

## **RIMBAUD**

**I**f, among the French poets, there are greater ones and deeper endowed than Baudelaire, there is none more important. By paraphrasing this famous assertion, we would say in our turn that there may be greater poets, showing more purity than Rimbaud, but there is none so unusual.

Indeed, everything contributes to turning this wild creature of the Ardennes mountains – the awe of Théodore de Banville’s literary circle – into a mythological being. His short but intense passage through this world will always be dazzling for us.

France by excellence has been producing such ardent lives, whose mission seem to be the re-debating of art, science or even more, the progress towards a state of grace. Let’s just consider Pascal, Evariste Galois, Rimbaud. The quality of such destinies resides in what we would call their “flashing” passage.

Elsewhere, the genius adapts itself to a dull existence, away from the unexpected. What else has been the life of the German, Bernhard Riemann, one of the greatest modern mathematicians, than the life of a recluse, almost of a hermit. As opposed to this seclusion, or “stylizing” that may have its grandeur, in France, the history of thinking, as well as history in general, amplified the signification of the tragic beyond any limits.

Whether we consider the burning down to ashes of Pascal’s high geometrical gifts by his devouring faith, or the stupid duel that one pale morning took Galois away from us, somewhere near Gentilly, or the satanic sun of violent puberties sublimating Rimbaud’s genius – long before the sun of Harrar burned his feet – everywhere, the same hasty end takes these demigods away from our unworthy eyes.

We suppose Rimbaud’s life to be known.

In spite of its enigmatic and dramatic character, we can in no way understand its strangeness and its transcendental message. For, we can rightfully wonder, like Claudel, if this voice, singular among all the others, was not that of an angel. And some passages from his poetry can justify it. We particularly have in mind the beginning of that part of *The Illuminations*, entitled *The Golden Age (Age d’or)*: One of the voices, / How angel-like it is! (Quelqu’une des voix, / Est-elle angélique!)

But, contrary to Claudel, we take the liberty to show that we are now dealing with a sort of scientist, a methodician of the delirium and not with a dew-drunk wanderer in a mystic state of osmosis with the invisible. Actually, the account on some unexplored areas in Ethiopia, which the poet sent from Aden to The Geographical Society of France, is obviously written in the objective and sober scholar-style.

Rimbaud’s work can be defined – especially its last part: *A Season in the Inferno (Une Saison en Enfer)* or *The Illuminations (Les Illuminations)* – as an introduction to an ecstatic knowledge of sensitive world, a sort of passage to the limit of exact investigation. It is exactly because of this quality that it surpasses beautiful literature and can interest even the spirits spellbound by Urania. Indeed, except for Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (so improperly called by Baudelaire *Histoires extraordinaires*) we know nothing so close to the object of science than Rimbaud’s “method”.

10

Whether we are dealing with *Une Saison en Enfer* or *Les Illuminations*, Rimbaud’s aim is no longer to analyse the modes of vision or feeling, as in current literature. He goes beyond the descriptive stage here, aiming at a certain dominating generality and validity, through which – like with the laws governing physical phenomena – we become the masters of reality, dominating our own possibilities of expression.

Claudel is very keen on Rimbaud’s method. He talks about an anesthesia – by movement – of the permanent duties of the personality, about a bringing into contact of the ego – thus flabbergasted – with the angels. We find it really difficult to accept this explanation, which sounds too church-like. On the

contrary, when turning Rimbaud into their forerunner, the sur-realists deny any idea or method in his representative works. Or they would rather ascribe them a strange random procedure, resulting from a mere confrontation of words. But, whether Catholics or Freudians, they are all wrong, in trying to have Rimbaud join their clan.

Similar to Parmenides's cosmogonic poems or as with Lucretius, his work precedes or even prolongs science.

If we had let ourselves tempted by the deceiving combinations of words, we should have spoken here not about Rimbaud's sur-realism, but about his infra-realism. An infra-realism that studies the essence of perception in order to deduce its law.

Imposed by the very nature of the object it is applied to, Rimbaud's method is still inseparable from it.

What is this object?

The cosmic uncreated: i.e. the embryonic existences, the germs, the virgin landscapes the limbs. By choosing as a domain for poetic operations the critical points of a nature rounded up by adding some ideal existences, Rimbaud proves once again to be a man of science. For the scientist – the mathematician particularly – in his most subtle investigations, acts similarly, by adding transcendent quantities to the given ones. What else would be the use of these “limbs” (“limbes”), these “auroras charging these forests” (“aurores qui chargent ces forêts”) these “watery flowers as glasses” (“fleurs d'eau pour verres”), than to extend the real up to something more significant, by absorbing the imaginary states and beings? We should consider the characteristic non-accomplishment of these existences as the result of some amazing scholarly method. Likewise, the geometrician, during his investigations, heads instinctively towards the singular points of the particular curves in order to deduce out of them truths that inform him on the norm itself.

But, in order to express these modalities of “non-created” nature, the colloquial language is too organized: Rimbaud does his best to deliberately impoverish it, to simplify it, down to a restricted system of discursive functions. They talk about Rimbaud's naïve, “angelic” language, about a lack of coherence and about rhythms taken from nursery rhymes. In fact we have to face a language and a prosody deduced by abstraction; it is a conscious elaboration meant to define the ineffable.

Once mastering his method, Rimbaud – again resembling the scientist – undertakes to extrapolate the experimental truths he had acquired. He tries to foresee and even to oversee the historical process.

What else can be the celebrated sonnet of the Vowels if not a revising – through ecstasy – of the grand days of creation.

It is interesting to mention a certain symmetry which makes the famous sonnet similar to the greatest of the human poems, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*. There, at each sound of the angel's trumpet a part of the sun is covered by shadow. Similar to the *Revelation*, but at the other end of the

cause-effect chain, the five fundamental sounds of the language, the vowels, give – with Rimbaud – the measure of these huge creations.

How far we are from the absurd interpretation given by his contemporaries, who saw in Rimbaud's masterpiece the turning into account of a mere fashionable theory of the time: the colorful audition!

Far from being the application of a truth, a doubtful one, actually, concerning an exceptional psychology, the sonnet *The Vowels* illustrates Rimbaud's own method; like an astronaut, having a quantitative apprehension of a given eclipse or a certain past cosmic catastrophe, he makes us witness the initial spasm of our universe. There is just one difference, though: Rimbaud's investigation is continued into the qualitative.

The same gift – we were about to call it visionary science – is developed in the outstanding work of *The Illuminations, Genius (Génie)*. It heralds not so much the reign of the Beautiful or of the Good, but that of a more rigorous principle: the Truth “permeated by new violences”. The instauration of an immediate way of thinking, which surpasses ancillary science and becomes consistence.

This is also Poe's conclusion in *Eureka*.

Thus, through his inspired writing, he restores science its sacred character.

As a conclusion we have to acknowledge that this Rimbaud raises problems that surpass art by far and are meant to confuse the men of letters; similarly, Poincaré's new physics or Einstein's confused in the beginning the physicists. For relativity was a chapter of Superior Geometry rather than one of experimental Physics.

The *Illuminations* might therefore be closer to scientific spirit than to pure lyricism. As a result, with the modesty and attention required when contemplating truth, we will benefit today from these essential lessons.