“JE NE M'OCCUPE PLUS DE ÇA”
[I AM NOT CONCERNED WITH THAT ANYMORE]:
THE POETIC SILENCE OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2007

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ABSTRACT

Robert Berg, Advisor

Entering young adulthood, the 19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud completely and permanently abandoned his literary gifts. He would never reveal his reasons for doing so. The power of his enigma is heightened by its set of polarities: the preeminent poet in zealous pursuit of his art transformed into a man of science and industry, limiting his written expression to flat and stunted phrases. To explain this phenomenon and thus bridge the divide between these two Arthur Rimbauds was the objective of this thesis.

In addressing the question, this study relied heavily on biographical material, including private letters, remembered conversations, and recorded impressions originating from the poet, his family, friends, and business associates. The researcher utilized Rimbaud’s literary works primarily in their autobiographical capacity, especially *Une Saison en enfer* [A Season in Hell] and the “seer letters.” Effective analysis of Rimbaud’s dramatic mental and emotional transition required establishing an appropriate psychological context. For this reason, Abraham H. Maslow’s distinct classifications of human motivation functioned as a basic touchstone throughout the thesis. With these tools, the author focused on determining how the qualities unique to Rimbaud’s personality worked in conjunction with his changing life circumstances, psychology, and personal philosophy to undermine his drive to create poetry.

Analysis determined that Rimbaud’s psyche gave priority to achieving self-transcendence and that his passion for poetry needed to function within the path chosen to satisfy this need if it were to survive. His compulsion to envision any such answer in absolute terms made his final
philosophy of materialism and objectivism completely unforgiving to the subjective ambiguities of art. In addition, he angrily blamed the artistic mindset and lifestyle for two distinct problems. First, he had come to depend on intoxicants in the writing of poetry, resulting in years of substance abuse that threatened his health and sanity. Secondly, his homosexual affair with Verlaine became public knowledge, resulting in scandal that followed him to the end of his life. Hoping to re-invent himself, he started a new life in Africa that represented the antithesis of his bohemian existence as a young poet.
I dedicate this work to my parents,

George and Janice Whiting
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because the completion of a thesis project represents a large investment of time and effort on the part of its author, it is naturally a significant milestone in any academic career. Although it is only one peak traversed on a much longer trek, it is a nice summit from which to look back and remember the many family members, friends, colleagues, and teachers that made the journey possible; these pages provide the rare opportunity to acknowledge them publicly.

In the most complete sense, I would not have attended graduate school, let alone completed this thesis, without the support and encouragement of my mother and late father, who passed in 2001. In addition to their constant willingness to assist in furthering my education, they have inspired me through both their conversation and personal example to have consuming intellectual pursuits at every stage of life. Above all, I am grateful to them for instilling in me their sense of personal integrity and value for work done well. The longer I live, the more I understand how fortunate I am to be their son.

I am very recognizant of the debt I owe the thesis committee, my advisor Dr. Robert Berg and Dr. Deborah Houk Schocket. Their patient guidance through multiple revisions allowed me to refine this thesis into a body of work of which I know I can still be proud many years from now. In particular, I am thankful for their steadfastness during what I prefer to characterize as an “extended” apprenticeship. Despite continuing well beyond the normally allotted time, they persisted with me until I could bring the project to its successful conclusion. For giving so generously of their time and professional knowledge, they will always have my gratitude, and I extend a very enthusiastic Merci beaucoup!
In addition to the individuals named above, there are countless others who have supported me over the years, influencing my academic path, often long before I envisioned attending graduate school, and I want to remember as many as this space permits.

I would like to express to Yvonne Gudemard Pickett my love and appreciation for including me in her family and ultimately initiating my passion for the French language and culture by inviting me to join them on a summer in France, visiting the Breton parents. Over the years, she continued to help me advance my study of the language whenever I asked, most recently spending many hours with me as I prepared graduate applications. I cherish my youth growing up with her children and my defacto adoption as their fellow sibling.

Jeannine Lemoine Etheridge’s stories of struggle, courage, and faith from her life as a young girl working in the French resistance movement of World War II—a member of le réseau JADE FITZROY—are always with me, and the memory of her spirit still guides me.

In and out of the classroom, Dr. Stephen Foster and his wife Michele consistently supported me in my—often-sporadic—attempts to deepen my knowledge of French language and literature. I am happy for their friendship and grateful they never lost faith in my potential.

From my arrival in town for study on campus, Bowling Green State University alumnus (2001), sculptor, painter, and general monstre sacré of Bowling Green—Emanuel Enriquez—proved to be more than a good landlord. Despite my tendency to cloister in the rented garage apartment to study for classes or push the hopelessly slow advance of my thesis, Emanuel forever invited me to engage in the discussion of friends inevitably taking place around the patio grill of his beautiful garden and lawn below my door. In his dialogue and by his life, he inspires others to pursue educational and professional goals at every age, and he never failed to remind me of the lasting importance of work done with excellence.
Among my professors at Old Dominion University, I would especially like to express my admiration and gratitude for the following. In pursuing my B.A. in theatre, Dr. Erlene Hendrix impressed on me her deep love and understanding of art, which I have carried with me into my study of French literature and culture; it is, in fact, through her lectures on the French Symbolists’ influence in theatre that I first heard the name Arthur Rimbaud. In like fashion, the knowledge and passion for artistic dance given me by choreographer Deborah Levithan Thorpe continued to serve me in my French cultural studies in Tours, particularly with my research into Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes. I have very fond memories of my participation in her productions, and I am grateful she made it possible for me to take part by always finding “something” for me to do. The enthusiasm of my academic advisor and German professor, Regula Meier, proved very contagious. Along with Dr. Foster, I am indebted to my professors of French, Dr. Gérard Montbertrand and the late Randolph Cole, especially for their ready willingness to engage me intellectually in an out of the classroom. I can say with confidence that the attention of all these people is finally bearing fruit.

From my time of endless first and second year foreign language classes at the College of William and Mary, I want to acknowledge in particular Rosa López-Cañete for helping me to successfully apply to graduate programs; to her, I say ¡Muchos gracias! and to the rest of the modern language department at W and M—Vielen Dank! Grazie! どうもありがとう!

In the entirety of my experience in Bowling Green State University’s graduate program, I can state without reservation a deep sense of gratitude, respect, and affection for the faculty on the Bowling Green campus and in Tours, France.

In addition to my thesis committee, from my time at Bowling Green, I will be forever grateful to Dr. Jason Herbeck, especially, for revealing the mysteries of Roland Barthes and to
Dr. Mariah Devereux-Herbeck for opening my eyes to the (too often insidious) presence of *le regard masculin* in film narrative. The love they demonstrate for their work and the care they show for their students inspires excellence in all those around them. I would like to thank Heather Morano Gabel for taking me on as her graduate assistant while she was the director of Academic Year Abroad, France-Quebec-Burkina Faso, showing me unending patience despite my initial status as a total computer illiterate. Dr. Bonnie Fonseca-Greber’s always encouraging words and Dr. Marilynn Ward’s energetic and supportive attention did more to boost my morale than I am sure they could be aware. In addition to resolving my numerous administrative glitches, Linda Meek kept me laughing, especially, with her stories of weekend equestrian adventure. Likewise, the department secretaries, Terrilyn Meel and Jeanne Wojtkowiak who followed, not only bailed me out of the daily or hourly crisis at hand, but also made a visit to the office one of the uplifting social events of my day.

On faculty in Tours, the resident director of AYA France Kevin Kane and coordinating secretary Monique Khoury rescued me more than once in my navigation the new environment, particularly in respect to my misguided and expensive attempt to locate the ideal French apartment—5th floor studio, overlooking the market, with a view of the cathedral—it did not happen. I am extremely thankful for the dedication, enthusiasm, and wisdom of our instructors: Dominique Charbonneau, Anne-Marie Johnson, Hervé Thizy, and François Weil, and especially our *tutrice* Hélène Callet for always agreeing to assist me at the absolute, very last minute. At the Université François Rabelais de Tours, the ideas and knowledge imparted by my professors with such an evident passion for their field of study will forever remain with me. They are Isabelle Moindrot (20th Century European Theatre), Philippe Dufour (*Zola’s La Curée*), and Jean Mottet (Film Theory). I feel fortunate to have enjoyed the presence of each of these individuals.
In the end, it is the special camaraderie of my fellow students, a band of brothers and sisters in the academic trenches of graduate school, that made the experience truly meaningful, and it is they I recall whenever I think of what I value most of my studies. From the 2002-2003 AYA group in Tours, they are Wendy Albrecht, Julie Bono, Cassie Dennis (Jamet), Kaitlin Duda, Sterling Elder, Nathan Maier, Katherine Osborne, Jessie Root (Bordeau), Ryan Schroth, Marisa Viele, and Robin Wright. I happily include all current and future spouses our group met while in France—it was a very successful year. In Bowling Green, I cherished especially the friendship of my colleagues and mutual thesis-cheerleaders, Ying Wang and Michele Gerring. The always welcoming residents of La Maison Française provided much needed breaks from study with the café conversations and fêtes, and I am particularly indebted to house director, Angeline Bourgoin, for patiently helping me improve my French grammar. Finally, I cannot complete this tapestry without including our fellow graduate students in Spanish with whom we shared office space and the computer lab, our colleagues in German and Russian from down the hall in Shatzel, and the undergraduates in and out of class who befriended us. Each of these people is an integral part of a wonderful collage I hold in my mind.

From my time in Tours, I reserve my fondest expression of thankfulness and admiration for ma chère amie, Christelle Azou.

The love and encouragement of my family is a wonderful presence in my life, and the constancy of it can sometimes tempt me to take it for granted. Just as for my parents, I want to express my deep appreciation for my sister Galen Bosworth, my brother Renn Whiting and his wife Shannon, and my beautiful and talented nieces Whitney Whiting and Brittany Bosworth, and I affectionately remember my late brother Scott Whiting.
For all my friends and family, especially those that I am not able to mention here for fear of missing even one, who have had to listen to me talk about my thesis—and hardly anything else—for the past couple years, and yet continued to express nothing but support and enthusiasm for my effort, I have unending gratitude. I promise finally to start talking about something else.
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INTRODUCTION

At the age of eighteen, Arthur Rimbaud wrote, “Un soir, j’ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux. —Et je l’ai trouvée amère. —Et je l’ai injuriée” (411) [One evening I seated Beauty on my knees. And I found her bitter. And I cursed her (Varèse 3)]. These lines open Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en enfer [A Season In Hell]*: a short work in prose inspired by the poet’s spiritual and literary journey up to the time of the book’s writing in the spring and summer of 1873. Although he did not intend these words to announce his abandonment of literature, the cursing of beauty would prove a strangely accurate and fitting prophesy for the death of the poet in the man. Too soon after the creation of *Saison [A Season]*, Rimbaud’s renunciation of literary beauty and his enormous talent for creating it would be permanent. The rejection of this gift by a very young man at the height of his talent is the enduring mystery of his short life and the focus of this thesis.

To appreciate the magnitude of such a renunciation and the ensuing fascination with its mystery, one must remember what the poet had in his possession to throw away. In respect to his influence on modern poetry, scholars today dispute Rimbaud’s importance only in terms of degree. However, he could not have traveled forward in time to savor and take encouragement from posterity’s favorable judgment concerning his work. It is rather the acclaim and acknowledgement of peers during Rimbaud’s own time that could have had the power to influence his desire to write, and indeed he received encouragement and support from the literary community on a level no young writer of any time would dare hope. Not yet seventeen, his power and promise as a poet already had the recognition and approbation of the leading writers and artists of the day.
Newly arrived in Paris from a small town in the Ardennes, Rimbaud’s childish appearance and extreme awkwardness in the social milieu contrasted with boorish and arrogant behavior that did not ingratiate him with the artists welcoming him to the capital. However, on the night of his introduction at the dinner of the Vilains-Bonshommes—a monthly reunion of literary figures and other artists—the guests could not deny the boy his talent. After the meal, Rimbaud read aloud from a poem inspired by the excitement of leaving his small town to come to the capital as a poet. “Le Bateau ivre” [The Drunken Boat] depicts the author’s genius in the allegory of a boat that carries the artist to an ever expanding and violent sea signifying his greater and greater faculties of discovery and creativity. The listeners were stunned as much by the evocative power and originality of the poem as by the young author who recited it.

Léon Valade, a fellow poet and guest at this dinner of September 30, 1871, wrote the following passage in a letter describing the evening and the discovery of the new prodigy. The dense text illustrates not only Rimbaud’s physical appearance at this pivotal moment in literary history but conveys as well the savage ambiance of the young poet’s budding rebellion against the social and moral conventions of the western world. Most importantly, it communicates the overwhelming impression of genius that his appearance left that night on the literary establishment of the day. In the letter, Valade refers to fellow guests, devotee to the arts, Edmond Maître and poet, Ernest d’Hervilly:

Vous avez perdu de ne pas assister au dernier dîner des affreux Bonhommes… Là fut exhibé, sous les auspices de Verlaine son inventeur, et de moi, son Jean-Baptiste sur la rive gauche, un effrayant poète de moins de 18 ans, qui a nom Arthur Rimbaud. Grandes mains, grands pieds, figure absolument enfantine et qui pourrait convenir à un enfant de treize ans, yeux bleus profonds, caractère plus sauvage que timide, tel est ce môme dont l’imagination, pleine de puissances et de corruptions inouïes, a fasciné ou terrifié tous nos amis. [...] D’Hervilly a dit: “Jésus au milieu des docteurs” — C’est le diable m’a déclaré Maître; ce qui m’a conduit à cette formule nouvelle et meilleure: le Diable au milieu des docteurs!
[...] — Arrivez, vous verrez de ses vers, et vous jugerez. [...] c’est un génie qui se lève. — Ceci est l’expression froide d’un jugement pour lequel j’ai déjà eu trois semaines, et non une minute d’engouement. (qtd. in Lefrère 344)

[You certainly missed out by not being present at the last dinner of the Affreux Bonhommes. A most alarming poet, not yet eighteen, was exhibited by Paul Verlaine his inventor, and indeed his John the Baptist.... Big hands, big feet, a completely babyish face, like that of a child of thirteen, deep blue eyes, a temperament more wild than shy, such is the boy, whose imagination, compounded of great power and undreamed of corruption, who has fascinated and terrified all our friends. [...] D’Hervilly said: “Behold Jesus in the midst of the doctors.” “More likely Satan!” replied Maître, and so the most apt description occurred to me, “Satan in the midst of the doctors.” [...].

Come and you will be able to read his verses and judge for yourself. [...] I would say that we are here beholding the birth of a genius. This is the statement of my considered opinion, which I have reached after three weeks of reflection, and it is not merely a passing whim. (qtd. in Petitfils 112)]

What is most interesting about the expression of Valade’s sentiment concerning Rimbaud is the adjective he chooses to assign the young poet. He does not use “charmant” [charming] as he might to express his appreciation for a new talent that with work may one day mature. Rather he writes “effrayant” [alarming]—underlined by Valade for emphasis—to communicate the stunned confusion of witnessing an already present ability developed far beyond that of other writers twice the boy’s age: poets who had worked diligently, perhaps all their lives, to nourish the capacity they now possessed.

Such enormous and manifest talent in an adolescent just shy of his seventeenth birthday (Valade incorrectly states eighteenth)—youth exaggerated by Rimbaud’s “figure absolument enfantine” [completely babyish face]—tempted the guests at the dinner to whimsically associate the phenomenon with the supernatural. Through allusions to Jesus and John the Baptist, Valade compares Rimbaud to the coming of a prophet. Despite the initial attempt to attribute this poetic miracle to the divine, “Jésus au milieu des docteurs” [Jesus in the midst of the doctors], Rimbaud’s “caractère sauvage” [wild temperament] and imagination full of “corruptions inouïes” [undreamed of corruption] moved the majority of guests to share Valade’s suspicion
that the adolescent’s magic was more likely black: “le Diable au milieu des docteurs.” [Satan in the midst of the doctors.] However, to convey the objective value of his judgment, Valade ends by letting the reader know that the revelation of Rimbaud’s disconcerting genius is such that it has caused him to reflect three weeks before rendering a verdict for fear he had somehow let the enthusiasm of the moment carry him away. It is most significant that Valade’s impression was not unique; rather it reflects an amazingly universal consensus among the members of the literary world who encountered, on that night or on later occasions, the boy poet. Rimbaud’s peers, well established writers of the day, gave the adolescent every reason to believe that the world would one day place him among the great in his field.

Just as Rimbaud’s case is not that of a budding artist whose talent withered for lack of encouragement from peers, neither is his the story of a writer who died in obscurity, never receiving in his lifetime the acclaim promised him for his work. Years before his premature death at the age of thirty-seven, he was given word on several occasions of his growing fame among the young decadent and symbolist poets of Paris. If he required the intoxication of great admiration to inspire him to take up his pen once again, it was his for the taking.

A commercial trader in Africa for several years, Rimbaud had written school friend Paul Bourde to inquire about engaging as a war correspondent for *Le Temps*, where the latter now worked as a senior reporter. In Bourde’s response of February 29, 1888, he saw it as his duty to enlighten Rimbaud not only concerning the fascination with the poetry of his youth but also the mystique surrounding his disappearance from the literary world:

Vous ignorez sans doute, vivant si loin de nous, que vous êtes devenu à Paris dans un très petit cénacle une sorte de personnage légendaire, un de ces personnages dont on a annoncé la mort, mais à l’existence desquels quelques fidèles persistent à croire et dont ils attendent obstinément le retour. On a publié dans des revues du quartier latin et même réuni en volumes vos premiers essais, prose et vers; quelques jeunes gens (que je trouve naïfs) ont essayé de fonder un système littéraire sur votre sonnet sur la couleur des lettres.
Ce petit groupe qui vous a reconnu pour maître, ne sachant ce que vous êtes devenu, espère que vous réapparaîtrez un jour pour le tirer de son obscurité. (qtd. in Lefrère 1026)

[You probably don’t know, living as far from us as you do, that you’ve become for a small cénacle in Paris a sort of legendary figure, one of those people whose death is announced but in whose existence some faithful will persist in believing, and whose return they await with impatience. They have published in a Latin Quarter review your first attempts in prose and verse, and have even made a small volume of them. Certain youths, whom I personally consider somewhat naïve, have tried to found a system on your Sonnet des Voyelles. This little group calls you its master and not knowing what has become of you, earnestly hopes that you will reappear one day to drag it out of its obscurity. (qtd. in Starkie 380)]

Bourde expresses not simply the idea that Rimbaud has received recognition for some of his old work, but rather that the (now former) poet and his life were achieving mythical status, becoming “une sorte de personnage légendaire” [a sort of legendary figure]. Because his admirers focused as much on the person of Rimbaud as his poetry, Bourde intimates that, even at this early date, the following was almost cult-like. The letter interestingly echoes Valade’s “return of the prophet” theme by indicating that Rimbaud’s followers waited for their “maître” [master] in the hope he would reveal the meaning and mystery of his poetry to the true believers.

Even if Rimbaud had once dreamed of fame as a poet, it is unlikely he could have anticipated the obsession with his personality. Based on the accounts given, it is appropriate to compare his aura among the young enthusiasts of poetry in Paris to that of today’s “rock star.” While his legend circulated in print and by word of mouth, the preoccupation with his person rivaled and often eclipsed the poems themselves. As early as October 1886 (over two years earlier than Bourde’s letter above), journalist and critic Félix Fénéon expressed the allure of mystery surrounding the missing poet, writing in the first edition of Le Symboliste, “Déjà son existence se conteste, et Rimbaud flotte en ombre mythique sur les Symbolistes” (qtd. in Lefrère 1028) [Already his existence is in question, and Rimbaud floats like a mythic shadow over the Symbolists]. The same month, Anatole France, writing for Le Temps, did his part to
accommodate the growing fascination with this vanishing from the literary world. To further
stoke the fire of intrigue, he offered up the fantastic rumors in circulation concerning Rimbaud’s
fate; the most bizarre of which claimed he was now the king of a tribe in Africa:

Ce jeune poète n’a brillé qu’un moment. Il était dans sa destinée de disparaître à vingt
ans. Ostendent terris hunc tantum fata. On ne sait ce qu’il est devenu. Les uns croient
qu’il est marchand de cochons dans l’Aisne, d’autres affirment qu’il est roi de nègres. [...] Que d’incertitudes! La vie de M. Arthur Rimbaud est mêlée de fables comme celle
d’Orphée. (qtd. in Lefrère 1028-29)

[This young poet burned brightly but for a moment. It was his destiny to disappear at
twenty. Ostendent terris hunc tantum fata. We do not know what has become of him. There are those who believe he is selling pigs in Asia, others affirm he is a king of
Africans. [...] What uncertainties! The life of Arthur Rimbaud mixes with the fables like
that of Orpheus.]

Playing on the Romantic concept of the young poet consumed by his own brilliance, Anatole
France’s emphasis is (as Bourde also indicated of Rimbaud’s devotees) the mystique of the
person rather than his poetry. The uncertainty of Rimbaud’s fate coupled with the possibility of
unlikely career choices contrasts with the greatness of his lost poetic promise. It is important to
remember that at the writing of Anatole France’s and Félix Fénéon’s early articles contributing
to the myth making of Rimbaud, the former poet was on the eve of only his thirty-second
birthday: still a young man, whose great abilities as a writer should have been reaching their
zenith while he took encouragement and satisfaction from the literary acclaim reaching its
fevered pitch in the capital. However, as the problem addressed in the thesis makes evident,
this was not the case.

The musings over Rimbaud’s whereabouts and current occupation at the time are in truth
misdirection from the question at the heart of people’s interest, both then and now. Today when
we know the answers to the simple questions concerning his choice of habitat and career later in
life, it does not tell us what we want to know: why did he stop writing poetry? Like the young
Parisian poets of the 1880’s, our fascination—and even frustration—with the fate of Rimbaud is
rooted in a simple disconnect between the incredible potential available to the man as poet and his ultimate choice to then shun such promise. From his propitious introduction at the dinner of the Vilains-Bonshommes in September 1870 until the last known poetic work of the author not more than four years later, Rimbaud’s capacity as a poet had shown no signs of diminishing. On the contrary, his work appears to have continually evolved into new and increasingly evocative forms of expression. Here lies the mystery so captivating for not only the devoted student of Rimbaud, but for anyone who admires and envies those who have the power to create great things. Using Rimbaud’s imagery from “Le Bateau ivre” [The Drunken Boat], the question is posed: why would a young man, in the midst of navigating his talent into seas of ever increasing powers of creativity, willfully abandon his gift, choosing instead to beach his boat before reaching even the middle of the journey, and then, in respect to artistic inspiration, wander inland to forever dwell on sterile and dry land?

The riddle had the power to perplex and make wonder Rimbaud’s followers from the very beginning. Even in the initial faltering moments of his literary career, the question frustrated the first and foremost student of Rimbaud and Rimbaldian poetry, Paul Verlaine, who accused his increasingly distant friend of wasting his gifts. “Ce m’est un si grand chagrin,” he writes in a December 12, 1875 letter to Rimbaud, “de te voir en des voies idiotes, toi si intelligent, si prêt (bien que ça puisse t’étonner!” (qtd. in Lefrère 734) [It is a source of great sorrow to me to see you in the pathways of stupidity, you who are so intelligent, so ready (although that might astonish you!) (Schmidt, Complete Works 245)]. Today’s admirers of Rimbaud’s talent find themselves echoing Verlaine’s annoyance and bewilderment in questioning the young poet’s decision to abandon his gifts.
I return once more to Rimbaud’s own analogy from *Saison [A Season]* to most perfectly illustrate the apparent paradox of his choice: “I sat Beauty on my knees. —And I found her bitter. —And I cursed her” (Varèse 3). To say that something is beautiful is to say it is delightful to the mind and senses of the perceiver; more simply, beauty is the thing desired. If—like in the tales of old—a man were to win the love of the one woman desired by all other suitors, the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, how could her admirers comprehend, even tolerate, that man’s rejection of their ideal? In the opening of *Saison [A Season]*, Rimbaud spells “Beauty” by beginning with an upper case letter, thus signifying the concept of “true” beauty: the beauty society has held up as universal, desired by everyone. To those who work diligently to possess “Beauty” for themselves, refusal by the individual who can have it for the taking is not merely puzzling but also threatening; such a rejection in effect questions and undermines the object of our own ambitions. It is our frustration with Rimbaud’s rejection of poetic beauty and the power to create it that this thesis intends to alleviate by attempting to understand it.

Motivation and Poetry

Asking to understand why Rimbaud no longer desired to write poetry, even coming to find the memory of it repugnant, is essentially seeking to enter the man’s psychology and dissect it. Before beginning an analysis of what drives any human behavior, especially something as complex and mysterious as the compulsion to create art, we must first acquire special tools. In order to find the appropriate concepts and terms for an effective analysis of Rimbaud’s behavior— instruments especially fashioned for the study of human motivation—I turn to the theories of psychologist, Abraham H. Maslow.

In his book *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow writes, “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself” (91). As a
psychologist specializing in the study of human motivation, Maslow understands that an individual pursues an activity only because it fulfills a need or causes pleasure. In this respect, the desire to write poetry is similar to that which drives any other form of human endeavor. However, the personal and intellectual power of art and literature to impact and inspire the individual gives it an elevated, if not quasi-religious, status in society. It is tempting in turn to separate from other human initiative the innate motivation of the artist to create and the poet to write. While still recognizing the need for society to place higher value on certain pursuits over others, it is important for the purpose of this thesis to demystify to some degree the impulsion to create art and remember that all endeavors work within the same psychological framework of human motivation. For this reason, a brief discussion of this area of psychology will help us in analyzing Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry.

In the introduction to his seminal paper “A Theory of Human Motivation (1943),” Maslow states, “Man is a perpetually wanting animal (par. 1).” However, the psychologist recognized that the wants of an individual are endlessly varied and complex, the satiation of one simply gives rise to another while certain desires exist simultaneously. In order to establish a pattern for the continual flux of these needs, Maslow offers the following propositions on which one should base a sound discussion of human motivation:

Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. [...] Also no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives. (“A Theory” par. 1)

The arrangement of these drives, commonly referred to as “Malow’s hierarchy of needs,” is often represented in a pyramid whose rising levels depict the progression from more fundamental physiological needs toward increasingly abstract psychological ones.
Maslow divides the levels of the pyramid into two basic groups: the lower level composed of “deficiency needs” that must be met for the individual’s survival and mental well being, and the upper level composed of “being needs” that make the personality distinct. Deficiency needs begin with physiological requirements (food, water, air, sleep, etc.) followed closely by safety needs (freedom from danger). The grouping progresses toward basic psychological wants of love and belonging (acceptance by family and community) and concludes at its highest level with esteem needs (self-respect, especially through the regard and recognition of peers). The upper half of Maslow’s hierarchy, being needs, addresses the most abstract and complex aspects of human desire, and it consists of two levels: “self-actualization” and “self-transcendence.”

Although, this thesis will reveal the surprisingly significant role that lower level deficiency needs played in Rimbaud’s rejection of literary pursuits, the more abstract classifications of being needs will, as expected, prove of special interest in understanding the choices of a poet.

Maslow encapsulates his definition of self-actualization in the phrase “What a man [or woman] can be he [or she] must be” (Motivation 91). Explicitly, self-actualization represents the desire to develop and realize one’s potentials, capacities, and talents. He restates the term as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (92). The concept aligns with the more developed aspects of our personality: desires that define our individuality as opposed to the universally shared motivations represented by deficiency needs. Writing poetry falls within the realm of self-actualization but not necessarily exclusively.

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1 The concept of self-transcendence did not appear in Maslow’s original 1943 paper. It is rather a refinement in the grouping of being needs: one which the psychologist introduced decades later in his work The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (1971).
At the top of the pyramid, Maslow places a refinement of self-actualization that he terms self-transcendence. The drive to transcend oneself is perforce the most abstract as here the individual hopes to connect with something greater than the limitations of the self. In opposition to the other needs that Maslow designates, transcendence signifies—at least from the individual’s perception—the desire to reach beyond the fulfillment of needs limited exclusively to the self. It is often made manifest as a desire to transform, usually for the better, the reality of others and the human condition, i.e. idealistic religious, philosophical, political, and humanitarian pursuits. I will argue that Rimbaud’s need for self-transcendence played the dominant role in his pursuit of poetry and that the failure of his art to have facilitated his reach beyond the self ultimately caused him to turn his energy elsewhere.

Maslow in his study of motivation does not claim that it is possible to ultimately understand the workings of human desire. Even in diagramming his hierarchy of needs, he does not intend to imply the establishment of a rigidly defined pattern of want and satiation but stresses instead the lack of fixity. He emphasizes as well that these needs do not operate in isolation of each other, rather they form a complex, ever-changing dynamic of impulsions influenced by the competing needs of the self and others around us. Likewise, the interaction of needs at play both within Rimbaud and with the outside influences of his environment will prove complex and uneasily defined.

That said, a basic understanding of Maslow’s theory of human motivation serves this thesis in two important ways. First, it is a simple reminder that the individual’s needs motivate all human action, including those pursuits most exalted by society, in this case poetry. Secondly, the needs and drives designated by Maslow will, for my study of Rimbaud, represent general human psychology and serve as a reference standard in analyzing the motivation behind his
choices. With this understanding, I will place particular emphasis throughout on examining the personality traits of Rimbaud, exploring how the needs peculiar to his psyche interplayed with the circumstances of his life as well as his changing literary and worldview. Exploring the interaction of Rimbaud’s personality, life history, and personal philosophy will enable us to understand why he would at first embrace art only to reject it in favor of a new vision. In sum, this study will determine why poetry failed to satisfy his needs.

Organizing an Approach to the Question

The abandonment of a calling, especially one to which an individual was once passionately and completely dedicated, rarely represents a decision made in an isolated moment of time. Such a profound change is likely the result of a process that has unfolded over an extended period, often measured in years. As this study will show, Rimbaud’s decision to abandon his literary gifts likewise resulted from an evolution of thought and sentiment. It follows that a personal transformation taking place over such an expanse of time would be subject to the influence of a myriad of events experienced, people encountered, and ideas absorbed during that period.

For the reason stated above, my thesis, although not intended to be a type of biography, will nonetheless rely heavily on the examination of biographical material concerning Rimbaud. The tools utilized in this respect include not merely the analysis of crucial life events but the examination of correspondence, the memory of conversations, and the personal observations originating from Rimbaud, his friends, family, and associates. I will analyze his actual poetry and other literary efforts only to the extent they are autobiographical (such as in the case of Saison [A Season]) and thus illuminate the question at hand. However, an in-depth examination of
Rimbaud’s philosophy of literature—particularly that of the “seer”\(^2\) poet and the various influences that contribute to its formulation—is invaluable in understanding his idea of purpose and perspective with not only literature but also life in general. Each chapter will emphasize tracing the development of the various aspects I believe key to Rimbaud’s poetic silence, and therefore I take a chronological approach in each examination. In other respects, I will narrate his life only to the extent necessary to create the context appropriate for addressing the purposes of each chapter: understanding the manner in which he turns on his literary talent (Chapter 1) and exploring the various reasons for doing so (Chapter 2, 3, and 4).

Creating the basic context for the central question of this thesis is the function of Chapter 1. Before understanding “why” Rimbaud ceased to write, the reader must first understand “how” he ceased to write: the manner in which his ultimate choice unfolded. I begin by briefly discussing how he came to arrive in the capital city as the sponsored guest of the Parisian literati; here I give attention to the articulation of his radical literary philosophy in the famous “seer letters”\(^3\) (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2). Although the two-year quest to realize his mystic vision of poetry culminated with Rimbaud’s perception of failure as expressed in *Saison* [A Season], I will argue that the writing of the book did not signify in any respect an intention to leave his literary career. However, I will demonstrate that, afterwards, his slowly waning attempts to find success as an author were paralleled by increasing redirection of his intellectual

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\(^2\) In Rimbaud’s vision of a potentially mystic function for poetry, the term “seer” refers to the poet’s new role in which he or she would no longer use the poem as merely a vehicle of self-expression. Through proper preparation of the soul, the seer would have the power to transcend the normal limits of the self, bridge the spiritual and material world, and tap into the perfected knowledge of the divine world. The seer as poet could capture this greater truth in poetry, which in turn could incite and empower humanity to move toward its betterment as a result of its enlightened state. I will expand on Rimbaud’s idea of the seer as the thesis progresses.

\(^3\) Rimbaud articulated his mystic literary philosophy in two spontaneous missives written in May 1871: one to his professor and mentor Georges Izambard and a second more developed letter to an associate of Izambard’s, a Paul Demeny. These two documents, which are known in literary history as the “seer letters,” are well studied as they represent Rimbaud’s only articulation of his thinking in this respect, at least, that is until he mocks the philosophy and its failure two years later in *Saison* [A Season].
energy toward non-literary areas. The most striking feature of Rimbaud’s disaffection with poetry discussed in Chapter 1 is his ever-increasing disdain—and eventually outright hostility—toward any aspect of his literary life. In tracing this hardening of sentiment toward literature, I analyze the significance of an increasingly dry and objective style of writing as demonstrated in his correspondence and field reports. Finally, I offer evidence of a surviving remnant of Rimbaud’s former poetic nature and abilities of verbal expression: first in a biting wit for which he was notorious among his associates in Africa, and second in the reawakening of an expressive personality when re-exposed to opiates (a phenomenon I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address directly the question of this thesis in that they isolate and analyze the key causes for Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry and explain his subsequent disdain for literature in general. To facilitate clarity, I am suggesting how the reader might perceive the order in which the three chapters address the causes identified. Chapter 2 (the search for self-transcendence while maintaining intellectual integrity) focuses on what, I believe, represents the core reason for poetry’s inability to continue to play a viable role in his life. Chapter 3 (the problem of chronic substance abuse and the fundamental need for self-preservation) and Chapter 4 (the desire for self-validation through the respect of peers and the avoidance of shame) address what I designate as secondary factors in that they function more to explain what led to the hardening of his attitude toward literature after he had ceased to write. Although I believe this perception of organization is helpful, such a separation between the sections is ultimately not so perfectly delineated. In truth, the elements identified in the different chapters overlap, and to varying degrees, each plays a role in all phases of his turning against literature. From this point of view, chapters 2, 3, and 4 signify a very general progression where I start by addressing the causes related more closely to the beginning of Rimbaud’s disaffection with poetry and then
move toward the issues that had their greater impact after the fact, serving to generate continuing hostility and regret in respect to his involvement with literature, forever cementing his rejection of it. Ultimately, these two perceptions of chapter organization are both true, and the reader should alternate between them as seems most useful in treating the various facets of the thesis question.

Chapter 2 focuses on the most abstract aspect of Rimbaud’s poetic silence. Here, I argue that his desire for self-transcendence was the dominant feature of his personality and that all pursuits, poetry in particular, were in some manner subservient to this one overriding need; literature’s ultimate failure to be of use in achieving this aim caused him to leave it by the wayside. I diagram the development of his search for self-transcendence through its various incarnations: from zealous Catholic, devotee of the Parnassian cult of Absolute Beauty, mystic in his quest of the seer poet, to finally believer in the transforming powers of commerce and science as a materialist. Here, I give special attention to understanding the various influences that play into the creation of the seer philosophy. In order to analyze how the drive for self-transcendence revealed itself, I found it necessary to address within this chapter the competing force shaping Rimbaud’s personality: his intelligence. His constant hunger for intellectual stimulation led to a continually changing choice of intellectual pursuits, and a study of these endeavors gives evidence to the transformation that was taking place within him. In addition, I argue that Rimbaud’s mental probity shaped his path toward self-transcendence by not permitting him to indulge in a practice—whether the Christianity of his family and French culture or the mysticism of the seer poet—once his mind determined it false. Finally, I assert that, after the shift to materialism, he ultimately found that his enthusiasm for the objective precision of science proved
inconsonant with the subjective and evocative expression at the heart of poetry; this incompatibility ultimately doomed his desire to write.

In Chapter 3, I contend that Rimbaud suffered crippling inhibition from which only the use of intoxicants provided liberation; for this reason, Baudelaire’s call for powerful drugs in the creation of poetry rang especially true. I will argue that Rimbaud’s pursuit of poetry became inseparable from the abuse of intoxicants, and out of a basic need for self-preservation (as well as a desire to regain a sense of self-dignity, which I discuss in Chapter 4), he rejected them as one. To support these assertions, this chapter traces the development of his use of alcohol and drugs, beginning with the flight to Paris between the Siege and the Commune that culminated with his ensuing appeal for a derangement of the senses in the seer letters. I focus particularly on examining how the special psychoactive effects of absinthe and hashish played so well into his ideas of the seer poet. However, the chapter will demonstrate that even without the seer vision for justification, he continued to drink excessively, thus indicating an underlying propensity toward alcoholism. I propose that his work as a site supervisor on a Cyprus construction project marks the critical turning point in his psychology, producing a mentality of absolute sobriety that in later years would grow into a lifestyle of asceticism. The chapter ends with the observation of a phenomenon caused by the reintroduction of opiates during his losing fight with cancer: the apparent reawakening of his poetic disposition.

Chapter 4 asserts that Rimbaud’s need for self-validation through the acknowledgement and praise of his peers was great, and literature’s failure to bring acclaim (while he still desired it) played a significant role in his disillusionment with literary endeavors. Furthermore, I maintain that he came to blame the artistic mindset and lifestyle for the ignominy of scandal, creating in turn an intense fear and scorn for his growing fame as a poet. To substantiate these
claims, Chapter 4 will first establish the nature of Rimbaud’s pride by examining how his absolute belief in the superiority of his talent and the correctness of the seer vision resulted in displays of overbearing arrogance, so extreme, that they led to his banishment by the Parisian literati. I will demonstrate that as he increasingly lost hope of publication, the shameful aspects of his literary life began to overwhelm him. In particular, I will examine how the trauma of the shooting incident in Brussels and the public revelation of his homosexual affair with Verlaine left a lasting scar. Finally, we will see how the desire to escape the cloud of scandal and the memory of his youthful folly with literature pushed him to leave Europe in a quest for self-reinvention, seeking to transform himself into the opposite of his artistic existence.

The Question of Relevance

The reader of this thesis may legitimately ask why the mystery of Rimbaud’s poetic silence has significance beyond that of idle curiosity. In other fields of endeavor, we could undoubtedly find examples of individuals who renounced greatness in favor of another career, and yet their choice would not motivate serious scholarly analysis. As students of literature, certainly our intuitive interest in understanding Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry is born precisely out of the artistic nature of his pursuit and his eminence in that area, but does the satisfaction of such curiosity have a place in serious scholarship? Adherents to a post-structuralist approach to literature (as championed in Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay “La Mort de l’Auteur” [Death of the Author]) would argue that, in respect to the literary works themselves, the author’s biography and personal psychology are irrelevant. Even if we were to put Barthes’ ideas of literary analysis aside, Rimbaud’s reasons for ceasing to write—naturally after having already written—would likely add little to the interpretation of his previously completed literary
product. Consequently, like the admiring decadent and symbolist poets of fin de siècle Paris, I must turn the focus back to the person of Rimbaud.

For everything known as a creation, it is impossible to completely escape awareness of the personality that created it; as humans, the very act of creation fascinates us and the possession of such ability becomes a thing of admiration and even envy. Consider the possibility of a monolith discovered in the desert, beautifully crafted but with unknowable origin. Although ignorance of the object’s designer would not inhibit our enjoyment of its beauty, curiosity of the unknown artist would never abate. When the master is known—a painting by Van Gogh, a symphony by Mozart, a dance choreographed by Martha Graham—we cannot experience the work and not wonder at the power of his or her artistic intelligence. From this perspective, I assert that an intrinsic—and therefore inescapable—aspect of encountering great literature is awe and appreciation for the mind and spirit of the author. In this thesis, our interest in the personality of Rimbaud and our curiosity to explore his abandonment of literature will serve as a tribute to the creative genius revealed in the excellence of his work.
CHAPTER 1: FROM BEAUTY TO DISGUST

Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry is a mystery because he left us little explanation for his choice. The intense loathing of his literary past made revisiting the memory of it, even for the moment he might have needed to illuminate the curious, almost unbearable. Without the cooperation and testimony of the one man who could explain the motivations for his crime, the burden of unraveling that mystery has fallen to this thesis, and like a good novel of the genre, it is essential for any detective to begin by examining thoroughly the scene of the crime. Before attempting to understand the reasons Rimbaud abandoned his gifts as a poet, effective analysis will require knowing how he evolved as a poet and then the way his disaffection with poetry revealed itself over time. Establishing and evaluating the evidence available will create the context needed for the more focused investigations in each of following chapters.

After a brief study of Rimbaud’s initial development as a poet, this chapter will place special attention on how, following a flight to the capital of war-ravaged France, he experienced a radical transformation in his literary and personal philosophy. I will examine in particular his expression of this new ideology in the two important letters written immediately upon his return home. In the dense text of this particular correspondence, Rimbaud explains his vision of the poet turned “seer” or one able to channel the greater divine truth of the universe, capturing and communicating it in his or her poetry. The chapter will follow in detail his path towards disillusionment, initially with the mystic philosophy of the seer poet and ultimately with literature in general. In addition to his few remarks (more often simple emotional reactions) concerning poetry, I will analyze how the dramatic change in his written expression mirrors the evolution of his negative mindset toward literature. The chapter will examine his persona the last years of his life, hardened businessman and trader in Africa, devotee of the promise of science.
Within this pragmatic and concrete minded personality, I will search for a remnant of his innate verbal abilities by discussing testimony concerning his use of language in a notorious biting wit. Finally, I note the re-emergence of his poetic disposition with the re-exposure to opiates on his deathbed.

Tu Vates eris [Thou Shalt Be a Seer and a Poet]

As Rimbaud would compose the majority of his literary work between mid and late adolescence, precociousness marks one of his most extraordinary qualities as a poet. Latin verse was a requirement of all students at the Collège de Charleville, yet at the age of thirteen, Rimbaud exhibited in this schoolwork a talent for writing and the ambition for acclaim that his talent might bring. On his own initiative, he sent the Imperial Palace of Napoleon III sixty hexameters of original Latin verse commemorating the first communion of the Emperor’s son. However, it is another early Latin composition, “Ver erat,” that in retrospect would prove especially interesting. In the poem, the muses announce three times a phrase that Apollo divinely inscribes on the forehead of a boy who has fallen asleep by the riverbank: “Tu Vates eris.” Rimbaldian scholar Enid Starkie notes that “Vates” translates simultaneously as both “seer” and “poet,” thus making the pronouncement particularly prophetic for the poem’s young author: “Thou shalt be a be a seer and a poet!” (43). In terms of his potential as a writer, she states that the early Latin verse reveals “if nothing else, a range of reading and a faculty for assimilation of vocabulary and turns of phrase uncommon in a schoolboy” (42). He would soon apply this extended knowledge and innate verbal sense to his native French, starting on the path toward becoming a poet and ultimately a seer.

To witness and give testimony to Rimbaud’s development as a poet was his close friend from late childhood through early adulthood, Ernest Delahaye. This important source for
Rimbaldian studies tells us that it was also at age thirteen that Rimbaud first ventured outside Latin verse to write poems in French. According to Delahaye, these early works in French, non-extant today, were mostly “petites satires” or short satirical pieces (Delahaye, Témoin 32). Only after his fifteenth birthday did Rimbaud make original poetry in French his primary focus, and in January 1870, his first publication of a French poem, “Les Étrennes des orphelins” [The Orphans’ New Year] appeared in the literary journal La Revue pour tous. Seeing his name and work in print cemented the boy’s dedication to poetry and fueled the desire for fame.

The publication of his poem coincided with the arrival of the new professor of French letters, George Izambard, and over the coming year, he would represent the active, dominant influence on Rimbaud’s intellectual and artistic development. Only twenty-one, the professor befriended his student, encouraging and instructing the adolescent in poetry, even offering free access to his personal library. Under Izambard’s mentoring, Rimbaud came to enthusiastically espouse the poetry of the Parnassians: writers who emphasized the perfection of form and technique in determining a poem’s literary worth. In a May 24, 1870, letter addressed to Banville via his literary journal Le Parnasse contemporain, Rimbaud submitted (unsuccessfully) three poems for publication and expressed his unrestrained enthusiasm for the Parnassian movement:

> Que si je vous envoie quelques-uns de ces vers, [...] — c’est que j’aime tous les poètes, tous les bons Parnassiens, — puisque le Poète est un Parnassien, — épris de la beauté idéale; [...] Voilà pourquoi. — c’est bête, n’est-ce pas, mais enfin?...
> Dans deux ans, dans un an peut-être, je serai à Paris, — Anch’io, messieurs du journal, je serai Parnassien! — Je ne sais pas ce que j’ai là... qui veut monter... —Je jure, cher maître, d’adorer toujours les deux déesses, Muse et Liberté. (133)

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4 Inspired by the artistic ideas of the poet Théophile Gautier, this group of writers—led by Gautier’s disciple Théodore de Banville along with Leconte de Lisle—established the literary review, Le Parnasse contemporain. As its mission, the journal promoted the aesthetic doctrine of “L’Art pour l’Art” [Art for Art’s Sake]: art without any other function or meaning than the beauty of the work itself.
Rimbaud is asking not only for recognition of his talent but also for acknowledgment that he is a worthy disciple of the Parnassians by virtue of his sincere devotion to the cause. I will argue that his desire to lose himself to their philosophy of Art for Art’s sake reveals an inherent tendency to want to believe in the absolute nature of his mission. Although the zeal expressed is due in part to adolescence, the compulsion to find a supreme answer to which he could surrender himself would prove evident in whatever approach he chose in life: a trait critical to the discussion in Chapter 2. He would make good on his promise to come to the capital within the suggested time span, but his fervent devotion to the Parnassian ideal faded before the year was up.

In July the same year, less than two months after the impassioned letter to Banville, France entered into its disastrous war with Prussia, resulting in the fall of the Imperial Government. The beginning of the war closed local schools, thus marking the end of Rimbaud’s formal education and signaling an important turn in his evolution as a poet. He made a series of flights of adventure through the war-torn countryside to Paris and Belgium that culminated with a visit to the capital, which by chance fell between the ending of the Siege in January 1871 and the establishment of the Commune of Paris in May; the political turmoil and social upheaval would energize the adolescent’s imagination.

Among the hotly debated questions in Rimbaldian studies is speculation on whether a traumatic experience of sexual abuse at the hand of soldiers in a Parisian barracks profoundly influenced the adolescent’s thinking and emotional state during this period. Starkie argues that because the advent of overt sexual and scatological expression in his writing—in addition to the
start of his anti-social behavior in general—coincides with the return from Paris, it is likely that
the poem said to depict the event, “Cœur Supplicié” [Tortured Heart], is indeed autobiographical
(79-81, 86-88). What is certain is that, parallel to the change in personality, a radical philosophy
of poetry, already germinating for perhaps months, finally crystallized in the boy’s head.

Les Lettres du voyant [The Seer Letters]

Rimbaud articulates his theory of the poet as voyant or “seer” in two letters: the first to
his (soon to be former) friend and mentor of the past year, George Izambard, and the second to
an associate of the latter, editor and amateur poet, Paul Demeny. In the “lettres du voyant” or
“seer letters” as they are known to history, Rimbaud calls for a new type of poet who will
transcend the self and the immediate world. As he imagines in these letters, the “seer poet” will
achieve transcendence by making him or herself a sensitive instrument able to receive the
vibrations of the greater reality and truth beyond. He likens the new role of the poet to that of a
violin or horn that, once created, can only receive the vibrations of the master musician who
plays it. In a concept that Rimbaud condenses with his famous edict, “Je est un autre” [I is
someone else], the seer poet would cede personal and conscious input into the creation of the
poem, giving that power over to the divine voice of the cosmos.

Because Rimbaud now believed Izambard too hopelessly stuck in poetry’s past,
Demeny’s letter of May 15, 1871, receives the more developed articulation of his ideas:

Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s’éveille clairon, il n’y a rien de sa faute. Cela m’est
evèdont: j’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l’écoute: je lance un coup
d’archet: la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d’un bond sur
la scène.
Si les vieux imbéciles n’avaient pas trouvé du Moi que la signification fausse, nous
n’aurions pas à balayer ces millions de squelettes qui, depuis un temps infini, ont
accumulé les produits de leur intelligence borgnesse, en s’en clamant les auteurs! (242)

[For I is someone else. If the brass awakes as horn, it can’t be to blame. This much is
clear: I’m around for the hatching of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it: I release a
stroke from the bow: the symphony makes its rumblings in the depths, or leaps fully
formed onto the stage. If old fools hadn’t completely misunderstood the nature of the Ego, we wouldn’t be constantly sweeping up these millions of skeletons which, since time immemorial, have hoarded products of their monocular intellects, a blindness of which they claim authorship! (Mason 31-33)

Rimbaud constructs the grammatically incorrect “Je est” or “I is” to effectively illustrate that the creative force for his poetry would possess an identity that is simultaneously independent from and yet one with the poet. The idea is reminiscent of (and indeed may be inspired by) a certain experience in the creative process often reported by artists, especially while in their youth. I am reminded in particular of accounts given by modern musicians and lyricists (in particular Bob Dylan and John Lennon) where they relate the sensation of music and/or lyrics seeming to formulate with little or no conscious effort, sometimes as the result of dreams. In Rimbaud’s theory of the seer, to receive the already written poem, the poet, has only to prepare his or her

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5 As described by the songwriters mentioned here, the sensation of an autonomous creative force occurring in the artistic process appears to be a product of their particular genius and a mind stimulated by the newness and energy of youth. John Lennon and Bob Dylan’s explanation of this phenomenon in the writing of certain songs intuitively brings to mind ideas of the seer poet and supports the assertion that similar experiences encouraged Rimbaud to embrace his mystic philosophy of literary creation. In reference to the lyrics for “Across The Universe,” Lennon reveals that the words came while he was half asleep and in a semi-dreaming state: “They were purely inspirational and were given to me boom! I don’t own it, you know; it came through like that. I don’t know where it came from, […] It’s not a matter of craftsmanship; it wrote itself. It drove me out of bed. […] It’s like being possessed; like a psychic or a medium” (Lennon 192-93). In a manner evocative of Rimbaud’s appeal for the seer to relinquish conscious control of the work, Lennon states that, even when he was making an active effort at writing, a similar type of surrender often proved crucial. Beginning with his attempt to write the song “Nowhere Man,” he recounts, “I’d spent five hours that morning trying to write a song that was meaningful and good and I finally gave up and lay down. Then [it] came, words and music, the whole damn thing, as I lay down. The same with ‘In My Life’! I’d struggled for days and hours trying to write clever lyrics. Then I gave up and [it] came to me. So letting it go is what the whole game is” (192-93). Remembering that Rimbaud’s writing occurred exclusively when he was young, statements from both Lennon and Dylan suggest that this type of spontaneous creation is more peculiar to youth. When asked, at the age of sixty-three, if he ever looked back on his past work with surprise, Dylan confesses frankly, “I don’t know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written. / […] Try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that, and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know? / […] I did it once, and I can do other things now. But, I can't do that” (Dylan, screen 1). Lennon reinforces the notion that this “magical” type of creation is more powerful in youth, emphasizing that, with age, the production of art becomes increasingly reliant on conscious effort as in the practice of a craft. When queried, at age forty, if he feared losing his creative ability, he responds, “I can’t believe it goes away forever… but you can never be twenty-four again. You can’t be that hungry twice. […] And in the same respect the creativity of songwriting had left Paul [McCartney] and me […], by the mid-Sixties it had become a craft.” The songwriter concluded by offering a hope for fellow artists followed by a warning that refers specifically to the same temptation that seduced and almost destroyed Rimbaud: intoxicants to facilitate artistic inspiration. Lennon explains, “And yet… a different kind of thing comes in. It’s like a love affair. […] It’s still love, but it’s different. So there’s that difference in creativity, too. As in a love affair, two creative people can destroy themselves trying to recapture that youthful spirit, at twenty-one or twenty-four, of creating without ever being aware of how it’s happening” (Lennon 141-42).
receptivity to mystic vibrations by stripping away layers of the controlling self or ego. In this manner, he hoped to move away from the rigid and stifling forms of established poetry.

To achieve his goal, Rimbaud believed two key elements are necessary. He first calls in the seer letters for a “dérèglement de tous les sens” [derangement of all the senses], implying, among other possible avenues, the use of intoxicants and hallucinogens to facilitate the poet’s escape from conscious control of his or her work (Chapter 4 advances my argument for this interpretation of the phrase quoted). Secondly, the seer philosophy appeals for sloughing off the stifling ideas of modern civilization, demanding a return to the primitive or savage state in order to free oneself from what he considered the artificial and corrupting mores of Christianity.

In the seer letter addressed to Demeny, Rimbaud proclaims his heroic mission and ends with a call for others to pick up the fallen standard should he fail in his quest:

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, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit, — et le suprême Savant! — Car il arrive à l’inconnu! Puisqu’il a cultivé son âme, déjà riche, plus qu’aucun! Il arrive à l’inconnu, et quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l’intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues! Qu’il crève dans son bondissement par les choses inouïes et innommables: viendront d’autres horribles travailleurs; ils commenceront par les horizons où l’autre s’est affaissé! (243)

[The Poet makes himself into a seer by a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses. Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains. He undergoes unspeakable tortures that require complete faith and superhuman strength, rendering him the ultimate Invalid among men, the master criminal, the first among the damned—and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the unknown! For, unlike everyone else, he has developed an already rich soul! He arrives at the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends up losing his understanding of his visions, he has, at least, seen them! It doesn’t matter if these leaps into the unknown kill him: other awful workers will follow him; they’ll start at the horizons where the other has fallen! (Mason 33)]

When Rimbaud finally had the opportunity to apply the practices of his theory as suggested above, he followed his own criteria with amazing orthodoxy, suffering “toutes les formes [...] de
follie” [every kind of madness]. However, it was not a vision of simple hedonistic pleasure. He sensed that the revolt against the Catholic and social values inherited from his mother and native culture would cause more pain than pleasure, a sort of torture requiring “toute la force surhumaine” [superhuman strength]. He announces heroically that he is committed to the process of exhausting in himself “tous les poisons” [every poison], risking self-destruction for a fleeting glimpse of the inconnu or unknown.

Upon completing the expansion of his theory in the letter to Demeny, Rimbaud begins to diagram the failure of poetry since the dawn of Christianity, preferring instead the timeless truth expressed in the poetry of the ancient Greeks. In his diatribe, he is especially severe with the history of French poetry and poets. The most interesting aspect of his critique is the absolute self-certainty and accompanying lack of humility. A paragraph of withering criticism devoted to the lyric Romantic poet, Alfred de Musset, is so extreme in its denunciation, it borders on the humorous, as Rimbaud dismisses for all eternity the poet of “Rolla” so beloved by his compatriots:

Musset n’a rien su faire: [...] Français, panadif, traîné de l’estaminet au pupitre de collège, le beau mort est mort, et, désormais, ne nous donnons même plus la peine de le réveiller par nos abominations! (247-48).

[Musset couldn’t do anything: [...]. French, half-dead, dragged from tavern to school desk, the beautiful corpse has died, and, ever since, we needn’t waste our time trying to rouse him with our abominations! (Mason 36)]

The condemnation of French poets continues up through Rimbaud’s contemporaries, and many of the Parnassian poets whom he had championed a year earlier in his letter to Banville, now garner only disdain. The devastating critique is a reflection of his absolute confidence in the correctness of his literary ideas, especially the seer vision: a self-assuredness that will eventually translate into his anti-social displays of overweening arrogance. For reasons not explained, Paul
Verlaine is among the few to escape the blistering criticism, emerging as a true seer and poet in the eyes of Rimbaud; the adolescent could not have foreseen the extent to which their destinies would intertwine.

Under the eye of a controlling mother and without his own finances, Rimbaud could not truly pursue his bold new philosophy, and he spent the summer of 1871 in his hometown plotting an escape. The unlikely friendship with a middle-aged customs man soon fixed his destiny with Verlaine. Rimbaud’s association with Charles Bretagne (already begun before the flight to Paris) originated in the cafés of Charleville where the older man bought the adolescent drinks in exchange for conversation. He influenced Rimbaud’s literary path in two important ways. A student of the occult, Bretagne lent Rimbaud books on the subject that provided many of the illuminist concepts he incorporated into his theory of the seer poet (Starkie 97-98). More significantly, Bretagne was an associate of Verlaine, and he would write the letter of introduction for Rimbaud to this rare poet worthy of consideration as a true seer. Impressed with the extraordinary talent shown in the boy’s poems, Verlaine agreed to sponsor his journey to Paris, even taking up a collection from fellow men of letters for that purpose. He finally invited the young poet to the capital in a letter that ends with the possibly apocryphal, “Venez, chère grande âme, on vous appelle, on vous attend!” (qtd. in Delahaye, Témoin 342) [Come, dear great soul, we are calling you, we wait for you!], and, in September 1871, the ill-clad boy from the provinces arrived in Paris carrying his recently composed poem.

The meeting between Verlaine and Rimbaud signified the beginning of a turbulent yet poetically productive two-year relationship. After the first year in Paris, the two poets lived a semi-nomadic life that moved them between Paris, Brussels, and London. Although ten years senior to the adolescent, only Verlaine’s sporadic attempts to save his marriage separated him
from Rimbaud during this period. With the moral and financial support of Verlaine, Rimbaud vigorously pursued the seer vision. However, on the hot summer day of July 10, 1873, the journey together ended traumatically. After wounding the adolescent with a gun in a Brussels hotel room and then only hours later threatening his life a second time, Verlaine was arrested. Scandal from the relationship with Rimbaud would ruin Verlaine’s name in society, forever separating him from his wife and child. As the judicial system in Brussels tried and sentenced Verlaine to two years in confinement, Rimbaud carefully edited the proofs of his new book.

Une Saison en enfer [A Season in Hell]

Even before the shooting incident, Rimbaud had concluded that his grand ideas of the seer were mere delusion. The trauma of Brussels could only have strengthened his conviction that the life he had led for the past two years was folly. To explain to the world (and perhaps more importantly to himself) the madness of his poetic and spiritual journey, he wrote the short book in prose and found private funds to pay for the printing.

In the years following Rimbaud’s death in 1891, scholars took satisfaction in pointing to the writing of Saison [A Season] as the marker of his decisive and ultimate farewell to the world of literature. The idea originated in great part out of the myth-making zeal of his first biographers: Rimbaud’s younger sister, Isabelle, in collaboration with the man she would marry years after her brother’s death, Paterné Berrichon. In their biography of Rimbaud, Isabelle recalls a holocaust initiated by her brother in which, along with his handwritten manuscripts, he burned the entire printing of Saison [A Season]: five hundred copies minus the six author’s copies given out to friends. Although an actual fire of old manuscripts at the time may have sparked the imagination of the then twelve-year-old sister, unfortunately for Berrichon, the discovery in 1901 of the entire printing—minus the six courtesy copies to the author—by a book collector
searching the attic of the Belgium publishing house Poot and Company doomed the tidy and
Dramatic tale of closure to his brother-in-law’s literary career.\footnote{The holocaust tale, parallel with the belief that \emph{Saison [A Season]} represented Rimbaud’s farewell to literature, received a temporary stay of execution, allowing both to flourish for more than another decade. Out of consideration for his fellow book collectors, who after great expense now owned one of the original six author’s copies, the discoverer of the printing, Léon Losseau, kept his silence until 1914 (Lefrère 644-45).}

If today we no longer have the mythical bonfire of \emph{Saison [A Season]} to provide insight into Rimbaud’s renunciation of literature, the text of the work itself exists as a more interesting and reliable guide. In the analysis of a literary work, the author’s personality and life circumstances are often of minimal importance in a modern approach. However, for understanding Rimbaud himself, his work can shine a revealing light on the complexities of his personality and motivations. In this respect, \emph{Saison [A Season]} is particularly valuable as few if any dispute its intensely personal and autobiographical nature. To this opinion, we have not only the belief of Rimbaldian scholars but also the author’s own testament. When his bewildered mother finished reading the recently printed copy of \emph{Saison [A Season]}, she asked her son what it meant. He replied, “Ça se lit littéralement et dans tous les sens!” (qtd. in Lefrère 640) [It means exactly what I’ve said, literally and completely, in all respects (qtd. in Starkie 287)]. The text of the book gives us every reason to believe that we should take him at his word.

Among the many important functions of \emph{Saison [A Season]}, it serves as both Rimbaud’s \emph{mea culpa} for and renunciation of what he now considered his sophistic delusions of the seer poet. The chapter entitled “Délires II. — Alchimie du verbe” [Second Delirium. — Alchemy of the Word] addresses a turning point in his literary thought important to this study. He opens by frankly qualifying the piece concerning his pursuit of seer poetry as “L’histoire d’une de mes folies” (427) [The story of one of my madnesses (Schmidt, \emph{A Season} 49)]. The author then goes on to mock point-by-point his former ideas as self-deluded arrogance. In reference to his poem
“Voyelles” [Vowels] in which he articulates his hope to create a universal language through the theory of correspondences (an aspect of seer philosophy I discuss in Chapter 2), he writes:

J’inventai la couleur des voyelles! — A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert. — Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d’inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l’autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction. (428)

[I invented the colors of vowels! A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. I made rules for the shape and movement of every consonant, and I flattered myself that I had invented, with rhythms from within me, a poetic language that all the senses, sooner or later, could understand. And I would be its translator.” (Schmidt, A Season 49)]

Rimbaud lets the absurdity of the grandiose claims above speak in their own condemnation. The author gives only the phrase “je me flattai d’inventer” [I flattered myself that I had invented] to point the reader to the self-mocking nature of the text.

Remarkably self-aware in Saison [A Season], Rimbaud criticizes in an open and honest manner the same elaborate system of thought the seer letters articulate with such conviction.

“Aucun des sophismes de la folie,” he writes in “Délires II” [Second Delirium], “— la folie qu’on enferme, — n’a été oublié par moi: je pourrais le s redire tous, je tiens le système” (433) [I didn’t forget, a single one of the brilliant arguments of madness—the madness that gets locked up. I could go through them all again. I’ve got the system down by heart (Schmidt, A Season 61)]. More direct here in his self-critique, he refers to his concepts of the seer as not only sophistic but dangerous to the point of insanity. It is interesting that he recognizes the paradox of using his meticulous logic to build a “brilliant” yet hopelessly flawed “system” of arguments to support his theories.

Rimbaud’s mea culpa of “Alchimie du verbe” [Alchemy of the Word] concludes with the line: “Cela s’est passé. Je sais aujourd’hui saluer la beauté” (435). [All that is over. Today, I know what salutation beauty deserves (Treharne 41).] In the introduction to his translation of Saison [A Season], Mark Treharne questions the significance of the closing line’s lack of
majuscule $b$ in the word “beauty,” remembering that in the opening paragraph of the book it is capitalized:

Interestingly, this final line addresses itself to “beauty” (as opposed, say, to poetry or literature), and it echoes the opening of the whole work, where “Beauty” is insulted. Here it would seem, the notion of beauty is relativized, put in its place: it no longer has the absolute value ascribed to it by its capital letter in the opening segment of *A Season*, where we can read it as a synecdoche for the Romantic cult of Beauty; nor does it seem to be associated any longer with the happiness of “one long banquet of open hearts and flowing wine” (lyrical effusion?) evoked at the beginning of the work. (xxiv)

By putting beauty “in its place,” Rimbaud is announcing a realization—one that emanates from the failure of the seer experiment—that poetry in itself could not fulfill his quest for the Absolute. It did not act as a vehicle to the beyond, and could not provide therefore the self-transcendence he sought, satisfying his hunger for God. Perhaps adding insult to injury, Treharne implies that the pursuit of poetry may have even ceased to bring Rimbaud joy; it was no longer the “one long banquet” as stated in the book’s opening lines.

The temptation to interpret Rimbaud’s demotion of beauty in “Alchimie du verbe” [*Alchemy of the Word*] as an indication that he is signaling his intention to abandon literature is naturally present. Seeming to support this suggestion, he writes in the existing scraps of the chapter’s rough draft:

Je hais maintenant les élans mystiques et les bizarreries de style. Maintenant je puis dire que l’art est une sottise. Nos grands poètes/Ma beauté (?) aussi facile: l’art est une sottise. (398)

[I now hate mystic leaps and peculiarities of style. Now I can say that art is stupidity. Our great poets/ My beauty (?) just as easy: art is stupidity.]

The phrase he repeats, “l’art est une sottise” [art is stupidity], appears at first glance to convincingly decide the idea of *Saison* [*A Season*] as a farewell to art. However, when considering the complete text, Treharne in his analysis notes that even Rimbaud’s choice of wording in the chapter’s closing line will not permit a clear understanding of the author’s future
relationship with beauty: “It ends with the statement ‘All that is over’ and an ambiguous formulation which in French can mean either ‘I know how to greet beauty’ or ‘I know how to say farewell to beauty’” (xxiv). Treharne properly suggests that one cannot reasonably conclude based on the text alone that Rimbaud intended with *Saison [A Season]* to announce the renunciation of the beauty of poetry, only that he knew his relationship with literature had somehow changed.

Indeed, Starkie offers solid arguments demonstrating that the context of *Saison [A Season]*, when taken in its entirety, makes it easier to contend that the work represents merely the intention of transition to a new approach to literature: a renunciation exclusively of the grandiose ideas proposed in the famous seer letters two years earlier. The inherent contradiction of using an artistically envisioned work as a vehicle to renounce the work’s very form is Starkie’s most compelling argument. The writing and printing of the book represent a great amount of effort on the author’s part. The existing rough drafts of *Saison [A Season]* testify to the careful effort Rimbaud took during five months to achieve a high literary form. In addition, he secured the services of a publisher and subsequently corrected and approved the proofs.

Once the printing was complete, he continued to treat his work with care and pride, placing his hope for acclaim in its success. “Why,” asks Starkie, “did he send copies to his friends and to men of letters in Paris, whom he admired, hoping they would review it favorably in the press?” (308). Finally, we have the testament of the author himself concerning the expectations he attached to *Saison [A Season]*. In a May 1873 letter to Delahaye, he describes his new project and states plainly: “Mon sort dépend de ce livre pour lequel une demi-douzaine d’histoires atroces sont encore à inventer” (383). [My lot depends on this book for which a half-dozen heinous stories still have to be invented.] A future that depends on the publication of a
carefully crafted piece of literature can only represent a destiny that Rimbaud envisioned as literary in nature.

*Illuminations*

There is a critical aspect of Rimbaud’s post-*Saison [A Season]* literary career that has so far proved impossible for scholars to determine with any degree of tenable certainty one way or the other. The question remains: in the two years that followed the book’s printing, did Rimbaud continue to write poetry? One of the great Rimbaldian debates of the past century concerns the likely dates of composition for the various poems that make up the collection known as *Illuminations*.

Before his death, Verlaine maintained that Rimbaud wrote all of *Illuminations* after *Saison [A Season]*. From the beginning, critics suspected him of merely wanting to deflect accusations that he had caused his brilliant young protégé to abandon his poetic calling (Lefrère 667-68). Especially while Berrichon could still breathe life into the holocaust myth of *Saison [A Season]*, scholars trended toward the conclusion that all of *Illuminations* dates to before the publication of the former (668). In 1914 (some thirteen years after the event itself), the revelation of the discovery of the still extant copies of the book finally opened the door for the possibility of at least a few poems composed post-*Saison [A Season]*. However, it was not until after World War II that the pendulum swung back to Verlaine’s original assertion.

In 1949, Bouillane de Lacoste submitted his doctoral thesis, *Rimbaud et le Problème des Illuminations*. Relying on graphological comparisons, he asserts in his paper that the existing manuscripts of the poems originate from the handwriting of Rimbaud as it appeared between 1873 and 1875. More surprisingly, the studies indicate that the handwriting for some of the manuscripts of *Illuminations* belong to Rimbaud’s companion in London at this time, poet
Germain Nouveau. However, the heavy reliance on graphology proves a weakness in Lacoste’s argument, which, as Starkie states in the case against his thesis, at first seemed so decisive. Casting aside for the moment his qualifications as a graphologist, she argues that he fails to take into consideration that the documents in question are undoubtedly “fair copies” of the poems: samples carefully prepared for the eye of a publisher. The date Rimbaud recopied his poems for this purpose gives little indication of their original composition. The fact that the handwriting samples indicate the participation of Germain Nouveau, Starkie concludes, only serves to reinforce the notion that both he and Rimbaud were copying from the same original documents, poems composed at some earlier date (225).

Among the most recent biographers of the poet, Jean-Jacques Lefrère concedes that, for now and in the near future, neither side of the question will claim preeminence. In his 2001 biography of Rimbaud, Lefrère gives the best approximation of a “final word” on this highly contested topic. Within the period encompassing the two most extreme dates considered as reasonable limits, the first months of 1873 until March 1875, Lefrère suggests, “Pourquoi, aujourd’hui, ne pas admettre notre ignorance à peu près absolue sur l’époque de composition des *Illuminations*, […]” (670) [Today, why not admit our almost absolute ignorance concerning the time of composition for *Illuminations*, […]]. Until new evidence surfaces that can significantly contribute to the debate, I believe, as Lefrère’s statement wisely implies, that enlightened ignorance concerning Rimbaud’s creation of poetry after *Saison* [*A Season*] is the only healthy basis for any study of his life.

Although Rimbaud did not leave the evidence we need to determine whether he continued to write new poetry after *Saison* [*A Season*], his actions and statements in the two years immediately following the book’s printing indicate that his passion for literature was far
from dead. When an artist loses the emotional and psychological energy to create new works, the energy to care for and promote work already finished can still linger on. As time passed after *Saison [A Season]*, I believe that this increasingly came to represent Rimbaud’s situation. If he did attempt to write, it may have become harder to find the motivation and, instead, easier to return to work he had already perfected. Lacoste’s identification of Nouveau’s handwriting confirms that in 1874, Rimbaud, with the help of his fellow poet, was recopying the entirety of *Illuminations* for the purpose of publication, leaving no doubt that he was still working diligently to advance, at the very least, the finished poetry in his possession and that he continued to see his future with literature.

While in London during the autumn of 1874, Rimbaud revealed his still extant literary orientation in a public manner when he placed an advertisement in the *Times*. The content of the announcement indicates that he clearly saw himself as a man of letters preferring the company of other like-minded artists. Appearing in the November 7 and 8 edition of the paper, it reads:

> A PARISIAN (20) of high literary and linguistic attainments, excellent conversation, will be glad to ACCOMPAGNY [sic] a GENTLEMAN (artists preferred), or a family wishing to travel in southern or eastern countries. Good references. — A.R., nº 165, King’s Road, Reading. (qtd. in Lefrère 695)

Rimbaud’s emphasis on his “high literary and linguistic attainments” suggests that literature was still, just over a year following the publication of *Saison [A Season]*, the most highly valued area of his life, the source of greatest pride, and the focus of his identity. It is interesting as well that he starts the advertisement by announcing himself as a Parisian. Although the association with Paris is certainly in part to create an aura of sophistication, it is possible that he, in light of his continuing efforts at publication, still envisioned a triumphant return to the capital that had spurned him.
At the end of February 1875, Verlaine—recently released from prison—visited Rimbaud in Stuttgart for what would be their last face-to-face encounter. Still carrying the fair copy of *Illuminations*, Rimbaud gave it to Verlaine hoping he would help it along to publication. The fact that, on his travels, Rimbaud continued to carry these manuscripts (bulky enough for Verlaine to complain to Delahaye by incredulously listing the exact postage needed to send the bundle of papers entrusted him on to Nouveau) is a strong indication of the enduring concern and hope for his work up to this later date.

The last known occasion Rimbaud manifested pride in his identity with literature, actively associating himself with his own literary creation, came in the summer of 1875, when he hoped to impress a widow who had taken care of him when he fell ill. In correspondence from Milan, he asked Delahaye to mail him the copy of *Saison [A Season]* that he had given his friend almost two years earlier. Delahaye never sent the book, and Rimbaud never seems to have expressed disappointment at his missed opportunity to prove to the woman that he was a man of literary accomplishment. The beginning of his ambivalence toward the subject of literature was now approaching with astonishing speed.

After requesting *Saison [A Season]* for the widow in Milan, Rimbaud’s references to literature become increasingly rare, and among these, only one more expresses a positive view on the issue. In a letter to Verlaine, of which only a fragment remains today, Delahaye reports encountering Rimbaud in August. After recounting the adventures of his latest travels, Rimbaud remarked that he had recently read Victor Hugo’s *Quatre-vingt-treize [Ninety-three]*, saying he

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7 In his May 1, 1875, letter to Delahaye, Verlaine writes, “[...] Rimbaud m’ayant prié d’envoyer pour être imprimés des “poèmes en prose” siens, que j’avais, à ce même Nouveau, alors à Bruxelles (je parle d’il y a deux mois), j’ai envoyé (2fr. 75 de port !!!) illico [...]” (qtd. in Lefrère 703) [Rimbaud having begged me to send for printing some “poems in prose” his, which I did, to this same Nouveau, now in Brussels (I am speaking of two months past). I sent (2 francs 75 postage paid!!!) at once]. Although Verlaine is possibly exaggerating the “begging” aspect of his former friend’s request for help with the publication of his poetry, Rimbaud must have made it very clear he was anxious to see the project to completion.
had found “des beautés” [some beauties] in the novel published the previous year. Expanding on his admiration, he stated to Delahaye, “Hugo a entrepris d’écrire un roman sans amoureux... chose nouvelle, hardie... Son livre est bien en somme” (qtd. in Lefrère 722) [Hugo has undertaken to write a novel without lovers... a new thing, daring... His book is good all in all]. Given that a primary theme of Hugo’s novel is the cyclical nature of history, Rimbaud’s appreciation for the work may have reflected a new worldview adopted from historian Jules Michelet (whom Starkie contends in her biography shaped the poet’s thinking (302-08)), an extension of his turning toward materialism, which I explore in the following chapter. From this point on, Rimbaud’s observations on literature would reveal a degree of disdain that increased in tandem with a growing unwillingness to mention the matter altogether.

“Des Vers de Lui?” [Verses by Him?]

The earliest indication we have of Rimbaud’s burgeoning contempt for literature, comes in an October 14, 1875, letter to Delahaye, less than two months after mentioning having found “des beautés” [some beauties] in Hugo. It is significant that Rimbaud’s twenty-first birthday, the obtainment of his majority, was only days away. Approaching this landmark in his life, he revealed for the first time a concern for finding a viable career. He asked Delahaye to report to him on all the requirements for the baccalaureate degree, which he had abandoned five years earlier in favor of the bohemian life and the pursuit of poetry. Significantly, he now sought a degree in the sciences as opposed to letters, an overt indication of his transition of focus. From this point on, his choices indicate a mindset that moved progressively from the subjective and intangible realm of literary pursuits toward the objective and concrete world of science and technology.
Rimbaud’s most immediate concern in the letter is the looming possibility of required military service, but it is the manner in which he expresses his annoyance with this matter that betrays his new attitude toward literature. The loathsome idea of army life inspires a rhyme about the smells of barracks life, particularly as it pertains to the flatulence of soldiers caused by eating various regional cheeses. In respect to the rhyme’s importance to literature, it serves as much as an intentional mockery of the art of poetry as it does the dread of sharing quarters with the pungent soldiers:

[... as it seems that the second “portion” of the “74th class’s contingent” will be called up next November 3, or the one after that: the barracks at night: “Dream.”
In the barracks, hunger finds you
It’s true...
Outpourings and explosions. The ingenuity
Of the engineer: “That’s me, Gruyère!”
Lefèvre: “Keller!”
The ingenious engineer: “I’m Brie!”
Soldiers cut their bread: “C’est la vie!”
The ingenious engineer: “I’m Roquefort!”
— “We’re done for...!”
— “That’s me, Gruyère!”
And Brie... etc.
— Waltz—

Lefèvre and I are one... etc... (Mason 72)
It is important that his anxiety over military call up both inspires and introduces the short piece. Similar to the accompanying inquiry into the baccalaureate for science, it suggests that he is now focused on the concrete realities that affect the quality of his life. In turn, I believe the form of the poem functions to express his growing contempt for the pursuit of a literary product that had proven powerless to change these realities. He revolts against high literary expression by employing a jarringly simple rhyme scheme in service of the poem’s scatological theme. If there is anything conceptually artistic in “Rêve” [Dream], it is that the poem presents the ugly reality of barracks life, with its simple and vulgar soldiers, in an equally graceless style. For someone whose poetic gifts were as highly developed as Rimbaud, he would only write “Rêve” [Dream] in an active effort to “dumb down” his talent to a level commensurate with the rhyme’s juvenile humor: a form of poetry he had not attempted since the first little satirical pieces at the age of thirteen as mentioned by Delahaye.

Almost six weeks after the letter with “Rêve” [Dream], Delahaye, in his correspondence with Verlaine, writes what is tantamount to an obituary relating the demise of Rimbaud’s poetic soul: an announcement that appears to have come long after the event itself. In a November 27, 1875, letter, Verlaine asks especially for news of Rimbaud’s poetic efforts and if he could obtain new verses. The response offers the first direct evidence that he had completely ceased any poetic activity. Delahaye writes:

— Des vers de Lui?
— Il y a beau temps que sa verve est à plat. Je crois même qu’il ne se souvient plus du tout d’en avoir fait. (qtd. in Lefrère 734)

[—Verses by Him?
—It’s a good while since his inspiration ran dry. I even think he no longer remembers having written at all.]

The initial part of Delahaye’s answer expresses absolute incredulity that Verlaine could be so out of touch as to suggest that Rimbaud was still writing poetry. Its unequivocal nature lets us know
that Delahaye was certain of the situation with “Lui” [Him] (his and Verlaine’s sarcastic reference to Rimbaud). The second half of the passage indicates that, at this date, Rimbaud’s poetic silence was not a recent phenomenon. We can only guess exactly how much time the expression “il y a beau temps” [a good while] implies, but Delahaye clearly perceived permanence in the matter, even suggesting Rimbaud had erased the former passion from his memory.

