escape in place if not in time, the inadequacy of grace to transform life, the self-destructiveness of Satanism, and the equal validity of heaven and hell as ideals. These themes have various antithetical relationships which provide the articulations of the chapter; thus its movement is not inductive but dialectic. Constituting as it does an introduction to the thought of *Une Saison en enfer*, “Mauvais sang” reaches no conclusion but rather has an almost futile cyclical motion. Each step in the dialectic leads both forward and backward again to itself. The elaborate parallelisms and contrasts between its parts give an illusion of movement, but essentially the narrative has not progressed.

With “Nuit de l’enfer” we commence the actual descent into hell; the landscape becomes eerie, void of other human figures, and shrouded in darkness. Instead of the erratic turnings and twistings of “Mauvais sang” the chapter consists of a smooth if dense monologue in which the narrator acquaints us with his successive *impressions de damné*. While in “Mauvais sang” he had merely explored the thought of self-damnation as a way of salvaging his soul from the nothingness of nineteenth-century life, here he has definitely committed himself to hell, and its pains and pleasures are

such as he had not earlier foreseen. His self-damnation is willful, which he proclaims with satisfaction:

J'ai avalé une fameuse gorgée de poison.—Trois fois béni soit le conseil qui m'est arrivé! Les entrailles me brûlent. La violence du venin tord mes membres, me rend difforme, me terrasse. Je meurs de soif, j'étouffe, je ne puis crier. C'est l'enfer, l'éternelle peine! Voyez comme le feu se relève! Je brûle comme il faut. Va, démon!

(I swallowed a terrific mouthful of poison.—Thrice blessed be the notion that came to me! My entrails burn. The violence of the poison twists my limbs, makes me shapeless, flings me to the ground. I'm dying of thirst, I'm choking, I can't cry out. I'm burning the way I should. Come on, demon!)

The way in which he has succeeded in losing his soul remains delicately ambiguous, since the poison he has swallowed is an inexplicit symbol conveying only corporeal destruction. He speaks curiously of an attempted conversion:

J'avais entrevu la conversion au bien et au bonheur, le salut. Puis-je décrire la vision, l'air de l'enfer ne souffre pas les hymnes. C'était des millions de créatures charmantes, un suave concert spirituel, la force et la paix, les nobles ambitions, que sais-je?

(I had glimpsed conversion to good and happiness, salvation. Can I describe the vision?—the air in hell doesn't transmit hymns. It was millions of enchanting creatures, a soft spiritual concert, strength and peace, noble ambitions, how should I know what?)

The rough draft of this passage bears the title "Fausse Conversion," and the expression seems indeed to explain the poet's situation. Yet false conversion is itself an ambiguous notion: it could imply an acceptance of God which somehow failed or a Faustian commitment to Satan in the hope of attaining a happiness which never came about. Rimbaud is carefully creating an equivocal situation which does not fit the usual notions of the discreteness of heaven and hell. This initial ambiguity will become intensified in the course of "Nuit de l'enfer."

At first the narrator is amazed that he remains alive, though in hell, and in possession of his reason, which he employs to analyze his state:

Et c'est encore la vie!—Si la damnation est éternelle! Un homme qui veut se mutiler est bien damné, n'est-ce pas? Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis. C'est l'exécution du catéchisme. Je suis esclave de mon baptême. . . . C'est la vie encore! Plus tard, les délices de la damnation seront plus profondes. Un crime, vite, que je tombe au néant, de par la loi humaine.

(And this is still life!—But damnation is eternal! A man who tries to mutilate himself is certainly damned, isn't he? *Cogito in inferis esse, ergo ibi sum*. It's the effect of the catechism. I'm a slave to my baptism. . . . This is still life! Later, the delights of damnation will be greater. A crime, quick, so I can drop into nothingness according to the law set for man.)

He longs for the *real* hell of the dead, finding the torments of this one too mild; he does not yet understand that his punishment will not consist in mere fire. Satan tempts him to forget he is damned and urbanely offers enchantments to distract him:

Tais-toi, mais tais-toi! . . . C'est la honte, le reproche, ici : Satan qui dit que le feu est ignoble, que ma colère est affreusement sotté.—Assez! . . . Des erreurs qu'on me souffle, magies, parfums faux, musiques puérides.

(Shut up! Will you shut up! . . . Here there's supposed to be shame, reproof; Satan says the fire is ignoble, that my anger is terribly silly.—Enough! . . . They are urging hallucinations upon me: magic sights, odd perfumes, puerile melodies.)

The poet angrily and suspiciously refuses the delights which are being pressed on him, not realizing that he is already succumbing to his true punishment, the illusion of his own perfection: “—Et dire que je tiens la vérité, que je vois la justice : j'ai un jugement sain et arrêté, je suis prêt pour la perfection . . .” Fear overcomes him, as he suddenly recognizes in what way hell is overpowering him and he recalls the earth in a violent outburst:

Orgueil.—La peau de ma tête se dessèche. Pitié! Seigneur, j'ai peur. J'ai soif, si soif! Ah! l'enfance, l'herbe, la pluie, le lac sur les pierres, le *clair de lune quand le clocher sonnait douze* . . . le diable est au clocher à cette heure. Marie! Sainte-Vierge! . . . —Horreur de ma bêtise.

(Pride.—My scalp is drying up. Pity! Lord, I'm afraid. I'm thirsty, so thirsty! Ah! childhood, grass, rain, the lake water on

the stones, *the moonlight when the belltower rang twelve . . .*
 The devil is in the tower now. Mary! Holy Virgin! . . . The horror of my stupidity.)

The last word sums up his reactions to the ambivalence of his feelings: the narrator has chosen to damn himself, yet prays to God; he feels certain of his own perfection but knows that only the hopelessly vitiated belong to hell. After this point, however, his last awareness of his situation vanishes and true damnation begins.

“Les hallucinations sont innombrables,” he announces as he sinks into the lower depths of hell—the hell of the truly dead for which he had earlier longed:

Ah, ça! l’horloge de la vie s’est arrêtée tout à l’heure. Je ne suis plus au monde.—La théologie est sérieuse, l’enfer est certainement *en bas*—et le ciel en haut.—Extase, cauchemar, sommeil dans un nid de flammes.

(Ah! there! The clock of life stopped just now. I am no longer in the world.—Theology is serious: hell is certainly *down below*—and heaven up there.—Ecstasy, nightmare, slumber in a nest of flames.)

The peculiarity of the poet’s hell is its sporadic semblance of beatitude: “hell is certainly *down below*” is a query, for visions of divinity and power are stealing on the narrator. First Jesus appears to the poet, who seems to have taken a seat among the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee (John 6; Matt. 14):

Jésus marche sur les ronces purpurines, sans les courber . . . Jésus marchait sur les eaux irritées. La lanterne nous le montra debout, blanc et des tresses brunes, au flanc d’une vague d’émeraude . . .

(Jesus is walking on the scarlet brambles, without bending them down . . . Jesus was walking on the angry waters. The lantern showed him to us, pale with dark locks, beside an emerald wave.)

The omniscience of deity then possesses the narrator: “Je vais dévoiler tous les mystères : mystères religieux ou naturels, mort, naissance, avenir, passé, cosmogonie, néant.” He presents himself as the supreme magician, a role which Satan traditionally enjoys: