

Excerpt from

# “Rimbaud Revisited”

Critical Essay accompanying  
a new translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s

“Une Saison en Enfer”

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“Il a peut-être des secrets pour changer la vie?”  
(Délires I)

WHEN I made the first draft of this translation of *Une Saison en Enfer* in the early Seventies, I viewed Rimbaud essentially as a pantheist and rabid opponent of Christianity. There's certainly plenty of evidence for such an interpretation of Rimbaud though not so much as I imagined if we stick strictly to *Une Saison en Enfer* : the real pièces à conviction for such a viewpoint are early poems such as 'Les Premières Communions' and 'Soleil et Chair' .

“— O Vénus, ô Déesse !  
Je regrette le temps de l'antique jeunesse  
Des satyrs lascifs, des faunes animaux...  
Je crois en toi ! je crois en toi ! Divine mere,  
Aphrodite marine ! — Oh ! la route est amère  
Depuis que l'autre Dieu nous attelle à sa croix;  
Chair, Marbre, Fleur, Vénus, c'est en toi que je crois !”

“O Venus! Goddess! How I regret that ancient youthful era peopled by lustful satyrs and fauns... I believe in you! I believe in you! Divine mother, Aphrodite who rose from the sea! How bitter the path is since the other god yoked us to his cross; Flesh, Marble, Flower, Venus, it is in you that I believe!”

This is certainly where Rimbaud was coming from but by 1872-3 he no longer quite subscribed to such a simple pantheistic faith though there are echoes of it here and there especially in the section *Mauvais Sang* ('Pagan Blood').

Re-reading *Une Saison en Enfer* today, I see it differently. *Une Saison en Enfer* is like a shower of sparks, or rather flames, shooting out in all directions. But there is a basic theme, a progression, an inner logic. At the centre of the book is the conviction that mankind must be transformed — present man is something to be overcome.

Rimbaud's preoccupations, to 'change life' ('changer la vie'), to 'recover the lost paradise' ('rechercher la clef du festin ancien'), to redefine 'love' ('l'amour est à réinventer'), to find a way to a new world order ('Matin') are all variations on traditional religious themes and place him firmly in the tradition of Pascal and even Saint Augustine (of the *Confessions*) rather than de Musset or Byron. *Une Saison en Enfer* is deadly serious : there is no place for humour, only occasional flashes of savage satire often directed against the author. Claudel described *Une Saison en Enfer* perfectly as 'un livre si sombre et amer, et en meme temps, pénétré d'une mystérieuse douceur' ('a dark and bitter work, which is nonetheless suffused with a mysterious gentleness').

Many twentieth century critics were puzzled, not to say shocked, to find that the poet of revolt, 'le premier et le plus grand' as Camus called him, should be so preoccupied with religion in *Une Saison en Enfer*.

In Rimbaud's early poems Christ is attacked as 'voleur d'énergies' ('thief of human energy') especially sexual energy : he is responsible for turning healthy sensualists into guilt-ridden neurotics. As the anonymous heroine of *Les Premières*

Communion puts it in a verse that must have profoundly shocked sensibilities of the time when it eventually saw print :

“Et mon cœur et ma chair par ta chair embrassée,  
Fourmillent du baiser putride de Jésus.”

“Both my heart and my body, embraced by your body, swarm  
with the putrid kiss of Jesus.”

There is relatively little of this, however, in *Une Saison en Enfer* : here Christianity is attacked, socialist fashion, for being in perpetual alliance with the ruling classes, the nobles, colonialists destroying native cultures and so forth.

But there is another aspect to religion of which Rimbaud was well aware. The major world religions, Christianity and Buddhism especially, embody far-reaching attempts to remodel human nature : they can be seen as a protest and a revolt against the human condition. By comparison secular movements, with the possible exception of communism, are much less ambitious. Nineteenth century democratic and socialist movements accepted human nature as it was, and, if we go a little further back, we find that practically all the thinkers of the Enlightenment believed that there was a ‘natural goodness’ within mankind on which they could ultimately rely and a ‘natural reason’ to which they could appeal. Improved working conditions, electoral reform, free education, a higher standard of living &c. &c. would automatically change the individual for the better. As against this, Christianity teaches that man is a degenerate, fallen creature who can only be changed with the help of God, either by grace alone which is the Lutheran position, or by an intensive God-directed psycho/physical regime such as that devised by Ignatius Loyola for the members of the Society of Jesus. Neither of these procedures is ‘natural’ or inevitable.

Rimbaud, despite his recurrent outbursts against Christianity, was a good deal closer in his thinking to the pre-scientific religious view of man than the modern progressivist one, and, at least in *Une Saison en Enfer*, more consistently anti-rationalistic than anti-Christian — “Je ne suis pas prisonnier de ma raison. J’ai dit Dieu” (‘Pagan Blood’). As far as he was concerned the Enlightenment had failed : he had the late nineteenth century results in front of his eyes and in his early poems he laments the wholesale trivialization and desacralization of life — ‘notre pâle raison nous cache l’infini!’ (‘pale Reason has blotted out the infinite!’).

As for Christianity, it is not really a matter of whether it is true — who cares whether it’s true or not? — but whether it actually works. And the reply is in the negative : Christianity, which promised ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ and a regenerated humanity, has not lived up to the vast expectations it aroused. It is not so much wrong as irrelevant. Rimbaud is not at all concerned with what humanity should be doing for Christ, but rather with what Christ should have done, and still be doing, for humanity, and in particular for himself — ‘Pourquoi Christ ne m’aide-t-il pas, en donnant à mon âme noblesse et liberté? Hélas ! l’Evangile a passé !’ (‘Why does not Christ come to my aid by endowing my soul with nobility and freedom? Alas! The Gospel has had its day’). This cry from the section *Mauvais Sang* has (probably deliberate) overtones of Christ’s cry from the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”



Une Saison en Enfer is the record of a crisis (Louis Forestier, Rimbaud). What today we would call a 'psychological crisis' and what in the nineteenth and earlier centuries they called a 'spiritual crisis'. A crisis of belief at any rate.

Rimbaud, however, belongs to the modern era — one could justifiably call him a twentieth century thinker even though he died in 1891. In Une Saison en Enfer the belief system on trial is not Christianity which as a system of ideas and moral imperatives accepted by most educated people went out in the mid-nineteenth century or earlier. But Rimbaud did not 'lose his faith' in the way in which so many Victorians did when they tried to square what the Bible said with Darwin : he seems to have had no intellectual (as opposed to emotional) difficulties in sloughing off Catholic doctrine as early as fourteen or so. His objection to Christianity, like Nietzsche's, was temperamental, 'spiritual' if you like — it was certainly not rational.

Une Saison en Enfer is clearly in some sense the chronicle of a 'loss of faith' : it is the log-book of an explorer who finds that he has landed up in a land of spiritual and intellectual darkness instead of light. But the faith we see Rimbaud losing as the carnet d'un damné ('notebook of a condemned man') progresses is not Christianity but the pagan/magical anti-system that Rimbaud developed to replace at one fell swoop Catholicism and science.

For many people in the late nineteenth century faith in education and technology had effectively occupied the position vacated by organised religion. And nowhere was this truer than in France, France with its excellent public education system and its sceptical, strongly rationalistic literary tradition (Montaigne, Voltaire, Diderot &c.). Whereas the eventual leader of the English Revolution, Cromwell, was a fervent believer in God, Robespierre saw himself as the servant of Reason and even had her statue drawn in triumph through the streets of Paris. But Rimbaud, moving forward historically at breakneck speed, rejects with contempt the new sacred cows: they are just the same old wretched tricks and illusions under a different name — "old wives' tales and new arrangements of popular songs" as he describes the natural sciences and philosophy. Science, technology, democracy, education &c. &c. all these things had not changed the essential and so they are dismissed by Rimbaud as completely pointless. What is needed is radical, thorough and above all sudden change — Rimbaud is always in a tremendous hurry, he is 'pressé de trouver le lieu et la formule' ('in haste to find the place and the formula [for changing the world]').

So where does that leave him? More precisely, where did it leave him in the two year period between the temporary closure of the Charleville lycée (where he had been a star pupil) because of the Prussian war and the publication of Une Saison en Enfer in October 1873? One possibility was political action, not the ballot-box social-democratic sort of action which was obviously far too slow, but a wave of revolutionary violence that would go through Europe like a tornado, sweeping aside the hated bourgeoisie — 'so respectable that they deserve to be burned alive' — and everything they represented for ever.



The remarkable (untitled) poem 'Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon cœur, que les nappes de sang' is usually dated 1871, the year of the Paris Commune, though whether it was written before or after the semaine sanglante (May 21 – 28) is unclear.

Since the poem is not particularly well-known, I shall give it in full along with a rough translation.

“Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon cœur, que les nappes de sang  
Et de braise, et mille meurtres, et les longs cris  
De rage, sanglots de tout enfer renversant  
Tout ordre; et l'Aquilon encore sur les débris;

Et toute vengeance ? Rien! ... — Mais si, toute encor,  
Nous la voulons! Industriels, princes, sénats :  
Périssez! Puissance, justice, histoire ; à bas !  
Ça nous est dû. Le sang! Le sang! La flamme d'or !

Tout à la guerre, à la vengeance, à la terreur,  
Mon esprit ! tournons dans la morsure : Ah! Passez,  
Républiques de ce monde ! Des empereurs  
Des régiments, des colons, des peuples, assez !

Qui remuerait les tourbillons de feu furieux,  
Que nous et ceux que nous nous imaginons frères ?  
A nous, romanesques amis : ça va nous plaire.  
Jamais nous ne travaillerons, ô flots de feux !

Europe, Asie, Amérique, disparaissez.  
Notre marche vengeresse a tout occupé,  
Cités et campagnes ! — Nous serons écrasés !  
Les volcans sauteront ! Et l'Océan frappe...

Oh ! mes amis ! — Mon cœur, c'est sûr, ils sont des frères :  
Noirs inconnus, si nous allions ! Allons ! allons !  
O malheur ! je me sens frémir, la vieille terre,  
Sur moi de plus en plus à vous ! la terre fond.

Ce n'est rien : j'y suis, j'y suis toujours...

“What does it matter to us, my heart, the sheets of blood and the ashes and the thousand murders, the long cries of rage and all the acts of vengeance, the shrieks as all hell is let loose upon the world, and the North Wind howling across the wreckage?

Nothing. On the contrary, we wish it! Capitalists, princes, senators, perish! Authority, justice, history — no more! It is our due. Blood! Blood! The golden flame!

Put everything to the sword, unleash vengeance and terror everywhere, this is what I want! Let us bite back against our oppressors! Your time is over, republics of the world! Emperors, regiments, colonists, peoples, enough, I say!

Who is there to fan these flames into a mighty conflagration but us and those we consider our brothers? Join us, idealistic friends, you will find joy in all this. Never will we do any work, oh floods of fire!

Europe, Asia, America, disappear without trace! Our march of vengeance has swept all before it, cities and farmlands! — We shall be crushed! The volcanoes will erupt! The Ocean struck....

Rise up, my friends! I know in my heart that you are friends : unknown black people, join with us! Let us begin! Let us begin ! O disaster! I feel my limbs trembling, the ground beneath my feet is shaking..... The earth itself is melting.

No; it is nothing; I am still here; I shall always be here ...”

This is strong stuff. I remember reading it enraptured at the age of fifteen and reciting it out loud when my parents were out. It expressed perfectly the pent up frustrations and limitless resentments of youth...

Later, when I found myself close to the political action in Paris I felt differently. Not just because of fears for my own skin (though there was this) but also because I was no longer so sure that blood was ‘the sacred flame’ and that, if the moment came, I would be able to shed it so heedlessly as Rimbaud invites his ‘brothers’ to do.

An Islamic jihadist, presumably translating into English some Arabic idiom, said, “Now you know the smell of the coffee”, with reference to the 7/7 suicide bombings in the London Underground. This is entirely in the spirit of “Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon cœur”.



As it transpired, Rimbaud did not go down the path of terrorist action as the French anarchists Ravachol, Émile Henry and several others did during Rimbaud’s own life time. Instead, during the period immediately after the Paris Commune, he opted for the path of individual, rather than social, transformation but on equally thorough, not to say fanatical, lines. A radical Marxist I knew in the Sixties (Chris Gray) talking to me about *Une Saison en Enfer* said that it was

“an attempt at a purely individual revolution”. “And of the inevitable failure of any such attempt”, he immediately added.

I used at one time to assume that Rimbaud’s for a while intense interest in magic, alchemy and esoterism belonged to an earlier, more ‘adolescent’ phase of his life (although he was only eighteen when he wrote *Une Saison en Enfer*), or, conversely, resulted from his disappointment with the collapse of the Paris Commune and the subsequent reaction. But, strangely enough, the famous *Lettre à Paul Demeny* where he develops his idea of the ‘poet as seer’ is dated May 15 1871, that is, while the Paris Commune was still in full swing though under sentence of death. Moreover, the letter opens with a (not particularly good) ‘contemporary psalm’ — as Rimbaud describes it — entitled ‘*Chant de Guerre Parisien*’ (‘Parisian War-Cry’) all about the political situation in Paris. One should thus, perhaps, envisage Rimbaud’s programme of personal transformation and literary revolution as all of a piece with the socio-political movement that was convulsing France — rather than as a transference of disappointed political hopes to the subjective sphere. During the so-called student revolution of May 68 in Paris I recall that there was a ferment of intellectual activity in and around the Sorbonne, not all of it by any means directly concerned with politics — though it was the exterior situation that was the indirect cause nonetheless. There seems to be something of this here.



Rimbaud’s programme for turning himself into a voyant (‘seer’, ‘clairvoyant’?) is contained in two letters, one dated the 13<sup>th</sup> and the other the 15<sup>th</sup> May 1871. In the first, after ungraciously insulting his old teacher, George Izambard, who had been extremely useful to him, he writes

“Je veux être poète. Et je travaille à me rendre voyant... Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens. Les souffrances sont énormes, mais il faut être fort, être né poète, et je me suis reconnu poète. Ce n’est pas du tout ma faute. Je pense. On devrait dire : On me pense.”

“I wish to become a poet. To this end I am striving to make myself into a seer. The idea is to reach the unknown by the disordering of all the senses. The sufferings involved are enormous, but you have to be strong, have to be born a poet, and that is how I see myself. It’s not my decision. It is false to say : I think. One should say : Someone is thinking through me.”

The reference to Descartes’ ‘*Je pense, donc je suis*’ is interesting as it shows once again how Rimbaud rejects the entire Western individualistic, rationalistic tradition in favour of the older shamanistic one which sees the individual as the vehicle, voluntary or not, of superhuman forces. Instead of free choice Rimbaud (freely) embraces destiny, instead of comfort he welcomes suffering and instead of self-assertion he calmly states that he intends to make himself into an instrument for powers unknown. Rimbaud proposes to take things further even than the pythoness of Delphi, since he is here offering to become, not simply a mouthpiece, but a thinking machine for another being (‘*On me pense*’).

The second letter, addressed to Paul Demesny, says much the same though it starts off by recalling the 'Know thyself' of Greek humanism : "La première étude de l'homme qui veut être poète est sa propre connaissance, entière; il cherche son âme, il l'inspecte, il la tente, l'apprend" ("The first study of anyone who wants to be a poet should be understanding himself; he searches into his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns all about it'). But this is only preparatory: the real task, to adapt Marx's phrase, is 'not to understand oneself, as up to now poets and philosophers have been content to do, but to change oneself'.

"Je dis qu'il faut être voyant, se faire voyant.

Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens. Toutes les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie : il cherche lui-même. Il épuise en lui tous les poisons pour n'en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit — et le suprême Savant! — Car il arrivera à l'inconnu ! "

'I say one must become a seer, must turn oneself into a seer.

The poet turns himself into a seer by a long, immense and systematic disordering of all the senses. He embraces all forms of love, suffering, madness : in these things he will find himself. He exhausts all poisons within himself, only keeping the refined extracts. Frightful torture which requires all his faith, all his superhuman strength, for he must become among other things the great sick person, the great criminal, the great damned soul — and the supreme man of knowledge. — He will reach what is as yet unknown! '

What is striking about this is the deliberateness of the project : it is the Will in the service of the Idea, Reason in the service of the Imagination. Becoming a visionary poet apparently requires the sort of training necessary to produce a Trappist monk or a candidate for the SS. Most nineteenth century artists liked to see themselves as victims of malign Destiny and/or cruel Society, but only Rimbaud goes so far as to state that harsh treatment is essential and that, since he can't count on what will be meted out to him by others, he intends to oversee the programme himself. Other nineteenth-century artists talked airily of the 'disorder of the senses', but what they usually had in mind was some form of agreeable self-indulgence : it takes a Rimbaud to speak of a systematic disordering of the senses. One is reminded of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola which were deliberately designed to be a kind of spiritual third degree — even today Jesuit novices undergoing the course not infrequently go to pieces as letters to the Catholic magazine *The Tablet* testify.

'Why all this? What's the point? Won't something less strenuous work just as well?' one might ask in bewilderment. The answer is no it won't. Because the basic human material is of such poor quality, it needs to be thoroughly shaken up, 'deranged', because only in this way can one get results. 'Quel travail ! Tout à démolir, tout à effacer dans ma tête !' ('What work needs to be done ! Everything must be demolished, all that is in my head wiped out !')





Rimbaud, rather surprisingly in some ways, does not envisage himself as a sort of poetic Messiah (or Antichrist) ushering in the new era by his very existence : he claims to be quite content with the much humbler role of pioneer psychic explorer, the equivalent on the poetic/visionary plane of those medical researchers who drank down cholera infected water in order to test the germ theory of disease. Moreover, Rimbaud anticipates that he will fail but cheerfully dismisses this as of no consequence since others will come after him and 'begin at the very horizon where he has collapsed'.

Rimbaud's programme for poetic and psychic self-development is not a personal power kick which explains why he can with a clear conscience launch into these far-fetched aesthetic theories at the very moment when the future of the socialist revolution is about to be decided with bayonets in the streets of Paris. He identifies the poet with Prometheus ('le poète est vraiment voleur de feu') and Prometheus we must remember was punished not for pride like Lucifer but for being a benefactor of the human race. In this same letter to Paul Demesny Rimbaud speaks of the poet as 'chargé de l'humanité' ('responsible for humanity') and envisages poetry not as a mere 'reflection' of what is going on but as preceding and initiating change 'La poésie ne rythmera plus l'action; elle sera en avant' ('Poetry will not just keep pace with action, but will be in advance [of action]'). It is not surprising that, given this extremely ambitious vision of the role of poetry in the future society, Rimbaud subsequently showed not the slightest interest in literature as a mere career.



Where does the poet/visionary get his stimulus from? Not God certainly; but not from humanity either. At this stage in his life Rimbaud adheres fairly closely to the Romantic 'religion' that goes back at least to Rousseau : the source is what we would call 'the unconscious' but it is not the individual unconscious which is why he says (on two occasions) 'Je est un autre' meaning, not that he is 'just anyone', but that he is 'a vehicle for someone or something'. This was the original meaning of 'inspiration', i.e. being 'breathed into' (by a god). The origin of the poet's visions thus lies in what today we would today call the 'collective unconscious' — though even this is still too limited a conception since it is restricted to the human sphere. Rimbaud himself speaks of 'l'âme universelle', 'the World-Soul'. In a formula as significant and much more useful than the far better known one about the disordering the senses, Rimbaud defines the poet's role : 'Le poète définirait la quantité d'inconnu s'éveillant en son temps dans l'âme universelle' ('The poet's task is to give expression to the unknown element that is awakening during his epoch within the world soul').

The focus and ultimate aim of all this project is, however, restricted to this world : it is not a flight into another dimension. This is why he writes, without any implied slight, 'Cet avenir sera matérialiste, vous le voyez' ('This future will be a materialistic one, you will see it for yourself').



The idea of changing the individual by intensive psycho/physical training has a long history since it goes right back to the age of shamans and 'holy men'. Monasticism is essentially a continuation of the same in a communal single-sex environment : the vows of lifelong 'Chastity, Poverty and Obedience' are today denounced as unnatural and inhuman but that is precisely the point. Nature, left to itself, will not produce either the Nietzschean Superman or the Christian anti-Superman, the saint. The last two and a half thousand years, in both West and East, have witnessed a sustained, by and large sincere, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to provoke what one might call a human mutation. The desired end product, the Christian saint or Buddhist Bodhisattva, is a human being in whom altruistic feelings have entirely replaced the biological ones of self-preservation and self-aggrandisement. Rimbaud understood this well enough — "The saints! Titans! Heroes! Where can they be hiding? Stylites, anchorites, aesthetes of the Holy Grail whose talents no longer find employment!" Compared to the pedestrian and money-grubbing nineteenth century bourgeois these people obviously had something to recommend them.



Educated people who look down on mysticism, ESP, the paranormal, occultism and so on, fail to understand that the movement is a counter-current produced by the material advances of the last century : it is a frantic last-ditch attempt to hit back before it is too late. Science and technology devalue the human individual completely since a human being is, physically and mathematically speaking, no different from any other 'body' — a baby thrown off the Leaning Tower of Pisa falls at the same rate as an empty beer can or a slug (excluding air resistance). Magic, however, is a human based technology, the source of power being the magician's personal will — and you do not need money or social connections or a college education to develop will power. Also, you can start the inner transformation immediately : there is no need to hang about like the Marxists endlessly waiting for the appropriate 'historical conditions'.



Rimbaud anticipated modern hippies, drop-outs and rebels without a cause by nearly a hundred years : he grew his hair long, smoked hashish, refused to get a job, scrawled 'Mort à Dieu' in chalk on public benches at Charleville &c. &c. But the Sixties and Seventies youth revolt was in general anything but controlled ; Rimbaud's ambitious plans to make himself into a seer are more in line with the ideas of Carlos Castaneda and the various 'programmes of personal development' that flourished for a while in the USA such as EST and Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

It is unclear how far Rimbaud actually went with his own programme. Nonetheless, there was from the beginning a hard, self-willed, ascetic, streak in Rimbaud's character which marked him out from the run of the mill happy go lucky bohemian and which he presumably inherited from his mother. Louis

Perquin, who knew her personally, described her as “une femme inflexible; je ne l’ai jamais vue rire ou sourire une fois” (‘An inflexible woman; I never saw her laugh or smile once’).



Délires II relates the complete collapse of Rimbaud’s programme of self-transformation : instead of turning himself into a visionary poet, he has, as he now sees it, very nearly turned himself into a lunatic.

And yet *Une Saison en Enfer* is not the record of failure. Certainly, Rimbaud has not found the ‘key to the primeval feast’ but he is no longer looking for it. If his aim all along was to escape from Hell, *Une Saison en Enfer* is a success story, the account of a mission very nearly completed. Although Rimbaud has not yet left Hell in the final section ‘Adieu’, he considers his release to be imminent : ‘Je puis dire que la victoire m’est acquise : les grincements de dents, les sifflements de feu, les soupirs empestés se modèrent’ (‘I am confident that ultimate victory will be mine : the gnashing of teeth, the hissing of flames, the pestilential moans diminish with every hour’).

Rimbaud is contemporary enough to envisage Hell as essentially a state of mind rather than a place : he says in ‘Matin’, ‘I believe I have now concluded the account of my hell’. In modern terms he has managed to work through the accumulated experiences of his youth and, without the help of a priest or psychoanalyst, has rid himself of them for good — ‘Tous les souvenirs immondes s’effacent’ (‘The pathetic episodes of my past life fade into nothingness’). He has made the irrevocable decision to change his whole style of life which, in his case, means amongst other things saying farewell to art — ‘Une belle gloire d’artiste et de conteur emportée!’ (‘A brilliant career as artist and novelist nipped in the bud!’).

Rimbaud stands at the end of *Une Saison en Enfer* a ‘free man’, psychologically free (because freed of his past) and he would have regarded this as the essential point. Of course, the actual use to which he put this ‘freedom’ and whether the latter part of his life as a clerk in Aden or arms-trafficker in Abyssinia was any improvement on Rimbaud the social revolutionary and Charleville enfant terrible is another matter. But he did break with all his bohemian and literary acquaintances, did leave Europe, did stop writing for good, did cease to interest himself in religious or philosophic theories and, most important of all, apparently ceased to see himself as ‘a damned soul’. His subsequent concerns in life were entirely practical : instead of counting the number of syllables in a line of poetry he counted sacks of coffee beans and instead of spending his time wondering what was wrong with humanity we find him writing an account of the topography of Abyssinia for the French equivalent of the Royal Geographical Society. It is typical of the ‘new Rimbaud’, one might almost say the ‘born-again Rimbaud’, that he writes in one of his letters from Harar “if I had a son I would not want him to become an artist but an engineer”.



Since *Une Saison en Enfer* has a happy ending of sorts, are we to suppose that Rimbaud had gained some sort of liberating insight during his traumatic experiences? If this is so, the place to look is not in *Mauvais Sang*, the longest and

best known section, but in the enigmatic *L'Impossible* where Rimbaud tries to get to the root of the sickness, his own and that of the entire West.