Even the death of a beloved sibling shortly before Christmas did not move Rimbaud to express his sorrow in poetry. His seventeen-year-old sister, named Vitalie like her mother, died on December 19, 1875, and despite his great affection for her, there is no evidence he felt compelled to pour out his grief in writing of any kind. Rimbaud simply no longer perceived poetry as a path worth traveling.

The Last Sixteen Years

The definitive assessment that Delahaye provided for Verlaine, that their mutual friend had completely ceased to write poetry or even express concern for the topic of literature in general, marks a critical dividing point in this examination of Rimbaud’s life. Exploring the manifestations of his poetic silence during the next sixteen years—what I believe in respect to the focus of the thesis is the second half of his life—will constitute the remainder of this chapter.

Three key questions guide the discussion in this section:

1. What was he doing? If he no longer focused his energy on writing poetry, what was consuming his intellectual energy?

2. What statements or reactions exist from him that provide insight into his perception or sentiment concerning literature and his association with it?
3. What is the evolving nature of his verbal expression, written and oral, and how does that illuminate the question of his relationship with literature?

In addressing the evolutionary dynamic of Rimbaud’s disaffection with poetry, I will examine the areas suggested above at each stage of his life during its last sixteen years when sufficient material exists at that point to permit analysis of the given question.

**Missing Purpose and Constant Wandering**

During the first five years that follow Delahaye’s announcement to Verlaine, Rimbaud would direct most of his energy toward satisfying a mania for two interests that worked in symbiotic fashion: travel and the acquisition of foreign languages. Before setting off to visit the country of choice, he would engage in a period of intense study for the language in question. Such is the case with learning Russian during the winter of 1875-76. Louis Pierquin, describes the intense concentration that Rimbaud devoted in his autodidactic approach to the language: “Afin que rien ne le dérange, à plusieurs reprises il s’enferme dans une armoire, un vieux coffre du temps passé, et il y reste parfois 24 heures, sans boire ni manger, absorbé dans son travail” (qtd. in Lefrère 738). [So that nothing would disturb him, again and again he locked himself up in an armoire, one of the old kinds from yesteryear, and he stayed there sometimes for 24 hours, without drinking nor eating, engrossed in his work.] This all-consuming mode would prove standard for each of the many projects of learning during the second half of his life.

In certain respects, foreign language acquisition appears a natural fit for a man with Rimbaud’s innate verbal skills. It was through the study of Latin as a boy that he first explored his potential as a poet. However, as an adult, he never expressed the slightest interest in the literature associated with the particular idiom, as is evident in his conversation and letters with friends and family. Rather, he appears to have perceived foreign language as a mere skill, and he
approached it in like manner, concerned exclusively with the rules of grammar, mechanics of pronunciation, and acquiring a sufficient supply of vocabulary for the task. I believe the fashion with which he attacked each given language, attempting to master it quickly and then move on to the next, similarly suggests a mindset of collecting “things,” expanding the collection of linguistic skills at his disposal as if he were greedily filling a type of tool box that would facilitate the adventure of travel. In respect to the culture that produced the language, his letters indicate as well that, once in the given country, he took an interest exclusively in the mechanics of daily living and social interaction peculiar to that area—not its art.

Rimbaud’s approach to languages is reflective of his new orientation to life since abandoning poetry. The mastery of a language followed by the adventure of travel permitted him an activity that was intellectually stimulating yet, unlike poetry, remained objective and detached. In the years that would follow, his choice of intellectual pursuits—studying the sciences and mastering technologies—demonstrates a progression toward domains that were increasingly factual and dispassionate. As we will see shortly, this mentality applied even to endeavors normally considered to have an inherently artistic purpose.

In the transition between poetry and a seemingly never-ending cycle of vagabonding for the purpose of language acquisition, Rimbaud took a single and odd detour. With the same obsessive manner demonstrated in learning Russian, he attempted to master the piano at the end of 1875, assimilating an extensive knowledge of musical theory in the effort (Starkie 337). As his mother refused to buy or lease an instrument for her son’s latest whim, he carved out the facsimile of a keyboard on the kitchen table and, in silence, practiced scales and chords for hours at a stretch. Vitalie finally permitted a piano, but only after her son had it leased and delivered without her prior permission (Lefrère 732). Although one would suspect that a musical
instrument would naturally illicit personal and artistic expression with the mastery of technique, there is no evidence that Rimbaud ever demonstrated interest in the subjective side of music. Considering his disinterest in the literary aspect foreign language study, it is possible to believe that he similarly perceived music theory as simply another language composed of mathematical rules and mastery of the piano merely a motor skill needed to speak it. After weeks of intense practice with the real piano, which he had acquired through subterfuge, he lost interest and never played again (732).

Following the winter of studying Russian, Rimbaud set off to find a tutoring position in St. Petersburg. The adventure stopped short in Vienna when his coach driver beat and robbed him. However, the pattern of his yearly peregrinations was established. Each year after wintering and studying in Charleville, he would set off with the warm weather towards the country that would permit him to practice and perfect the new idiom.\footnote{In their correspondence, Delahaye and Verlaine refer to the Rimbaud of this period as “l’homme aux semelles de vent,” suggesting a man who moved where the wind took him (Starkie 327, Lefrère 762).}

In Rimbaud’s mania for the stimulation of foreign lands, the various attempts to make travel possible reveal an attitude approaching desperation. On one occasion, he wrote the United States consul in Bremen asking to join the American navy, and on yet another, the unabashedly anticlerical Rimbaud told Delahaye in all seriousness he planned to join a missionary group just for the sake of following them abroad. As proof that he made his wild schemes to travel in earnest, some of the more incredible plans were realized. In the late spring of 1876, he enlisted in the Dutch colonial army as a legionnaire in order to receive the recruitment bonus and see new parts of the world. After a month of military training, he set out with the other conscripts on the steamer \textit{Prins van Oranje} for Java. By August, he deserted and crossed the island in three days on foot. Arriving at the nearest port city, he found passage and work on an English sailing ship:
appropriately named in light of its passenger, *The Wandering Chief*. Five months later, he arrived home to winter once again in Charleville (Lefrère 752-55). Although researchers cannot always track his movements with certainty, we know that, among the odder turns in his adventures, he worked for the Circus Loisset in Stockholm.

Rimbaud’s years of vagabonding are relevant to the question of his poetic silence in a manner that is so obvious it is easy to overlook. From at least the age of fifteen until sometime during the two years that follow the printing of *Saison [A Season]*, he was utterly and passionately consumed with a single purpose in life: the creation of poetry. Once destiny robbed him of that sense of mission, we must ask what filled the void. From the preceding discussion, we now know the activities that occupied his time, but it appears he had yet to find one overriding purpose to guide his life. This was a period of transition, and lack of personal direction represents the primary characteristic marking his years of wandering; as an adult, he would look back on this aimlessness with regret. Although Rimbaud had already ceased to write, I will assert in the following chapters that he would perceive this period as simply an extension of the bohemian life he had begun as a poet, and the pursuit of poetry, guilty by association, would receive the blame.

**Letter from Saint Gothard’s Pass**

In a particular letter home, the account Rimbaud relates of one adventure offers insight into the evolution of the man as a writer. On his 24th birthday, October 20, 1878, he set out on what would be his second attempt to reach Alexandria in Egypt, the previous attempt interrupted by illness in the port of Marseilles. This time he decided to travel to the port of Genoa by traversing the Swiss Alps. The letter home to his sister and mother describes his trek through heavy snows over the summit of Saint Gothard while searching for the shelter of a hospice. The
letter, if not intended as literature, is remarkable for the engaging style. It is important to study, as it is his last written work that begins to approach literary quality. He describes the ascent through the snow:

La route, qui n’a guère que six mètres de largeur, est comblée tout le long à droite par une chute de neige de près de deux mètres de hauteur, qui, à chaque instant, allonge sur la route une barre d’un mètre de haut qu’il faut fendre sous une atroce tourmente de grésil. Voici! plus une ombre dessus, dessous ni autour, quoique nous soyons entourés d’objets énormes; plus de route, de précipice, de gorge ni de ciel: rien que du blanc à songer, à toucher, à voir ou ne pas voir, car impossible de lever les yeux de l’embêtement blanc qu’on croit être le milieu du sentier. Impossible de lever le nez à une bise aussi carabinante, les cils et la moustache en stalactites, l’oreille déchirée, le cou gonflé. Sans l’ombre qu’on est soi-même et sans les poteaux du télégraphe, qui suivent la route supposée, on serait aussi embarrassée qu’un pierrot dans un four. (545)

[The road, which is never wider than six meters, is filled the whole way with nearly two meters of fallen snow, which, at any moment, might collapse, covering you with a meter-thick blanket you have to hack through during a hailstorm. And then: no more shadows above, below, or beside, despite being surrounded by these massive things; no more road, or precipices, or gorges or sky: just whiteness out of a dream, to touch, to see or not see, since it’s impossible to look away from the white annoyance in the middle of the road. Impossible to lift your head with the biting wind, eyelashes and mustaches becoming stalactites, ears torn, necks swollen. Without the shadow that is oneself, and without the telegraph poles to mark what one must assume remains of the road, you would be as flustered as a sparrow in an oven. (Mason 81)]

This passage I find particularly illustrative of the transitional state of Rimbaud’s relationship with verbal expression. In a matter of four sentences, he demonstrates moments of scientific precision, journalistic recounting, and even literary form. The first sentence reports the width of the road and depth of the snow with precision. In the next line, the style shifts to a more descriptive use of imagery to report the author’s disorientation in the blinding snow. In one instance, he even begins to transgress in to the realm of the poetic. With his own emphasis on the form of “to be,” he opens the final sentence with the curious phrase, “sans l’ombre qu’on est soi-même” [without the shadow that is oneself], as if his lingering intuition as a poet could not help but compare his existence to the dark and shifting image on the ground.
In contrast to the letter above, future correspondence and even professional articles by Rimbaud are extraordinary only for their utter lack of imagination in expression. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, letters to his mother and sister from Africa distinguish themselves only by the running motif of complaint and discontent with his life and working situation. Business associates and the scientifically minded individuals of geographical societies—groups typically consisting of personalities not known for their poetic nature—complain about the sterility and dryness of his field reports. In examining Rimbaud’s written work during his later years, I will explore why he seemed to purposely avoid all but the blandest forms of language and style.

“Je ne m’occupe plus de ça”
[I’m Not Concerned with That Anymore]

Except for perhaps the mocking rhyme of “Rêve” [Dream], the former poet had up to this point revealed his disaffection with poetry simply by neither participating in literary writing nor discussing literature in his letters or conversations. Delahaye would record the first direct testament from Rimbaud concerning his sentiment on the matter. The incident occurred when Rimbaud returned to the family farm in Roche to recover from typhoid fever contracted while working in Cyprus. Hearing his old friend was home, Delahaye decided to visit in September 1879: their first reunion in two years.

Understanding the significance that Rimbaud would soon turn twenty-five, Delahaye commented on how the striking physical and emotional change in the man seemed to herald the approaching quarter of a century milestone in his age. Recognizing him at first only by the extraordinary blue color of his eyes, Delahaye remarked with amazement that Rimbaud, who had always possessed the fresh-faced appearance of an English schoolboy, now had a hard and dark
look about him. The change, he noted, was not merely physical but represented a radical transformation in personality evident when Rimbaud spoke. “[S]a voix,” writes Delahaye, “perdant le timbre nerveux et quelque peu enfantin que j’avais connu jusqu’alors, était devenue grave, profonde, imprégnée d’énergie calme” (Delahaye, *Rimbaud* 185-86) [“[H]is voice had lost the nervous, rather childish timbre that it had once had, and had become deep and grave, and imbued with calm energy” (qtd. in Petitfils 237)]. The hardening of Rimbaud’s appearance and personal strength seems to mirror the progression of his attitude toward literature.

That evening, Delahaye dared to ask Rimbaud about his poetry, and the intuitive interpretation of his friend’s unambiguous reaction offers invaluable insight:

> Le soir, après dîner, je me risquai à lui demander s’il pensait toujours... à la littérature. Il eut alors, en secouant la tête, un petit rire mi-amusé, mi-agacé, comme si je lui eusse dit: “Est-ce que tu joues encore au cerceau?” et répondit simplement: “Je ne m’occupe plus de ça.”

> Il y avait dans le ton qui accentuait le méprisant monosyllabe et la façon dont Rimbaud me regardait à ce moment, — avec je ne sais quoi d’impatientement ironique qui sous-entendait: “J’aime à supposer que tu comprends et que je n’ai pas besoin d’insister davantage!” (Delahaye, *Rimbaud* 186)

[In the evening, after dinner, I made so bold as to ask him if he ever gave a thought to literature. He shook his head and gave a little half-amused, half-irritated laugh, as if I had asked him, “Do you still play with your hoop [from childhood]? and replied simply: “I’m not concerned with that anymore.”

> In the tone that stressed the contemptuous monosyllable, and in the way that Rimbaud looked at me at the moment, there was a touch of ironic impatience that seemed to say: “I hope I don’t have to say any more.”]

The intention of Rimbaud’s terse response was not to communicate that he simply no longer took an interest in his former hobby. Rather his eyes, gestures, and tone of voice betrayed a bitter and deep contempt for the matter, a subject so painful his look made it plain to Delahaye that he was to never tread on it again if he still placed value on their years of friendship. It is significant that Delahaye would compare Rimbaud’s response to the prospect of still writing poetry with that of asking a grown man in all earnestness if he still liked to ride his hobbyhorse or suck his thumb.
At this point in his life, Rimbaud perceived the literary endeavors of his youth as a childish and useless waste of time that had caused him reason for regret.

“Les Léprosités des vieux murs”

[The Leprous Condition of Old Walls]

This same summer we receive one more statement from Rimbaud concerning his evolving perspective on literature. Although he would expand his thoughts on the matter by only a couple sentences, it proves voluminous in terms of added understanding. The pronouncement took place at a café in Charleville where he met his two school day friends, Louis Pierquin and Ernest Millot.

The two acquaintances discussed enthusiastically the current literature of the day, naming the books of poetry they hoped to purchase. Characteristically silent for most of the conversation, Rimbaud finally interrupted with his opinion on the topic at hand:

“Acheter des bouquins, et surtout de pareils, c’est complètement idiot. Tu portes une boule sur les épaules qui doit remplacer tous les livres. Ceux-ci, rangés sur des rayons, ne doivent servir qu’à dissimuler les léprosités des vieux murs” (qtd. in Lefrère 775).

[Buying books, especially books like that, is completely idiotic. You’ve got a head on your shoulders that should replace all books. All books are good for is to stand on shelves and conceal the leprous condition of old walls! (qtd. in Petitfils 234).]

Rimbaud’s opening remark expresses frankly his consideration that books of poetry, along with any other sort of literary art, are “complètement idiot” [completely idiotic]. The remainder of the statement merits more analysis. The second line suggests a philosophy of intellectual self-reliance in developing a new interpretation of the world: one that leaves the outdated ideas and visions recorded in books, “surtout de pareils” [especially ones like those], to the past, discarded like useless and burdensome cargo on the new road to the future. The final part of the statement reinforces this interpretation. In declaring that literature only serves to “dissimuler les léprosités des vieux murs” [conceal the leprous condition of old walls]—the decayed walls signifying
perhaps a hopelessly diseased and dying civilization and its thought—he intimates his new world perspective and personal philosophy: recreation of the world through technology and science.

After Rimbaud made his bold pronouncement, he abruptly changed the topic of conversation along with a striking transformation in mood that would leave a lasting impression on Pierquin. Thirty years later, he described Rimbaud’s disposition the rest of the evening as, “une gaieté inaccoutumé, débordante” (qtd. in Lefrère 775) [an unaccustomed cheerfulness, exuberant]. The surprising change of humor could easily reflect a sense of liberation that came from having cast off the burdens of his literary past.

The encounters that Delahaye, Millot, and Pierquin enjoyed with Rimbaud would be their last. He left the continent of Europe never to return until coming home to die eleven years later. Once sufficiently recovered from typhoid, he returned to Cyprus in March 1880, and by the end of the summer, he found himself in the Red Sea port of Aden, overseeing the workers of the exporting house of Vianay, Bardey and Co. Over the coming years, he would remain in Abyssinia, continually clinging to the hope of rising in the company and eventually making a fortune as a trader in his own right.

Rimbaud’s choice of pursuits outside his work proved consistent with his established progression toward an increasingly objective and detached mindset. In contrast to the type of books he once declared to Pierquin and Millot as “idiotic,” we can determine those he now considered useful by examining his many requests for publications that included an endless number of “how to books” in the hopes of mastering technological and industrial skills. To put this knowledge to use, he envisioned ordering and shipping the necessary equipment to Africa. In a letter dated January 15, 1881, he wrote to a maker of precision tools, requesting catalogues on, “instruments de Mathématiques, Optique, Astronomie, Électricité, Météorologie, Pneumatique,
Mécanique, Hydraulique, et Minéralogie” (564) [mathematical, optical, astronomical, electrical, meteorological, pneumatic, mechanical, hydraulic, and mineralogical instruments (qtd. in Robb 324)]. The list of items sought effectively illustrates the scientific orientation that dominated the second half of his life.

In contrast to the abundant evidence for Rimbaud’s interest in the sciences, technology, and foreign language, he never gave the slightest indication during the years in Africa of an interest in literature. Alfred Bardey related to Rimbaldian biographer, Jean-Paul Vaillant, that despite many opportunities for conversation when business was slow, “la littérature n’était jamais en jeu” (35) [literature was never a topic]. With the exception of Bardey, who would discover his employee’s literary past only by an extraordinary chance meeting with Paul Bourde, none of Rimbaud’s associates ever suspected in the man a career as a poet. Even years later, after Arthur Rimbaud became a household name as the literary pride of France, his former friends in business did not recognize him as the trader that they had known so well. Fellow French merchant, Augustin Bernard, writes, “[C]e ne que depuis huit ou dix ans que j’ai pu comprendre qu’il y avait identité entre le Rimbaud dont il était question dans la presse et le fameux trader que j’avais connu pendant mon séjour à Aden” (qtd. in Lefrère 1103) [It wasn’t for eight or ten years that I could understand there was a connection between the Rimbaud in question in the press and the first-rate trader I had known during my time in Aden]. That Bernard could have read for years details in the press about the famous poet that shared an identical name with his friend in business and never have realized the link offers dramatic testimony not only to

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9 Rimbaud continued to devote himself to the passion that would endure longest in his life: foreign language acquisition. For the purposes of communicating with his workers or facilitating trading, he concentrated on Arabic as well as other more localized languages including the Abyssinian language Amharic. However, with the exception of understanding the Koran to facilitate business with the Islamic population (Lefrère 871), there is no evidence he concerned himself with more than the mechanics of using the given idiom in daily interaction, similar to his study of language in the vagabonding years (1103).
Rimbaud’s silence on literary matters but also the absolute divorce in personality from the artistic nature of his youth.

“Absurde, ridicule, dégoûtant”

[Absurd, Ridiculous, Disgusting]

As already noted, mere indifference did not define Rimbaud’s feelings about literature, but rather contempt and disgust distinguished his sentiment. Equally extraordinary as the intensity of his negative reaction toward poetry was the constancy of this feeling. In a report given to writer and diplomat Paul Claudel in 1912, Gabriel Ferrand, a fellow employee, recalls asking Rimbaud if he had any novels on hand. Ferrand recounts the acerbic response: “Il répond qu’il s’est servi des [sic] quelques romans qu’il avait pour faire des paquets et des cornets” (qtd. in Lefrère 878). [He answered that he made use of the few novels he had for packing material and to make paper cone hats.] Literature, Rimbaud seems to want to say, is useless and the quality paper used to print it would serve better as wadding or more fittingly a dunce’s cap.

Rimbaud would have preferred (and most likely counted on) never discussing the topic of poetry, especially his own, the rest of his days. However, while he was struggling to make a new life in Abyssinia, Verlaine had worked tirelessly in Paris to resurrect a life Rimbaud felt certain he had buried. With even the first publication of his work, the young poets of Paris, the Decadents and the Symbolists, quickly proclaimed Rimbaud their hero, and with equally surprising swiftness, the unwelcome celebrity soon greeted Verlaine’s former friend a continent away.

10 During the fall of 1883, Verlaine included Rimbaud’s work in a series on selected writers entitled “Les Poètes maudits” [Accursed Poets] featured in the literary publication Lutèce. In the spring of 1886, Verlaine again facilitated the publication of Rimbaud’s collection of poems, Illuminations, in the literary review La Vogue, and the fall of the next year sees the first true publication—one not paid for by the author—of Saison [A Season].
A truly unlikely meeting on a passenger ship would cause Rimbaud to first learn about the phenomenon of his new prominence in the literary world. Around Christmas of 1883, his childhood friend, Paul Bourde, and his employer, Alfred Bardey, happened to strike up a conversation while in passage on a ship out of Marseilles. During the course of the conversation, Bourde recognized the name of his old classmate and in turn informed Bardey of the publication of Rimbaud’s poetry, speaking as well of his friend’s bohemian youth. Such a literary background in the employee Bardey described as “taciturne et généralement triste” (Vaillant 31) [uncommunicative and generally sad] must have both shocked and delighted the businessman. In contrast, Rimbaud received the news much less happily, making a sound his employer compared to the “grognement de sanglier” (32) [grunting of a wild boar]: the animal like utterance appropriately illustrating his gut felt disdain.

Despite limited success in soliciting a response, Bardey’s curiosity would lead him to question Rimbaud from time to time on the matter. In a July 16, 1897, letter to Berrichon, he recounts the typical result of his inquiries: “[...] il ne m’a jamais laissé faire allusion à ses anciens travaux littéraires. Je lui ai demandé quelquefois pourquoi il ne les continuait pas. Je n’obtenais que ses réponses habituelles: ‘absurde, ridicule, dégoûtant, etc.’” (qtd. in Lefrère 893). [He would never allow me to mention his former literary works. Sometimes I asked him why he didn’t take it up again. All I ever got were the usual replies: “absurd, ridiculous, disgusting, etc.” (qtd. in Robb 353).] Despite the habitually terse response, Rimbaud’s blunt adjectives help contribute to forming a basis for understanding his perception of literature as an adult.

We already understand from his previous comments to Pierquin and Millot—the best use of literary books was to conceal the flaking plaster of walls—that he considered literature a pursuit that lacked a viable purpose and meaning, thus making it “absurd” and therefore
“ridiculous.” However, the sentiment of outright disgust with literature seems to have appeared later than the general perception of its pointlessness. The question to ask is: why did he come to consider the pursuit of poetry “disgusting?” Why was it not a case of indifference or simple bemusement for Rimbaud when asked to confront a former endeavor that he had since judged useless? As I will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, I propose that the origins of Rimbaud’s visceral revulsion to the memory of his association with literature are found primarily in his acute sense of humiliation from the scandal involving Verlaine and general regret over a lifestyle of chronic substance abuse.

Rimbaud’s reactions consistently indicated intense resentment for the intrusion of his literary past into the life he was working to create in Africa. In preparation for upcoming publications of the poems of *Illuminations* in *La Vogue*, Verlaine apparently sent a letter requesting his former friend to send new poems. Although the exact words are not known, it is easy to determine that Rimbaud’s response was typically concise and unequivocal. Vaillant recounts Bardey’s description of what was undoubtedly Rimbaud’s final contact with his former partner in the derangement of all the senses:

> [Bardey] n’a pas vu la lettre, mais Rimbaud lui en parlé, lui en a montré l’adresse, et ses explications firent nettement ressortir qu’elle était extrêmement laconique, et qu’elle se pouvait résumer ainsi: “Foutez-moi la paix!” Et les yeux de Rimbaud précisaient: “Je lui réponds, mais c’est bon pour une fois!” (38-39)

> [Bardey did not see the letter, but Rimbaud spoke to him about it, showed him the address, and his explanations made it evident that the letter was extremely terse, and could be summed up like this: “Leave me the hell alone!” And Rimbaud’s eyes spelled it out: “I am answering him, once and for all!”]

Similar to the way Delahaye recalled his impressions of Rimbaud’s reaction of hurt and disdain to the simple question of poetry at Roche, Bardey remembered sensing his employee’s true level of contempt only by the intensity registered in his eyes. Rimbaud had done everything in his power to escape the loathsome memory of his past, and now it had managed to follow him by a cruel
twist of fate to a new continent, despite the safeguard of having chosen a land inhabited by few Europeans and even fewer Frenchmen.

“Mes Chers amis” [My Dear Friends]

As I have suggested, Rimbaud’s manner of expression and use of words in his various writings in Africa serve as a reliable indicator of his attitude toward literature. In letters to family, we no longer of find even the imagery of his 1878 letter concerning the summit of Gothard. If not writing to bemoan his life, he was likely to fill his letters with prosaic requests for help in the purchase of a technical book or instrument.

Typically starting the letter with “Mes chers amis” [My dear friends], the letter of May 20, 1883, is characteristic of Rimbaud’s correspondence with his family:

Je compte que vous aurez reçu ma première lettre du Harar. 
Ma dernière commission de livres doit être en chemin; vous l’aurez payé, comme je vous en avais priés, ainsi que le graphomètre, que vous devez m’avoir envoyé en même temps.
La photographie marche bien. C’est une bonne idée que j’aie eue. Je vous enverrai bientôt des choses réussies.
Par la première poste, je vous ferai envoyer un chèque pour quelques petites commissions nouvelles.
Je vais bien, mes affaires vont bien; et j’aime à penser que vous êtes en santé et prospérité.

Rimbaud (604)

[I expect that you will have received my first letter from Harar by now.
My last order of books should be en route: you will have paid for them, as I asked you to, including the graphometer, which you must have sent me at the same time.
The photography is going well. It turns out it was a good idea I had. Soon I’ll send you some successful examples.
The next time the mail leaves, I will have a check sent to you for a few small new orders.
I am well, business is good; and it makes me happy to imagine that you are healthy and prosperous.

Rimbaud (Mason 173)]

Rimbaud’s primary concern here is assurance that his family has followed through with ordering the things that would facilitate his varied projects. The sentences in this regard are short, sterile, and business like. Even in relating his efforts with photography, a project for which he was very
enthusiastic, he is not the least expansive. The phrasing reminds us more of a young boy of average intelligence struggling to compose a letter home describing his activities at summer camp. At this point in his life, Rimbaud’s relationship to verbal expression is not just a question of no longer wanting to write an elevated form of poetry, but absolute resistance to the least elaboration.

The closing of the letter above illustrates an aspect of Rimbaud’s personality that will be central to our discussion in Chapter 3. Although I will argue shortly that, for the most part, Rimbaud actively chose to limit his expansiveness while writing, I believe as well that his personality naturally restricted the articulation of more intimate sentiments. The one attempt in the letter to address his mother and sister—family members for whom he held genuine affection—in a more personal manner is suggestive of a formula that lacks any depth of sentiment. The stunted phrases “Je vais bien, mes affaires vont bien” [I am well, business is good] indicate an individual who had an aversion to intimate expression. His African correspondence in general displays severe emotional restriction that seemed to ossify and deepen as the years distanced him from the poetic personality of his youth.

The one area where Rimbaud consistently demonstrates a desire to open up to his family is in articulating the physical discomfort and unhappiness of his situation; in fact, habitual complaint comprises the most interesting aspect of his correspondence. In his letter of August 23, 1887, from Cairo, he writes to his mother and sister, “Je dois donc passer le reste de mes jours errant, dans les fatigues et les privations, avec l’une unique perspective de mourir à la peine” (669) [I must therefore spend my remaining days wandering, in exhaustion and hardship, with nothing to look forward to but death and suffering (Mason 262)]. The line typifies a running motif of exaggerated lament for not only his physical discomfort but also the fear of futility in his efforts.
Although Rimbaud did not restrain himself emotionally in the area of expressing his woes,\textsuperscript{11} even here the use of language lacks development. The following excerpt from an October 8, 1887, letter home illustrates the characteristic style of expression:

\begin{quote}
Donc, depuis deux ans, mes affaires vont très mal, je me fatigue inutilement, j’ai beaucoup de peine à garder le peu que j’ai. Je voudrais bien en finir avec tous ces satanés pays; mais on a toujours l’espoir que les choses tourneront mieux, et l’on reste à perdre son temps au milieu des privations et des souffrances que vous autres ne pouvez vous imaginer. (676)
\end{quote}

[So, for two years, my work has been going badly, I exhaust myself purposelessly, I have great difficulty holding on to what I have. I would like very much to be done with these damned countries; but still hold on to the hope that things will be better while still wasting my time surrounded by deprivation and suffering of the sort you and anyone else wouldn’t begin to understand. (Mason 275)]

Rimbaud shows no compulsion to find images that would express his frustration more vividly, but in a series of short phrases states plainly his dissatisfaction. Considering the openness with raw emotion, one can only explain the stunted, if frank, style by a rejection of any higher form of writing, a choice made, at least originally, with intent.

The one hope for joy that Rimbaud regularly mentions to his family is the dream of travel to new places. To express this desire, he often ends his list of complaints with an ever-illusive prospect of moving on to Zanzibar. In an August 23, 1887, letter from Cairo, he finishes pages of lament by writing, “Peut-être irai-je à Zanzibar, d’où on peut faire de longs voyages en Afrique, et peut-être en Chine, au Japon, qui sait où? (668-69)” [Perhaps I will go to Zanzibar, whence one may make trips to Africa, and perhaps China, Japan, who knows? (Mason 262)]. He would never have the chance to travel to the new lands of his dreams. Instead, he would have to content himself by venturing into the unknown regions of Abyssinia. His voyage deeper into the

\textsuperscript{11} Interestingly, Rimbaud is fully aware of his inability to keep from his complaints as evident by his open admission in this excerpt from a November 10, 1888, letter home from Harar: “Mon existence dans ces pays, je l’ai dit souvent, mais je ne le dit pas assez et je n’ai guère autre chose à dire, mon existence est pénible, abrégée par un ennui fatal et par des fatigues de tout genre” (702). [My existence here—and I say it often, but I don’t say it enough and I have hardly anything else to say—my existence is painful, my life being shortened by boredom and exhaustion (Mason 306).]
continent—a land of which he complained so bitterly—seems an appropriate metaphor for the
unhappy manner in which he withdrew increasingly within himself during his adult years,
shunning the most normal forms of personal expression.

Lettre au directeur du *Bosphore Égyptien*

or *Travels in Abyssinia and the Harar*

At the time Verlaine was arranging the publication of *Illuminations* in *La Vogue*,
Rimbaud prepared for a yearlong trip into the interior of Abyssinia, intent on making the fortune
he sought by selling guns to Menelek II, the King of Choa—vassal to Johannes IV, Emperor of
Abyssinia. Although the trip would not result in the great financial windfall he desired, Rimbaud
established significant new trading routes for future Europeans. He prepared a report of his
findings, and beginning in August 1887, several geographic societies would publish the account
of his voyage in their journals.\(^\text{12}\) The information stirred great interest and contributed
significantly to the understanding of the region. He correctly predicted the future strategic and
economic importance of the then insignificant Diboujiti (Lefrère 1010). However, for the
purposes of this thesis, the article provides a sample of writing that he prepared specifically for
public presentation during his post-literary period. The analysis of such a carefully crafted piece
will enable us to understand his new ideal of written expression and in turn shed light on his
detached and objective approach for perceiving and interpreting the world.

In “Lettre au directeur du *Bosphore Égyptien*” (known often in English translations as
*Travels in Abyssinia and the Harar*), Rimbaud relates the important aspects of his journey,
including the possibilities for commercial exploitation of the area and particularly the recent
political and military events surrounding Menelek II. The choice of style therefore is naturally

\(^{12}\) Originally written for the geographic society based in Cairo, Bardey sent the report on to the *Société géographique
de Paris* for their journal, and in turn, many geographical societies in Europe would print or cite from the article.
journalistic rather than literary. That said, the one criticism from the scientifically and commercially oriented readers of the geographic journals was the absolute sterility of the writing. Representing the consensus at the time, Austrian explorer, Phillipp Paulitschke, gave the following critique: “Le mémoire est, malgré sa sécheresse, d’une grande valeur, car il se fonde sur les déclarations d’un témoin oculaire et décrit une contrée nouvelle dans ses traits les plus généraux” (qtd. in Lefrère 868). [The report is, despite its dryness, of great value, as it is founded on the statements of an eyewitness and creates an overall picture of a new country.] Although the often technical and practical subject matter that the article needs to treat can explain a certain extent of the “dryness” described by Paulitschke, Rimbaud appears to have gone out of his way to strip the text of any language that might inspire the reader’s imagination.

In the following excerpt, which is representative of the article’s general style, he discusses the possibility of exploiting salt deposits and the difficulties involved:

Certes, le sel existe, en surfaces très étendues, et peut-être assez profondes, quoiqu’on n’ait pas fait de sondages. L’analyse l’aurait déclaré chimiquement pur, quoiqu’il se trouve déposé sans filtrations aux bords du lac. Mais il est fort à douter que la vente couvre [...] les frais de personnel et de main-d’œuvre, qui seraient excessivement élevés, tous les travailleurs devant être importés [...] et l’entretien d’une troupe armée pour protéger les travaux. (659)

[Certainly the salt exists in giant surface areas and perhaps quite deeply, although no one has done any soundings. The analysis would have declared it chemically pure although it is found deposited without filtration on the shore of the lake. But it is highly doubtful that the sale covers [...] the costs of personnel and labor [...] and the maintenance of an armed troupe to protect the project would be very high. (Bell 10)]

Rimbaud does not include any descriptive phrases that might dilute the purely objective and detached presentation of information; rather he voids the text of even the most limited subjective impressions needed to satisfy the curiosity of a normal reader. He chooses, for example, not to comment on the salt field’s visual impact with its great expanse of white and eerie formations. In
contrast to the vivid manner with which he related the featureless snow of St. Gothard’s Pass, here he is intent on stating only concrete and measurable facts.

The tedious and technical style in explaining the mining of salt deposits is perhaps appropriate for the subject, even if unnecessary. However, Rimbaud continues in the same fashion of writing with the most dramatic of situations. In recounting Menelek II’s taking of the city of Harar, he creates an account reminiscent of an insurance report:

Ménélik entra quelques jours ensuite au Harar sans résistance, et ayant consigné ses troupes hors de la ville, aucun pillage n’eut lieu. Le monarque se borna à frapper une imposition de soixante-quinze mille thalers sur la ville et la contrée, à confisquer, selon le droit de guerre abyssin, les biens meubles et immeubles des vaincus morts dans la bataille et à aller emporter lui-même des maisons des européens et des autres tous les objets qui lui plurent. (662)

[Menelek then entered Harar a few days later without resistance and, having consigned his troop outside the town, no pillage took place. The Monarch contented himself with slapping a 75,000 thaler assessment on the city to confiscate the homes and belongings of the defeated dead in the battle, according to the Abyssinian war rights, and taking himself European houses and all other objects that pleased him. (Bell 14)]

Again, Rimbaud limits his comments to the objective and verifiable facts. He is not interested in stimulating the reader’s imagination by suggesting images or emotions associated with the historic event such as the trepidation of the inhabitants of Harar or the triumphant spirit of the king upon entering the conquered city.

It is simply extraordinary that the man whom scholars would one day acclaim a great poet wrote in such a sterile manner. The mode of expression is so extreme in its flatness that it serves as convincing evidence that he chose to write in what I would call an “anti-style,” the sterility reflecting a conscious rebellion against literary form. Chapter 2 will argue that in Rimbaud’s mind, this dryness represented the precision of a purely scientific approach to life: a mentality of objectivism born out of his decision to embrace a philosophy of materialism; the
extremity of his exactness affirms he perceived such expression as part of a quest to find an absolute.

“Des Mots si drôles qu’on se demandait”

[Words So Funny That One Wondered]

In observing how Rimbaud rejected literary articulation, it is reasonable to ask if any trace of his natural talent with words continued to manifest itself during the post-literary years. Perhaps the one area of expression where he allowed his gift to have some reign was in a notorious, caustic wit. Here the creative use of language stands in stark contrast to his otherwise unimaginative style. Giving their testimonials some forty years after his death, the European traders in Africa universally commented on Rimbaud’s genius of wording and imagery in his biting humor.¹³

In an April 3, 1930, letter to Georges Mauvert, trader Armand Savouré relates his appreciation of Rimbaud’s talent for witty wordplay:

J’ai eu pas mal de rapports d’affaires avec lui et ai eu beaucoup de ses lettres mêmes commerciales rédigées en style réellement crevant. On se réunissait pour lire les dites lettres et c’était une vraie partie de plaisir. Pince sans rire, je l’ai rarement vu très gai, mais il avait le talent de réjouir son auditoire par ses histoires et anecdotes racontées [sic] avec des mots si drôles qu’on se demandait d’où il pouvait les tirer. (qtd. in Lefrère 1048)

[I had many business dealings with him and a lot of his letters, even the commercial ones, written in a truly hilarious manner. We used to get together to read these so called letters and it was a real party. Deadpan, I rarely saw him very cheerful, but he had the talent to delight his audience with his stories and anecdotes told with words so funny one wondered where he got them.]

The fact that Rimbaud’s letters would cause fellow businessmen to gather for the purpose of sharing them is convincing testimony to Savouré’s opinion of their comic appeal. Most

¹³ Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify or locate the letters in question, if in fact they still exist. However, because various associates of Rimbaud express in their commentaries a similar sense of hyperbole concerning his wit and imaginative use of words in that respect, I believe the testimonies given are sufficient for the purpose of this thesis.
interesting is Savouré’s marvel at the choice of wording in their text, such that he wondered at
the mind that could produce them. The commentary gives evidence that Rimbaud’s ability to use
words in the creation of unusually evocative images was very much alive, thus reinforcing my
assertion that the excessive sterility in his written work resulted not from the loss of ability but
instead represented a choice.

Rimbaud’s use of his verbal gifts in this manner raises an important question: why did
humor enjoy such freedom of expression when he imposed blanket censorship against any other
creative use of language? We will find the answer by first addressing a parallel question: why did
he allow himself the use of caustic humor alone as his emotional and social outlet?

Normally silent and withdrawn, Rimbaud, as witty raconteur, experienced a dramatic
transformation of personality. Pierre Bardey, business partner and brother of Alfred Bardey,
paints a clear picture of these instances:

[...] Tantôt il était morose, silencieux, semblant éviter la compagnie de ses semblables,
et tantôt s’animant, devenant causeur aimable, avec une verve un peu caustique qui le
portait à tourner en ridicule les faits et gestes des personnes qu’il mettait en cause dans
ses récits.
On était, c’est naturel, porté à rire de ses histoires, toujours spirituellement contées,
sans qu’on fût bien certain de ne pas être traité, à son tour, de la même façon dans ses
entretiens avec d’autres auditeurs. (qtd. in Lefrère 1074)

[At one moment he was sullen, uncommunicative, seeming to avoid the company of
everyone, and then the next moment he came alive, becoming a good conversationalist,
with witty and caustic eloquence that caused him to ridicule the actions and gestures of
the people in his stories.
Everyone was naturally brought to laughter by his stories, always told with wit, without
being too certain to not be treated in the same manner at their turn in his conversation
with others.]

In addition to affirming an across the board opinion that the unique manner in which Rimbaud
worded his stories was extremely funny, Pierre Bardey indicates the sudden and dramatic
animation of a man whom he describes as otherwise having had great trouble connecting
emotionally with his compatriots, preferring instead to remain aloof. These flights of satiric wit
appear to have permitted Rimbaud his one moment of freedom where he could come to life and enjoy the company of others.

Alfred Bardey, who among all the traders in Abyssinia had worked the most closely and for the longest period with Rimbaud, offers surprisingly trenchant yet sensitive observations concerning his employee’s psychology. In his April 25, 1923, letter to Berrichon, he explains the source of Rimbaud’s witticisms: “La plupart du temps tout était mal, mauvais, idiot, et, pour exprimer tout cela, les mots ironiques et drôles lui venaient d’abondance” (qtd. in Lefrère 1089). [Most of the time everything was wrong, bad, idiotic, and to express all that, ironic and funny words poured out of him in abundance.] Although Rimbaud’s prevailing attitude of disgust and criticism for seemingly everything inspires his humor, Bardey perceived the caustic and critical mode as a defense mechanism. Writing again to Berrichon on July 7, 1897, he says of Rimbaud, “Il ne sut jamais se débarrasser de ce pauvre et méchant masque satirique qui cachait cependant les réelles qualités de son cœur (qtd. in Lefrère 1074)” [He never knew how to rid himself of this pathetic and mean satiric front that hid, however, his real noble-heartedness].

Bardey wanted to make it clear that, as the one who knew him best in Africa, the meanness of the humor represented a front (and a pathetic one at that) that protected a gentler soul.

Although caustic humor certainly functioned as the emotionally protective shell that Bardey suggests above, I believe Rimbaud would never have permitted the use of his verbal gifts in this way if he somehow sensed such expression conflicted with a materialist ideal of detached reason: the mindset, as I will argue in the next chapter, that ultimately dominated his personality.

14 In the same letter to Berrichon, Bardey effectively illustrates the spirit of Rimbaud’s wit and the effect on his victims: [S]on esprit caustique et mordant lui fit beaucoup d’ennemis. […] Il égratigna beaucoup et ne fit jamais grand mal si ce n’est à lui-même par répercussion de ses cruelles moqueries dont certains voyageurs du Choa et du Harar paraissent conserver encore le mauvais souvenir (qtd. in Lefrère 1074). [His caustic and biting wit made him many enemies. […] He put in a lot of jabs at people and never caused any great harm if not to himself through the repercussions from his cruel mockeries, which certain travelers from Choa and Harar seem to still have some bad memories.]
Since at least early adolescence, this dark humor had been his dominant mode of interpersonal interaction, especially when he felt threatened or vulnerable—such as when ill at ease among the socially refined personalities of the Parisian literati. His timidity and innate emotional restriction severely limited the modes of social interaction where he felt at ease. However, his satiric wit played to the area that gave him the most confidence: his intellect. All humor, whether inclusive and gentle or mean spirited and critical, depends on the mind’s ability to recognize an inconsistency in logic or an incongruity in the natural order of things. Rimbaud’s powerful and unforgiving rationality, in conjunction with his intolerance for hypocrisy and perhaps human failing in general, inspired his satire. More importantly, because his humor attacked the illogic of other’s ideas and actions, it only worked to reaffirm his sense of reason. I propose, therefore, that he intuitively understood that the eloquence in his biting wit did not conflict with the objective and scientific expression he championed but rather complimented it. For this reason, the imaginative use of words, when in the service of sarcasm, still received his blessing.

“Et puis c’était mal” [And Besides, It Was Wrong]

In April 1891, a pain in Rimbaud’s right knee grew in intensity with each day, progressing up his leg until it completely incapacitated him. His desperate situation forced him to sell at a loss all the material of his business before hiring men to carry him on an excruciatingly painful eleven-day journey to the coast. On May 20, he arrived by steamer in the port of Marseille where the Hospital of the Immaculate Conception admitted him. Doctors recognized immediately the cancerous disease consuming his leg and the immediate need for amputation (Lefrère 1116-18). However, the staff decided to keep the patient in ignorance concerning the ultimately fatal nature of his condition. After recovering from surgery, he returned to the farm at
Roche on July 23, his first visit home in eleven years. At the age of 36, he would have less than three months of life left him.

Aside from appreciating the tragedy of Rimbaud’s last days, the examination of these eleven weeks will provide insights important to the question of this thesis. The destiny that brought him home to the land of his youth would force him to confront anew his literary past with questions from the curious. The trauma of the ravaging disease would leave him emotionally vulnerable. In the nurturing care of his beloved sister and with the psychologically freeing power of pain killing opiates, he would open ever so slightly to provide precious testimony on the topic of his poetry.

Rimbaud’s literary fame was already present in the Ardennes, and the question of his past would come up in his presence at least the few times recorded in biographical material. The family’s physician, Dr. Pierre-Henri Beaudier, naturally unaware of Rimbaud’s sentiment toward literature, felt comfortable enough to broach the topic of his patient’s literary career. According to the account the doctor gave to Rimbaldian biographer Robert Goffin, the response was—not surprisingly—terse, unequivocal, and hostile. The doctor states of Rimbaud, “Il ne me laissa pas continuer et, avec un geste d’indignation, il me répondit froidement: il s’agit bien de cela, merde pour la poésie! (Goffin 48)” [He didn’t let me continue and, with a gesture of indignation, he answered me coldly: that’s not my problem, to “shit” with poetry!]. Rimbaud’s hostility confirms that his disdain for the subject of literature had not softened in the least, not even when confronted by the prospect of his death, which he certainly realized by now was a possibility. However, the exchange does not tell us any more than his contemptuous remarks to Bardey while in Africa.
A new closeness with his sister would prove a more important source for understanding his perception of poetry and his state of mind at the end of his life. When first reunited with his mother in Marseilles at the time of his leg amputation, Rimbaud displayed an uncharacteristic tenderness and affection toward her. However, once home, it was quickly replaced by the more habitual antagonism of the past. For reasons that remain unclear, at Roche, his hostility towards his mother appeared more intense than at any other period in their relationship. This extreme tension between mother and son would lead Isabelle to take on the role of caretaker and confidante until the moment of his death. In a very literal sense, she often stayed at his side night and day, and her testimony is the essential resource for understanding his final days.

The first anecdote related by Isabelle illustrates Rimbaud’s undiminished repulsion to poetry in an unusually powerful way. Because of his disease, he suffered chronic insomnia, and during the long periods of sleeplessness, Isabelle would read aloud to him. When she happened upon a poetic passage in the course of reading, Rimbaud objected strenuously. She recounted to Victor Segalen, “Quand arrivait un vers, un seul, il me suppliait de passer. Il avait horreur de la poésie” (qtd. in Lefrère 1145) [When a verse [of poetry] came up, a single one, he begged me to skip over it. He had a horror of poetry]. Rimbaud’s expression of disdain here for the slightest reminder of his old craft is all the more impressive when one considers that, despite his suffering, he managed to find the energy to interrupt. His aversion to poetry is so extreme in its manifestation that it demands explanation, and therefore forms a major focus of this thesis.

15 For biographer Goffin, Beaudier painted a vivid picture of his patient’s relationship with his mother during this time: “Une seule grande impression me reste de mes visites à Roche: c’est l’indifférence (pour ne pas dire l’aversion) d’Arthur Rimbaud pour sa mère. On sentait en lui un malaise physique à sa seule présence. À plusieurs reprises, pendant que je m’entretenais avec lui, elle poussa la tête dans une porte entrebâillée. Immédiatement les traits de Rimbaud se contractaient et je me souviens qu’une fois, il la rabroua vertement, en la priant de ‘foutre’ le camp? (Goffin 47).” [One single deep impression remains with me from my visits to Roche: it is the indifference (to not say aversion) of Arthur Rimbaud towards his mother. One sensed in him real physical pain at her mere presence. Several times, while I was speaking with him, she would poke her head through the half-open door. Immediately the features of Rimbaud’s face would tense up, and I remember one time, he sharply rebuffed her, begging her to please get the ‘hell’ out?]
Isabelle is the last known individual to question Rimbaud directly concerning his poetic silence. Her unique position as confidante privileged her to the rare and—albeit ever so slightly—expansive answer concerning his poetry. She recounted the incident to Paul Claudel, during his visit to Roche in the summer of 1912. In his journal, Claudel faithfully recorded the anecdote told him concerning Rimbaud:

Quand il était à Roche en cet été de 1891 sur son lit de douleur souffrant horriblement, sa sœur lui dit: “Pourquoi ne continues-tu pas à écrire? on dit pourtant qu'autrefois tu as fait de très belles choses.” Il répondit: “Je le sais bien, mais je ne pouvais pas continuer, je serais devenu fou.” Puis après un moment de silence: “Et puis c’était mal.” Et cela d’un air si triste! (qtd. in Lefrère 1145)

[When he was at Roche during that summer of 1891, on his bed of pain suffering horribly, his sister said to him: “Why don’t you continue to write? They even say you once created very beautiful things.” He answered: “I am well aware of it, but I couldn’t continue, I would have become crazy.” Then after a moment of silence: “And besides it was wrong.” And that with an air of such sadness!]

Considering Rimbaud’s negative view of poetry, it is questionable that he meant to confirm Isabelle’s assertion he had once written “beautiful” things in any positive sense. More likely, he intended merely to affirm awareness that his poetry had achieved a high (if unwanted) level of recognition. In answering why he ceased to write, he cites two important reasons. First, the threat that poetry had posed to his sanity—particularly from substance abuse associated with the seer philosophy—is not new information, but a reoccurring theme in “Délires II” [Second Delirium]. However, the statement significantly confirms that the negative association between poetry and the damage done by drugs remained strong years later. According to Isabelle, her brother reflected with a moment of silence before uttering the second reason: an indication the statement came from his gut. Most likely to record the emotion present in Rimbaud’s voice as indicated to him by Isabelle, Claudel emphasized in his journal: “Et puis c’était mal.” [And besides, it was wrong.] The sadness that followed confirms the deep regret and bitterness Rimbaud experienced when forced to revisit the matter.
The question remains: in what sense did he believe poetry was “wrong?” The exchange with Isabelle certainly reveals the extent to which he perceived that his literary endeavors had played a destructive force in his own life, but did he think poetry was universally wrong, even in a moral sense? Especially, because he believed literature offered nothing towards the betterment of the world and because, as I will argue, that an objective and scientific approach to life offered the best hope for humanity, I contend that he had fallen to the temptation to generalize his negative experience with art, and therefore ultimately perceived poetry as destructive by its very nature and therefore wrong for everyone.

The emotional openness during these last days that allowed Rimbaud to reveal even what little he did on this sensitive matter was unusual. The change owes itself to two different things. First, as already stated, his attachment to Isabelle grew profoundly during his intense suffering, especially as she provided the familial affection their mother was seemingly incapable of expressing. A second factor working in tandem with this dynamic, one that will prove interesting to our discussion in Chapter 3, is the power of intoxicants to dramatically free up Rimbaud’s emotional rigidity.

In Africa, Rimbaud led a life of such sobriety that even the local missionaries took notice. Since his twenty-fifth birthday, following his return home from the important turning point of his work in Cyprus, the evidence indicates that he religiously avoided the use alcohol and drugs, including the most mild or socially acceptable forms. Only the metastasis of his cancer would cause him to break this vow. His chronic insomnia induced Isabelle to prepare opium-based teas prescribed for relief by Dr. Beaudier. The affect of the opiates in the tea—and subsequently the more powerful morphine injections necessary at the very end of his life—caused an amazing transformation, to a certain extent, permitting the personality of the poet to return. During the last
two weeks of his life, Isabelle claimed to hear him spontaneously speak of visions with strange language of compelling, evocative power. If we can trust her account, these ephemeral creations said for her ears alone may represent the brief reawakening of Rimbaud’s poetic soul.

The examination in this chapter has demonstrated that Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry does not represent a decision isolated in a moment of time but rather an evolution over years. Initially, he let go of his identity as a writer with great reluctance, keeping faith that his destiny lay in literature, even after he had most certainly ceased to write. As the remainder of the thesis will seek to demonstrate, he only broke with his artistic identity when he became convinced against his expectations that the pursuit of poetry would never fulfill his needs. However, once the break occurred, his regret and bitterness over his relationship with literature intensified and hardened as the years progressively separated him from his poetic past. In the chapters that follow, the goal is to first identify Rimbaud’s primary needs and second to isolate and analyze the reasons poetry failed to meet these needs, and finally to understand why that failure created such intense hostility and recrimination towards his former passion.
CHAPTER 2:
A NEW RELIGION—FROM SEER TO MATERIALIST

From early adolescence until the last days of his life, Rimbaud articulated openly and without ambiguity his anti-clerical, anti-Christian, and even atheistic sentiments. To then claim that he possessed a primarily religious nature might appear to some as incongruent. Yet his confession of a constant hunger for some vision of divinity is one of the important themes of *Saison* [*A Season*], where he writes in “Mauvais Sang” [*Bad Blood*], “J’attend Dieu avec gourmandise” (415) [I am starving for God (Mason 7)]. Although, for most of his life, Rimbaud was not devout in the traditional sense, I will argue that the drive to find a personal philosophy (in concert with a similarly inspired endeavor or calling) to which he could lose himself—as one might a religion—was the dominant aspect of his personality and the chief motivating force in his life. Furthermore, I assert that all other interests and passions were in some manner subordinate, and therefore expendable, in respect to this greater need to find a path that would function as the absolute answer. When it became obvious to him that poetry could not play a role in the course he ultimately chose, he judged literary expression useless, and the love for his former craft quickly faded.

To make such an argument, I must first define more accurately the controlling drive that I assign Rimbaud’s personality. My possible application of the term “religious” would be too limited as the true meaning of the word refers specifically to an absolute that includes a concept of God. Although, for the majority of Rimbaud’s life, theism was not the case, it can be argued that the adjective “religious” is correct in the sense that he readily admitted that his quest for an ultimate answer related directly to the void left by his inability to accept the traditional Christian beliefs of his youth. Nevertheless, in order to find a more exact term, I return to Maslow’s
classifications of human motivation to describe his particular hunger. I equate Rimbaud’s drive to fill his personal void to the concept of self-transcendence: a need that does not necessarily manifest itself in traditional religion and the worship of God. The drive to go beyond the self can focus its expression on the purely physical world (i.e. a political movement or mastering and transforming the material world through science and technology). Often the seeker looks for the answer somewhere between these two paths, attempting to establish a link between the spiritual and physical (i.e. good works, metaphysics, mysticism). Rimbaud’s perpetual thirst for self-transcendence would lead him to experiment with each of these solutions.

This chapter will explore the manner in which Rimbaud’s need to reach beyond the self revealed itself throughout his career. Tracing the various evolutions of his quest will accomplish two goals. First it will substantiate my assertion that the longing for self-transcendence dominated his personality. Second, it will allow us to analyze how poetry ultimately failed to remain a viable avenue to meet this need. In the last respect, an examination of each transition will illuminate in turn a particular aspect of the question. Rimbaud’s move from zealous Catholic to unrelenting critic of the Church and Christian doctrine highlights his innate compulsion to interpret the world in black and white terms, leaving little room for shades of gray in his personal philosophy. In studying his shift from follower of the Parnassian cult of Beauty to his development of the seer vision—as the replacement for both it and Christianity, we learn what formed for him a satisfactory vision of self-transcendence: a connection with a greater reality (preferably a spiritual one) that simultaneously provided power to transform the immediate world, especially in terms of remaking society. Finally, an investigation of his conversion to materialism will reveal how, after a permanent loss of faith in the existence of a spiritual realm,
his need to interpret the world in absolute terms—at this point scientific ones—strangled the love of poetry with his ideal of extreme objectivity and precision in written expression.

“Pour la pensée, je crains personne”

[When It Comes to Thinking, I Don’t Fear Anyone]

Before beginning an exploration of the areas mentioned above, it is necessary to understand the dynamic competing to define Rimbaud’s personality: his intelligence. This is the one area from which he consistently drew confidence. After confessing all his fears of confronting the socially refined personalities of the Parisian literati, he could still defiantly tell Delahaye that in face of even the great writers, “[O]h! pour la pensée, je crains personne [...]” (Delahaye, *Rimbaud* 49-50) [Oh! When it comes to thinking, I don’t fear anyone]. If the desire to reach beyond the self was his primary motivation, his highly developed intellect worked to determine which paths he chose to achieve that goal.

To justify Rimbaud’s confidence, the evidence for his exceptional intelligence is abundant. His impressive mind is consistently among the handful of qualities that friends and associates felt compelled to volunteer when giving their posthumous testimonials. Fifty years after their last encounter, the Italian explorer Jules Borelli stated of Rimbaud, “Ce qu’on ne peut lui nier, c’est une intelligence au-dessus de la moyenne, une grande faculté d’assimilation” (qtd. in Lefrère 1047) [What one cannot deny him is an above average intelligence, a great capacity of assimilation]. These qualities became manifest in an unusually large appetite for learning that motivated Rimbaud’s post-literary attempts to master multiple foreign languages, scientific domains, and endless technical skills.

Rimbaud’s brilliance was evident in childhood. He was not only routinely the youngest in his class by more than two years, but he also formed genuine bonds with older students who
represented the most academically gifted in the region. In an August 4, 1919, letter to surrealist writer André Breton, school friend Jules Mary writes of a precocious Rimbaud, “Plus jeune que nous de trois ou quatre ans, il était beaucoup plus âgé” (qtd. in Lefrère 60) [Younger than us by three or four years, he was a lot more advanced]. Mary’s choice to befriend a boy so much younger—at a stage of development in life where the difference of a single year would separate most children—serves in itself to authenticate his claim. The objective evidence of Rimbaud’s singular academic success alone substantiates his extraordinary ability in youth. Until his last year at the Collège de Charleville, he would continue to take home the majority of top honors in local and regional scholastic contests, winning out over students considerably older than he.16

Intelligence would affect Rimbaud’s search for self-transcendence in two important ways. The first is more obvious and therefore potentially overlooked. The avenues he followed to reach beyond the self were either intrinsically conceptual (poetry and the philosophy of the seer) or at least initially approached with similar consideration (work in industry and commerce as a conscious expression of a materialist outlook). It is because of the intellectual and artistic success of his attempt to find self-transcendence in poetry that we take an interest in him over a century after the fact. However, I will argue that his advanced reasoning also worked in conjunction with

16 Unusual evidence of Rimbaud’s abnormally advanced intellect, particularly in respect to his chronological age, comes in the form of more than one professor’s surprisingly negative reaction to its manifestation. Despite his status as the academic racehorse that would bring honor to the school, certain faculty members found the presence of the young student—possessing “le sourire narquois” [the mocking smile] and “l’éclair de moquerie” (qtd. in Lefrère 60) [the glint of mockery] in his eyes—disturbing. Professor Pérette complained, “Est-ce que, non content de me déconcerter, ce galopin … se ficherait de moi par hasard?” (Delahaye, Témoin 67) [Could it be, that not satisfied with disconcerting me, this kid… would be making fun of me by chance?]. In reference to Rimbaud’s precocious mind, Pierquin reported overhearing the school principal, Desdouet, say, “Rien d’ordinaire ne germe en cette tête, ce sera le génie du mal ou celui du bien” (qtd. in Lefrère 54) [Nothing ordinary comes to this head; he will be a genius for evil or for good]. Delahaye records that Pérette was less cautious in his response to the statement: “Tout ce que vous voudrez!… Il a des yeux et un sourire qui ne me plaisent pas… Je vous dis qu’il finira mal!” (Delahaye, Témoin 67). [What ever you say!… He has eyes and a smile that I don’t like… I tell you he’ll finish badly!] The worries about the possibly “evil” nature of their student’s intelligence (concerns reminiscent of those expressed by the bewildered guests attending the dinner of the Vilains-Bonhommes, as recorded in the letter by Valade) are testament to the uncommon or “freakish” character of Rimbaud’s ability.
his personal values to create yet a second and subtler dynamic important in his determination of which paths he deemed acceptable.

A highly developed sense of intellectual integrity was the lens through which Rimbaud perceived and judged the world. Along with his mind, his trustworthiness and honesty universally impressed business associates in Africa. Pierre Bardey—claiming to represent the consensus of fellow traders in Abyssinia—stated with emphasis to Berrichon that Rimbaud was “la loyauté et la probité même” [loyalty and integrity itself] never acting “contre l’honneur” [contrary to honor], handling every interest entrusted him with “une scrupuleuse honnêteté” (qtd. in Lefrère 895) [a scrupulous honesty]. Rimbaud’s intelligence naturally engendered a strong sense of logic, and this developed rationality worked in tandem with his strong moral code of self-honesty to create and reinforce integrity of mind intolerant of any system of thought that could not withstand its severe analysis. Throughout his search to find a way beyond the limits of his self, any answer would have to withstand the rigors of his personal and intellectual integrity. If they did not pass the scrutiny of his mind (as did many ideas that he once embraced unreservedly), he would quickly cast them aside and forever afterwards look back on them with contempt. Christianity, especially the Catholicism of his mother and French ancestors, would be the first vision of self-transcendence to fail the test and earn his relentless scorn.

“Très religieux, […] intolérant, fanatique”

[Very Religious, […] Intolerant, Fanatic]

The manner with which Rimbaud first embraced and then rejected the Christianity of his youth reveals a critical aspect of his personality: the compulsion to find an absolute. The belief in and reverence for God, especially as defined by Christianity, was consistent with Rimbaud’s thinking and behavior only until about his thirteenth birthday. In line with his abilities as a
student, he would routinely take the top academic prizes for religious instruction. However, even among the pious, the intensity of his devotion to the Catholic faith was not normal. Delahaye describes the zealous Rimbaud of this period as “très religieux, toujours premier en instruction religieuse, intolérant, fanatique” (qtd. in Lefrère 73) [very religious, always the top student in religious instruction, intolerant, fanatic]. This mind set of absolutism in respect to his early faith is important to study as it is representative of what would prove a lifelong inclination: to embrace a philosophy that permitted him to define the world in black and white terms, and similarly, to seek a path in the form of an endeavor such as poetry or scientific expression, that he could follow unreservedly towards perfection.

Rimbaud’s fanatic religious mentality of early adolescence was captured in a memorable display of fervor during the year of his first communion. The sight of upperclassmen splashing holy water on each other from the chapel font had enraged the boy. Delahaye recounts his friend’s passionate reaction to the perceived blasphemy:

Rimbaud, tout petit, bondit de fureur à la vue du sacrilège; il s’élança, voulut les repousser, subit des bourrades, répondit par des coups de poing, tant qu’il pouvait, en reçut davantage, s’obstina, griffa, mordit, se cramponna aux vêtements des profanateurs, jusqu’à l’intervention, enfin, de l’autorité, qui mit tout le monde en retenue. Cette bataille lui valut, au collège, la qualification, qu’il accepta avec fierté, de “sale petit cagot.”

(Delahaye, Rimbaud 21)

[Rimbaud, very small, jumped up in a rage at the sight of the sacrilege; he rushed forward, tried to push them away, subjected to hits, he responded with fists, as long as he could, received even more hits, dug in his heels, scratched, bit, hung on to the clothes of the profaners, until finally the intervention of the authority who put everyone in detention. This battle earned him at school the name, which he accepted proudly, of “dirty little sanctimonious hypocrite.”]

Rimbaud’s violent defense of the font reveals not only his complete commitment to the cause but his deep-seated conviction. Too intelligent, even at twelve, to accept his Catholicism as mere ritual, he had—as his academic honors in religious instruction suggest—carefully considered its theology as presented him by his mother and professors. He believed that he was defending the
absolute truth. Oblivious to the peer pressure that is particularly acute for his age, he only garnered pride from the subsequent ridicule of classmates, thus indicating how firmly his sense of identity rooted itself in his source of self-transcendence, at this point Christianity.

Undoubtedly, his tendency to see things in black and white terms is, to a certain extent, a trait typical of adolescence. However, as we will see in continuing the examination of his life, the inclination to find and commit to an absolute never abated.

In keeping with his compulsion to judge things in an uncompromising manner, as either completely true or untrue, when a particular calling proved flawed from his perspective or fell short of expectations, Rimbaud would renounce it with the same violence and passion he had once shown in embracing and defending it. This dynamic is first seen in his abandonment of Christianity. Approximately a year after the battle of the font, Delahaye describes his thirteen-year-old friend’s spiritual orientation with simply the word “athéisme” (qtd. in Lefrère 74) [atheism]. We can only guess what caused the dramatic about face in such a short period. However, it is reasonable to assume that the change in philosophy was connected with the boy’s relationship with his mother who had originally inculcated him with her uncompromising view of Catholicism. Upon entering full adolescence, he undoubtedly identified his faith too closely with the stifling, authoritarian control of his oppressively religious mother, and he welcomed any information that could discredit its doctrine and especially its earthly representatives in the form of the clergy. Delahaye also claims that it was during the same period that Rimbaud wrote his first poems in French as opposed to only the Latin verse required for class (Delahaye, Témoin 31-32). This may indicate that the adolescent had expanded his reading, thus opening his mind to the competing ideas that incited and/or justified his revolt. Once convinced that his religion was flawed, he rejected it in the same manner he had taken it to heart: absolutely.
The surprisingly virulent and consistent manner with which Rimbaud maintained an anti-Catholic stance throughout his life reinforces the notion that his natural tendency was to judge ideas and the people representing them, especially in respect to his failed paths beyond the self, as either categorically right or wrong. When Verlaine, recently released from prison, came to visit Rimbaud in Stuttgart, the former had every intention of returning his wayward friend to the faith. A derisive Rimbaud describes the failed attempt at his conversion in a March 5, 1875, letter to Delahaye: “Verlaine est arrivé ici l’autre jour, un chapelet aux pinces... Trois heures après on avait renié son dieu et fait saigner les 98 plaies de N.S. [Notre Seigneur]” (515).

[Verlaine arrived here the other day, clutching a rosary... Three hours later he had renounced his god and reopened the 98 wounds of Our Savior (Mason 68).] The sarcasm toward the religious revival that Verlaine had experienced in prison is illustrative of Rimbaud’s intolerance of perceived hypocrisy and intellectual inconsistency. His suspicion of falseness in the conduct of the Church, as well as a conception of illogic in its doctrine, would continue to incite passionate, outspoken displays of disgust until even the last weeks of his life. Speaking to Rimbaldian biographer Robert Goffin, a local villager of Roche related that, while he was helping to relax the stiffness in Rimbaud’s cancerous leg out in the courtyard of the family house, the ailing young man “jurait comme un païen et se moquait de moi parce que j’allais à la messe dimanche” (Goffin 40) [would swear like a pagan and mock me because I went to mass on Sundays]. These expressions of contempt for the Church occurred no more than three months before Rimbaud’s death, revealing the deeply entrenched and enduring nature of his sentiment. We have only the word of Isabelle to believe that he returned to the Christian faith the final two weeks of his life.

Although Rimbaud’s possible deathbed conversion is of limited relevance to the purpose of this thesis, it is greatly debated in Rimbaldian studies and, therefore, difficult to ignore in a
discussion of the man’s drive for self-transcendence. The testimony concerning a return to the faith of his boyhood comes from an October 25, 1891, letter that Isabelle claimed to have written her mother from the hospital in Marseille, describing the event at length. A second letter dated December 15, 1891, one that she unquestionably wrote to the missionaries in Harar, appears to support the authenticity of the first. However, the veracity of the account is disputed for two primary reasons. The first is simply because Rimbaud remained so outspokenly derisive of Christianity during the months just before the last two weeks in question, a period to which Isabelle alone was privy. The second reason is the more worrisome as it potentially taints Isabelle’s entire testimony about her brother. The myth-making zeal that she and her husband both shared for Rimbaud would, on more than one occasion, cause them to avoid reporting unpleasant facts about him and, worse yet, to distort others. 17

Similar to the unsettled question concerning the writing of *Illuminations* (before or after *Saison* [*A Season*]), the arguments in favor or against the possibility of Rimbaud’s deathbed conversion are both compelling, and the evidence available will never resolve to anyone’s complete satisfaction the question of his spiritual beliefs the last two weeks of his life. If true, such a change of heart could only re-confirm what he confesses in *Saison* [*A Season*]: he had a hunger for God. However, a deathbed acceptance of a traditional vision of divinity would not represent the beliefs he held the majority of his life. His lifelong rhetoric against Christianity lets

17 Because Isabelle and her husband Paterné Berrichon are two of the most important sources for Rimbaldian biographers, it is important to understand the full nature of this controversy. If the couple never resorted to gross, intentional fabrication, it is known that Berrichon would make petty alterations to the record that included correcting the grammar of Rimbaud’s letters from Africa and even adjusting the margin of profit from the trading enterprise there simply to not allow his brother-in-law appear a failure in business (Lefrère 1188-89). At the very least, Isabelle and Berrichon are guilty of a not entirely rigorous historic method. However, to his credit, Berrichon exhaustively collected and jealously held on to documents and testimony from all periods of Rimbaud’s life before the passage of time would have the opportunity to permanently erase them. He would never once destroy or in anyway alter the original documents so that they remain available for study today (Starkie 20-21). However, because of his and Isabelle’s proven manipulation of documents and memories, this thesis takes caution to use only verified testimony from either of the couple.
us know that he needed to look elsewhere to find the self-transcendence he desired. Therefore, the goal left in this chapter is to explore the paths Rimbaud chose to follow in his search while he still believed the best of his life lay out before him.

From the Cult of Beauty to the Vision of the Seer

Because Christianity did not prove acceptable to Rimbaud’s intellect and temperament, he was left to search for something to replace it, and an analysis of the approaches he chose—and eventually created—to replace it will illuminate what constituted for him an acceptable vision of self-transcendence. In “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood], he explains the continual desperation to fill his void and, in doing so, leaves an indication of what he was seeking: “Ah! je suis tellement délaissé que j’offre à n’importe quelle divine image des élans vers la perfection” (416). [— God! I am so bereft that I could offer up my urges to perfection to any divine image you care to name (Mason 9).] Because the advent of his passion for poetry followed his loss of traditional faith, it is natural that he would have looked to his art for an answer, wanting to incorporate it into some vision of absolute perfection that would approximate divinity. The Parnassian cult of Beauty with its aesthetic doctrine of “l’Art pour l’Art” [Art for Art’s sake], celebrating the perfection of form, must have appeared an obvious choice for a young poet at the age of fifteen, obsessively working to learn new literary techniques and develop his own. His exuberant letter to Banville examined in the previous chapter testifies to his hope, albeit momentary, that the Parnassian vision provided the supreme answer.

Adherence to the primacy of Beauty would prove merely a transitory period, and in terms of the question of this chapter, it only hints that Rimbaud’s idea of self-transcendence included some image of divine perfection; however, I propose the Parnassian ideal lacked two critical elements. First, the obtainment of absolute Beauty could, at its best, only be a simple
representation of divinity, and the resulting sense of connecting with a greater reality would have ultimately felt hollow and sterile. Only a literal and living interaction with the creative force of the universe could truly replace what his former Christian beliefs had once promised, and it is the absence of this self-transcendence experienced in his boyhood that defined the hunger driving him now. Of at least equal importance, the Parnassian ideals had secondly proved powerless, from Rimbaud’s point of view, to better the lot of humanity and change the social order. The excitement of the Franco-Prussian War and the revolution of the Commune of Paris had ignited his passion for the transformation of society, and any connection with the truth of a greater reality would have to also affect the immediate one. To adequately replace the faith of his childhood, therefore, he would create a quasi-religion that allowed him to interact directly with the spiritual world yet, at the same time, provided power to renew the present one. A philosophy or type of religion that made poetry the vehicle for practicing his new faith would be the ideal solution. His vision of the seer poet would satisfy all these aims.

Because Rimbaud’s philosophy of the seer is self-designed, composed of elements handpicked by him in its formulation, a study of its tenets provides us his personal roadmap to self-transcendence. He fashioned his vision of a new literature that would lead to real engagement with the divine from a hodgepodge of ideas, originating primarily from the half-century preceding him (Starkie 103), and just as it can be argued of every artistic or intellectual movement, it is his choice of emphasis in the rearrangement of each borrowed idea that makes the vision his own. However, careful examination of the various influences that he incorporated into the seer philosophy will provide a clearer and more complete understanding of what components he specifically required in his vision to attain a personal sense of having gone beyond the self, including those mentioned above: a connection with a greater reality (preferably
a metaphysical one) and for that relationship to result in the betterment of humanity. In addition, analysis will highlight how his mania for new knowledge, especially as seen in a pattern of starting and quitting learning projects, reflected an innate hope to experience perpetual revelation that would lead to omniscience: a final aspect of achieving self-transcendence.

Mysticism of the Illuminists and the Cabala

In order to form a philosophy that would provide interaction with a greater spiritual reality, Rimbaud drew heavily on the mysticism of illuminist doctrine, especially cabalistic themes that include the ultimate harmony of the universe and the potential of the individual to channel great knowledge and creative power by attuning his mind and soul to this harmony.

The Cabala—a loose collection of teachings and traditions concerning esoteric Jewish mysticism—plays the key role for all occult and illuminist doctrine, and it is likewise prominent in the seer vision (Starkie 104). Just as music serves as the seer’s principal analogy to explain God’s relationship with creation, the Cabala professes that the Creator is “the supreme melody” and the individual only a participant in the cosmic harmony: “one note of the divine chord but blending perfectly with the melody and enriching it” (105). The seer would accordingly prepare himself to transmit the vibrations sent forth by the supreme musician. When existing within this harmony, the primary promise of cabalistic and illuminist doctrines was the power “to unfold the secrets and mysteries of creation and particularly to reveal and explain the divine nature of God” (105). Rimbaud announces the need for the seer to achieve similar omniscience as “le suprême

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18 In her biography of Rimbaud, Starkie emphasizes that the poet’s knowledge of these areas did not necessarily have to be profound. Rather, the ideas of mysticism that Rimbaud chose to work into his aesthetic theory could have been gleaned from the many contemporary writers also inspired by illuminist thinking, Baudelaire in particular. In this respect, Rimbaud’s primary source for material was his middle-aged drinking friend from the café’s of Charleville, Charles Bretagne, an amateur student of the occult and magic. Bretagne helped to familiarize Rimbaud with these ideas and provided books on the matter from his personal library (Starkie100-01).
Savant” [the supreme Savant] and stresses that the new mission of the poet was to arrive at the “l’inconnu” (243) [the unknown].

The mystic basis of the seer vision provides the first evidence that Rimbaud’s primary purpose in creating the philosophy was to achieve self-transcendence by connecting with the divine. However, for Rimbaud, contact with the spiritual, even possession of its mysteries, would only have true meaning if it translated into the capacity to affect the immediate world. In this respect, illuminist doctrine had taught him that the seer could have dominion over both the material world and the corresponding spiritual world beyond, remaking both (Starkie 108-09); his passion for poetry would induce him to find a way to make his art the primary instrument for bridging the two worlds and channeling the coveted potential. In exploring the great power promised, Rimbaud would start in a comparatively modest manner with the creation of a new poetic language, and through the new poetry, the transformation of society would follow.

“Le Temps d’un langage universel”

[The Day of a Single Universal Language]

To make poetry the essential vehicle for penetrating the spiritual, Rimbaud focused on cabalistic concepts that contend the sounds and letters of language have significance independent of their assigned modern usage. This occult belief is born in part out of the idea that language originated from a superhuman intuition existing among primitive peoples (Starkie 125), and Rimbaud wanted to create, or more accurately rediscover, the same sense of words that contained and conveyed all the power of the object or idea they were meant to represent. In the seer letter to Demeny, he writes:

—Du reste, toute parole étant idée, le temps d’un langage universel viendra! [...] Des faibles se mettraient à penser sur la première lettre de l’alphabet, qui pourraient vite ruer dans la folie!—

Cette langue sera de l’âme pour l’âme, résumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs, de la pensée accrochant la pensé et tirant. (246)
[—What’s more, given every word is an idea, the day of a single universal language will dawn! [...] Just thinking about the first letter of the alphabet would drive the weak to the brink!

This language will be of the soul, for the soul, encompassing everything, scents, sounds, colors, one thought mounting another. (Mason 36)]

As a seer, Rimbaud imagined that he would infinitely magnify the power of the new language by reunifying it with its greater metaphysical parallel. To develop the theory that would make such an idiom possible, he depended on yet another poet’s attempt to combine mysticism and art.

Through the writings of Baudelaire, the thinking of 18th-century illuminist philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg shaped Rimbaud’s vision of spiritual reality and a poet’s potential role in it (Starkie 111-12). An unusual combination of scientist, mystic philosopher, and theologian, Swedenborg had sought to reconcile his scientific work with his religious outlook. Believing that everything in the physical world is caused by or corresponds to an aspect of the spiritual, he developed a vision of the universe as a system of symbols permeated with light. Almost a century later, Baudelaire would adapt Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences to create an aesthetic philosophy in which he states that the true purpose of the artist is to discern in nature the imperfect symbols and images that correspond with the higher truth and perfect beauty of the spiritual world. Here, the poet can be no more than what Baudelaire calls the déchiffreur or translator; the more developed the soul of the artist, the greater his or her capacity to perceive these symbols. Just four years after Baudelaire’s death, Rimbaud, in his turn, modified his hero’s Swedenborgian inspired aesthetic vision for the purpose of placing his passion for poetry at the center of his latest attempt to reach beyond the self. The fact that Rimbaud felt obligated to justify his art by incorporating into a greater mystical vision, as opposed to simply the joy of self-expression or aesthetic pleasure, substantiates my assertion that poetry, as much as he loved it, could not exist outside his efforts to go beyond the self.
“Un Multiplicateur de progrès”

[A Propagator of Progress]

Rimbaud’s sense of self-transcendence demanded he participate in the radical reorganization of society; in order to fully justify his continued indulgence in the literary arts, he developed a doctrine that would make poetry the necessary weapon in achieving that aim. As evidence of his passion for social change, he declares in the seer letter to Izambard that only his greater calling to create the new poetry held him back from joining the dramatic forces of revolution playing out that very moment in the capital: “[C]’est l’idée qui me retient, quand les colères folles me poussent vers la bataille de Paris—où tant de travailleurs meurent pourtant encore tandis que je vous écris!” (237). [[I]t’s this idea that keeps me alive, when my mad fury would have me leap into the midst of Paris’s battles—where how many other workers die as I write these words? (Mason 28).] Although, in all likelihood, the statement served in some part as rationalization for staying out of harm’s way, it illustrates not only how the historic upheaval had captured Rimbaud’s imagination, but also his sincere belief that the seer poetry held the key to rescuing society and changing the human condition, indicating at the same time the great personal importance that he attached to such a mission.

The purpose and characteristics that Rimbaud assigned the new poetry reveal the central values he needed to incorporate into any adequate vision of self-transcendence. In his seer letter to Demeny, Rimbaud makes it clear that, although beauty and self-expression may function as important elements in a poem, the primary purpose of literary art is to foment social change and advance humanity through capturing perfect truth:

Le poète définirait la quantité d’inconnu s’éveillant en son temps dans l’âme universelle: il donnerait plus — que la formule de sa pensée, que la notation de sa marche au Progrès! Énormité devenant norme, absorbée par tous, il serait vraiment un multiplicateur de progrès!
Cet avenir sera matérialiste, vous le voyez; — Toujours pleins du Nombre et de l’Harmonie ces poèmes seront faits pour rester. — Au fond, ce serait encore un peu la Poésie grecque. L’art éternel aurait ses fonctions; comme les poètes sont citoyens. La Poésie ne rythmera plus l’action; elle sera en avant. (246)

The poet will define the unknown quantity awaking in his era’s universal soul: he would offer more than merely formalized thought or evidence of his march on Progress! He will become a propagator of progress who renders enormity a norm to be absorbed by everyone!

This will be a materialistic future, you’ll see. These poems will be built to last, brimming with Number and Harmony. At its root, there will be something of Greek Poetry to them. Eternal art would have its place; poets are citizens too, after all. Poetry will no longer beat within action; it will be before it. (Mason 36)

It was important to Rimbaud that his poetry did not just passively react to the human condition nor merely record the events of history. As indicated by his enthusiasm for the Commune’s short-lived promise, he needed to perceive himself as an active participant in the process, and likewise his poetry must also serve as the vanguard’s weapon of choice.

In addition to the strong emphasis on the progress of humanity, the precise manner in which poetry would stimulate change is also telling of Rimbaud’s core values. The perfection of language and capturing of unchanging truth would make the seer’s poetry as irrefutable and constant as the laws of mathematics, allowing the poem power in itself to enlighten and transform the world. Poetry overflowing “du Nombre et de l’Harmonie” [with Number and Harmony] would satisfy his desire for perfection and, at the same time, fulfill his yearning to participate in the social revolution by defining with its truth the need for change awakening in the universal soul—before humanity was even conscious of its own true need—thus impelling individuals to action. However, as I will argue shortly, the same qualities Rimbaud stresses in the new poetry, also serve as harbingers of his future course in life, indicating the very ideas that would eventually work to lead him away from literature.

The role of art championed in the seer letters—an agent of social change through the capture and dissemination of perfected truth—could only function in poetic expression while
Rimbaud still believed in the need to understand and communicate the otherwise indefinable mysteries of a spiritual realm. Here, his call for a materialistic future refers to the everlasting form and substance of his poetry as well as the concrete change that his art would foment. However, I propose that the ideal of social progress as brought about by perfected, unvarying knowledge was the very thing that—once separated from the metaphysical context of the seer vision—would doom his ability to continue as a poet. At this point in his life, Rimbaud still believed in a spiritual reality. His talk of atheism pertained more to the rejection of traditional religion. Once he decided that the existence of a spiritual dimension was illusion, his desire for progress and unchanging knowledge destined him toward his own materialistic future.

In his second life as a man embracing commerce and science, the same principles expressed above would inspire Rimbaud to see himself as an individual of action that forged the future, bettering humanity with his precise and irrefutable understanding of the physical world as provided by science; casting aside the obsolete weapon of poetry, he would arm himself instead with the tools of technology and industry. Although he had initially expected to incorporate his art into the latest path toward self-transcendence, poetry would prove incompatible with an interpretation of materialism that valued only concrete and verifiable realities.

It is not known what precisely brought Rimbaud to the conclusion that his ideas of the seer poet—one able to transgress the metaphysical realm and tap the divine force of the universe—were after everything simply false. The essence of the reason for his most recent loss of faith was in all likelihood uncomplicated and banal: it simply did not work. In May 1871, his ideas of what was possible as a seer poet were new and untested. Not having already run the experiment again and again, as he would during the next two years with the encouragement and financial backing of Verlaine, he could still believe anything was possible. However, after
faithfully following the self-prescribed path, he had not realized his vision: he had not discovered a powerful new universal language for his poetry nor captured with it everlasting truth capable of changing the world. With the passing of time, he must have understood with increasing clarity that his poetry was not the creation of divine vibrations pouring through him from the infinite universe but merely the product of his limited self.

“Sophismes magiques” [Magical Sophisms]

In restating the claims of the seer, the text of *Saison* [*A Season*] makes it clear that, in respect to author’s “sophismes magiques” (429) [magical sophisms], Rimbaud is amazed at the arrogance and self-delusion that once allowed him to believe he could become, in some respect, the equal of God. Verlaine confirms the madness his friend’s ambition. “Crimen armois” [Crime of Love]—a poem Verlaine wrote in prison and which is widely accepted as depicting Rimbaud—describes a young man of all the talents who exclaims in exaltation, “Oh! je serai celui-là qui créera Dieu!” (10.4) [Oh yes, I’ll be the one who creates God!” (Sorell 137)]. Even Rimbaud’s choice to read Goethe’s *Faust* during the writing of *Saison* [*A Season*] indicates that he was particularly conscious of his naiveté and hubris, confirming again the grandeur of his former vision. Like Lucifer in Genesis, the title character in the poetic drama *Faust* is also tempted to believe he could rival God. However, despite Rimbaud’s similar admission of guilt in *Saison* [*A Season*], unlike Faust, he could not return to the Christianity of his French ancestors as his form of redemption or, for that matter, any other spiritual vision of self-transcendence.

Nevertheless, Rimbaud’s personality continued to demand that he reach beyond the self in a manner that could best fulfill his definition of self-transcendence while still satisfying his

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19 In a May 1873 letter, Rimbaud writes Delahaye in the postscript: “Prochainement je t’enverrai des timbres pour m’acheter et m’envoyer le *Faust* de Goethe, Biblioth. populaire. Ça doit coûter un sou de transport (383). [I’ll soon send you stamps so you can buy and send me Goethe’s *Faust* [in the] Bibliothèque Populaire [edition]. Mailing it will cost a sou (Mason 62).]
sense of integrity: self-honesty that manifested itself in an absolute intolerance of moral hypocrisy and intellectual inconsistency. He perceived his craving for a spiritual form of self-transcendence, at first Christianity and later the mystic invention of the seer, as a weakness that causes him to exclaim in “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood] of Saison [A Season], “Je suis de race inférieur de toute éternité”(415) [I have belonged to an inferior race forever and ever (Schmidt, A Season 13)]. Despite his confessed gluttony for God or some vision of divinity, he would not accept comfort in something he had come to believe was hallucination. The final chapter of Saison [A Season], “Adieu” [Farewell], ends with text that Rimbaud marks for emphasis: “[...]—et il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps” (442). [...]—and I will be free to possess the truth in a single soul and a single body.] Although the line remains enigmatic, within the context of the book, I believe one can interpret it to profess that he would live with neither the love of God nor the love of man. He would create instead his own truth independent of divine meaning or even necessarily the validation of society. Once he determined that the spiritual aspect of his quest was delusion, he turned his hopes exclusively to the material world.

Assumptions Made in Light of Rimbaud’s Silence

In the search for evidence to support my proposition that the drive for self-transcendence dominated Rimbaud’s personality and guided his life choices, the thesis now comes to a crossroad. Up to this point, I have had the benefit of Rimbaud’s expressed thought for my analysis, especially that which he articulated in his writing of Saison [A Season] and the seer letters. However, here, we are confronted by one of the very obstacles that make his life the enigma that it is. In the previous chapter, we saw that he had not only ceased to create a high literary form but he had also lost any desire to reveal his intimate thought, as seen in his prosaic
letters to family. In addition, he exhibited the same resistance to self-revelation in conversation among colleagues. For this reason, further investigation into the possibility of his continuing quest for self-transcendence will become increasingly dependent on the less easily discerned evidence found in his behavior and the observations of those individuals close to him. In the absence of Rimbaud’s active articulation of his thinking, I am proposing the following principles as reasonable assumptions to help guide the interpretation of the less direct evidence available from this period of his life when he chose to remain mute.

First, I propose that the essence of the higher level needs identified as prominent in Rimbaud’s personality, ones to which he consistently gave priority from childhood on to the period where we find ourselves now, would have remained present and unchanging until the end of his life despite their psychological (and thus, often incorrectly perceived as ephemeral) rather than physiological basis. Specifically, I assert that the desire to reach beyond the self was intrinsic to his psyche, and although I have demonstrated that the paths he chose to satisfy this need did indeed vary over time—Christianity, the cult of Beauty, and the mysticism of the seer poet—the initial drive to transcend the limitations of himself remained constant. In the absence of contradictory evidence, there is simply no reason to assume that his failure to articulate his thinking in respect to fulfilling this need would indicate that the drive itself had disappeared. Rather, it is more reasonable to assume that in any given situation in which his most basic needs were sufficiently satisfied (hunger, safety, communal acceptance, etc.), the more abstract psychological needs that he had exhibited in the past would always resurface and exert their familiar influence.

In addition to the assumption given above, I believe that similar reasoning can be applied, although perhaps more tenuously, to the permanence of personal values that I have judged as
most core to Rimbaud’s personality. In a mentally healthy individual, the basic moral compass is not likely to change as quickly as his or her shifting life circumstances and environment. In the case of Rimbaud for example, I have argued that personal and intellectual integrity represented values fundamental to his personality, and indeed, as I demonstrated earlier in the chapter, his associates in Africa universally testified to the prominence of these particular traits to the very end of his life. Similarly, in continuing my analysis of how the quest for self-transcendence might have manifested itself in his behavior and thinking, I will assume that the same basic values he sought to accommodate in his past efforts to reach beyond the self would most likely linger on into what I believe was his final philosophy of materialism. In particular, I assume that, at least initially, he continued to maintain the passion for social transformation articulated in the seer letters and that he would mold his final attempt at self-transcendence in such a manner that it would satisfy this as well as his other demonstrated core values.

Despite my confidence that the guiding principles suggested above are sound and reasonable, they are in essence still assumptions and, therefore, make my remaining analysis of Rimbaud’s thinking at the end of his life more vulnerable to error than that which has come before. That said, I believe the evidence available is more than sufficiently viable to justify pursuing to its conclusion the line of investigation begun at the beginning of the chapter. In respect to the following discussion, it is true that Rimbaud never stated in his writing or conversation, “I am a materialist, and a purely scientific interpretation of the world is my guiding life philosophy.” Nevertheless, certain extraordinary aspects of his behavior during the second half of his life (i.e. the extreme scientific precision and flatness of his anti-style in writing, a lifestyle of abnegation that resembled asceticism) merit explanation, and I assert that only the continued presence of his established pattern of seeking out an all-encompassing life philosophy
can most reasonably explain these manifestations. His rejection of a possible spiritual aspect to existence in conjunction with his declared reverence for scientific and technological achievement—as evidenced in his family letters and demonstrated by his choice of learning projects—leads me to assert that materialism represented his final worldview and provided his remaining hope for achieving self-transcendence.

Materialism: Jules Michelet, Vico, and Science

Without the possibility of a metaphysical dimension, Rimbaud would have to shape a perspective of the material world that included the elements I have previously identified as essential to his vision of self-transcendence. In this respect, a connection with a greater reality that simultaneously empowered him to participate in the betterment of humanity was the most basic concept he needed to retain. However, without an image of the divine, the world beyond the self would have to exist primarily within the very humanity he wanted to save.

In fashioning a perspective that would function within the new parameters, it is probable that Rimbaud turned to the ideas and writings of a man he had admired since childhood: the preeminent nationalist and Romantic historian of France, Jules Michelet (Starkie 302).  

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20 In respect to the proposition that Michelet played a key role in Rimbaud’s thought, this thesis depends heavily on Starkie’s repeated assertions to this effect as presented in her biography of the poet. Although the Rimbalidan scholar does not articulate in the work a focused argument on which to base such a premise, she does offer the following. In addition to the general pervasiveness of Michelet’s books among students at the end of the Second Empire, Starkie makes special note of the striking similarities between “Le Bateau ivre” [The Drunken Boat] and descriptive passages in the historian’s work *La Mer* [The Sea]; the parallel between the two is particularly significant when remembering that, at the time Rimbaud wrote the poem, he had not seen a body of water larger than the Meuse river, which runs through Charleville. Furthermore, it is likely that Rimbaud received one of the illustrated volumes of *La Mer* [The Sea] that publishers had created at the time to function specifically as a prize given in academic contests: the type of competition that the young poet won so regularly (Starkie 132-37). Aside from Starkie’s work, Lefrère’s 2001 biography of the poet records one anecdote that gives unquestionable evidence that Rimbaud’s closest friends and intellectual peers at the Collège de Charleville held special esteem for Michelet. In 1896, Paul Bourde, at this point a successful journalist, related to his colleague Pierre Mille that, as early adolescents, he, Jules Mary, and Rimbaud had read *Voyage aux sources du Nil* [Journey to the Source of the Nile] by Speke and Grant. Enthused by the prospect of discovering the mysterious source of the great river themselves, the three boys made a pact to each learn one of the languages that they had determined would be key in such a venture; Bourde studied Arabic, Jules Mary Portuguese, and Rimbaud Amharic (the same language that destiny would allow him to perfect during his years in Abyssinia). In a March 17, 1870, letter addressed to Michelet, Paul Bourde, seeking career advice from the historian, explains that the foreign language project had inadvertently cut his formal education short,
Rimbaud would have found useful Michelet’s belief in the advancement of the human race throughout the course of history as inspired by the concepts of the 18\textsuperscript{th}-century Italian philosopher of culture and law, Giambattista Vico. Michelet had translated Vico’s major work, *Scienza Nuova* [New Science], which presents the progression of humanity as historical cycles of growth and decay. Diverging from Vico’s view that religion, particularly Christianity, was the civilizing force in the progression of civilization, Michelet envisioned humanity’s continuous ascension as brought about by the application of science and industry. By embracing this promise, Rimbaud could have found the manner of self-transcendence he desired within a materialistic perspective.

The emphasis on science fulfilled a characteristic critical to Rimbaud’s notion of reaching beyond the self by providing a path he could follow towards its perfected end and, in doing so, make it into the tool that would change the immediate world. Through the scientific method, he would participate in unlocking the mysteries of the physical world, working to complete the understanding thereof. The knowledge gained in this great venture would continually better the lot of society, leading potentially to an earthly utopia.

Rimbaud’s adulation of science did not appear suddenly after *Saison* [A Season] without antecedents; rather it originated from the same sources that had inspired the seer philosophy. Many of the illuminist writers and philosophers who had shaped his mystic ideas of the seer had proclaimed the greatness of science in combination with the hope of reaching into the spiritual realm, stressing an inter-relation and even interdependence between the two areas. Swedenborg was foremost a scientist seeking to correlate his scientific work with his religious and mystic

“chassé à 15 ans pour avoir voulu apprendre l’arabe en cachette” (qtd. in Lefrère 59) [kicked out at fifteen for having tried to learn Arabic in secret]. If Bourde thought so highly of Michelet that he would dare to correspond with the famous scholar in search of advice during the greatest crisis of his young life, it is reasonable to conclude that a close friend such as Rimbaud (who originally bonded with the two boys, both three years his senior, because of their shared intellectual interests and ability) would have also held the historian and his work in similar regard.
beliefs. Illuminist doctrine routinely prophesizes the eventual marriage of science and faith, stating that, once each field has reached its perfected form, arts would equal the sciences in precision, and philosophy could be stated in terms as certain and unchanging as the laws of mathematics (Starkie 109). Illuminist doctrine, therefore, had taught Rimbaud to idealize the sciences in the same manner he did the arts. With this background, disillusionment with the mystical beliefs of the seer would have left him with an inculcated respect for science and only a lingering love of poetry.

To Discover the Unknown:
The Search for Omniscience and Never Ending Epiphany

Rimbaud’s shift in intellectual focus following Saison [A Season] gives evidence to the seriousness with which he adopted a materialist worldview, internalizing it as his personal philosophy. As discussed in Chapter 1, his choices of intellectual endeavor exhibited a steady pattern of moving away from the abstract and subjective applications of his mind towards the mastery of more concrete, objective skills. However, his manic approach to learning overall raises additional questions concerning how intelligence functioned in determining his vision of what it meant for him to reach beyond the self.

Rimbaud’s compulsion to assimilate a scope of domains and skills too impossibly large and varied for even an above average intellect such as his suggests a dynamic that mirrors and may even serve to form his concept of self-transcendence. I have already argued that he had an inherent urge to lose himself completely to an endeavor, calling, and/or system of belief.21 Furthermore, in keeping with what I have previously suggested concerning his personality, it

21 The ever-present impulse to devote himself completely to something may, in fact, constitute the heart of his yearning to reach beyond the self, as it implies he possessed, in the first place, an instinctive belief that an absolute to which he could lose himself must or, at least, should exist. This innate conviction concerning the existence of an absolute would naturally engender the desire to pursue it. In order to obtain the perceived absolute, its very nature would require the complete giving over or losing of oneself to it.
follows that his intellectual orientation would determine the manner in which he wanted to lose himself. Simply stated, the consequence of these two aspects of his psychology is that, throughout his life, he was less interested in giving himself over to something through the channeling of his emotional energy as he was his intellectual ability. Evidence for this in his Christianity may be his consistent taking of top honors in religious instruction; with the Parnassians, his assimilation of literary techniques—as well as history, mythology, and other fields—for incorporation into his poetry also gives evidence to this tendency. The seer philosophy itself reflects the amalgamation of various intellectual influences such as Baudelaire. However, although his seer and pre-seer poetry reflects his extensive reading, the distinctly categorized nature of the scientific and technical knowledge that he pursued as a materialist make his mania for learning truly apparent. Here, it is simply easier to enumerate the number of disciplines he attempted to absorb after he abandoned poetry.

The stated mission of the seer accurately articulates the spirit driving Rimbaud’s hunger for learning: to discover the unknown. During the two-year attempt to become a seer, his goals had included the illuminist promise of great mystic revelations. However, the same compulsion for discovery also drove him in the acquisition of earthly knowledge throughout all phases of his life. I propose that, in his intellectual pursuits, Rimbaud sought two things. First, he looked for an endeavor of the mind that would prove a renewing source of mental stimulation, creating an endless sense of epiphany. Secondly, he needed the hope and was energized by the idea that his work would lead to a form of omniscience, making him a master of all things and holder of all knowledge, even if as a materialist that proved limited to the finite context of a concrete world.

Rimbaud’s constant cycle of obsession and abandonment in his learning projects supports the contention that he was forever looking for an intellectual pursuit to which he could lose
himself. Because of his brilliance, he found the better part of his satisfaction and joy in mental challenge. However, I believe his exceptional powers of assimilation too often allowed him to acquire quickly a certain level of proficiency in things, which in turn hastened his boredom with the given endeavor, the dynamic creating a pattern of enthusiasm followed by a complete loss of interest with almost every pursuit he embraced. At the age of fifteen and sixteen, he learned and mimicked traditional styles of poetry, often surpassing the skills of his adult counterparts. Once the style was successfully mastered, he arrived at a point where his former admiration for the form would turn to disdain.\footnote{His great capacity for assimilating a poetic style is demonstrated in his work on the \textit{Album Zutique}. Created during 1871-72 by a small group of Parisian poets on the periphery of the established writers, the \textit{Album Zutique} served to mock Parnassian masters such as François Coppée and Théodore de Banville. In part because of the ease with which he could mimic another’s style, and in part because of an innate desire to mock others, Rimbaud wrote the vast majority of pastiche for the collection (Lefrère 369-80).}

Especially in his post-literary period, Rimbaud seemed to not want to deepen and refine his expertise in most of the areas of study he started, suggesting that he was especially drawn to the initial, and therefore more dramatic, sensation of discovery: the sense of epiphany. Chapter 1 examined the manner in which he, after having abandoned poetry, would focus intensely and exclusively on a project at hand—mastery of a language (i.e. Russian) or skill (i.e. piano)—devoting enormous amounts of time and energy. However, he almost always abruptly quit or cut short these learning ventures, particularly once he was satisfied he had acquired a certain level of proficiency. In Africa, he spent half of a year’s salary to purchase a camera and all the necessary chemicals for development of the photographic images. Nevertheless, he tired of the project and sold the camera with all the accoutrements after only six months.

In his adult life, Rimbaud’s final hope to lose himself to never ending intellectual stimulation and epiphany was placed in the study of foreign languages and cultures, especially the discovery of new lands and peoples through constant travel; it was the one endeavor—or
combination of endeavors—of which he never tired, that he never felt he could truly conquer or exhaust. The farther the student of foreign language advances in the field, the more he or she understands that the prospect of learning all the nuances of the language is akin to drinking the ocean. For Rimbaud, the complexity of the linguistic puzzle was expanded and given depth by his fascination with the land and ways of the people who spoke the language—if not their art.

Rimbaud’s dream of constant travel during the second half of his life is a manifestation of his lasting hunger for discovery of the unknown and the sense of self-transcendence that such continual revelation might inspire. If he were to have ever made the fortune he believed his years in Africa would one day produce, he dreamed of spending his life traveling from one place to the next, learning the language, and observing the differences among the various peoples of the world. He is unusually expansive about these dreams in a January 15, 1885, letter to his sister and mother:

En tous cas, ne comptez pas que mon humeur deviendrait moins vagabonde, au contraire, si j’avais le moyen de voyager sans être forcé de séjourner pour travailler et gagner l’existence, on ne me verrait pas deux mois à la même place. Le monde est très grand et plein de contrées magnifiques que l’existence de mille hommes ne suffirait pas à visiter. [...] Je voudrais [...] passer l’année dans deux ou trois contrées différentes, en vivant modestement et en faisant quelques petits trafics pour payer mes frais. Mais pour vivre toujours au même lieu, je trouverai toujours cela très malheureux. (632)

[In any case, I wouldn’t count on my becoming any less of a vagabond; on the contrary, had I the means of traveling without having to work and earn my way, I would never be in one place more than two months. The world is very big and full of magnificent lands that a thousand lifetimes wouldn’t allow one to visit. [...] I would like to [...] spend each year in two or three different lands, living modestly and trading here and there to cover my expenses. But to live in the same place all the time, I find that miserable. (Mason 212)]

The illuminist philosophy of the seer poet had once promised to reveal the limitless mysteries of the universe, allowing him to arrive at the unknown of God. As a seer, he could have achieved omniscience yet never lost the possibility of new revelation because the universe would have unfolded before him into infinity. For a materialist Rimbaud, an investigation of the physical
world that “l’existence de mille hommes ne suffirait pas à visiter” [a thousand lifetimes wouldn’t allow one to visit] was now the best approximation of a vastness to which he could still lose himself. Likewise, in his compulsion to know all things, he would have to content himself with exploring the many facets of science and technology, which, even if ultimately finite, were too numerous and varied for one person to absorb in a single life.

“Avoir au moins un fils [...] à élever à mon idée”

[At Least Have One Son [...] Raising as I See Fit]

If there were any remaining reason to doubt Rimbaud’s commitment to a purely materialistic outlook as an adult, he expresses his passion and faith for the promise of science and technology in a poignant May 6, 1883, letter to his family. Here, he speaks to his mother of an enduring desire to marry and have a child, and like many men, he projects on his hoped for son all the things he envisioned and wished for his own life. In the beginning of the passage, Rimbaud mixes the customary complaints about the hardship and futility of life with his fascination of foreign language and culture, effectively providing the context from which he reveals the most profound dreams he maintained for himself through the imagined child:

Pour moi je regrette de ne pas être marié et avoir une famille. [...] Hélas! à quoi servent ces allées et venues, et ces fatigues, et ces aventures chez des races étranges, et ces langues dont on se remplit la mémoire, et ces peines sans nom si je ne dois pas un jour, après quelques années, [...] trouver une famille, et avoir au moins un fils que je passe le

It is intriguing that the son dreamed of in the letter mentioned here resembles more Rimbaud’s father, Captain Rimbaud, than it does the former poet himself. It is equally curious that Rimbaud in turn came to share his father’s same passion for Arabic language and culture. Although Captain Rimbaud was physically absent from his son’s life after the age of six, one should not underestimate the psychological presence of the missing father. Like the profession that would bring fame to Rimbaud’s imagined son, Captain Rimbaud was an engineer assigned to the Bureau of Arab Affairs. An accomplished student of the Arabic language and culture, he produced a large number of documents concerning his work with the military and the population of Algiers and even made his own translation of the Koran (Lefrère 14-15, 871). Although the occupying German forces of World War I would burn the majority of these manuscripts along with the family house in Roche, the father’s papers had remained a constant fixture of the home throughout Rimbaud’s life. Although Rimbaud left little evidence concerning his impressions or thoughts of his father, the circumstances lend themselves to the creation of a romanticized image of the missing Captain Rimbaud. It is certainly natural for a young boy to take pride in and emulate a paternal image of military stature. Such an idealization on Rimbaud’s part, albeit muted by the mother’s personal resentment for her abandonment, could help to explain the ultimate career paths he chose.
reste de ma vie à élever à mon idée, à orner et à armer de l’instruction la plus complète qu’on puisse atteindre à cette époque, et que je voie devenir un ingénieur renommé, un homme puissant et riche par la science? (603)

[Myself, I regret not being married and not having a family. [...] Alas! To what end these comings and goings, this exhaustion, these adventures among strange races, and these languages that fill my memory, and these nameless pains if I cannot, one day, after a few years, [...] find a family, at least have one son whom I can spend the rest of my life raising as I see fit, adorning and arming with the most complete education one can currently imagine, and whom I will watch become a renowned engineer, a man made rich and powerful by his knowledge of science? (Mason 171-72)]

The letter indicates Rimbaud’s priorities as an adult: fame, power, and money. However, it is debatable that these particular goals are substantially different from those of his youth as a poet. I believe the true difference lay only in the means chosen to achieve these aims. As a materialist, he perceived power and wealth as the legitimate reward for those who would master the knowledge of science; he would take pride in recognition that came from accomplishing great feats of engineering. Rimbaud did not choose these fields simply because he believed they represented the most efficient paths to the ends desired. When he learned that fame and possibly wealth already awaited him for his former work as a poet, he rejected it scornfully. For the materialist Rimbaud, the knowledge of science, the mastery of technology, and the success of industry represented what was valuable and important in life. In the context of his search for self-transcendence, these things constitute what he now considered holy.

“Soyons nets, purs des vieux mélanges”

[Let Us Be Clean, Pure of Old Things]

Although Rimbaud’s adoption of a materialist perspective naturally directed his focus on to the concrete world, it does not explain in itself why he did not—or could not—adapt his literary skills to accommodate his new philosophy. Certainly other writers, even of Rimbaud’s time, with a similar emphasis on the physical world, i.e. Zola, successfully employed literature to their secular and materialist outlook. Although it is not known whether he produced any literary
work after *Saison* [*A Season*], the fact that he continued to embrace his identity as a writer makes it probable that, at the minimum, he contemplated how literature might work for his new materialist outlook. His momentary fascination with Hugo’s *Quatre-vingt-treize* [*Ninety-three*] offers conclusive evidence that, for at least the time surrounding his reading of it, he considered an approach to literature that would promote his social ideals. The novel’s theme of political upheaval and the recurring cycles of history (a thesis strikingly reminiscent of the Michelet/Vico outlook on human progression) would have provided Rimbaud an example of how his writing might enlighten its reader and, therefore, act as an agent of social transformation. However, we know that, only two months afterwards, even this faint hope, if indeed he ever profoundly embraced it, was dead.

If, by the time of “Rêve” [*Dream*], Rimbaud had definitively lost interest in attempting to accommodate literature to his materialism, it was not until four years later—with his comment concerning books hiding the leprous condition of walls—that we begin to see more clearly why literature could not continue to be useful in his chosen life mission. To Pierquin and Millot, he expressed, on that evening, the final evolution of his attitude toward the matter: literary art was not only useless, but it was also a hindrance to progress. I agree with Starkie’s assertion that Rimbaud, in shaping his final philosophical approach to achieving the modern world, probably took his initial cue from Michelet’s work *La Bible de l’humanité* [*The Bible of Humanity*] (303). The historian proclaims in his book that we could only successfully transform society by embracing completely modern ideas. In creating the new world, it would be equally necessary to erase all vestiges of the old one. Michelet exhorts his reader: ‘Soyons nets, purs des vieux mélanges, ne pas boiter d’un monde à l’autre’” (485). [Let us be clean, pure of old things, to not limp from one world to the next.] However, Rimbaud’s demonstrated tendency to believe in and
seek out an absolute answer induced him to follow Michelet’s suggestion in an extreme and literal manner that the historian would have never imagined.

It is Rimbaud’s spirit of absolutism—his compulsion to follow his chosen paths toward self-transcendence to their perfect end—that caused him to renounce art completely in favor of his own vision of a modern, scientific world. Once he decided that a detached and empirical approach to life represented the proper path toward the transformation of society, he followed it in the same manner he had his former avenues leading beyond the self: he pursued it like a religion. The severity with which he applied his concept of a purely objective form of written expression is likewise a reflection of his deep-rooted desire to find an absolute. I propose that this alone can explain the extremity of the “anti-style” seen in the dryness and exactitude of his field reports and letters: an objective exactness that precluded even a minimal level of journalistic imagery. Embracing unflinchingly a spirit of scientific precision in his writing was only the latest manifestation of the compulsion he had confessed in *Saison* [*A Season*] to offer up his “élans vers la perfection” (416) [*urges to perfection (Mason 9)*].

If it were possible to confront Rimbaud on the verge of his nineteenth birthday as he exited the printers of Poot and Co.—the complimentary copies of *Saison* [*A Season*] in hand—and have asked if he could ever envision the day that he would permanently abandon literature, the evidence indicates he would have answered with an incredulous “no.” In one sense, he did not give up his literary career by choice. Rather, he made other life choices concerning matters that had preeminence with him, and he did not imagine at the time that these priorities would ultimately doom his passion for literature. By his own admission in *Saison* [*A Season*] and as evidenced by his personal history, especially the mystical role he attempted to assign poetry in
his philosophy of the seer, the need to find self-transcendence was the choice that had primacy in his life.

The death of Rimbaud’s passion for poetry was essentially collateral damage within the context of a much greater conflict. Using a more precise analogy from war, I compare his dilemma with poetry to the turn of the century cavalry officer forced to abandon his beloved horses in order to fight a modern mechanized war. Reluctant at first to abandon the emotional bond with his magnificent beasts of war, with time, he will ultimately celebrate the elimination of the slow and vulnerable animals from his arsenal, realizing they had become the very obstacle to his greater purpose. Within the context of the battlefield, he could only admire the power and beauty of his horses when they helped him to achieve the only goal that truly mattered: victory. Similarly, Rimbaud could only love his art when he believed it functioned as the beautiful thing that carried him into the heart of the only battle he considered important. When poetry became the useless burden that slowed his advance, he cursed his former love like broken debris, leaving it aside the road to die.

When considered in the context of his need for an absolute, Rimbaud’s materialist philosophy goes far in explaining the absence of literary expression in his adult life, and yet it falls short. It cannot satisfactorily explain his outspoken hostility toward any form of literature or his loathing for attempts to revive the memory of his art. If an ideal of objectivity and precision in the expression of concrete and measurable realities led him away from poetry, other factors caused him to slam the door shut on literary expression in anger, hastening his exit on the way. The remainder of this thesis will explore what engendered the lasting bitterness concerning his involvement with literature.
CHAPTER 3: INHIBITION, INTOXICATION, AND POETRY

In articulating his literary philosophy, Rimbaud states that the poet makes him- or herself into a seer—arriving at the unknown—only through “un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens” (243) [a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses (Mason 33)]. Although the method for achieving this aim is not explicitly identified in either of the seer letters, there is more than sufficient reason to conclude that the phrase “derangement of all the senses,” underlined by Rimbaud for emphasis, not only indicates the mental and spiritual state needed for the poet to become a seer, but also functions as code to reveal the intended means: alcohol and drugs with special psychoactive qualities.

Supporting the premise that intoxicants were key in Rimbaud’s self-prescribed process toward the creation of the new poetry, the discussion in this chapter will demonstrate first that his persistent and aggressive use of psychoactive substances began at the very time he wrote the famous missives. Secondly, I examine how, two years later in “Alchimie du verbe” [Alchemy of the Word], he proclaims his damnation of the mystic vision of poetry in the same breath that he expresses regret over the chronic state of self-induced hallucination that accompanied his literary adventure, further tightening the association between a chemically inspired derangement of all the senses and the stated goals of the seer poet. Finally, my examination of Les Paradis artificiels [Artificial Paradises] will show that Rimbaud took inspiration directly from Baudelaire’s faith in the use of hallucinogens for the expressed purpose of creating a more spontaneous and intuitive poetry.

Indeed, the very man that the seer letters designate “le premier voyant, roi des poètes, un vrai Dieu (248)” [[the] first among seers, the king of poets, a true God (Mason 37)], Baudelaire,
poetically and powerfully articulates in *Les Paradis artificiels* [*Artificial Paradises*] his theory that the intoxication of hashish could infinitely magnify the creative powers of the poet. Considering the declared reverence for Baudelaire, it is reasonable to believe that *Les Paradis artificiels* [*Artificial Paradises*], published approximately a decade before the writing of the seer letters, had initially inspired Rimbaud to consider the possibilities that powerful mind- and mood-altering drugs might offer the imagination of the writer. Nevertheless, in the discussion most central to the purpose of this chapter, I will argue that the close alliance between poetry and intoxicants, as I have proposed the seer philosophy demands, was not born purely out of Rimbaud’s intellectual attraction to Baudelaire’s aesthetic theories. Rather, it is the peculiarities of Rimbaud’s psychology that most drove his need to give drugs and alcohol a central role in the creative process.

In this chapter, I will argue that Rimbaud suffered severe inhibition from which only intoxicants offered relief, and because of this obstacle to his expression of intimate thought and feelings, the freer and more intuitive form of poetry he desired to create as a seer depended on their use. This dynamic, coupled with the possible existence of a naturally addictive personality, led him to experience years of substance abuse that threatened his physical and mental health. After he had freed himself from the cycle of addiction (whether psychological or physical), and when the subsequent years of sobriety progressively distanced him from his drunken past, he came to see the destructive lifestyle of his youth as a direct result of his poetic endeavors. Having already determined that literary expression did not serve a useful purpose in

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24 Rimbaud had at least some heritage of alcoholism in the family. His uncle on his mother’s side, Charles Cuif, almost lost the family farm at Roche because excessive drinking caused him to neglect operation of the estate while under his care (Lefrère 20). Fortunately, Cuif, for all his faults, possessed a strong constitution and despite a life of constant inebriation (chronic in the most literal sense), it was not until the age of 93 he found himself on his deathbed and under the care of nuns. Anticlerical like his famous nephew, he refused last sacraments, asking instead for a liter of red wine, and upon emptying the bottle, he closed his eyes and died (31).
the modern materialist world, the perceived cause and effect relationship between art and
substance abuse compelled Rimbaud to further disassociate himself from literature and, more
significantly, engendered much of the intense disgust with poetry in the second half of his life.

In addressing the propositions given above, this chapter will begin by examining the
maladjusted aspects of Rimbaud’s psychology for which the use of intoxicants may have offered
temporary relief. The manifestations of his inhibition studied here include extreme timidity,
increasing inability to maintain intimate friendships, which led to self-isolation as an adult, and
finally, diminished emotional range, especially in his capacity to experience spontaneous joy.

These inherent psychological restrictions functioned as an especially problematic obstacle to the
proclaimed goals of the seer poet, and in tracing the development of Rimbaud’s substance abuse,
our discussion will reveal that the use of intoxicants began in conjunction with the formulation of
his literary philosophy, and that the practice remained an integral part of his artistic life
throughout the entirety of his years as a mature poet. To further explain the relationship between
poetry and intoxication, I will analyze how—in terms of perceptual sensation—the psychoactive
qualities of absinthe and hashish mimicked the conceptual goals of the seer poet, causing
Rimbaud to believe that the substances functioned as a means for achieving his literary vision.

When he eventually achieved sobriety as an adult, his complete abstinence evolved into a
mindset and lifestyle of asceticism, reflecting his post-literary outlook: a rejection not only of his
drunken bohemian past but also a refusal of anything that detracted from his capacity to perceive
the world in an accurate and objective manner. Finally, the chapter will discuss how a dramatic
change in personality as caused by the reintroduction of painkilling opiates at the end of his life,
reconfirms his dependence on intoxicants to liberate his capacity for self-expression.
Without Rimbaud’s testimony, it is difficult to analyze in depth the origins of his extreme inhibition, and therefore, it will not advance the purpose of this thesis to dwell on that aspect of the question. That said, it is sufficient to point to the influence of his mother as the most probable key agent in that respect. In addition to her stifling authoritarian approach to parenting, Vitalie Rimbaud’s own inability to express emotion or show her children a modicum of affection is well documented (Starkie 30-32). We can imagine the important impact that this level of severity might have had on the personality of a sensitive and exceptionally intelligent young boy. Although we cannot completely determine the causes of Rimbaud’s inhibition, there is ample evidence to document its existence and analyze the nature of its manifestations.

“Les Façons gauches de l’homme timide”

[The Awkward Ways of a Shy Man]

To effectively argue that Rimbaud needed intoxicants to write poetry, it is necessary to first establish the key features of his emotional psychology that would make such dependence likely. The first evidence of his inhibition is an unusual timidity in respect to interpersonal relationships. Among the words or phrases used time and again by friends and associates to describe Rimbaud are the words, “parle peu,” or, as one might say in colloquial English, “don’t talk much.” When prompted to expand on this reticence, those personally familiar with him describe a man incredibly ill at ease in the social milieu. Alfred Bardey’s report to the company’s home office about their dependable but rather odd new employee illustrates Rimbaud’s awkward demeanor: “C’est un grand et sympathique garçon qui parle peu et accompagne ses courtes explications de petites gestes coupants, de la main droite et à contretemps” (qtd. in Lefrère 799). [He’s a tall and likable boy who speaks little and accompanies his terse explications with short, sharp little gestures using his right hand and off beat [at that].] Echoing this image, Delahaye
describes a perpetually boyish looking adolescent who never seemed to know what to do with his oversized hands. He characterizes Rimbaud’s manner as “les façons gauches de l’homme timide” (qtd. in Lefrère 877) [the awkward ways of a shy man]. The previously mentioned account of the young poet’s anxiety at the prospect of joining the Parisian literati indicates how painfully aware he was of his own timidity.

Rimbaud’s social discomfort represents a more profound aspect of his personality than mere diffidence, his reserve being the face of a severe emotional handicap that plagued him most of his life. As he approached adulthood, his inhibition became manifest through a growing inability to develop and maintain intimate attachments. Not only did he rarely become close to people as an adult, but also he let many established friendships just fade: a pattern so unmistakable that it prompted Delahaye to ask Rimbaud point blank, “Tout de même, comment se fait-il que tu te sois brouillé avec tout le monde et pas avec moi?” (qtd. in Lefrère 876) [Honestly, how does it happen that you might break with everyone and not with me?]. In an April 2, 1929, letter to Marcel Coulon, Delahaye’s description of Rimbaud’s poignant reaction illuminates this aspect of his emotional psychology:

Il fronça le sourcil par agacement, sourit aussitôt pour réparer, rougit très fort—il rougissait pour la moindre chose—et balbutia plutôt qu’il ne dit: “C’est que nous nous sommes connus enfants,” accompagnant ces mots d’un petit rire de pitié sur lui-même et sur moi sans doute, mais ayant en somme énoncé une chose profondément humaine. (876)

[He frowned with irritation, then smiled straight away to recover, blushed severely—he would blush over the least thing—and stammered more than he spoke it: “It’s because we knew each other as children,” accompanying these words with a giggle of pity for him and for me undoubtedly, but having in fact articulated something deeply human.]

