

# *Beyond the Poem*

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*‘and sometimes I have seen what men have imagined they saw’*

In *no* other body will Rimbaud appear. He who experienced ‘identity,’ not as a terrestrial or celestial gift, but like one who, in drawing back the diaphanous curtains of his own flesh, opened them onto a statue of Christ, but a Christ without religious existence, and who, in his hand, held onto the mask of a face of Rimbaud that Rimbaud himself would *never* wear. This poet then in emptying his mind of both his own body and all others escaped definition of himself in the world. Mallarmé wrote: ‘My work was created only by *elimination* (...) it will be imperishable if *I* don’t perish. I looked upon it without ecstasy or fear; I closed my eyes and *saw that it existed.*’ After the demise of the idea and poetry, without ever departing from it, Rimbaud passed beyond the poem, allowing the poet, for the first time, a foothold in the strata of *nothingness*; for underneath his skin operated the cartilaginous skeleton of a soul completely unresponsive to rhetorical stimuli; like a deep

sea creature his shifts of movement were prismatic, and like lantern-lights coming out from the darkness his atoms danced around him like a shoal of abstract fish. Rimbaud realized at once that poetry, like theology, should never *stop* at God, rather it should continue, unfulfilled, doubting, exasperated, until when shifting from secret to secret, impulse to impulse, it steps foot onto the surface of the final planet.

When in *Apocalypse* D.H. Lawrence wrote 'the grand idea that the cosmos *always was*, that it could not have had any beginning, because it was always there and always would be,' he was describing the 'type' of infinite hypothesis that we could also apply to the imagination of Rimbaud; i.e., if accepting that the imagination pre-dated Man, and that it had always been here, then great poetry would be exposed for what it truly was: an ecstasy of non-history, and a legitimization of non-meaning. Rimbaud, in managing to *surpass* literature was able to slide the tombstone of his own imagination across the corpse of the final poet, to reveal the superbeing beyond the soul of all of us, a metaphysical giant who, clutching the fetish of a most *impersonal* god, appears finally in the mind of man glad to be dying a now alien and non-poetic death. God's virginity lasts for the same period that an image does, and thus faced with this transparency, Rimbaud had no other choice but to hand literature back to the grammarian and choose instead to go beyond the poem, that is by living his life in epochs in the same way that other people lived theirs in days:

In a loft where I was shut in when I was twelve, I came to know the world, I illustrated the human comedy. In a wine cellar I learned history. At some nocturnal revel in a northern city I met all the women of the old painters. In an old arcade in Paris, I was taught the classical sciences. In a magnificent dwelling surrounded by the entire Orient, I accomplished my vast work and spent my illustrious retreat. I churned up my blood. My duty has

been remitted. It need not even be thought of any more. I  
am really from beyond the tomb, and no commissions.  
(‘Lives’—from *Illuminations*)

When the spectacle of history is no more, when providence, reason and progress are replaced by impulse, chaos and fossilization, the beginning of the *impersonal* wars will start, after the end of identity, and mass-produced morals and the absurdity of the glory of the collective, when each ‘truism’ like a chalice of our own human blood is emptied, then, says Rimbaud, man will return to his original state of bitterness in the world, before the discovery of fire parched man’s tears from his brain. This will be in the final phase of the imagination, a time in which heaven is re-colonized by a god elected not by the most religious race on earth, but by the most intelligent. So can a writer really go beyond the imagination? The imagination can create many things, such as a tree that sheds hands, or maybe a landscape in which humans, from their feet up, grow; but it could never induce a new reality and a new set of elements to replace our own, and that, for Rimbaud was its failure. In poems such as ‘Fairy,’ ‘Being Beautous’ and ‘Barbare’ he *ignored* certain levels of the imagination to portray only what was running through his mind. Yet what he wrote will never run through the mind of the reader, for we cannot concur with the resemblance of images that, post-imagination, are nothing more than the rusted empty casing of metaphors already exploded. The imagination in a poem like ‘Barbare’ cannot recognize itself, maintains no levels of ‘resemblance’; is nothing but a new set of realities *adjusting* the poet’s gait to the gravitational pull of his thoughts. It is the mind born of a non-associative realm, but one that attains the enigma and glitter of our own mysteries to survive in language. Rimbaud peered over and beyond the balls of his own eyes so as to move both upward and horizontally over the *drafts* of the landscapes that he himself would create; this poet who, in equaling God, would no longer float, an *etheric* form, inside

of his own mind, but would rather swim free of the matter of both himself and the universe; the result of which was, in the 'last' phase of his mind, that he managed the impossible, i.e., to ground the weight of earthly light onto an inhuman plain:

Live embers, raining in gusts of frost.—Bliss!—fires in  
the rain of the wind of diamonds flung out by the earthly  
heart eternally carbonized for us.—O world!

(‘Barbare’—from *Illuminations*)

No part of the mind now is being concealed. We, as a reader, receive only the *confession* of what the thoughts themselves were thinking. Rimbaud was opposing his own mind as a pretext to gratifying himself into the obscure. And for this reason ‘Barbare’ is still, today, the *newest* poem probably ever written. Nothing is artificial. Metaphor, once the great mimic of the soul, is reduced now to a papier-mâché model of the ‘object’ under inspection by his imagination. Rimbaud, leaving mankind behind, positions himself in the light of an alien sun to lampshade and shower our minds in *his* stares. If we could transport a Lear or a Hamlet to Rimbaud’s new world, then in determining, for the first time, their *own* personalities, the idea of being anything so absurd as a ‘central character’ would, in this poem, be fatally cheapened, debunked and alas, un-masked. Literature alone cannot survive such terrains. Even Keats’s ‘negative capability’ would have been, in the mind of Rimbaud, no more than radio *interference*, a cosmic obligation to ignore facts, data, reason, etc. If usually an artist creates his world from within-a-world, then Rimbaud created his *outside* of the resemblance of one. ‘Long after the days and the seasons, and beings / and countries.’ The history of poetry has already proven to us that ‘metaphor’ has always had to resemble something else, or at least be ‘symbolic’ of it; but now, in the breakdown of all cognitive and imaginative matter, Rimbaud was obliterating ‘likeness’ from *things*, as if draining the ink from the cistern of every ‘literary’ object. Images were setting their sails for worlds beyond our own, de-magnetizing

the compass of the mind; any fascination with literature was to be the death of it, yet it was never an ailment that Rimbaud suffered with, for his addiction to writing was always a cure from its fictional irregularities, its stupefying 'laws' and unfailing vacuity. Before Rimbaud, poets had utilized the imagination by looking at a tree *without* noticing the wind; while Rimbaud, in drawing across the curtains of the mind, revealed to us the projector and the gramophone that had, for centuries, been *portraying* both. This poet believed one *free* act of the imagination would unchain the locks of being and release the universe, like steam, out through the vents of literature. Rimbaud realized that poetry would fail because it didn't come *before* the universe; subsequently 'meaning' turned out to be no more than a twitch upon the huge palpating body of the imagination. Rimbaud was successful in that, for a while at least, he managed to temporarily *blind* this imaginative behemoth by throwing into its eyes the dirt from the foreign landscapes of his soul.

Wittgenstein wrote 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world,' which I could accept as being true if, like the philosopher, I believed that language was the motor of all being, that it did in fact *activate* us all into thinking, speaking, moving, imagining, etc. Rimbaud did not. And unlike Wittgenstein, this poet abandoned himself *not* to the nearest reef of a phrase, but to the reef of the nearest sensation. God, by out-imagining himself, gave birth to man's greatest metaphor: himself; and while century after century continues to produce *thinkers* like Nietzsche who sought only to overcome the self, what Rimbaud was informing us of was that man's greatest task was to overcome the imagination. Age-old and hackneyed are the on-going human beliefs that *without* language, poetry, theology, science, philosophy would no longer exist; and while this may be true for say philosophy, it is certainly not true of the others; the imagination does not exist because of language, rather *in spite* of it. Like Hölderlin,

Rimbaud imagined a future age when man might return to silence and therefore herald a bright new era of expression; a new kind of 'non-speech' that would emerge as if from a *later* phase of the human mouth. In many of Rimbaud's last poems, and certainly in a number of poems in *Illuminations* his voice, molten, carried a volcanic threat that it would *end* any civilization that did not surpass his mind. Sentence after sentence burned up crucifixes, bones, utopian machinery, masonry of now ruined church roofs. A different world is carried into view, one that is real and that is not; words, like flaming carriages, fetch the reader back and forth from the 'other' side of humanity. And thus in escaping definition his poems escaped the world; yet no vision *chooses* between two other visions to exist; it just simply *is*, and aspires vertically to its own subcutaneous gradients of truth:

At any price, under any semblance, even in metaphysical journeys.—But *then* no more.

(‘Devotions’—from *Illuminations*)

Rimbaud explores the no man's land that stretches between the frontiers of physical exertion and that of literature. Imagine a poem whose 'author' is no longer the *personality* of the work, but is in fact only the loophole in literary 'taste' through which all responsibility for the poem is avoided. 'Voyages' had cancelled themselves out. Each image, a *wreck of consciousness*, bobbed up now to the surface of his blood, either blackened by the smoke of *indefinite* symbolism, or by the rust of adventures not sought; and thus in exhausting art and its possibilities he located forms of expression that were in fact alien to it. When in the poem 'After the Flood' Rimbaud wrote 'After the idea of the Flood had subsided' what he really meant was, 'after' he had failed to substitute his *latest* reality for the fiction of another, he was forced to lie about the psychological future of his gift; and then fantasy, desirable now to 'fact,' began to secrete a new set of appearances inside