*L'Impossible* functions as a hinge within the overall structure, or, to change the metaphor, as the Aristotelian *peripeteia* ('turnabout'), the moment when the action completely changes direction because of some unexpected piece of news. In Greek tragedy *peripeteia* means change for the worse, as, for example, when the Messenger in *Oedipus Rex* unwittingly reveals to Oedipus that he is the killer of his own father, thus precipitating the death of Jocasta and Oedipus' self-blinding. But in comedy it is possible to have an unexpected change for the better as here.

Up to this point the general tone has been one of desperation. The untitled Prologue tells us that the author has lost for ever his previous state of innocence, his place at the 'primeval feast'. *Mauvais Sang* records the narrator's various unhappy reincarnations as rebel, victim or outcast, while *Nuit de l'Enfer* gives a graphic picture of the torments of Hell, physical and mental. *Délires I* introduces us to the widow, apparently the narrator's only companion and supporter, but he considers her untrustworthy and unworthy of his confidences. *Délires II* is the story of the narrator's own pitiful delusions and self-deceptions, as he now sees them. This brings us to *L'Impossible*. But, although *L'Impossible* ends on a temporarily sombre note — 'Déchirante infortune !' ('Heart-breaking misfortune!') — from here on the work becomes much calmer, more positive, and ends on a quietly triumphant note which one would hardly have expected half-way through.

Has Rimbaud found some new method of changing life? When asked precisely this by the widow in *Délires I* he replies in the negative — he is only looking for it. *L'Impossible* brings the realisation that the situation is a good deal worse than even he had originally thought. It is not just a matter of getting rid of the guilt-ridden ethos of Christianity: there is something inherently wrong with the entire West which has lost contact with the 'original and perennial wisdom'. What, then, is this wisdom? It is, seemingly, the Zen-like message that 'things are as they are' : the problem is thinking there was a problem in the first place. 'L'homme se joue, se prouve les evidences, se gonfle du plaisir de répéter des preuves, et ne vit que comme cela ! Torture subtile, niaise, source de mes divagations spirituelles' ('Humanity is playing a game with itself, insists on proving the obvious, swells up with self-satisfaction at repeating endlessly the same proofs, and is incapable of living in any other way ! A complicated and childish form of torture which is at the root even of my own spiritual confusion'). So all this soul-searching, which has filled all the previous sections of *Une Saison en Enfer* is now seen to be completely pointless; the moment has come to 'say goodbye to all that' and Rimbaud does just this three sections further on in *Adieu*.

Rimbaud has not seemingly received any kind of profound intuition about the nature of the universe and man's place in it : his 'enlightenment' turns out to be the realisation that 'a rose is a rose is a rose....' But that is precisely the point. One is reminded of the Zen story about the Patriarch of a monastery asking his monks to write a poem to show their understanding of Buddhism and promising to nominate the monk who writes the best poem as his successor. The head monk, whom everyone expects to succeed as Patriarch, writes a quatrain comparing the mind to a mirror and exhorting everyone to keep it clean all the time so that no dust can cling to it. The Patriarch praises the poem publicly but in private tells the author that there is much he does not understand. Another monk overnight posts a poem anonymously in the corridor; it states that the 'natural mind' does not need polishing because there is nothing to which the dust can

cling. The Patriarch, who knows there is only one person in the monastery who could possibly have written it, secretly confers his begging bowl and robe on this monk who at the time worked in the kitchens and was little thought of by the others. He eventually becomes the famous Zen master, Hui-neng\*.

The difficulty, however, is that once one starts thinking about 'being natural', one's effort gets in the way and the mirror becomes clouded. This seems to be what Rimbaud is saying in *L'Impossible* : the ceaseless rationalising which he considers to be typically Western is a sort of Original Sin from which there is no escape. One thing that can be done, however, is to leave off thinking and pass on to action : the very next section, *L'Eclair*, is concerned with work (manual work). It is perhaps worth mentioning here that Zen was the first Buddhist school to require all its monks to perform manual work.