In his answer, Rimbaud effectively confesses his inability to form close relationships as he approached adulthood, thus confirming the severity of his inhibition. That he would blush and stammer (a reaction that apparently occurred often) at the question posed to him by his longtime
and most trusted friend demonstrates an exaggerated sensitivity to the invasion of his intimate psychological space.

Particularly after beginning a life of sobriety, Rimbaud’s preference for self-imposed isolation seemed to grow stronger with the passing of time, causing him difficulty in achieving intimacy with peers in Africa. Monsignor Jarosseau—who as the simple priest and missionary in Harar was originally known as Father André—has, along with Alfred Bardey, demonstrated in his observations the best understanding of Rimbaud’s character as it was in Abyssinia. In an interview with Henri d’Acremont for an August 27, 1932, article entitled “En Abyssinie sur les traces de Rimbaud” for Revue hebdomadaire, Jarosseau explains the nature of his interaction with Rimbaud over the years, while offering insight into the former poet’s unrevealing personality. The Monsignor states, “[Rimbaud] était un silencieux et un méditatif; il venait souvent me voir; nous causions de choses sérieuses; mais il ne se racontait pas, il lisait beaucoup et semblait toujours loin de nous; [...]” (qtd. in Lefrère 1058) [[Rimbaud] was a silent and meditative type; he came often to see me; we would talk about serious matters; but he never talked about himself, he read a lot and always seemed distant from us; [...]]. 25 Rimbaud’s perpetual emotional distance, despite a consistent willingness to engage the cleric intellectually in respect to profound matters, reinforces the presence a restricted personality that resisted intimacy, the psychology of which had become entrenched in adulthood.

Rimbaud’s discomfort with an invasion of his personal psychological space may have engendered, in part, his preference for emersion into foreign culture at the exclusion of his own.

25 In interviewing the Monsignor for their book, Le Passant d’Éthiopie, the brothers Jérôme and Jean Tharaud also recorded Jarosseau’s impression of a distant Rimbaud: “Il parlait peu, se livrait encore moins, et l’on sentait pourtant qu’on avait devant soi un homme peu commun” (qtd. in Lefrère 1045). [He didn’t talk much, opened up even less, and yet you felt that you had before you an uncommon individual.] As with his comment to d’Acremont, Jarosseau indicates that Rimbaud’s reserve was not a sign of disinterest or dullness of mind but rather that the former poet’s inhibited demeanor stood in stark contrast to the cleric’s intuition he was dealing with an exceptional individual.
His business associates noted that he seemed more at ease with the native population, preferring to spend the majority of his time with them rather than the other Europeans (Lefrère 891). Although he shared a house for several months with an Abyssinian woman as his mistress (897-99), it was only a devoted servant, Djami Wadaï—also native to the area—for whom he ever expressed any profound attachment aside from his sister and mother. By itself, his preference for the company of non-Europeans would not necessarily indicate anything unusual about his personality. However, because he demonstrated a marked inability to open up with the Europeans who spoke his native French, it suggests that, in his interaction with individuals of the local population, the foreign language and culture of the region (for which Rimbaud would not have had the same innate emotional sense as his own) served as a psychological buffer against intimate expression.

“...A Very, Very Serious Young Man, [...] Very Serious and Sad”

As a sober adult, Rimbaud seems to have all but surrendered himself to his tendency toward inhibition, demonstrating an inability (or even simple unwillingness) to experience a normal range of emotional response in the first place. This dynamic was particularly evident where it concerned the enjoyment of any sort of spontaneous gaiety. Apart from the rare occasions when he became animated with his acerbic observations, he seemed to show either little emotion or appeared morbidly serious. Again it is Jarosseau who offers the clearest observation concerning this aspect of Rimbaud’s personality. While passing through Harar in the early 1930’s, author Evelyn Waugh found the aging cleric and attempted to inquire about the
French trader whom the Monsignor had known forty years earlier. Despite confusion caused by Waugh’s poor French accent and the Monsignor’s growing deafness—Jarosseau mistook the inquiry about “le poète Rimbaud” [the poet Rimbaud] for “le prêtre Rimbaud” [the priest Rimbaud]—the author successfully recorded the cleric’s testimony in his book, *Remote People*:

> [A] very serious man who did not go out much; he was always worried about business; [...] ... a very, very serious young man, the bishop repeated. He seemed to find this epithet the most satisfactory—very serious and sad. (102-03)

The Monsignor’s emphasis on the extreme and perpetual gravity of Rimbaud’s demeanor points to a singularly reduced capacity for joy, the absence of cheerfulness in turn creating the intense air of constant sadness. In conjunction with his letters home to family where he expressed only regret and despair (if indicating any sentiment whatsoever), the observations of Jarosseau suggest that the spectrum of Rimbaud’s emotional range had become limited as an adult. To a certain extent, this restriction may represent a choice. Similar to his shift of focus away from the subjective pursuits of poetry to the acquisition of objective knowledge, his reported preoccupation with business to the exclusion of purely social contact supports the notion that he was avoiding or minimizing the provocation of intimate emotional experience.

Establishing the presence of deep-rooted inhibition in Rimbaud’s psychology can explain why he would have found the use of intoxicants useful on a personal level and, in addition, how his personality made him especially susceptible to the years of damaging substance abuse that he endured before achieving sobriety. Nevertheless, it does not make clear why he focused blame for his addiction squarely on his youthful pursuit of poetry, associating the waste of chronic intoxication inextricably with the artistic mindset. To understand how he justified his later resentment toward art for causing his problems of addiction, I will examine closely the evolution of his use of intoxicants, especially in relation to his career as a poet, demonstrating how closely the two intertwined.
Initiating the Derangement of the Senses

Rimbaud’s submission to his emotionally restrictive predisposition as an adult stands in stark contrast to his mindset as an adolescent poet who worked against his tendency toward inhibition, aggressively seeking out as a seer the exploration of his inner self. In the seer letter to Demeny, Rimbaud writes, “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” (242) [The first task of any man who would be a poet is to know himself completely; he seeks his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns it (Mason 33)]. The profound exploration and honest examination of the self as suggested by Rimbaud would represent a challenge for anyone possessing normal psychological safeguards. However, for a man whose personality had exhibited a strong inclination toward the avoidance of intimate expression or emotional provocation such as Rimbaud, the task must have appeared Herculean. For this reason, I assert that he proved especially inclined to any method or thing that would have provided him the emotional freedom to accomplish an invasive study of his soul as required of the seer. The one situation in which he consistently found himself liberated and suddenly able to articulate the intimate depths of his self, freely and easily, was in a state of intoxication. This dynamic between Rimbaud’s capacity of self-expression and the use of psychoactive substances lends itself to my premise that the freeing power of such agents had indeed found an elevated and almost sacred status in the philosophy guiding his poetic quest; in the process of transforming himself into a seer, intoxicants became his philosopher’s stone.

Rimbaud initiated the excessive use of alcohol and experimentation with other psychoactive drugs during the same period he was formulating his vision of the seer, suggesting not only the possibility that the literary philosophy encouraged him to begin his substance abuse but also that his first experiences with intoxication may have worked to shape the theory in the
first place. Although we do not know exactly when he first realized the power of intoxicants to free his capacity of self-expression, it was only after the return to Charleville from his last flight to Paris that he first makes both implicit and explicit mention of their use in writing. Following these two weeks in the capital (the 25th of February to the first week of March 1871), Rimbaud not only calls for the derangement of all the senses in both of the seer letters, which I have argued is a thinly veiled allusion to chemical intoxication, but in the shorter correspondence to Izambard, the adolescent also openly brags to his former professor of cynically inventing the most outrageous and obscene stories for café clientele in exchange for drinks. He boasts to his mentor of the past year, “tout ce que je puis inventer de bête, de sale, de mauvais, en action et en parole, je le leur livre: on paie en bocks et en filles” (237) [I throw anything stupid, dirty, or plain wrong at them I can come up with: beer and wine are my reward (Mason 28)]. Because of the dramatic personality change brought on by alcohol, the café clientele of Charleville—who enjoyed the contrast between the young poet’s angelic choirboy face and his obscene utterances directed against the Church and clergy—were happy to buy Rimbaud his drinks (Starkie 85). The feeling of drunken liberation in telling his stories at the café would have contributed to his enthusiasm for Baudelaire’s notions of intoxicants as a tool in the creation of poetry, and the experience most likely marked the beginning of the relationship between his art and psychoactive agents.

In addition to inspiring the general radicalization of Rimbaud’s mind and spirit, one key reason his sojourn in the capital played such an important role in initiating the aggressive use of

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28 In her biography of Rimbaud, Starkie makes note that the term “fille,” in addition to sometimes referring to a prostitute, can also indicate a measure of brandy (85). Given that, in this instance, Rimbaud is speaking of drinking and telling stories in a café, I agree with the biographer’s assessment that it is much more likely he was bragging only about the clientele buying him drinks; it is likewise improbable that the fifteen year old would have been collecting money for the purposes of a prostitute (85) or that in writing the letter, he could have thought Izambard would have found such a claim believable. Just as Mason’s translation appears to support the idea that it was exclusively a question of alcohol, so to does Wallace Fowlie, translating the line in question as “They pay in beer and liquor” (303).
intoxicants, especially in respect to those of a more exotic nature, is the simple question of availability. It is not likely that the powerful drugs about which Baudelaire writes so eloquently in *Les Paradis artificiels* [*Artificial Paradises*] would have been available in a small town, especially to an adolescent with little money of his own (Starkie 139). However, in Paris, these things were easily obtainable, and with the right company, Rimbaud may not have even had to pay for them himself. As I will soon demonstrate, this was never truer about the capital than the particular moment in history he chose to make his way into Paris.

Just as the upheaval of the Franco-Prussian war worked to impregnate the seer vision with Rimbaud’s enthusiasm for social transformation, historic events may have also conspired to encourage the young poet to give alcohol and psychoactive drugs a lofty position in the new poetry. The turmoil of an extended siege followed by the burgeoning spirit of revolution in the city during the winter of 1870-71 caused the citizenry of Paris to consume record levels of various forms of intoxicants. In an article written for *Lipincotts*, Lucy Hooper claimed that Parisians’ consumption of wine and liquor increased 500 percent between the months that encompass the beginning of the Siege and the fall of the Commune (Lanier 18). Accompanied by the general need of the citizenry to find relief from the heightened psychological stress of encirclement by the Prussian army, the severe lack of food and a comparatively large supply of spirits in the city gave rise to the excessive consumption (18). In such an atmosphere of revelry driven by angst, one can imagine that more than a few Parisians would have welcomed a stranger such as Rimbaud to join in their indulgence. It is probable that when he wandered into Paris during the brief lull between the trauma of the Siege and the Commune, the young poet experienced for the first time one or both of the two intoxicants that would prove his mainstays in the derangement of the senses: absinthe and hashish. In the charged atmosphere of the historic
moment, he would have intuitively linked the Communard’s seductive euphoria over social revolution with his discovery of personal liberation through the power of intoxication, giving him all the more reason to believe alcohol and psychoactive drugs held the key to his poetic vision.

Rimbaud’s choice of absinthe and hashish as his preferred agents to facilitate the process of becoming a seer was not without reason. Although both substances provided him emotional freedom by keeping his inhibitions in check, so did the simple beer and brandy available in Charleville. However, I will argue that the unique psychoactive qualities of absinthe and hashish served to both inspire and/or reinforce his ideas of what the seer could achieve. Furthermore, a belief that these intoxicants empowered him to realize his spiritual and poetic goals allowed him to justify their excessive use, while simultaneously blinding him to any personal problem of addiction. By examining the unique appeal of absinthe and hashish, we can understand why their special psychoactive properties suited his vision of the seer so well, thus encouraging their abuse.

Absinthe

Banned in France since World War I (and most other countries in the decade encompassing the war) (Lanier 10), today absinthe evokes the image of fin de siècle artists and writers who, in iconic manner, often featured the cherished liqueur in their art and writing.

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29 Typically with a high alcohol content of between 55 and 72 percent, absinthe is a greenish liqueur characterized by the licorice taste of green anise. However, it is the ingredient of the absinthe plant (Artemisia absinthian) also known as grand “wormwood” that makes the liqueur unique. Other traditional ingredients included petite wormwood (Artemisia pontica, aka Roman wormwood), fennel, and hyssop (Virtual Absinthe Museum, FAQ 1, par. 1). Over the centuries, the absinthe plant has had many medicinal uses including the cure of intestinal parasites—hence the name wormwood (Lanier 1). However, its modern use as a narcotic began around 1790 with a French refugee living in Switzerland, Pierre Ordinaire, a physician known for his herbal remedies. Acquiring the recipe from Ordinaire, the family of Henry-Louis Pernod began manufacture of the liqueur, eventually establishing their famous distillery, Pernod Fils, in Pontarlier. Due to its expense, use of the drink was initially limited mostly to the middle class until the 1870’s, but because of its purported hallucinogenic qualities, the liqueur gained an earlier popularity within artistic circles (8-9). The bitter taste of the wormwood requires the addition of anise in the manufacturing process as well as sugar at the time of consumption to mask the taste. Ice water poured over the sugar suspended in a specially perforated spoon created a ritual well known to drinkers of the 19th century (23). The entrancing emerald color of the cloudy mix gave absinthe the nickname “la fée verte” or “the green fairy” (22).
However, beyond its mystique, there is ample evidence that absinthe possessed distinct psychoactive qualities that were not dependent on its high alcohol content alone. Among absinthe drinkers of the 19th century, there is consistent testimony that the quality of intoxication it produced was unique. Patricia E. Prestwich in her study, *Drink and the Politics of Social Reform: Antialcoholism in France Since 1870*, states of absinthe, “The drink was reputed to cause euphoria without drunkenness, and its effects were sometimes compared to opium” (130). Doris Lanier, in her book *Absinthe: The Cocaine of the Nineteenth Century*, reports as well that the sensation produced by absinthe distinguished itself from any other normal type of spirit. She gives us the following description of the liqueur’s effects as reported in the 1868 edition of the *American Journal of Pharmacy*:

> You seem to lose your feet, and you mount a boundless realm without horizon. You probably imagine that you are going in the direction of the infinite, whereas you are simply drifting into the incoherent. Absinthe affects the brain unlike any other stimulant; it produces neither the heavy drunkenness of beer, the furious inebriation of brandy, nor the exhilarant intoxication of wine. (23)

Although the high concentration of alcohol would have relieved Rimbaud of his inhibition, the research by both Lanier and Prestwich record a reaction to absinthe that is more reminiscent of an opiate derivative. It is significant that the reported sensation of journeying into the infinite

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30 In terms of modern scientific study, the psychoactive effects of absinthe remain largely undefined. Despite a current renaissance in the production and consumption of absinthe—facilitated by the creation of the European Union and new trade rules—the body of scientific knowledge concerning the liqueur’s effect on the mind is almost non-existent or second rate. Researchers are still in disagreement whether thujone (the believed psychoactive ingredient in the wormwood plant) is responsible for the “secondary effects” reported by many absinthe drinkers. Similarly, there is little agreement concerning the amount of thujone required to cause acute psychoactive activity or even the amount of thujone present in turn of the century pre-prohibition distillations of absinthe (Hutton 62-64; Virtual Absinthe Museum, FAQ II, par. 3-7). The question is complicated by the lack of standardization in the manufacture of absinthe at the time. Many of the cheaper productions that proliferated in the 1870’s substituted elements of the original recipe with more questionable substances that might have played a psychoactive role, especially in respect to those of a less desirable nature (Hutton 62-64). Due to the lack of current empirical data, it is necessary to rely on the opinion of professionals from the pre-World War I era and the subjective descriptions from fin de siècle drinkers concerning their experiences with the liqueur.

31 Michael Albert–Puleco of Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine conducted one of the few modern studies of thujone, which confirms the observations of 19th century professionals. The researcher states that in his tests, absinthe drinkers reported exaltation, auditory and visual hallucinations, and excitation (Lanier 12). Furthermore, in just 2000, researchers at UC-Berkely and Northwestern University stated in the prestigious
parallels themes in the seer letters of connecting with a limitless metaphysical dimension of the universe. For at least as long as the effects of liqueur would last, it might have given Rimbaud the feeling of moving toward his mystic goal. If 19th century reports were correct, he would have found absinthe a useful agent (and by the 1870’s, a cheap and plentiful substance in Paris (Lanier 18)) to aid in his derangement of all the senses. However, before ever having experienced the effects of absinthe or even simple alcohol, it is probable that Rimbaud had already dreamed of the magic of hashish as described to him by Baudelaire in *Les Paradis artificiels* [Artificial Paradises] (Starkie 115).

Hashish and *Les Paradis artificiels* [Artificial Paradises]

An examination of Baudelaire’s subjective and conceptual interpretations of hashish’s psychoactive effects will demonstrate how they might have contributed to Rimbaud’s ideas of what the seer poet could achieve while simultaneously providing the vehicle (in the form of the drug itself) for realizing the desired state of enlightenment. In *Les Paradis artificiels* [Artificial Paradises], Baudelaire elaborates on his experience with the phenomena of hashish intoxication by relaying objective observation alongside his subjective impressions. 32 In the chapter entitled “Le théâtre de Séraphin” [The Seraphim Theatre] for example, he concludes his empirical observations of the power of the drug to sharpen the senses with the exclamation, “Les yeux visent l’infini” (47) [The eyes behold the infinite]. Like absinthe, the sensation of seeing or experiencing the limitless universe would have inspired Rimbaud to believe that a glimpse of omniscience was possible and that the drug would let him achieve it. As we will soon see,
Baudelaire’s descriptions of other phases of hashish intoxication could have reinforced Rimbaud’s vision of the seer in yet more specialized ways.

Baudelaire’s account of vivid synesthesia (the phenomenon in which the stimulation of one sense evokes instead the sensation of another) as caused by hashish is reminiscent of the Swedenborgian theory of correspondences. In concert with claims that the mind would have an enhanced ability to form and manipulate associations between sensations and ideas while under the effects of the drug, Baudelaire extols the wonders of synesthetic hallucination:

Les sons se revêtent de couleurs, et les couleurs contiennent une musique. [...] Ces analogies revêtent alors une vivacité inaccoutumée, elles pénètrent, elles envahissent, elles accablent l’esprit de leur caractère despotique. Les notes musicales deviennent des nombres, [...] la mélodie, l’harmonie écoutée, tout en gardant son caractère voluptueux et sensuel, se transforme en une vaste opération arithmétique, où les nombres engendrent les nombres, et dont vous suivez les phrases et la génération avec une facilité inexplicable et une agilité égale à celle de l’exécutant. (47)

[Sounds are clothed in colors and colors in music. [...] These analogies assume an unusual purity and force. The mind is penetrated, invaded, and overpowered by their despotic nature. Musical notes become numbers, [...], the melody and the harmony, while retaining their sensuous and voluptuous qualities, are transformed into a vast arithmetical operation: numbers engender numbers, the phrases and generation of which you follow with inexplicable facility and an agility equal only to that of their execution. (Diamond 50-51)]

I believe Rimbaud interpreted Baudelaire’s first promise here—that hashish would give its user the ability to turn sounds into color, color into music, music into arithmetical equations, and so on—as more than just a mimicking of Swedenborg’s correspondences through simple hallucination. Because of Rimbaud’s aggressive incorporation of hashish into his pursuit of the seer vision, it seems likely he believed the drug offered real power to discover and determine the true and eternal associations among the elements of creation and the spiritual universe that he believed existed. Furthermore, the ease with which Baudelaire promises that the hashish user could both follow and manipulate the infinitely complex correspondences must have nurtured
Rimbaud’s confidence (albeit naive and adolescent) that through the use of this and other drugs, he would become the Supreme Savant as declared in his vision of the seer.

In continuing his analysis, Baudelaire describes a shift in one’s sense of identity under hashish intoxication that is suggestive of Rimbaud’s proclamation, “Je est un autre” (237) [I is another]: an appeal for the seer to surrender his or her poetic voice to that of the greater “other” of the universe. Baudelaire states that in the contemplation of an object, self-awareness begins to disappear until, as the hashish user, you forget your own existence, believing that your thoughts and feelings belong to the object perceived. He provides the following illustration:

Votre œil se fixe sur un arbre harmonieux courbé par le vent; dans quelques secondes, ce qui ne serait dans le cerveau d’un poète qu’une comparaison fort naturelle deviendra dans le vôtre une réalité. Vous prêtez d’abord à l’arbre vos passions, votre désir ou votre mélancolie; ses gémissements et ses oscillations deviennent les vôtres, et bientôt vous êtes l’arbre. (47-48)

[You stare at the tree that harmoniously rocks in the breeze; in a few seconds what would for a poet be a natural comparison becomes reality for you. You endow the tree with your passions and desires; its capriciously swaying limbs become your own, so that soon you yourself are that tree. (Diamond 51)]

One might describe the experience more accurately as a super heightened empathy where the projection of feelings and thoughts on to the thing observed is such that Baudelaire could proclaim in the case of the tree, “vous êtes l’arbre” [you yourself are that tree]. The goal of the seer is inversed. The seer does not wish to place his or her identity onto the other but rather to allow the other—in the case of the seer, the other being the divine voice of the universe—to replace the poet’s creative identity. Nevertheless, the general notion of shifting one’s sense of self and surrendering control as expressed by Baudelaire would have reminded Rimbaud of similar illuminist ideas and inspired him to believe that he had in the drug a means to an end.

Finally, in a chapter of the book entitled “L’Homme-dieu” [God-Made Man], Baudelaire attempts to warn the reader of a certain temptation created by the heightened sensory perception
and hyper-stimulated imagination of hashish intoxication: to believe oneself in a state of omnipotence. Here, he claims that the overload of sensory and mental stimulation can cause users of hashish to focus so intensely on their own experience they forget the existence of any other reality than their own. At these moments, the intoxicated fall into an egocentric view of the universe so extreme they come to believe everything perceived was created specifically for their pleasure. Unchecked by reality, the author warns that it is possible to succumb to a primordial desire for omnipotence all too suggestive of Rimbaud’s ambitions for the seer poet. Baudelaire had wished to alert his reader that the world perceived through the intoxication of hashish is—as the title Les Paradis artificiels [Artificial Paradises] implies—an illusion. However, Rimbaud chose to ignore the warning, believing instead that the sensation of omniscience experienced under the effect of hashish represented obtainable reality for the true seer.

All of the various factors analyzed up to this point—the presence of an emotionally restricted personality, a visit to the capital that coincided with Paris’ moment of historic turmoil, and the seduction of Baudelaire’s aesthetic theories—all conspired to give alcohol and psychoactive drugs their prominent role in Rimbaud’s artistic career. His initial exposure to the inhibition-freeing power of intoxicants amidst the excitement of a war torn and revolutionary minded Paris—where the citizens both eased their anxiety and bolstered their spirit for social upheaval with alcohol and other intoxicating agents—first caused the young poet to link his

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33 In voicing the mania of the hashish user’s thought, Baudelaire writes, “‘[…].—toutes ces choses ont été créées pour moi, pour moi, pour moi! Pour moi, l’humanité a travaillé, a été martyrisée, immolée, —pour servir de pâteure, de pabulum, à mon implacable appétit d’émotion, de connaissance et de beauté!’” (66) [‘[…].—all of these marvels have been made for me, for me, for me! Humanity has labored, has been martyred and immolated, for me! —to serve as fodder, as pabulum, for my insatiable appetite for emotion, knowledge and beauty!’ (Diamond 70)].

34 Cautioning against this madness of the hashish user at the zenith of his or her mania, Baudelaire writes, “qu’un cri sauvage, ardent, s’élance de sa poitrine avec une énergie telle, une telle puissance de projection, que, si les volontés et les croyances d’un homme ivre avaient une vertu efficace, ce cri culbuterait les anges disséminés dans les chemins du ciel: ‘Je suis un Dieu!’” (66) [that a savage, ardent cry explodes from his chest with such energy and force that if an intoxicated man could make his wish his power, and his thought a deed, that cry would topple the angels lining the paths of heaven: ‘I am a God!’ (Diamond 70)].
ambitions as a writer with intoxication. The experience gave him sufficient reason to believe that Baudelaire’s ideas of a poetry facilitated by psychoactive drugs would prove true. Finally, the sensation and/or hallucination of achieving the goals of the seer, as brought about by the consumption of hashish or absinthe, ultimately cemented the intellectual and emotional marriage between Rimbaud’s literary career and psychoactive agents.

In the beginning of this relationship between artistic creation and substance abuse, Rimbaud’s sense of conviction concerning his ideas of the seer worked in conjunction with the feeling of empowerment provided him by the liberation of intoxication to make everything seem possible; he believed he could achieve the omniscience and omnipotence that Baudelaire had warned was only the illusion of the drug. However, just as the seer vision and agents of intoxication ascended as one in Rimbaud’s mind, they would also fall together, each proving a cruel deception, and until the end of his life, he would blame them interchangeably as the source of his problems in youth.

Excess: A Sense of Mission

The aggressive manner with which Rimbaud sought out hashish and absinthe upon his return to Paris in September 1871 demonstrates his driving sense of purpose in respect to beginning a life of intoxication, thus establishing that his mindset was consistent with the notion that the seer philosophy indeed prescribed a derangement of all the senses as brought about, at least in part, by psychoactive agents. In November of that year, Delahaye ventured to the capital to see how his friend’s dream of living as a poet in the literary world of Paris was succeeding, and with the help of Verlaine, he found Rimbaud reclining in a café. Awaking at their arrival, Rimbaud rubbed his eyes, wincing as he told his two visitors he had taken hashish: “—Et alors?... demanda Verlaine. —Alors, rien du tout... des lunes blanches, des lunes noires, qui se
poursuivaient...” (Delahaye, Témoin 141). [—And well?... asked Verlaine. —Well, nothing at all... some white moons, some black moons, that were following each other.] The drug had upset his stomach, made him dizzy, and then pass out, prompting Delahaye to insist Rimbaud get some air to recover from what one of them described as “un paradis artificiel exactement raté” (141) [an artificial paradise perfectly messed up]. Less than two months prior to the incident described above, Rimbaud had left a small town where—as stated earlier in the chapter—the availability of hashish was unlikely. The frequency of his use can be inferred from the improbability that on Delahaye’s only visit to Rimbaud while in the capital, he should first happen on him in the process of recovering from hashish intoxication. For this reason, the anecdote serves not only to flesh out the reality of Rimbaud’s drug use, but it confirms the seriousness of his intent to use hashish upon arriving in Paris.

Similar to Rimbaud’s use of hashish during the first year in Paris, his extraordinary ingestion of absinthe left a lasting impression on those who knew him. Jean Louis Forain, a young artist himself in 1871, was one of the few to maintain an association with Rimbaud throughout the poet’s literary career. Nevertheless, the two adolescent’s attempt to room together in the attic of a Parisian apartment building survived only a couple months, doomed by Rimbaud’s drinking. Intending the description of their squalid living conditions at the time to serve as an allegory for Rimbaud’s general lifestyle, Forain, in 1927, told his friend and client, art collector René Gimpel, that he and the poet had lived in “un taudis épouvantable” [an appalling hovel], saying of his former roommate, “[Ç]a lui convenait, ça lui plaisait, il était si sale” (qtd. in Lefrère 393) [[T]hat was fine for him, he liked that, he was so dirty]. Forain abruptly ended any further elaboration by stating bluntly, “La vie avec Rimbaud n’était pas

35 Forain, a nationally successful and respected artist in later years, forever loathed to talk of his bohemian youth and was even more reluctant to talk about his friendship with Rimbaud yet constant prodding by the curious provides us now with a few details (Lefrère 390-93).
possible parce qu’il buvait de l’absinthe de formidable façon (393) [Life with Rimbaud was not possible because he drank absinthe like nobody’s business]. As a fellow adolescent (just one year older than Rimbaud), Forain should have had considerably more tolerance and flexibility for others’ habits of inebriation than perhaps would a mature adult. However, the extremity of Rimbaud’s absinthe consumption—articulated so vividly by Forain’s expression “de formidable façon” [like nobody’s business]—proved intolerable. Even the unclean ways of Rimbaud’s personal habits, although in part representing a general rebellion against years under an overly fastidious mother, may indicate as well a constant state of intoxication that left little energy for hygiene. In any case, Forain’s testimony leaves no doubt as to Rimbaud’s excess with absinthe.

Because of Rimbaud’s well-documented excess in the use of absinthe and hashish during the two years leading up to the writing of Saison [A Season], one can only reasonably interpret certain text in the book as allusions to this behavior and its consequences. For this reason, I assert that Rimbaud confirms in the work not only the chronic nature of his substance abuse but he also indicates the sense of mission as a seer that drove it. In “Alchimie du verbe” [Alchemy of the Word], for example, he relates that the distortion of perception became a norm and offers a sample of his visions:

Je m’habituai à l’hallucination simple: je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d’une usine, […], un salon au fond d’un lac; les monstres, les mystères; un titre de vaudeville dressait des épouvantes devant moi. (429)

[I got used to ordinary hallucination: I could very plainly see a mosque where there was a factory, […], a living room at the bottom of a lake, monsters and mysteries: a vaudeville’s title conjured up terrors for me]. (Schmidt, A Season 53)

In the context of his experience just prior to writing the passage, the hallucinations in question are undoubtedly chemically induced. The listing of his visions suggests that, despite the constant intoxication, he never lost awareness of his intent to envision and remember the apparitions for their incorporation into the creation of poetry. A statement following the text above reinforces
the notion that he sought to alter his state of mind with the psychoactive agents for the very purposes stated in the seer letters. He proclaims, “Je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit (429) [In the end I thought of my mind’s disorder as a sacred thing (Schmidt, *A Season* 53)]. Together with the testimony of Delahaye and Forain, the apparent confession in *Saison* [*A Season*] makes it clear that not only had Rimbaud’s abuse of alcohol and hallucinogens become a way of life, but also his belief that he was accomplishing a holy aim justified the practice and initially kept him from appreciating the presence of any personal problem of addiction.

In a manner typical of substance abuse victims, with time, Rimbaud’s original experience of empowerment by intoxication turned bitter. Although it did not signal the end of his problems with alcohol and drugs, by the end of the seer experiment, chronic intoxication had already given him cause for regret as the damage done to his health and mental well-being had become critical. When he returned home to Roche in April 1873 to begin work on *Saison* [*A Season*], the family, although ignorant of the causes, was alarmed at his condition. In examining the description of Rimbaud’s physical symptoms, Starkie correctly suggests he exhibited the signs of a man experiencing withdrawals from narcotic addiction (264). His mother and sister could hear an insomniac Rimbaud groan behind closed doors and indeed questioned him about his health, but he insisted there was no need for concern but that he only needed to be left alone (Berrichon

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36 Although the symptoms described originate from the memory of a then twelve-year-old Isabelle and recounted years later to Berrichon, they are not details one is likely to invent. Rather the worries of a concerned family reinforced these recollections at the time of their occurrence. In his biography, Berrichon summarizes Isabelle’s impression of her brother’s condition: “Son teint, devenu terreux, plombé, se marbre de rougeurs fiévreuses; le bleu de ses yeux pâlit, et les pupilles, se rétrécissant parfois jusqu’à presque disparaître, donnent au regard un caractère infiniment vague et comme mourant. Il maigrit dans son corps et dans son visage [...]. Des journées entières, [...], il reste enfermé dans sa chambre, étendu, les yeux mi-clos, sur son lit” (Berrichon 228-29). [His complexion had become sallow and leaden, mottled by feverish red blotches; the blue of his eyes had paled, and at times his pupils contracted to the point of disappearing, giving his eyes an extremely vague look as if dying. His face and body had thinned [...]. For whole days, [...], he stayed closed up in his room stretched out on the bed with his eyes half closed.]

37 In addition to absinthe and hashish, it is probable that during their long wanderings throughout London, Verlaine and Rimbaud had frequented the Chinese opium dens by the city’s docks of the East End (Starkie 258). This would explain the type of withdrawal symptoms witnessed by Isabelle, which are congruent with narcotic addiction.
In truth, he was very aware of the harm he had caused himself, and once he recovered sufficiently, he put this realization into words.

In conjunction with Rimbaud’s established history of substance abuse, the deterioration of his health just prior to the writing of *Saison [A Season]* would support the premise that passages in the book suggestive of these problems do indeed function as his acknowledgment that constant intoxication had taken a toll. In the following passage from “Alchimie du verbe” [Alchemy of the Word], he seems to evoke the peril of an unending dream state as caused by narcotics:

Ma santé fut menacée. La terreur venait. Je tombais dans des sommeils de plusieurs jours, et, levé, je continuais les rêves les plus tristes. J’étais mûr pour le trépas, et par une route de dangers ma faiblesse me menait aux confins du monde et de la Cimmérie, patrie de l’ombre et des tourbillons. (433)

[It affected my health. Terror loomed. I would fall again and again into a heavy sleep, which lasted several days at a time, and when I woke up, my sorrowful dreams continued. I was ripe for fatal harvest, and my weakness led me down dangerous roads to the edge of the world, to the Cimmerian shore, the haven of whirlwinds and darkness. (Schmidt, *A Season* 61)]

Despite the danger illustrated here, Rimbaud might have accepted the risk to his health if he could have continued to believe the vision of the seer poet would come to pass. However, at the end of his two-year experiment, I believe he came to understand that the derangement of the senses through intoxicants leads neither to divine enlightenment nor to the creation of a brighter future for humanity. Instead, as the passage indicates, he had sunk increasingly into depression and a cycle of terrifying and dark visions interrupted only by wasted days of endless sleep.

**Intoxication without Purpose**

An examination of the years following *Saison [A Season]* will demonstrate that Rimbaud’s life decayed until even his closest friends found his company intolerable, becoming convinced that alcoholism would lead to his end. Even if he had ceased to pursue the more exotic
drugs such as hashish and opiates (of which there is simply no evidence either way), his love of alcohol, especially in the form of absinthe, remained constant for at least two years after what I have argued is his clear admission in Saison [A Season] that he was ruining himself with intoxicants. It was in specific reference to his time in London after the self-publication of Saison [A Season] that he grudgingly and angrily uttered to Bardey the terse epithets that described his life with the artists in the English capital as “une période d’ivrognerie” [a period of drunkenness] and “de rinçures” [cheap wine] (Lefrère 1102). The short remarks are sufficient to confirm the hard link in his mind between art and the painful regret he felt over his lifestyle of intoxication. Once sober, the drunken phase of his life caused Rimbaud the greatest resentment, and he would lay the blame squarely on his former love of literature.

“Ce Chat malfaisant de Rimbaud est encore revenu!”

[That Evil Cat Rimbaud Is Back Again!]

One particular incident in Paris would make evident not only the continuing nature of Rimbaud’s addiction but the destructive attitude associated with his drinking. After returning from Stuttgart, he went to Paris in July 1875 searching for the few friends in the capital who did not consider him a pariah: these included Henri Mercier, Ernest Cabaner, and Jean-Louis Forain. Because of Rimbaud’s weakness for absinthe, he would wear out his welcome before an unwitting host was aware he had a guest. Ambroise Vollard retells the anecdote that came to the great Auguste Renoir (by way of Cabaner’s friend Guillemet):

Et la fureur de Cabaner, ajoutait Guillemet, quand, en rentrant chez lui, il y trouvait tout sens dessus dessous et, bien entendu, vidée jusqu’à la dernière goutte, la petite fontaine dans laquelle il serrait sa provision d’absinthe. “Ce chat malfaisant de Rimbaud est encore revenu!” (qtd. in Lefrère 709-10).

[And the fury of Cabaner, added Guillemet, when returning home, he found everything turned upside down and, of course, empty to the last drop, the liquor cabinet where he would lock up his supply of absinthe. “That evil cat Rimbaud is back again!”]
At this late date, three months before his twenty-second birthday, Rimbaud still drank excessively and his intoxication was associated with behavior that did not endear him to the few who could tolerate him. In fact, his reputation as a compulsive and destructive drunk preceded him to the degree that Cabaner could instinctively identify the “chat malfaisant” [evil cat] responsible for the crime without prior knowledge that the former poet had returned to Paris. Over two years removed from the time when intoxication served to facilitate divine revelation and inspired poetry, Rimbaud clearly drank merely for the sake of intoxication and in a manner beyond his control.

By the end of 1875, the rare friends who remained more or less in contact with Rimbaud grew increasingly impatient and disgusted with his lack of self-discipline and direction in life. Even Delahaye, the most faithful of his friends since childhood, tended to share Verlaine’s dubious opinion concerning the current course of Rimbaud’s life. In the existing fragment of an August 1875 letter from Delahaye to Verlaine, its author expresses his fear for Rimbaud’s future following a chance encounter while they were both back home in Charleville. Delahaye leaves no doubt as to the identity of the agent driving Rimbaud to ruin when he writes:

[[... que cette fin, dont nous causions là-bas, sera quelque asile d’aliénés. Il me semble qu’il y va maintenant. C’est d’ailleurs tout simple: l’alcool. Le malheureux se vante, avec une volubilité assez étonnante chez lui, d’avoir, à Paris, flanqué le pied au c... à tout le monde (qtd. in Lefrère 723)]

[[... that this end, of which we talked about down there, will be some lunatic asylum. It seems to me he on his way now. The reason I may add is quite simple: alcohol. The wretch brags, with volubility rather surprising for him, of having given everybody in Paris a kick in the a...].

In referring to the incident in Paris, which certainly involved the looting of Cabaner’s absinthe and the drunken destruction of the apartment, not only did Rimbaud have no appreciation for the

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38 The Verlaine-Delahaye correspondence of this period almost constantly denigrates or mocks Rimbaud and generally portrays him as an individual obsessed by the pursuit of some half-baked idea or some passing craze (Lefrère 723).
problem with his behavior, but he also took unusual pains to boast about it. The two that knew him best, Verlaine and Delahaye, shared the conviction that their friend was headed for a mental breakdown, perhaps even his physical demise.

For the entirety of Rimbaud’s career as a mature writer—from the inception of the seer philosophy until after his renunciation of literature with the mocking rhyme of “Rêve” [Dream]—the problem of substance abuse was a fixture of his life. I believe that the uninterrupted coexistence of poetry and the use of psychoactive drugs contributed to his later perception that the artistic mindset and intoxication were inseparable, proving in his mind that a cause-effect relationship existed. If he could have discontinued the abuse of intoxicants upon recognition that the seer philosophy was an illusion, he would have led a life of sobriety during the two years following *Saison* [A Season] when he still considered himself a man of literature. In this scenario, it is possible he might have successfully disassociated in his mind the problem of his addiction and the pursuit of poetry. However, this was not the case, and in some ways, his lifestyle of drunkenness seemed to worsen without the direction and purpose provided at one time by his hope of the seer poet or even literature in general.