of his head. When Tristan Tzara wrote '*la pensée se fait dans la bouche*' he was speaking of the *loss* of appearance amid his own spontaneous and Dadaistic word-hordes; that, and the sum of diminishing realities lost by the tongue every time that man opens his mouth. Likewise, Rimbaud used 'each' identity as an alibi to cover up the crime of 'self'; and by pretending to abandon being he offered up a new transcendental reality for his shadow. The poet, by remaining supernaturally singular, managed to subtract one 'new' self from another, and thus in abandoning his 'personality' to the *other* side of literature, he trapped language in a lunar shade, long enough for him to switch on and off the neon and semi-transparent words of God:

(Will postilion and animals of dream begin again in the  
most stifling forests, in order to plunge me up to my eyes  
in the silken spring?)  
(‘Common Nocturne’—from *Illuminations*)

Rimbaud, at the head of an always imaginary procession, traipsed the planets, flapping the pennants and the religious banners with his own breath, before looking back up to see suddenly upon the cross that he himself carried the body of a *non-Christian* Christ beginning finally to wake. The natural order of things, or the dispensation of what, without the lucidity of God's death, he himself managed to determine for any future society, is absolutely dependent upon a vision passing beyond the subtle effacement of his own imagination in poems. Yet how can one man *see* what others have only imagined that they've seen? Well, not by having too much talent, or by achieving the absolute apogee of the *mystical* faculty of the brain? No; it requires much more than even genius; it is to re-flesh the body and then journey until within barely a lens-breadth of God's eye, until the poet's own stare becomes recognizable to the skull-bones of Christ, God or both. Rimbaud listened from ear to ear to what *every* man was saying before he began to reassemble the physiology of

his soul in accordance to the weight of words. The satisfaction of obtaining a new poetic order is *not* felt by this poet, only the critic. Rimbaud himself would have been completely neutral to the effects of his genius on others. By the time that he had finished writing the poems of *Illuminations* he no longer suffered the literary burden of *naming* things, and even the spectacle of understanding the origins of everything had, for him, become just another birth. The poet had finished compiling his dictionary of stones, coal, iron, wood, to *replace* words; a philosophical inventory that excluded ideas by wearing them down to the bone-of-the-world in verbal ties. The world and its once useful verbal apparatus were left now in a state of imaginative desuetude. Into Pascal's abyss Rimbaud lowered a microphone and waited for God to speak; he never did. Therefore even philosophy, that unfailingly fertile ground of the *unknown* would become, in this poet's mind, redundant. Even Socrates and Aristotle were only ever promoters of the 'beyond,' not as they should have been, 'inventors' of it; so if by *suspending* death in theories, in predicates and in hypothesis man remained *only* 'man,' then Rimbaud knew that he would be forced to revert all mythologies, all religions, all cultures into their original state as mere hymns to the sun. For the fact remains that Rimbaud was the first poet to sidestep the subject of 'man' for an even higher cause, that of finding a way to *cure* himself of being one:

His body! the dreamed-of release, the shattering of grace  
crossed by new violence!

His vision, his vision! all the old kneelings and the pains  
*lifted* at his passing.

('Genie'—from *Illuminations*)

Such was the *singularity* of Rimbaud's voice it would remain isolated from its author, an injunction against unreality; but so removed was his imaginative 'voice' from his personality that it demands of us all to imagine only the most simple of auditory equipment in order to hear it behind its meaning: a

paper cup and a length of string would suffice for its *insistence* to travel from one ear on one planet to another ear upon the next. For his voice happens all alone at the core of our heads, speaking to *itself* of the truths that no one in the history of literature had ever heard before; like a digger shoveling the earth of the world either side of his jaw, Rimbaud's voice exhumed all unwanted objects in its way: artifacts, bones, fossils and papyrus, until reaching the equivalent in diameter and length of its own *tone* in gravel, stone, rock, etc.; in repudiating the world in language, he revealed the limitations of both geology and literature to exist, side by side, in the imagination; thus extending as he did the frontiers of what existed between word and word, life and death, cosmology and myth, fable and nature:

Less high, there are sewers. At the sides, nothing but the thickness of the globe. Perhaps chasms of azure, wells of fire. Perhaps it is on these levels that moons and comets, seas and fables, meet.