However we rate this insight on the religious/philosophical plane, i.e. as triviality or profound truth, it seems to have worked for Rimbaud. In the next three sections we leave soul-searching and return to strictly mundane concerns : the problem of employment in *L'Eclair*, of realisable social progress in *Matin*, and of Rimbaud's personal plans to leave Europe in *Adieu*. The world has not changed in any miraculous fashion — as the widow in *Délires I* believes that it can 'thanks to the magic powers' of her little friend — nor is it likely to. However, Rimbaud is no longer quite so bothered. Enlightenment is, after all, nothing special — "I obtained not the least thing from unexcelled complete awakening, and for this very reason I knew it to be unexcelled, complete awakening" (attributed to the Buddha).

In *Matin* Rimbaud states that he has concluded his account of his sojourn in hell — the first time he has even suggested that he might be leaving the underworld at all. He still has some desires for a better society — why should he not have? — but he neither affirms nor denies that the longed-for change will come about. He merely asks when "will we salute the beginning of a new concept of work, a new form of wisdom....?" Moreover, this new world, if it comes at all, is not a religious apocalypse, quite the reverse, since it will signal the 'end of superstition' and will be the 'first time' that humanity really 'celebrates Christmas on this earth', as opposed to the countless times when it has celebrated the birth of the false Messiah, as Rimbaud sees him. The last line can be interpreted as an attack on all otherworldly doctrines and expectations — 'Esclaves, ne maudissons pas la vie !' ('Slaves, do not curse [the gift of] life !')

In the last section of all, *Adieu*, Rimbaud reinforces the moral of a return to this world and the day to day. 'Moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol avec un devoir à chercher et la réalité rugueuse à éteindre !' ('I who considered myself to be a magician or angel, beyond the reaches of good and evil, have had to come down to earth and realise that I have a mission to accomplish and must embrace harsh reality'). On this note he steps out to greet the new era, which, for a brief moment, almost looks like Russia after 1917 seen through the eyes of a recent convert to Bolshevism.



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\* The story is recounted by Alan Watts in his book, *The Way of Zen*, pp. 111-112.

The irony is, of course, that now he has decided to 'live from day to day' and no longer search for the formula for transforming humanity, Rimbaud finds that he needs his iron will and extremely tough constitution, not in order to become the poet/seer who will help to usher in the new era, but simply in order to stay alive.

Byron and Shelley could afford to travel in carriages and stay at inns if they wished. But when 1875 Rimbaud walked alone through Switzerland he arrived at Milan in such bad shape that a local woman took pity on him and lodged him for a while. He pushes on towards the south but suffers sunstroke near Livorno and is repatriated by the French authorities. In 1877 we find him being repatriated by the French Consulate of Stockholm, but once back in France he embarks for Alexandria. There he falls ill and is forced to beat a retreat to Charleville for the winter season. And so it goes on. Exposure to the subtropical sun and a hard life generally soon took a toll on Rimbaud's youthful looks — 'une beauté du diable' according to Verlaine — and in the Harar photograph, one of the few we have of Rimbaud, he looks like someone who has been in the Foreign Legion for the last ten years which in a sense he had.

Whereas Gauguin ended up in lush Tahiti and took beautiful native mistresses, Rimbaud for some reason ended up in Aden, 'un roc affreux, sans un seul brin d'herbe....la chaleur est excessive' ('A frightful rock without a blade of grass... the heat is stifling'). The poet who wrote at the age of sixteen

"Chair, Marbre, Fleur, Vénus, c'est en toi que je crois"

would have found little enough of these at Aden.

Rimbaud was not really an arms-trafficker : he did sell a shipment of arms in Abyssinia to King Menelik but most of the time he spent in North Africa he was dealing in coffee and sitting at a desk or standing behind a counter. His travels sound a good deal less romantic when we realise that he was often ill; eventually, he had to be shipped back to Marseille in 1891 to have his right leg amputated and he died later that year at the age of thirty-seven after frightful sufferings.

All this is not only depressing but rather odd. Rimbaud never really was a 'poète maudit' while he actually wrote poetry : to be received at once by the most fashionable poets in the country is every young writer's dream. However, as an explorer and adventurer he really does seem to have been jinxed : although one of the first to penetrate into the heart of Abyssinia this did not bring him any renown and his chief independent trading exploit, the Menelik arms deal, brought in very little considering the enormous effort and dangers involved (his two European associates in the venture died during the trip). It is as if, once he had renounced the idea of being a 'damned soul', he became instead a 'damned man'.