After Cyprus: Sobriety

I propose that it was only when Rimbaud discovered a satisfying and practical vision of how to live his new materialist philosophy—and thus fully regained an engrossing sense of purpose in life—that he ceased the use of all intoxicants. During the three years that followed the absinthe incident at Cabaner’s—a period when Rimbaud’s life consisted of constant traveling (when not home to winter in Charleville) and the avoidance of fulltime work—we have no clear record of his use or lack of use in respect to alcohol and psychoactive drugs. However, if there is one critical point of transition in his mental and emotional development during this period that
led him to sobriety, it is his employment as the foreman for a building project on Cyprus. We can only guess why this job would have influenced him so profoundly, but I find various aspects of the work significant. For the first time he maintained a position of higher responsibility where he directed a large group of laborers under him, thus instilling a sense of self-pride. More importantly, the nature of the work itself was new to him. It was physical labor that had as its aim the construction of buildings (Lefrère 768-70): a tangible result, in opposition to his previous endeavors that had focused exclusively on the creation of an intellectual product. I believe that the construction of concrete things such as buildings proved intuitively congruent with his materialist perspective and desire to be a man of action reshaping the world through human know-how. Finally, his employment in Cyprus may simply have occurred when the desire to vagabond in poverty and waste time in a drunken or drug induced stupor was exhausted.

Upon returning home to recover from typhoid fever acquired while on Cyprus, the dramatic difference in Rimbaud’s conduct and demeanor would attest to the life-changing significance of his work on the island. During a September 1879 visit to the farm in Roche, Delahaye, who had not seen his friend in two years, could appreciate the full measure of transformation in Rimbaud’s personality. He was especially impressed by Rimbaud’s personal calm and new dedication to physical labor as he worked at harvesting in the family’s field (Delahaye, *Rimbaud* 186). Interestingly, Rimbaud took the most pride in showing off a letter of reference from his employers in Cyprus (Lefrère 773). Particular to the question of substance abuse, Rimbaud’s newfound sobriety especially struck Delahaye, the former appearing to have lost any liking for intoxication and excitement (Starkie 348). Rimbaud’s extraordinary change in persona accompanied by his marked focus on the concrete symbol of his accomplishment in Cyprus, the letter of reference, confirms the important role played by this period of employment.
Asceticism and Withdrawal

Consistent with a personality drawn to achieving a sense of the absolute, following each chosen path like a zealot, so Rimbaud pursued sobriety to the point of severity. In contrast to the life of intoxication during his bohemian years, his sobriety in adulthood developed into a form of asceticism. In 1905, the brothers Athanase and Constantin Righas, both associates of Rimbaud in Africa, gave Rimbaldian biographer Victor Segalen this description of the former poet: “[...] il était très sobre, ne buvait jamais d’alcool; du café seulement, à la turque, [...]” (qtd. in Lefrère 878). [...] he was very sober, would never drink alcohol; only some coffee, Turkish, [...].] It is significant that the brothers would choose to add the intensifier “very” to characterize Rimbaud’s sobriety, indicating not only an unusual severity in his abstinence from intoxicants but also suggesting it reflected his generalized attitude toward life.

Indeed, with the passing of years, Rimbaud’s idea of sobriety seems to have expanded into every aspect of his life, causing him to forego almost every indulgence beyond the pleasure of work. Monsignor Jarosseau talked of how he and the nuns, themselves living in poverty as missionaries in Harar, were amazed at the austerity of Rimbaud’s life. A June 10, 1933, article for Le Temps records the Monsignor’s thoughts on the matter: “Et nous, voyant sa vie toute de renoncement, nous disions: ‘Il a manqué sa vocation; il aurait dû se faire trappiste ou chartreux’” (qtd. in Lefrère 1057). [And we, seeing his life of abnegation, we would say; he missed his calling; he should have become a Trappist or Carthusian.] The missionaries’ intuitive application of a religious calling to describe Rimbaud’s behavior supports the notion

39 In the Monsignor’s interview with Henri d’Acremont done for an August 27, 1932, article entitled “En Abyssinie sur les traces de Rimbaud” for Revue hebdomadaire, Jarosseau reiterates the same idea stated above, saying of Rimbaud: “[I]l vivait chaste et sobre; pour mieux préciser, si je puis employer cette comparaison, il vivait comme un bénédictin (qtd. in Lefrère 1058).” [[H]e lived celibate and sober; to be more precise, if I might use the comparison, he lived like a Benedictine.] Comparison of this statement with the one cited in the text indicates that Jarosseau’s analysis concerning the trader with whom he spoke so often decades earlier remained consistent.
that his choices in respect to lifestyle were rarely matters of simple preference. Rather, I believe they reflected an innate understanding of a greater mission and need for self-transcendence. Believing an abstemious and self-disciplined approach to life was most congruent with an objective and scientific outlook, he followed this latest path in his typical religious-like fashion.

The years marking Rimbaud’s abstention from intoxicants coincide with his increasing withdrawal from personal attachments, thus reinforcing the argument that only alcohol and drugs held his inhibition in check. Before he left France for the last time, the unusual manner in which the newly sober Rimbaud withdrew from childhood friends indicates not only the emerging presence of a naturally inhibited personality but also the powerful role intoxicants had played in blocking it. Despite being among the few to have continued to talk with Rimbaud up until his permanent departure from France, Ernest Millot painted a compelling scenario to articulate his frustration with the former poet’s increasingly aloof nature. In his article “Les Souvenirs d’un ami de Rimbaud,” Jean-Marie Carré records Millot’s revealing impression:


[Longtime before his ultimate departure, his silence, his detachment struck us. “I imagine myself meeting him one day in the middle of the Sahara, said Millot, after several years of separation. We are alone and we come at each other from the opposite direction. He stops an instant: —Hello, how are you? —Fine, goodbye.” —And he continues on his way. Not the least bit of effusiveness. Not one word more.]

In contrast to my previous suggestion, that Rimbaud actively chose to live an ascetic lifestyle, I believe his aloofness reflects more of an involuntary response caused by his natural disposition. The fact that his reclusive manner emerged together with the new sobriety reinforces a central argument of this chapter: he depended on alcohol and psychoactive drugs to facilitate the expression of his more intimate thoughts and emotions. Without the help of intoxicants, the
restrictive aspect of his personality quickly and progressively reasserted its control. It follows, that in approaching adulthood, he would have needed alcohol and drugs to express effectively his subjective and intimate self in poetry. From this perspective, he was correct to believe the practice of the literary arts brought with it his personally destructive habit of addiction.

Rebirth of the Poetic Personality

As if to prove once again the capacity of intoxicants to free Rimbaud from the powerful grip of his emotional inhibition, destiny would force him to accept once again powerful narcotics into his body. When he started to take opiates again in the summer of 1891, the purpose of the drug was not to reveal the mysteries of the spiritual world through poetry but simply to numb the horrible pain in his body and ease the unrelenting insomnia it brought each night. In respect to understanding Rimbaud’s psychology and its relationship to poetry, it is the dramatic effect the drugs would have on his personality that is of most interest.

The reintroduction of narcotics immediately eased the rigidity of Rimbaud’s psyche, causing him to suddenly resemble more the poet of his youth than the sullen and aloof businessman of Africa. One source of his opiate intake at this time was a tea made of poppies prescribed by Dr. Beaudier and prepared by Isabelle to help her brother sleep. In her October 1897 article for Mercure de France, “Le Dernier Voyage de Rimbaud,” Isabelle states that the opiate provided sensations of alleviation for her brother, “[...] presque agréables, extralucidant sa mémoire, provoquant chez lui l’impérieux besoin de confidences (qtd. in Lefrère 1142) [almost pleasant, expanding his memory, causing in him the pressing need to share confidences].

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40 Dr. Beaudier recounted to biographer Goffin that after learning of the suffering that caused Rimbaud to moan from morning till night, “C’est alors que je conseillai des calmants et des narcotiques dont il abusa au point que je dus intervenir” (Goffin 47) [It is then that I recommended some sedatives and narcotics that he abused to the point that I had to intervene]. Considering Rimbaud’s profound repulsion to the use of drugs during the preceding twelve years, his almost immediate excess with them—when he could once again legitimate in his mind their use—may reflect not only the intense need to find pain relief but also an inherent susceptibility for substance abuse as well.
She recounts that Rimbaud, in this state of mind, would close the shutters and doors of his room, light candles and oil lamps, and at the gentle and continuous sound of a very small barrel organ, “il repassait sa vie, évoquait ses souvenirs d’enfance, développait ses pensées intimes, exposait plans d’avenirs et projets (qtd. in Lefrère 1142) [he would go over his life, evoking memories of childhood, expanding on his personal thoughts, setting out his ideas for the future and plans]. In contrast to the tone in his letters home from Africa or the conversations remembered by Monsignor Jarosseau or Alfred Bardey—so limited in personal openness, Isabelle observed in Rimbaud’s discourse under the influence of opiates “l’impérieux besoin” [the pressing need] to share his more intimate feelings and thoughts. His compulsion here to focus on the memories of childhood is additionally curious in that it is reminiscent of efforts in his poems—particularly those of *Illuminations*. The reintroduction of psychoactive drugs after years of sobriety was unquestionably the element that finally broke his entrenched inhibition, freeing the expressive aspect of his personality so vital to the creation of poetry.

“Expressions d’un charme pénétrant et bizarre”

[Expressions of a Strange and Penetrating Charm]

In addition to the change in personality brought on by the new use of opiates for pain management, there is evidence to suggest Rimbaud consciously created and spoke phrases on his deathbed that were indicative of poetry. The progression of his illness had required increasingly stronger doses of morphine. Despite the effects of the drug, he remained, according to Isabelle, more or less lucid until almost the end of his life. In addition to his possible religious conversion sixteen days before his death, Isabelle reports in a letter (and again later in biographical material) on this other phenomenon in question that could give insight into Rimbaud’s psychology in respect to the creation of poetry. Perhaps from the emotional release of acknowledging and
accepting his coming death, Rimbaud became calm. I propose that the act of making peace with
his mortality, working in combination with the constant dosing of morphine, allowed him to drop
any remaining emotional and mental defenses, and in this state of mind, he surrendered to the
same impulses that once fed his poetry.

In a letter to their mother, Isabelle describes Rimbaud as in a waking dream state
where—though conscious and lucid—he seemed to speak his dreams. She conveys amazement at
his manner of expression in communicating his visions, and her account of this expression
intuitively evokes the idea of poetry. While attending to him at the hospital in Marseilles,
Isabelle wrote to their mother concerning a dying Rimbaud:

Éveillé, il achève sa vie dans une sorte de rêve continuel: il dit des choses bizarres, très
doucement, d’une voix qui m’enchanterait si elle ne me perçait le cœur. Ce qu’il dit ce
sont des rêves—pourtant ce n’est pas la même chose du tout que quand il avait le délire,
on dirait et je crois qu’il le fait exprès. Comme il murmurait ces choses-là […], c’est un
être immatériel presque et sa pensée s’échappe malgré lui. Quelquefois il demande aux
médecins si eux voient les choses extraordinaires qu’il aperçoit et il leur parle et leur
raconte avec douceur en termes que je ne saurais rendre, ses impressions; […]. (qtd. in
Lefrère 1162-63)

Wide-awake, he finishes his life in a sort of continual dream: he says strange things,
very softly, with a voice that would enchant me if it did not cut me to the heart. What he
speaks about are dreams—however it’s not the same thing at all as when he was
delirious, they would say and I believe he does it on purpose. As he murmurs these things
[…], he’s almost an ethereal being and his thought escapes from him despite himself.
Sometimes he asks the doctors if they see the extraordinary things he perceives and he
talks to them and tells them with gentleness in terms that I would not know how to
explain, his impressions; […].

Although Isabelle had learned of her brother’s career as a poet, she appeared unfamiliar at that
time with the work itself.41 Any other poetry that she might have read, especially while her
education was under the scrutiny of their mother (the more than conservative Vitalie Rimbaud),
would likely have represented only the most traditional forms of verse. In this context, it makes

41 While caring for her brother at Roche, Isabelle asked him, “‘Pourquoi ne continues-tu pas à écrire? on dit pourtant
qu’autrefois tu as fait de très belles choses’” (qtd. in Lefrère 1145) [“Why don’t you continue to write? They even
say you once created very beautiful things”]. The phrase “on dit” [they say] suggests she was not personally familiar
with Rimbaud’s work but had only heard about it from others.
sense that Isabelle would refer to any poetic utterances from Rimbaud’s deathbed as “chooses” [things] (which she does on two occasions just in the passage above), as if to say it was something beyond her immediate capacity for definition. Nevertheless, she emphasizes her ability to distinguish the verbal expressions in question from those of Rimbaud’s periods of delirium. Isabelle stresses that these “chooses” [things] he said consisted of impressions expressed in specially chosen terms that she did not know how to recreate. The observations she recorded leave enough reason to consider that, during his last two weeks, Rimbaud did indeed apply his innate verbal skills (ability that, until this point, he reserved exclusively for use in his biting sarcasm) to express his visions in a special way, creating something akin to poetry.

Isabelle would recount the phenomenon again years later in the biographical material she wrote of Rimbaud. Because the details coincide with the letter written from the side of her brother’s deathbed, the later account can also be trusted. It is interesting for the few but revealing details concerning the substance of his deathbed expression of his visions. Isabelle writes:

Sans perdre un instant connaissance [sic] (j’en suis certaine) il a de merveilleuses visions: il voit des colonnes d’améthystes, des anges marbre et bois, des végétations et des paysages d’une beauté inconnue, et pour dépeindre ces sensations il emploie des expressions d’un charme pénétrant et bizarre.... (Yerta-Méléra 181-82)

[Without losing consciousness for an instant (I am certain of it) he has marvelous visions: he sees columns of amethyst, angels of marble and wood, plants and scenery of an unknown beauty, and to paint these sensations he uses expressions of a strange and penetrating charm....]

Isabelle reaffirms her conviction that Rimbaud spoke with intent and did not merely ramble incoherently. She leaves no doubt of the beauty of his words and their power to move the listener. We can never know if Rimbaud’s articulation of his visions truly represented something that would qualify as poetry in the literary sense. Nevertheless, the evocative nature of his expression as described by Isabelle bore no resemblance to the years of dry correspondence and field reports that he produced in Africa.
Significant to our discussion is the evidence suggesting that only the influence of the opiate based drugs emotionally freed Rimbaud to engage his intellect in a personal and subjective expression such as poetry. Even the lighter doses from the poppy flower teas caused an amazing change in his personality, revealing an aspect of the man not seen since before the beginning of his absolute sobriety some dozen years earlier. For the inhibited and rigid psychology that dominated his adulthood, there is no question that intoxicants created an emotional state that was more conducive to poetry. Like the positive results from a controlled experiment in a laboratory, the brief renaissance of Rimbaud’s poetic personality—if not the consciously active poet per se—due to the reintroduction of intoxicants during the late summer and fall of 1891 confirms poetry’s dependent relationship with psychoactive agents.

To maintain the assertion that Rimbaud depended on intoxicants to write poetry, it is necessary to offer an explanation for how he succeeded in creating important works before his initial exposure to alcohol or other psychoactive agents: an event occurring as late as the first half of his sixteenth year. I have argued that because inhibition functioned as a particularly important obstacle in respect to the intuitive nature of Rimbaud’s mature writing as a seer, his need to use psychoactive agents in the creation of poetry became critical at that point in his life. In following Baudelaire’s idea of a poetry that flowed uninhibited from the subconscious, Rimbaud especially needed the emotional freedom provided by intoxication. In contrast, his earlier work that depended on more traditional structure and themes may have permitted him a detached, conceptual approach that was less demanding of such freedom. In addition, we should remember that his inhibition appeared increasingly severe toward adulthood and, likewise, less controlling in his mid-adolescence when he first started to write.42 For the same reasons, this

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42 I do not believe that Rimbaud’s newfound sobriety alone caused the increasing inhibition in his personality as he aged. Aside from the artificial relief that intoxication provided him in his youth, the heightened physical, mental,
chapter has argued that he made alcohol and psychoactive drugs the cornerstone of his literary philosophy not merely because the ideas of Baudelaire appealed to him intellectually but because the growing restriction of his personality demanded it in order to accomplish the task at hand. Indeed, the desire to overcome emotional dysfunction may have even driven his initial attraction to Baudelaire’s notions of an intuitive poetry facilitated by an intoxicating agent.

By the end of Rimbaud’s literary career, the very real dependence on drugs to write had become so strong that his later fears that poetry had functioned as a destructive force in his youth were not unjustified. In this context, Maslow’s most basic need of safety and freedom from danger gave an adult Rimbaud reason to consider poetic endeavor perilous and exclude any consideration of returning to his former life as a poet.

As previously stated, Rimbaud’s relationship with literary writing as an adult was not simply a matter of inactivity in such endeavors, but the subject generated sentiments of angry regret. Certainly his judgment that poetry had led to years of waste from chronic intoxication fueled much of his negative reaction. However, the exaggerated nature of his loathing over the intrusion of his growing fame requires a more satisfactory explanation. This thesis contends that he believed the artistic lifestyle and mindset of his youth had damaged his reputation and self-esteem, and it was his sense of shame concerning his bohemian years that engendered the visceral contempt. He especially feared that literary renown would revive the public scandal involving the shooting in Brussels and his affair with Verlaine. The following and final chapter will examine how the pursuit of poetry not only failed to meet Rimbaud’s great desire for the praise of his peers but also proved a source of great humiliation and ignominy.

and emotional energy unique to adolescence may have acted as a psychological counterweight that only temporarily held back (or perhaps more accurately overpowered) his more natural inclination toward emotional restriction.
CHAPTER 4:
PRIDE AND SHAME

Among the “concert d’enfers” [symphony of hells] that Rimbaud claims for himself in “Nuit de l’enfer” [Night in Hell] of Saison [A Season], he announces, “Je devrais avoir [...] mon enfer pour l’orgueil [...]” (422) [I ought to have a special hell [...] for my pride [...]](Schmidt, A Season 31). I believe the statement indicates Rimbaud’s awareness not only of his hubris in respect to the ambitions of the seer but also his great vanity, affirming my assertion that the need for recognition represented one of the important driving forces in his life. It is natural to want the praise of others, and in fact, Maslow groups the desire for self-esteem—as achieved through the respect and acknowledgment of one’s peers—among the more essential deficiency needs. As this chapter will demonstrate, Rimbaud’s particular appetite for praise, while not necessarily beyond what is mentally healthy, was significantly greater than average. For this reason, I will argue that his initial failure to garner literary recognition worked to undermine poetry’s place in his life, and the shame he later associated with his artistic existence caused him to regret bitterly his participation in literary writing.

As an adolescent—and then later as a young man—who cherished poetry and believed in his skills as a poet, Rimbaud naturally focused on the literary community to provide the validation he sought. However, in the course of seeking greatness as a poet, he would risk not only his well-being but also become the subject of public scandal. Yet despite his confession in Saison [A Season] that he had spent two years chasing an illusion, threatening his health and sanity in the process through substance abuse, and despite the traumatic shooting incident in Brussels and the humiliating revelation of his homosexual affair with Verlaine, he maintained faith in the power of his art to bring the acclaim for which he hungered. This chapter will argue
that it was only after he lost all hope of finding glory as a writer (and when in a parallel occurrence, his sense of identity shifted to non-literary endeavors) that he began to feel the full burden of “mistakes” made in the pursuit of poetry. The sense of shame that Rimbaud felt in looking back on his former lifestyle (the negative aspects of which he perceived as inextricably linked with poetic endeavors) explains his exaggerated revulsion in later life to the memories of his time as a poet.

This chapter will begin by establishing an understanding of Rimbaud’s pride and the accompanying hunger for the esteem of his peers. I will then detail the primary aspects of his bohemian life that worked against the fulfillment of this need by either contributing to his personal sentiment of dishonor or by destroying his hope for acclaim from the one audience that mattered: the literary community of Paris. The previous chapter has already exhausted the problem of substance abuse, which unquestionably played a role in his later disgust with the past. Here, I will give prominence to the shooting in Brussels and its aftermath, emphasizing the trauma of Verlaine’s violent instability, the forced revelation of the two poet’s homosexual relationship, and the subsequent rejection of Rimbaud and his writing by the literary community, especially as evidenced by the scorn displayed in the café Tabourney. To demonstrate Rimbaud’s desire to distance himself from the ways of his artistic youth, I will discuss his self-reinvention, as demonstrated by his permanent flight from Europe to create a new life in Africa; here, I will emphasize his desire for wealth through manual labor and industry as a rejection of the physical sloth and chronic financial dependence of the bohemian years when he focused exclusively on intellectual effort in the production of a literary product.
A Marriage of Self-Importance and Self-Confidence

Rimbaud’s pride and his accompanying need for recognition originated first with a sense of superiority that he inherited from his mother, an attitude subsequently reinforced by an absolute confidence in his intellectual ability. For the Rimbauds, high self-regard—one might say outright snobbery—was a family value. Louis Pierquin described the mother of his childhood friend as “une femme d’un orgueil démesuré” (qtd. in Lefrère 20) [a woman of overweening arrogance]. Perhaps because she saw herself as a member of a landowning family and the wife of an officer, or simply because she believed that through social separation she could help her children to escape the drunken and delinquent fates of their two uncles, Charles and Jean (Starkie 28-29), Vitalie Rimbaud’s consciousness of class was extreme (32-33). For fear the children might mix with those of the underclass or other undesirable sorts, she never let them escape her watchful supervision, still meeting the boys to escort them home from the school yard gate until just before Rimbaud’s sixteenth birthday (35-36). In Vitalie’s determination that her sons would find respectable careers, she sacrificed to afford the best schools in the area and with unusual severity pushed them toward academic achievement.43

As Rimbaud’s intellect developed, his ability to surpass not only peers but also older students reaffirmed the sense of superiority already inculcated by his mother. In previous chapters, we have discussed how his precocious intellect won friends at least two or three years his senior; even his professor of rhetoric, the twenty-one-year-old Izambard, treated him more like a peer than a student. The first place prizes in almost every discipline for local and regional academic contests could have only bolstered his self-regard and self-confidence. By the end of

43 Often a single error in the recitation of long samples of Latin verse proved sufficient to subject Frédérique and Arthur Rimbaud to slaps and hits and/or to be sent to bed without dinner. Vitalie empowered the two sisters, both younger than their brothers, to stand over the boys and inflict similar punishment for each mistake in their academic work (Lefrère 70-71).
early adolescence, he had every reason to expect he would achieve great things. In turn, the high level of self-assuredness created not only a desire for the recognition of his personal greatness but also the confident expectation that such acknowledgement would come.

Honor, Arrogance, and Anti-Social Behavior

The highly elevated sense of pride that resulted from the alliance between Rimbaud’s faith in his abilities and his mother’s self-importance became manifest in his behavior. Initially his actions displayed merely a heightened sense of honor, but with the revelation of the seer vision, his pride evolved into outright haughtiness. In a 1911 article entitled “Lettres retrouvées d’Arthur Rimbaud” for Vers et prose, Izambard reports an incident in which a fellow student had exclaimed to the class that Rimbaud was cheating by passing a paper to his neighbor. The young professor held the item up to prove there was nothing suspicious, but by this time Rimbaud had already half stood up. “Avec le geste auguste du semeur” [With a majestic movement like the sowing of seeds], Izambard recounts, the fifteen year old launched his Thesaurus at the head of the accusing student, after which, Rimbaud “s’est rassis, stoïque et dédaigneux, comme un qui chante dans les supplices” (qtd. in Lefrère 116) [sat back down, stoic and disdainful, like an innocent man before his would be executioner]. Inflicted in defense of his integrity, the moderately violent assault—conducted with an air of self-assuredness and contempt—illustrates not simply the developed nature of the young Rimbaud’s pride, but more importantly the great value he placed on his intellectual ability (reflected here in the academic work of the classroom) as the primary source of validation.

Once convinced he possessed the secrets to the new poetry and the keys to becoming a seer, a radicalized Rimbaud’s sense of self-worth often exhibited itself as abrasive arrogance. In his seer letter to Izambard—a man who, in and out of the classroom, had shown incredible
indulgence and goodwill toward his precocious student, Rimbaud attacks unapologetically both the banal nature of his professor’s career and the insipidness of his poetry. He writes to Izambard, “Mais vous finirez toujours comme un satisfait qui n’a rien fait, n’ayant rien voulu faire. Sans compter que votre poésie subjective sera toujours horriblement fadasse” (237) [But you will end up an accomplished complacent who accomplishes nothing of any worth. That’s without even beginning to discuss your dry-as-dust subjective poetry (Mason 28)]. The scornful remarks reflect a momentary attitude not atypical of someone close to Rimbaud’s age and possessing similar conviction. However, most adolescent’s self-amazement is usually the product of an unrealistic assessment of personal ability, where in contrast, Rimbaud had abundant and verifiable justification for his confidence if not his arrogance. Furthermore, the belief that he had recently discovered the key to a mystical union between art and the spiritual realm, capable of transforming both poetry and humanity, magnified exponentially his perception of personal superiority. Still untested by reality, the new theories could reign unchecked in the young poet’s imagination. Rimbaud’s epiphany of the seer vision caused him to perceive his potential for greatness in cosmic proportions, and it would drive him to amazing heights of hubris.

During the first year in the capital, Rimbaud’s conviction concerning the supremacy of his artistic vision motivated anti-social behavior that ultimately led to his banishment by the Parisian literary community. The negative aspects of the prodigy’s personality quickly eclipsed any initial marvel with his talent, a dynamic mirrored in the fact that Rimbaud’s lodgings changed frequently in Paris as he quickly wore out the hospitality of those willing to sponsor the boy genius. Impressed with Rimbaud’s work, fellow poet Charles Cros permitted the adolescent

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44 Based on his many interviews with those who encountered Rimbaud in Paris, Rodolphe Darzens captures the sense of dichotomy between the attraction to the young poet’s talent and the distaste for his character. Darzens summarizes the general impression of Rimbaud at the time as “une espèce de petit collégiens vicieux, malpropre, peu sociable, devant lequel tout le monde était en extase” (qtd. in Lefrère 352) [some depraved little schoolboy, dirty, unsociable, about whom everyone was in raptures].
to share his apartment. However, Cros soon noticed that the pages torn out of his collection of poetry publications were precisely those containing poems that he had written; in the meantime, Rimbaud bragged to others “de les avoirs lacérées, et non par admiration et pour les posséder. Il les avait affectées à divers usages familiers!” (qtd. in Lefrère 354) [to have torn them out, and not out of admiration and to keep them. He had set them aside for various uses involving personal hygiene!]. Without question, the vulgar abuse of Cros’ poetic publications shows that, despite an advanced intellect, Rimbaud still possessed in some respects a juvenile mentality and a certain emotional immaturity. At the same time, the anecdote directly links his arrogance and rebelliousness to a belief that his ideas of poetry would, in the end, prove superior.

Another offensive and, in the end, violent attempt at critiquing the poetry of his peers would result in Rimbaud’s permanent exile from the artists and writers who had originally paid his way to Paris. After finishing the main course of the March 2, 1872, dinner of the Vilains-Bonhommes, one of the invitees, Jean Aicard, recited a poem he had written, which particularly offended Rimbaud’s aesthetic sense. From a collection of interviews with guests at the dinner, one of the original Rimbaldian biographers, symbolist poet Rodolphe Darzens, relates:

Jean Aicard, de sa voix chaude, vibrante, en déclamait depuis assez longtemps déjà, de ses vers au lyrisme facile qu’il excelle à dire. Arthur Rimbaud en coin les scandait d’un mot sans cesse répété, celui qu’il est assez aisé de deviner: “M...! M...! M...!” (qtd. in Lefrère 397-98)

[Jean Aicard, with his warm, resonant voice, had already declaimed for quite a long time his easy lyricism, which he excels at saying. Arthur Rimbaud in the corner was scanning the verses by repeating one word constantly, one easy enough to guess: “S...! S...! S...!”]

When politely told to be quiet, a furious Rimbaud erupted with a torrent of verbal abuse, leading to his forcible removal. As the dinner guests started to leave, he emerged from hiding to lunge at the photographer Carjat with a cane sword, lightly wounding him in the hand before the others wrestled the adolescent to the ground. In addition to marking the end of his association with the
Parisian literati, the incident establishes once again that Rimbaud’s belief in the supremacy of his poetic vision motivated, at least initially, his disruptive behavior. The confrontational spirit also suggests that, where poetry was concerned, he believed he possessed the absolute truth for which there could be no room for compromise—a mentality all too reminiscent of his violent defense against the desecration of the church font five years earlier. Understanding that he thought he had such knowledge, we can reasonably assume that, as a seer, he cherished the idea that his fellow poets would one day hail him for leading them out of their artistic darkness.

Rimbaud’s presence at the dinner—and his general willingness to keep company with poets for whose work he aggressively expressed disdain—signals a psychological dynamic at play important to the question at hand. Although openly critical of the established writers of the day, the evidence suggests he simultaneously desired the validation that could only come from their acknowledgment of his superiority as a poet. These seemingly contradictory impulses are comparable to the rebellious child whose validation requires that the recognition of independence come from the very parental figures with whom he or she desires to break. For the literary writer, validation is inevitably equated with the willingness of a publisher to print his or her words, and in this respect Rimbaud was no different. Although he would remain from this point an outcast of the Parisian literati, his persistent attempts at publication afterwards (the privately funded printing of *Saison [A Season]* and the carefully prepared fair copy of *Illuminations*) support the idea that he continued to desire vindication, and thus redemption, with the same literary world that had expelled him. Nevertheless, at some moment after he had handed *Illuminations* over to Verlaine in February 1875 and before he wrote to Delahaye the letter containing “Rêve” in October of that year, Rimbaud ceased to believe that literature would ever lead to glory.
A key assertion of this chapter states that it was only after he lost any expectation of acclaim through publication that the circumstances associated with his years as a poet began to overwhelm him as something shameful. I have already demonstrated in previous chapters that during the two years following the printing of *Saison* [*A Season*], his identity and source of personal satisfaction shifted increasingly away from poetry to the acquisition of objective skills. As Rimbaud progressively lost hope of formal recognition by the literary community, I believe the shift in his mental orientation accelerated, and it in turn hastened the removal of any remaining notion of literature’s redemptive power. As long as he could believe glory awaited him at the end of his trials, he had been willing to suffer and forgive any degradation he had endured as a poet. However, without the prospect of acclaim acting as a counterweight to the many negative aspects of his poetic existence, he decided that not only would poetry never bring validation, but also his entire life as a writer had, in contrast, caused him nothing but disgrace.

**The Shooting in Brussels and Scandal**

Although Rimbaud would ultimately condemn his lifestyle as a poet in its entirety (particularly the waste of drug abuse and the demeaning financial dependence on family and friends—the latter, I will examine shortly), the shooting incident in Brussels and the ensuing public scandal would come to represent in his mind the culmination of ignominy inherent in his life as a poet. Verlaine’s irrational state of mind that resulted in the wounding of Rimbaud—as well as a following incident of threatening that caused the adolescent to flee in fear for his life—was only the initial source of emotional scarring. The arrest of Verlaine and the discovery of the two poet’s homosexual relationship would haunt Rimbaud the rest of his days. To understand the profound impact of these events on his life, and to fully appreciate why they would cause lasting trauma, I will explore not only the shooting and its immediate aftermath but also the nature of
Rimbaud’s friendship with Verlaine within the context of its unacceptability in 19th century society and the open hostility of the Parisian artistic community that resulted.

The impossible conflict in Verlaine between his passion for Rimbaud and a deep desire to reunite with his wife Mathilde Mauté and their child created the prelude for events in Brussels. Over the past two years, Verlaine and Rimbaud had broken on several occasions because of sporadic efforts by the former to keep his family. The last attempt by the two poets to live together proved contentious, and on July 3, 1873, a spontaneous quarrel caused Verlaine to suddenly leave Rimbaud in London. In truth, Verlaine had used the fight as pretext to return to the continent and win back the wife he had completely abandoned during the past year to vagabond with Rimbaud. In passage on a steamer from London to Brussels, he would write letters to Mathilde, his mother, and many others, including, strangely, Vitalie Rimbaud, announcing plans to commit suicide should his wife fail to come back to him. From the beginning, Mathilde had perceived Rimbaud as an evil influence, yet the thought of a homosexual relationship between Verlaine and the adolescent from the provinces would never have entered her imagination if not for the discovery of the two poets’ correspondence in a

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45 Despite Vitalie Rimbaud’s reputation for hardness as reported in this thesis, she responded to Verlaine with a surprisingly thoughtful, empathetic, and encouraging letter that gives cause to reconsider the often-severe judgment on the woman’s character. Her July 6, 1873, letter owes its preservation to the seizure of Verlaine’s belongings by police in Brussels. It is difficult to do the long missive justice in the space given here, but the following citation gives an idea of its tone: “[J]’ignore quelles sont vos disgrâces avec Arthur mais j’ai toujours prévu que le dénouement de votre liaison ne devait pas être heureux. […] Vous voyez que je ne vous flatte pas; je ne flatte jamais ceux que j’aime. […] Vous êtes trop raisonnable pour faire consister le bonheur dans la réussite d’un projet, ou dans la satisfaction d’un caprice, d’une fantaisie, non, une personne qui verrait ainsi tous ses souhaits exaucés, tous ses désirs satisfaits, ne serait certainement pas heureuse car du moment que le cœur n’aurait plus d’aspirations il n’y aurait plus d’émotion possible et ainsi plus de bonheur, […] (Lefrère 600-01).” [I do not know the nature of your quarrel with Arthur, but I always expected that your relationship would end disastrously. […] You see I don’t flatter you; I never flatter those of whom I am fond. […] You’re too sensible to imagine that happiness can merely exist in the successful carrying out of a plan, or the gratifying of a whim. No indeed! A man who would find all his desires fulfilled would not be happy, for as long as the heart has no aspirations no emotion is possible and so no happiness (Starkie 281-82).]

46 In explaining his friendship with Rimbaud, Verlaine had once pronounced excitedly to his wife, “Nous avons des amours de tigres” (qtd. in Lefrère 512) [We have the love of tigers], while simultaneously baring his chest to show the scars from their knife play yet Mathilde’s naïveté on the matter persisted. More importantly, the anecdote illustrates a part of the mentality that propelled the two poets’ relationship: the desire to experience the excitement
With this knowledge, she petitioned for separation citing her husband’s “relations infâmes” [shameful relations] with the boy (Lefrère 543). Now a year later, when it became clear to Verlaine that his wife had no intention of returning, he summoned Rimbaud to Brussels.

The homosexual affair with Verlaine represented a dangerous secret for Rimbaud, and in the days leading up to the shooting, there was an emotional exchange of letters between the two poets that illuminate this aspect of their relationship. The letters (which exist for study today only because of their seizure by police) proved damning when they fell into the hands of authorities. Rimbaud’s sincere and intense emotional pleading to Verlaine affirmed for investigators that the attachment was not that of simple friends but, for lack of a better word, romantic: a sentiment that the society of the day believed should only exist between a man and a woman.

The substance of Rimbaud’s arguments to persuade Verlaine shed insight into the mindset that drove their relationship. Here, Rimbaud communicates a sense of mission in his rescue and recreation of Verlaine:

“You can only be free with me, [...] since I adore you, if you don’t want to come back or me to rejoin you, you are committing a crime, and you will repent its commission for MANY YEARS in the form of freedom lost and [suffering] more unbearable than any you’ve known. So think of what you were before we met (Mason 65).”

One of the great regrets of Rimbaldian scholars is that Mathilde would destroy these papers, which included a poem by Rimbaud entitled “La Chasse spirituel” [The Spiritual Hunt]. According to Verlaine, this work—of which no other known copy exists—was the most beautiful and powerful poem ever written by Rimbaud (Starkie 193-94). The regret of this loss is especially intense as Verlaine’s judgment in respect to Rimbaldian poetry is the most trusted.

In a passage from his July 4, 1873, letter, Rimbaud implores Verlaine using a passionate tone that is representative of the correspondence as a whole: “Reviens, ce sera bien oublié. Quel malheur que tu aies cru à cette plaisanterie. Voilà deux jours que je ne cesse de pleurer. Reviens. [...] Nous revivrons ici bien courageusement, patiemment. Ah! je t’en supplie” (384). [Come back and all is forgotten. It is unbearable to think you took my joke seriously. I have been crying for two days straight. Come back. [...] We will live here once again, bravely patiently. I’m begging you” (Mason 63).]
By presenting Verlaine the opposing choices of his dilemma, Rimbaud reveals part of the mentality that bonded them as a couple: the adolescent freedom and excitement of their bohemian life together in contrast to the quiet yet stable happiness of traditional domestic life. For Verlaine, the past two years with Rimbaud had meant a chance to live his second adolescence. However, as an adult, he never lost awareness that it was merely a fantasy existing on borrowed time. Rimbaud had a different vantage point. As a young man living out his true adolescence, the turbulent period was the only reality he had known since leaving his childhood home. More significantly, the bohemian life was the only manner of existence he had experienced (and because of his short career, would ever experience) as a mature artist. When an adult Rimbaud looked back on his youth, this limited perspective would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to separate the creation of literature from a lifestyle that had proven destructive. The events to soon follow the passionate correspondence quoted above would impossibly deepen the unfavorable association.

Verlaine’s display of instability and the ensuing violence it produced were sufficiently disturbing to negatively color Rimbaud’s later evaluation of the artistic mindset. In Rimbaud’s deposition to police, he repeatedly emphasizes the irrational thought and extraordinary mood swings of Verlaine’s manic-depressive episodes preceding the shooting incident: “Il était dans un état d’exaltation très grande. Cependant il insistait beaucoup auprès de moi pour que je restasse avec lui: tantôt il était désespéré, tantôt il entrait en fureur. Il n’y avait aucune suite dans ses idées” (Rimbaud, Œuvres 853). [He was in a state of extreme hysteria. However, he kept insisting very strongly that I stay with him: one minute he was in despair, the next in a fury. There was no sense in his thoughts. (Schmidt, Complete Works 184).] Because of Rimbaud’s emotional and intellectual intimacy with Verlaine, the spectacle of madness must have impacted
him profoundly and, to some degree, have even caused him to project the possibility of such insanity on to himself. As someone who prized highly the strength of his intellect and depended on his unforgiving logic to interpret the world, the mere prospect of losing his own mind to a similar irrational state would have proven especially disconcerting, giving him in the end further reason to distance himself from the artistic environment that he came to perceive as responsible for such madness.

Verlaine’s extreme agitation would lead directly to the shooting, causing Rimbaud to forever associate the violence to his person with his friend’s disturbing psychology. After having drunk excessively the night before and again that morning, an extremely intoxicated Verlaine returned at noon with a pistol he had bought. An alarmed Rimbaud asked him what he intended to do with it. Verlaine answered, “C’est pour vous, pour moi, pour tout le monde!” (Rimbaud, Œuvres 853) [It’s for you, for me, for everybody!] yet Rimbaud perceived it at the moment as a joke. Disgusted or disturbed by Verlaine’s hysteria, Rimbaud insisted he was leaving for Paris. Intending to stop him, Verlaine sat in a chair with his back to the hotel room door, and pointing the pistol in Rimbaud’s direction, he shot twice hitting him once in the left wrist. As the target was within such close range, Verlaine may have only intended to frighten rather than wound, but the damage was done, and he immediately repented, offering the gun to Rimbaud.