(Part V of 'Childhood'—from *Illuminations*)

If any poet of genius has arrived *after* Rimbaud then it is because his own work was but a premonition of him; and likewise if, one day, we all became Rimbaud it would only be because Rimbaud is the object of all our thoughts, a prediction of our minds. Each of us *is* Rimbaud in our refusal to become him, in our inability to remain *other* within ourselves. By translating Rimbaud with our thoughts, not words, he proves to be a witness to all that limits us; redoubling in himself our own personalities in order to crush into dust our bones. In principle everything about us *through* him can be revealed. What in us we consider irreducible is, in his words, already a reciprocal truth. The problems of any poet going *beyond* the art in which they practice are of course manifold, but it rests in retrospect on this: beyond man is God, beyond God is the *idea* of God, and beyond that is only a cage, a cage in which upon a hook swings a jaw in front of a microphone

which, to this day, is still to be spoken into. Rimbaud, like any poet of vision sought only to be *that* voice never spoken. It is the determination to exist inside of the *unknown* using the methods of the known. Rimbaud saw in advance man's false knowledge and disqualified the legitimacy of anything that could not be self-determined. Amid the darkness of *failed* imaginations, Rimbaud saw the poets of his age trapped in the beam of the projector of the hologram of man; and so decided to ignore them, they with their eyes sore and bloodshot from having stared too long into a light which, for Rimbaud, had long since failed to illuminate him. Knowledge traversed through Rimbaud like an unforeseen filament, negating darkness and proving to be always the first light of another dimension. Without knowledge man remained utterly opaque, only a *possible being*, while with it man could, through a series of insoluble predictions, propose a new date for the re-birth of mankind. Like the light from a dead star, the visions of Rimbaud were seen by him before they arrived; all *untruths* are only discoverable by the one who, in acknowledging them, prepares the world for the conditions in which they will be subjected. The distance between two ideas were, for Rimbaud, merely two ontological planes; and thus to travel between them required that he himself equal the physical exertion to do so, but in words. The history of the absolute is not recorded by its *objects*, but by the time it takes to *forget* a state of timelessness:

—But I see that my mind is asleep.

If it were always wide awake from now on, we should soon arrive at the truth, which perhaps surrounds us with its angels weeping! ...

(*'The Impossible'*—from *Une saison en enfer*)

This poet managed to surpass even his own thoughts by refusing to distinguish between the 'object' of each thought and his own personal knowledge of just what that thought entailed. He *transferred* the weight of idealism by replacing

one mask for another upon his own face; the more Rimbaud became a poet the less he became Rimbaud, turning the paradox of multiple identities into a single moment superseded by *ideas*. Once poetry had died inside of him, then Rimbaud could regain possession of himself, by losing briefly within his own imagination just *one* of a number of its most conceptualized bodies. The imagination takes place only after the universe has failed to formulate a question potent enough for us to solve our own consciousness. Yet Rimbaud saw only failure here too, for to go 'beyond' poetry was in the end to prove nothing; mortality would always conquer us, no matter how far beyond language we reached. Rimbaud, using the phalanx of Adam's skeleton, pushed the 'Stop' button on the tape-recorder playing the voice of God inside of man's head; and in doing so began to infringe upon the laws of both religion and silence. After all a 'master of silence' was not just someone who would *stop* questioning the universe; for Rimbaud it was to celebrate lightness over infinite weight, nothingness over being, and most importantly, to exist between the parentheses of two identical thoughts; Rimbaud, unable to anchor himself in the absolute of every sentence, withdrew his tongue, closed his mouth, and lived the life of a dumb anomaly in an anomalous world. The universe, to reveal its truths has always *said* nothing, not to scientists, philosophers or poets. It has since the beginning of mankind echoed 'No' to all human interpretations and, in each moment, eliminated the idea of God in man's mind for as long as it takes for us to keep imagining an alternative. Before stepping free of the plinth of the Ego and kicking away its stone, for a short period Rimbaud *believed* that he had matched God and thus could give poetry back to him, just as one day God would 'give' back sin to Satan, once man, by himself, finds meaning. The hypnotic contingency of moving always *towards a meaning* was, for Rimbaud, nothing more than a poetical *opportunity*, a truth that this poet left behind in texts inside of his head, 'texts' that might well have finally explained his failure; the

'failure' to elude the imagination by being *too* imaginative. So, like a thinker who no longer believed in thought, Rimbaud would, in his poetry, come to unmask the poet by wheeling into our heads a pseudo-mannequin of *himself*; to first abolish the personality of the 'author,' and second, to abolish every new surface in the mind by *not* writing about them. And finally by an act of absolute negation, to move beyond the poem by out-imagining the imagination in every last *pause* in the world:

Seen enough. The vision was met with in every air.  
Had enough. Sounds of cities, in the evening, and in the  
sun, and always.  
Known enough. The pauses of life.—O Sounds and  
Visions!  
Departure in new affection and new noise.  
(‘Departure’—from *Illuminations*)

Notes:

All translated excerpts from *Illuminations* are taken from *Illuminations and Other Prose Poems*, translated by Louise Varèse (New Directions, 1946).

Translated excerpts from *Une saison en enfer* are taken from *Rimbaud – Collected Poems*, translated by Oliver Bernard (Penguin Books, 1962).