A second threat to Rimbaud’s life—one indicating a more serious intent to follow through—compounded the trauma of his confrontation with Verlaine. After a visit to the hospital, Rimbaud announced he was returning instead to Charleville where he would have the bullet removed and recover. On the way to the train station, Verlaine once again became erratic. In the deposition to police, Rimbaud again emphasizes his friend’s frightening instability: “Verlaine était comme fou, il mit tout en œuvre pour me retenir, d’autre part, il avait
constamment la main dans la poche de son habit où était son pistolet" (Rimbaud, Œuvres 854).

Verlaine was like crazy. He did everything he could to hold me back; also, he had his hand constantly in the pocket of his suit where his pistol was (Schmidt, Complete Works 185).] In fear for his life, Rimbaud ran to the nearest policeman, and Verlaine was arrested. Even if the whole of the incident had ended here, the shock to Rimbaud would have proven considerable and, in later life, tempted him to blame the artistic mindset for the trauma. However, for a personality who valued acclaim from his peers, perhaps as much as his own life, it can be argued that the worse was yet to come.

The shooting incident inadvertently precipitated the official investigation of Rimbaud’s relationship with Verlaine. From almost the beginning of the friendship in the fall of 1871, Verlaine and Rimbaud had confronted rumors and insinuations that their attachment was homosexual. However, when the problem was limited to their circle of acquaintances, primarily in the literary and artistic world, Verlaine—who as an established member of society had the most to lose—felt he could contain the accusations by indignantly labeling them as calumny. His arrest would now forcibly subject the relationship to the unforgiving scrutiny of police: officials they could not dissuade with mere feigned indignation. Accentuating the disturbing intrusiveness of the inquiry, Rimbaud undoubtedly heard of the degrading medical exam Verlaine was ordered to undergo in the belief it could determine whether or not he had recently engaged in sodomy. The invasive and thorough character of the investigation, the insistent questioning about the potentially damning secret, must have caused at least momentary dread in the young poet.

Determining Rimbaud’s natural sexual orientation, heterosexual or homosexual, would contribute to understanding whether he, fairly or unfairly, blamed the literary mindset for a lifestyle that threatened his reputation. Although biographers have long abandoned any attempt
to seriously argue that the relationship between the two poets did not include a physically sexual aspect (Lefrère 444), there is room to speculate about the degree to which Rimbaud might have been predisposed toward homosexuality. There is no evidence to suggest that he expressed an interest in or engaged in consensual homosexuality before or after Verlaine.  

Similarly, we can ask whether it was exclusively with and because of Verlaine that Rimbaud engaged in a same sex relationship at all. The question is pertinent for the following reason. If, in later years, he felt homosexuality had never represented his natural identity, it might have caused him in retrospect to blame his mindset as a poet and his association with poets for the lifestyle he now perceived as a deviation. Such a point of view would have also contributed to his sense that poetic endeavor was uniquely responsible for the spotlight of scandal in which he found himself.

Whether Rimbaud had an innate attraction for his own sex or his homosexual relationship with Verlaine simply resulted from immediate circumstances, popular opinion of same-sex relationships in the 19th century was, needless to say, extremely negative. The society would have treated known participants in homosexuality as pariahs if not actually prosecuted them

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49 In addition to the lack of positive evidence linking Rimbaud to homosexuality outside of his rapport with Verlaine, the following biographical material supports the notion that his behavior was otherwise heterosexual. The correspondence with Izambard never suggests Rimbaud ever thought of the man as more than a mentor or big brother figure. The earliest known romantic interest expressed by him was in the spring of 1871 for the daughter of a prominent family in Charleville, where his feeble attempt to court the girl ended in personal embarrassment. Rimbaud—who had only seen the girl from a distance—sent her a carefully crafted letter expressing his sentiment and arranged to meet her in the town square. The girl, older by over a year, arrived with her nanny and mocked the nervous adolescent’s shabby appearance. In keeping with his reputation for extreme timidity in social encounters, Rimbaud recounted later to Delahaye that he could only blush and stammer, “effaré comme trente-six millions de caniches nouveaux-nés” (qtd. in Lefrère 259) [wild eyed with panic like six million new born poodles]. As an adult in Africa, Rimbaud—when not living in total celibacy as Monsignor Jarosseau noted—maintained an Abyssinian woman as his mistress whom he attempted to educate (Lefrère 897-99). When queried years later on Rimbaud’s sexual orientation, Bardey stated plainly that the employee with whom he had worked so closely gave no indication of homosexuality in either his statements or behavior. In the expression of the day Bardey asserts, “Il m’a toujours donné l’impression d’un homme normal” (qtd. in Lefrère 900) [He always gave me the impression of being a normal man].

50 Rimbaud’s extreme timidity and awkwardness in social interaction—coupled with a boyish appearance that persisted until late adolescence—severely impeded him from making contact with the opposite sex. In her biography, Starkie contends that Rimbaud’s first sexual experience was either the alleged abuse by soldiers depicted in “Le Cœur supplicié” [Stolen Heart] (80) or with Verlaine (182). In either case the poet’s sexual initiation would have been one with his own sex and in mid-adolescence while his sexual identity was still vulnerable.
legally as sodomites. In 1895, despite Oscar Wilde’s fame in his own time as a beloved humorist and playwright, a jury convicted him of sodomy under British law, forcing him to serve two years hard labor in the Reading Gaol as a result of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Although authorities never formally charged either Verlaine or Rimbaud in this respect, the mere prospect of its revelation would have normally proved a great burden for a young man to bear. However, the evidence indicates that, at least in the beginning, this was not the case for Rimbaud. In order to maintain the assertion that the scandal of Brussels caused him lasting trauma, it is necessary to address his initial lack of visible concern.

Despite any immediate fears about infamy that he might have had, they do not appear to have overwhelmed him at the moment, but rather his immediate priorities remained with achieving success as an author. Although Isabelle indicates that her brother returned home from Brussels in a distressed state, his concern appeared to be more for the fate of Verlaine. Afterwards, his main objective was the completion of *Saison [A Season]*, arranging for its printing, and finding a means to pay for it. These actions attest to the priority that Rimbaud placed on literary fame. As far as the discovery of the homosexual affair, he may have naively hoped it would remain within the confines of the legal system or, already accustomed to fending off the rumors, believed he could explain it away to friends, family, and, most importantly, literary peers. His unconcern certainly demonstrates a complete lack of appreciation for how the events in Brussels could threaten his position with the Parisian literati and the hope for publication that he held so dear. On the other hand, although he would never have willingly

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51 As evidence of the psychological trauma caused by the Brussels incident, Isabelle testifies that her brother entered the house upon his return home in an emotionally distressed state. Berrichon repeats the account of the homecoming as seen by the then thirteen-year-old sister: “À peine entré, sans répondre aux paroles de bienvenue, il va s’effondrer sur une chaise. Une crise affreuse de sanglots le secoue. ‘Oh Verlaine! Verlaine!’ gémit-il seulement de temps à autre” (Berrichon 278). [Barely having entered, without responding to our words of welcome, he collapsed in a chair. An awful convulsion of sobs shook him. “Oh Verlaine! Verlaine!” he would moan just now and then.]
suffered the consequences of open homosexuality, there is reason to believe in his writing of *Saison [A Season]* that a part of his psyche relished the idea of revealing the truth of the matter.

Because “Vierge Folle. L’Époux infernal” [The Foolish Virgin and the Demon Bridegroom] of *Saison [A Season]* represents a thinly veiled description of his relationship with Verlaine, the attempt to write and publish the text in the months after the Brussels incident supports the notion that not only was Rimbaud initially unconcerned about the scandal but also that he sought to escape the hypocrisy of hiding the truth. Although the literary piece is ostensibly the description of a contentious heterosexual relationship as related through the viewpoint of the woman, anyone who had known Rimbaud and Verlaine well and seen their manner of interaction could have easily matched them with the couple in the text. The intensely personal portrait would have revealed to those in the know details about the two poets’ rapport. The text leaves no doubt as to the romantic physical expression of their passion, and shows Rimbaud, depicted by the title character of the Demon Bridegroom, as the dominant personality in the relationship. One passage appears to intimate an apology for homosexuality and, at the least, expresses the author’s trouble in establishing relationships with women. Rimbaud’s boldness in respect to writing “Vierge Folle” [Foolish Virgin] indicates that in some fashion he wanted to tell the truth, albeit without paying the price. However, his daring took place before he understood the complete rejection of his person that would result as fallout from Brussels.

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52 From the perspective of Verlaine as the Foolish Virgin quoting Rimbaud as the Demon Bridegroom, the text reads: “Mais, après une pénétrante caresse, il disait: ‘Comme ça te paraîtra drôle, quand je n’y serai plus, ce par quoi tu as passé. Quand tu n’auras plus mes bras sous ton cou, ni mon cœur pour t’y reposer, ni cette bouche sur tes yeux’” (426). [But then after a penetrating embrace he used to say: “How funny everything will seem when I am gone, everything you’ve gone through. When you won’t have my arms around you anymore, or feel my heart beneath you, or my mouth against your eyes” (Schmidt, *A Season* 41).]

53 As if to quote himself through the persona of the Demon Bridegroom, Rimbaud writes, “Il dit: ‘Je n’aime pas les femmes. L’amour est à réinventer, on le sait. […] Ou bien je vois des femmes, avec les signes du bonheur, dont, moi, j’aurai pu faire de bonnes camarades, dévorées tout d’abord par des brutes sensibles comme des bûchers...’” (424) [He says: ‘I don’t love women. Love has to be reinvented, we know that. […] Sometimes I see women who look as if they could be happy, and I think I could have made friends with them, but they’re already swallowed up by brutes with the feeling of a log of wood...’ (Schmidt, *A Season* 37)].
A Pariah at Café Tabourney

The café Tabourney represents a significant turning point for Rimbaud, as it is here that he first understands the damage done to his standing in the literary community, even foreseeing the possibility that his writing would never result in personal glory. Rimbaud arrived in Paris at the end of October 1873, hoping to sound out reaction to the copies of *Saison* [*A Season*] that he had sent in advance to Forain to pass among the literati. If Rimbaud had hoped that full knowledge of his affair with Verlaine and its violent end would at least remain with authorities in Brussels, he discovered that the story had quickly spread to Paris. Newspapers made no mention of the investigation, but because of the story’s sensational nature, word of mouth proved sufficient. When Rimbaud entered the café Tabourney, the well-circulated news had completely poisoned the artistic community’s already dim view of the poet.

During Rimbaud’s visit to the capital, he experienced not only the overt hostility of the Parisian literati but also came to understand their absolute indifference to *Saison* [*A Season*]—or any other potential literary effort on his part. On the first of November, he found himself at the café Tabourney—close to the Odéon Theater. The writers and artists he had known well his first year in the city filled the place, and he approached a table asking to join in the discussion. In recounting the chilly reception, Nouveau states that he witnessed a rebuffed Rimbaud settled in at a table, “où il fut d’abord parfaitement seul. Non loin des littérateurs, des artistes, qui le reconnaissent, se le désignèrent en prononçant des paroles de méfiance” (qtd. in Lefrère 642) [where he was in essence completely alone. Not far away, literary types, some artists, who recognized him, pointed him out to each other pronouncing disparaging words]. The former colleagues of Verlaine blamed Rimbaud for the plight of their once gentle friend now in jail in Mons. As for the café crowd’s evaluation of *Saison* [*A Season*], it is doubtful that anyone,
including Forain, had expressed a desire to even read the work (642). For the young poet welcomed two years earlier by the same group as a genius, potentially the next Victor Hugo, the cold reality of complete rejection could not have been taken easily. At this moment, he began to realize that the adventure with Verlaine and its violent culmination just months earlier had cost him—perhaps irrevocably—the long hoped for admiration of his peers.

Upon Rimbaud’s return home from his trip to Paris, he finally began to demonstrate full awareness of the damage done to his life by recent events, showing for the first time a visceral sense of shame. It was in respect to this period of time that Isabelle claimed her brother initiated the holocaust of his writings (Lefrère 643-44). Although certain aspects of the literary bonfire are now known to be apocryphal, it does not seem likely that she would have invented the idea without some real event as inspiration, and, as we will see below, Rimbaud’s friends could have verified that his demoralized state would be in keeping with such a dramatic display. Even though he continued to see himself as a man of letters, the burning of even some of his papers would have marked the first sign of disaffection with literature.

An encounter with Rimbaud after his return from Paris attests to his intense distress and profound awareness of what infamy had cost him. Millot and Pierquin—already familiar with the shooting and trial in Brussels over the summer—saw Rimbaud sitting alone at the café Dutherme in Charleville. He was withdrawn, refusing to touch the pint of beer before him: a demeanor already witnessed by the two on several occasions. Hoping to shake him out of his doldrums, his friends attempted to bring up the matter that, until this point, they had avoided, “sachant combien il en était affecté” [knowing how much he was affected by it]. Pierquin recounts:

Il pouvait rester ainsi des heures entières, silencieux, absorbé. Je l’abordais en lui disant: “Eh! bien... et nos répugnants contemporains?” Je ne sais si l’idée lui vint que je faisais allusion à Verlaine et au procès de Bruxelles: il leva sur moi ses yeux voilés de tristesse et me répondit par un haussement d’épaules. Quelque temps après, Millot, moins timoré
que moi, lui en toucha quelques mots: “Ne remue pas ce tas d’ordures, dit Rimbaud. C’est trop ignoble!” Millot se le tint pour dit. (qtd. in Lefrère 649)

[He could stay there like that for whole hours, silent, preoccupied. I came up to him saying: “Hey! Well... how goes our loathsome men of this Age?” I do not know if the idea came to him that I was alluding to Verlaine and the trial in Brussels: he looked at me his eyes veiled in sadness and answered by hunching his shoulders. Sometime later, Millot, less timorous than I, broached the matter with a few words about it: “Don’t stir up that heap of garbage,” said Rimbaud, “It is too vile!” Millot considered himself warned.]

The story unmistakably links Rimbaud’s emotional state to the events in Brussels and its ramifications, which he had only recently come to appreciate at the café Tabourney. Pierquin effectively communicates the depth of the trauma as measured by the fact it caused Rimbaud day after day to remain immobilized for hours in despair. Even close friends approached the source of his pain with trepidation. The terse comments from Rimbaud tell us two important aspects of his gut-felt reaction to the scandal and its fallout. Referring to the matter as “ce tas d’ordures” [that heap of garbage], he indicates his disgust. He definitively closes the matter as “trop ignoble” [too vile/base] suggesting that by now he considered it a source of shame. Although it would still take two years for him to completely lose hope in the potential of his art to bring vindication, the ignominy he felt at this moment would ultimately metastasize to include literature in general and everything associated with it.

Self-Reinvention through Travel and Wealth

Rimbaud’s desire to flee the cloud of scandal and reinvent himself lies at the heart of his obsession with travel outside of France, eventually driving him to leave the continent altogether. Among the other factors motivating him to leave France (including the stimulation of new environments, the acquisition of foreign languages, and finally, in Africa, the hope of escaping the cultural restrictions of his European heritage), I believe the need to escape infamy at home was key. During the years that followed the ugliness at café Tabourney, he spent most of the time in other European countries where his past was unknown. However, when Rimbaud started
to venture away from Europe, he began to truly believe he could escape the past and reinvent himself. In Abyssinia—where few Europeans would have ventured except for intrepid explorers and traders looking to make a fortune—he could fully envision the possibility of starting his life again with a completely clean slate. Certainly there would have been no figures from the literary world to remind him of his foolish pursuit of poetry and the life he remembered with contempt and shame. In Abyssinia, Rimbaud could work to become what he dreamed for his imagined son: a man rich from commerce and science.

Born in great part out of disgust with years of demeaning financial dependence, the dream of making a fortune as a result of his own hard work, personal fortitude, and sense of industry played an important role in Rimbaud’s vision of self-reinvention. In “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood] of Saison [A Season], he emphasizes strength, independence, and wealth as the things that constitute his fantasy image of the man he could become: “Je reviendrai, avec des membres de fer, la peau sombre, l’œil furieux: sur mon masque, on me jugera d’une race forte. J’aurai de l’or [...](415). [I will come back with muscles of iron, with dark skin and angry eyes: they will look at the mask of my face and think I belong to a master race. I will have gold (Schmidt, A Season 13).] The description bares an uncanny resemblance to what the former poet both became and still hoped to become while in Africa. Here in Saison [A Season], Rimbaud announces a burgeoning dream to become the antithesis of his artistic life.

Throughout his bohemian years, Rimbaud expressed a loathing for any physical work that might interrupt his poetic and intellectual endeavors (an important theme in Saison [A Season]). As a consequence, he continually sponged money from friends and family. If he

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54 In “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood] of Saison [A Season], Rimbaud writes, “J’ai horreur de tous les métiers. Maîtres et ouvriers, tous paysans, ignobles. La main à plume vaut la main à charrue. —Quel siècle à mains! —Je n’aurai jamais ma main (413) [I can’t stand professions, occupations. Bosses and workers, they’re all stupid peasants. A
could not make a living with his mind, preferably with the publication of poetry, he preferred to beg from friends and live in poverty. Henri Mercier, owner of the publication *Revue du monde nouveau*, encountered the poet down-and-out in Marseilles and asked him if he needed five francs. Taking the money before a quick exit, Rimbaud answered, “On a toujours besoin de cinq francs” (qtd. in Lefrère 709) [I always need five francs]. The anecdote is emblematic of a day-to-day existence that depended on someone’s generosity, usually Verlaine’s. While at home, financial dependence on his mother required submission to her stifling control such that even in his early twenties, friends could not send letters directly to the family address for fear of Vitalie’s interference (723). To bring the humiliation of the matter to a focus, the exposure of his reliance on Verlaine’s money in the Brussels investigation revealed Rimbaud to the world as a kept man. Even in the writing of *Saison* [*A Season*], he communicates a developing sense that his willingness to live off others was somehow corrupt.  

After Rimbaud’s farewell to France, he was determined to never return to his homeland unless he could do so a wealthy man. Paralleling his chronic expression of unhappiness, another running theme in his letters home from Africa was the desire to obtain financial security, often emphasizing it as an absolute prerequisite for returning to France. As recounted in her July 22, 1897, letter to Berrichon, Françoise Grisard, a French woman working as a maid for Alfred

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55 Again from “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood] of *Saison* [*A Season*], he writes, “Mais! qui a fait ma langue perfide tellement, qu’elle ait guidé et sauvegardé jusqu’ici ma paresse? Sans me servir pour vivre même de mon corps, et plus oisif que le crapaud, j’ai vécu partout” (413) [But who made my tongue so treacherous that it has always protected my laziness until now? I haven’t even used my body to survive. I have lived everywhere, idler than a sleepy toad (Schmidt, *A Season* 9)].

56 On May 29, 1884, he writes to family, “Enfin qu’il arrive seulement un jour où je pourrai sortir de l’esclavage et avoir des rentes pour ne pas travailler qu’autant qu’il me plaira!” (623) [May a day only come when I will be released from slavery and have sufficient income not to work any more that I should like! (Mason 198)].

57 In his December 30, 1884, letter, he explains to his mother that financial independence is prerequisite to any return to home: “Comme vous le dites, je ne puis aller là que pour reposer; et, pour se reposer, il faut des rentes, pour se marier il faut des rentes; et ces rentes-là, je n’ai rien” (629). [As you say, I could only go there to rest; and to rest one needs income; to marry one needs income; and that sort of income I don’t have (Mason 208).]
Bardey’s wife, remembered Rimbaud telling her emphatically that “il ne reviendrait en France que lorsqu’il aurait gagné une grosse fortune, sinon il ne reviendrait jamais [...] (qtd. in Lefrère 898) [he would only return to France when he would have amassed a substantial fortune, if not he would never come back [...]]. In many respects, Rimbaud’s desire for money was similar to anyone else’s wish to have the means to follow personal goals—in his case, the adventure of world travel. However, the emphasis on not returning to his native country without having already become a man of independent means suggests it was of more importance that his own people should see him in that manner. It was essential to become the opposite of what he had been in his youth when he—as indicated by the self-critique in Saison [A Season]—disdained labor and wanted to live only for the creation of an intangible intellectual product. Most importantly, he wanted to flee the disgrace of financial dependence on Verlaine, friends, and his mother; he feared most returning to the degrading position of beggar, another important aspect of his youth that he would forever look back on with shame and revulsion.

Rimbaud would have been right to fear that the resurrection of his old poetry would revive with it the scandal that associated him with Verlaine. At the end of Rimbaud’s life, his physician, Dr. Beaudier, asked the ailing man about his career as a poet not because the doctor had read the young man’s poetry but because he had heard the sensational stories surrounding his patient and Verlaine.58 While in Africa, only a year after the first publication of his work in the series “Les Poètes maudits” [Accursed Poets] of Lutèce, Rimbaud learned from family that his older brother, Frédérique, was threatening to talk up the Verlaine affair if he did not receive financial support. Rimbaud’s response in an October 7, 1884, letter home reveals not only his

58 For biographer Robert Goffin, Dr. Beaudier explained the reason for his awareness of Rimbaud’s literary career: “Je savais qu’Arthur Rimbaud s’était occupé de littérature. Son aventure avec Verlaine avait animé les potins de la région […] (Goffin 47). [I knew Arthur Rimbaud had been interested in literature. His affair with Verlaine had livened up the gossip of the area […].]
fear that the infamy of his youth had come back to haunt him but also the personal importance he placed on the reputation he had created for himself in Africa. Rimbaud writes to his mother:

Quant à exercer sa langue sur mon compte, ma conduite est connue ici comme ailleurs. Je puis vous envoyer le témoignage de satisfaction exceptionnel que la Compagnie Mazeran liquidée m’a accordé pour quatre années de services de 1880 à 84 et j’ai une très bonne réputation ici, qui me permettra de gagner ma vie convenablement. Si j’ai eu des moments malheureux auparavant, je n’ai cherché à vivre aux dépens des gens ni au moyen du mal. (628)

[As for him running his mouth about me, my actions are well established here as elsewhere. I can send you the attestation of exceptional satisfaction that the bankrupt Mazeran Company gave me after my four years of service, from 1880 to ’84, and I can tell you I have a very good reputation here, which allows me to earn my keep rather easily. If I have known moments of adversity in the past, I have never sought to live off of others, nor to make my living dishonestly. (Mason 206)]

The most interesting aspect of Rimbaud’s reaction to his brother Frédérique’s attempt at extortion is that—to form a defense—he turns immediately to and relies exclusively on his record as a good employee and dependable businessman. Similar to the great pride he had shown to Delahaye years earlier in his letter of good reference from Cyprus, the high regard of colleagues in Africa was now his most important source of self-esteem, and he holds up this reputation as a sort of protection from mistakes of the past. Equally significant is the emphasis placed on his ability to now earn his own living. However, when he attempts to claim at the end of the passage that he had always made his own way in life, never living off of others, I believe that Rimbaud was not simply demonstrating a selective memory of his past, hoping to erase from his mind the degrading financial dependence of his artistic life, but rather he wished to hold up the reinvention of himself in Africa as his true persona.

The Praise of Fools

In the second half of his life, Rimbaud’s sense of identity had shifted completely to his work as a trader: a vocation, which I have argued that he perceived as his personal participation in the transforming power of industry and science. The esteem of fellow businessmen, explorers,
and local officials formed his source of validation. Physical labor, commerce, and controlling the material world through science and technology represented something of “true” value for him. This was in opposition to the creation of literary art, which, he was now convinced, represented simple delusion. From early adolescence until just before his twenty-first birthday, he had valued literature among the highest of earthly endeavors, squarely placing his identity in his abilities as a writer, earnestly seeking validation in repeated attempts at publication. Because literature no longer represented something of worth as an adult, he took no pleasure in looking back on his career as a poet. In contrast, he could only see a list of powerful negatives whose painful memory merely wounded his pride: the waste of substance abuse, demeaning financial dependence, the victim of his partner’s violent instability, and the stain of public scandal that had managed to follow him to another continent.

It is a cruel irony that the praise Rimbaud once sought so earnestly from his literary peers came not only when he no longer desired it, but when he had come to regard such approbation as an insult and a curse. A year before his death, he received a letter from Lauren de Gavoty, editor of the literary review La France moderne. Gavoty expresses an admiration and awe for the former poet similar to that which Rimbaud in his turn had articulated twenty years earlier to Théodore de Banville in praise of the “tous les bons Parnassiens” [all the good Parnassians]. Gavoty writes to his idol:

Monsieur et cher Poète,
J’ai lu de vos beaux vers: c’est vous dire si je serais heureux et fier de voir le chef de l’École Décadente et Symboliste collaborer à la “France Moderne” dont je suis le directeur.
Soyez donc des nôtres.
Grands mercis d’avance et sympathie admirative. (qtd. in Lefrère 1100)

[Monsieur and dear Poet,
I have read your beautiful poetry. It follows that I should be happy and proud to see the leader of the Decadent and Symbolist School be a contributor to La France moderne, of which I am the editor.]
Please be one of us.
Accept in advance our deep gratitude and admiring friendship.

Rimbaud kept this letter, and it was among the belongings he brought back to France during the onset of his illness. Knowing Rimbaud’s uncompromising condemnation of literature and his connection with it, there is no reason to believe that the letter evoked either positive emotion or nostalgia for his former passion. One can only make conjecture concerning his reasons for holding on to the letter. Did he merely intend to use it to thwart any future publication of his work? There is still a more interesting prospect to consider. If Rimbaud recognized in the sincere words of Gavoty an image of himself from years earlier, he may have hoped to talk sense into the naïve and deluded young man, sparing him from following the same miserable path that he had once ventured. It is only possible to know that something motivated Rimbaud not to cast aside this reminder of an affiliation with literature that he consistently found odious.

When admirers of Rimbaud find it difficult to accept that the materialist minded businessman in Africa faithfully represents his personality during the last half of his life, it is necessary to return once more to the poet’s final comments on the matter and simply take him at his word. Undoubtedly referring, at least in part, to Gavoty’s effusive letter, Rimbaud—while under the influence of opiates—opened up to talk to his sister about his former literary work and the news he had received concerning the “fuss” taking place over his poetry in Paris. Isabelle states of her brother’s reaction, “Ainsi l’on sut que là-bas, au Harrar [sic], il avait appris la possibilité de réussir en France dans la littérature; mais qu’il se félicitait de n’avoir pas continué l’œuvre de jeunesse, parce que ‘‘c’était mal’’” (qtd. in Lefrère 1142) [In this way we knew that down in Harar he had learned about the possibility to succeed in France with his literature; but he congratulated himself for having not continued the pursuit of his youth because “it was wrong’’]. It is interesting that Isabelle should say that Rimbaud “se félicitait” [congratulated himself],
indicating an almost celebratory mood for not yielding to the temptation of glory now offered
him through literature, and he applauds himself for recognizing the “mal” [wrong] inherent in
poetry. At this point in his life, he considered the acclaim awaiting him from the decadent and
symbolist poets as the praise of fools; foolishness he felt enlightened to have buried long ago.
CONCLUSION: A STERILE PEACE

When a great mystery is solved, the discovered facts, once revealed, often seem banal in contrast to the allure of the former unknown. However, in the case of Rimbaud’s abandonment of his literary talent, even when his choices are more clearly understood (an end to which, I believe this study has contributed significantly), the story loses little of its power to captivate. In contemplating the circumstances of his poetic silence, one word comes to mind: extraordinary. Although this adjective is too often attributed lightly, it is proper in the given context, and the temptation to return to it or a synonym when reviewing the findings of this thesis will be strong.

The initial details that form the question concerning Rimbaud’s disaffection with literature would seem incredible if they had not originated from well-established biographical material analyzed at the start of this study. The contrast of extremes between what he was and what he became make his story especially perplexing: a completely dedicated artist, demonstrating talent that would secure his place in Western literature, transformed into a man who valued only the promise of science and industry, limiting his writing to calculated sterility. This transition (all the more astonishing inasmuch as it was more or less complete by his twenty-fifth birthday) represents a change as unexpected as the image given us in the beginning of Saison [A Season]: an artist turning on the very essence of his or her calling and cursing beauty. In the fullness of time, Rimbaud fulfilled his own prophecy, rejecting scornfully his former passion for poetry and never wavering in his contempt until the last days of his short life.

In examining how Rimbaud’s disaffection with poetry unfolded, our discussion determined that his transformation was less the result of a willful, isolated decision and more an evolution in perspective, where changing circumstances, particularly in terms of personal philosophy, unwittingly robbed him of his first love. Despite his continuing efforts to have his
work published, the two years following Saison [A Season] represented a progressive shift away from an artistic mindset to a point of disinterest in literature and even mild annoyance with its inability to bring success. Considering the magnitude of Rimbaud’s talent, his loss of enthusiasm for poetry would have proved sufficiently bewildering, but in the years following “Rêve” [Dream], he came to look back on his association with the literary arts as a destructive force in his life, eventually extending his own negative experience to perceive literature universally as a social evil and a hindrance to the progress of humanity. In addition to his utterances of visceral disdain, he manifested his antipathy toward literary expression by methodically purging his writing of any evocative or subjective imagery: dryness so abnormal that it required explanation.

To account for the transfiguration that took place in Rimbaud over a period of approximately nine years (the interval between his articulation of the seer philosophy in May 1870 and the pronouncements concerning his final perspective on literature to Delahaye, Pierquin, and Millot at summer’s end in 1879), this thesis needed to identify sufficiently powerful psychological forces at the heart of the question. Relying on the distinct categorizations of human motivation determined by Abraham H. Maslow, three drives proved key: self-transcendence (Chapter 2), self-preservation (Chapter 3), and self-esteem (Chapter 4). Although often complex, the psychological dynamics proposed in our discussion are not theories that exist only in the abstract as projected onto an unknowable Rimbaud, but rather they are claims substantiated by his own words and actions as well as the observations of those who knew him.

Rimbaud’s confession in Saison [A Season] of a constant hunger for some vision of divinity attests to his drive for self-transcendence. His attraction to mystic doctrine for incorporation into the seer vision, especially in conjunction with the further need to justify his practice of poetry within such a philosophy, not only reinforces the predominance of his drive to
reach beyond the self but also poetry’s subordinate position in respect to that need. Despite his determination to maintain a literary identity after the adoption of a materialist viewpoint, his passion for poetry failed to win the day, thus confirming that the desires of his heart needed to either conform to the demands of his greater vision or perish. In particular, it was a deep-rooted inclination to envision his self-transcendence in the form of an absolute that made his final philosophy so unforgiving in respect to poetry. The intentional flatness of his writing as an adult can only be explained by a mindset that saw the purely objective interpretation of the world as a reflection of personal doctrine: a means of participating in what he believed represented the unique “true and right” path to which he could lose himself as one might a religion.

Once our discussion had established that Rimbaud’s desire to reach beyond the self held ascendance in his personality, it was possible to explain the absence of literary expression in his adult life almost exclusively by poetry’s inability to function within the parameters of his brand of materialism. It accounts for his ultimate loss of interest in literature, his belief that it represented an obstacle to the advancement of humanity, and even the development of his anti-style in writing. However, it could not justify the surprising presence of gut-felt disgust: the violent reaction to the topic of poetry or the memory of his involvement with it. Only the subsequent set of negatives identified in this thesis (ones that Rimbaud attributed to his artistic life and which he perceived as having threatened his most fundamental needs: preservation of physical and mental health, acceptance by the community, and maintenance of self-dignity) could have legitimized his feeling that literature had not only proven useless but also a deleterious influence, prompting him to tell Isabelle only months before his death that in respect to his poetry, “[C]’était mal’ (qtd. in Lefrère 1145) [It was wrong].
After Rimbaud had freed himself from his addiction to intoxicants, he blamed the artistic mindset and its accompanying bohemian lifestyle for the years of waste caused by perpetual drunkenness and drug induced stupor, counting himself lucky to have escaped with his health and sanity intact. This thesis has demonstrated that the derangement of all the senses called for in the seer letters implied the use of alcohol and special psychoactive drugs in order to facilitate achieving the desired spiritual and mental state. However, the inspiration to link intoxicants with the creation of poetry did not originate purely out of an intellectual attraction to Baudelaire’s corresponding aesthetic theories, but rather from Rimbaud’s particular need for an outside agent to liberate him from innate emotional restriction. The ever-strengthening grip of his inhibitions made self-expression in his art increasingly dependent on the damaging habit. Because the complete sobriety he practiced as an adult gave birth to a life of asceticism, it suggests he had incorporated the concept of abstinence into his overall post-literary philosophy: the mood and mind altering effects of intoxicants otherwise undermining his capacity to interpret the world in an accurate and objective manner.

Finally, the impact of personal shame resulting from the revelation of Rimbaud’s affair with Verlaine should not be underestimated. Although he did not initially appreciate the full consequences of the sensational news concerning the shooting and Verlaine’s subsequent arrest and trial, his ultimate devastation—after rejection by the Parisian artistic community as fallout from the scandal—was clearly evident in the testimony of Pierquin and Millot. As an adult, he correctly feared that the revival of his poetry would bring with it the ignominy of the past: a fact affirmed by the attempted blackmail by his brother and the testimony from a country doctor such as Beaudier, indicating that, eighteen years after the fact, details of the affair with Verlaine were still universal knowledge. For Rimbaud, who exhibited pride that bordered on arrogance, who
had come to anticipate acclaim due the greatness he was certain he possessed, the resulting wound to his self-esteem was equal in depth to at least the height of his former expectations. Because he blamed the damage to his pride directly on the life he had led as an artist, he cherished all the more the opportunity he had found in Africa to recreate his persona, becoming the opposite of what he had been in his youth.

Despite the identification and reasonable substantiation in this thesis of specific psychological dynamics relating to Rimbaud’s abandonment of poetry, there may still be moments when our intuition will entice us to ignore the evidence presented and lead us to suspect that the poet’s loss of interest in his art was, after everything, simply a reflection of his youth: an outcome typical of passage into adulthood. Because the most superficial aspects of Rimbaud’s story seem to identify closely with a life experience shared by most, the common sense reaction in this instance can be seductive. A phenomenon familiar to perhaps every adult is that of the adolescent who wholeheartedly embraces a certain endeavor but with maturity loses enthusiasm as he or she realizes the more tedious aspects of the youthful calling. We are reminded of the garage band guitar player who is satisfied to have mastered the basic chords but in truth is more intrigued with the aura of the virtuoso’s stardom than the long hours needed to attain a similar level of expertise. When these types of youthful obsessions die, the individual often discovers that he or she did not possess a personality suited for what was most at the heart of the endeavor. Consider the potential actor, stage struck and enthralled with the thrill of performance, who realizes with time that the prospect of exploring and developing the psychological aspects of his or her assigned character is of less interest than the more peripheral aspects of theatrical craft. The adolescent craving for excitement that originally made the calling
seem so appealing will not otherwise sustain the “would be” artist in his or her career after the initial more superficial attraction disappears with adulthood.

To avoid the temptation to simply ascribe the phenomenon of youth to Rimbaud’s situation, we must remind ourselves of the basic facts. For at least five years, he demonstrated complete focus and dedication in respect to literature, exploring and developing his literary technique to a level that would count him among the world’s great poets. The maturity of his effort confirms that he appreciated and welcomed what his art demanded. Furthermore, while the former garage band musician or passing actor normally looks back as an adult with either nostalgia or bemusement, Rimbaud remembered the practice of poetry with only regret and bitterness, indicating that more substantial psychological agents were at the heart of his disaffection with it. In light of these certainties alone, it is more reasonable to conclude that the congruence in time between the evolution of Rimbaud’s perspective on literature and his passage from adolescence into adulthood is—aside from his status as a prodigy—coincidence. However, I am willing to concede to the transition of youth argument in the following limited respect.

A particular excitement that Rimbaud may have associated with the creation of poetry—one that proved ephemeral with the passing of his youth—is the thrill of self-discovery and self-expression. Within the arguments already presented in this thesis, it is still possible to propose that he emotionally wearied of exploring his soul and examining his psyche in the invasive manner that he had originally demanded so excitedly of the seer. Especially while intoxicated, what he discovered too often in the depth of his heart was simple rage. In a letter dated December 12, 1875, Verlaine challenged Rimbaud to confront this aspect of his personality, writing, “[… ] ta perpétuelle colère contre chaque chose, — juste au fond, cette colère, bien qu’inconsciente du pourquoi” (qtd. in Lefrère 734) [your never ending anger against each [and
every] thing, at your very core, this anger, although [you are] not aware why]. In the initial freedom of his adolescent adventure as a seer poet, Rimbaud may have found the experience of his anger, especially as a manifestation of his general spirit of rebellion, empowering. However, by the time he reached young adulthood, the feeling of perpetual rage would have easily become more draining than exhilarating. After two years of chaos from living out the seer vision with Verlaine, he could have exhausted and purged his craving for what is necessarily at the heart of artistic creation: conceptual and/or emotional revelation of the self. Once the thrill of self-exploration was appeased, his inherent inclination toward emotional restraint would have (as the evidence presented has indicated it did) slowly asserted its control. However, in view of the fact that Rimbaud alone could verify this proposition, and inasmuch as the problem of this thesis existed only because he refused to articulate his later feelings on literature in any detail, I can only offer this hypothesis as reasonable conjecture. Nevertheless, given his desire as an adult to focus exclusively on the objective world external to himself, dealing only in verifiable and measurable realities, it is possible he believed that, as a materialist and objectivist, he had found freedom from the turmoil of inner conflict that had plagued him in his youth, achieving a manageable, albeit sterile, form of peace.

Although it is even more subject to the whims of speculation, a final question is worth considering: if Rimbaud had not tragically died so young, would his sentiment toward literature have softened to any degree in later years? At the age of thirty-six (his death occurring just under three weeks past his thirty-seventh birthday), he was well into adulthood, and he demonstrated up to that point just how deeply rooted was his negative assessment of literature: the rejection of art representing personal ideology. In all likelihood, he would have attempted to exercise his copyright privileges (just as Isabelle had after her brother’s death (Lefrère 1177)) to suppress any
further publication of his old poetry. Failing that, it is difficult to imagine that, at the ages of fifty, sixty, or seventy, he would not have rationalized profiting from his enormous fame, just as his former friends later searched for scraps of old Rimbalian letters to sell to collectors or wrote down their memories of Rimbaud for publication. It is easy to believe that he would have justified using the money to finance his scientific, technical, and industrial ventures or more likely his long dreamed of travels to far parts of the world where the name of Arthur Rimbaud was still unknown, perhaps to his quixotic Zanzibar.

Despite the musings about what might have happened if Rimbaud had lived out his normal life span, the fact remains that he did die young, and more importantly, his artistic soul perished even younger. Considering the unexpected abruptness with which he ceased to write, in a surreal manner, we might envision his literary career as the victim of an artistic car wreck—a twenty-one year old Rimbaud behind the wheel—that left the progression of his art frozen in time: isolated in a special period of development in life. Among the qualities that make Rimbaud’s writing unique, the adolescent spirit of his work is part of its allure. It represents a spasm of youth and a period of creative magic when the author, at the beginning of his artistic journey, retained all his potential and believed that anything—even the fantastic ambition of the seer poet—was possible.

In the beginning of this thesis, I acknowledged that the question of Rimbaud’s poetic silence was primarily a focus on the person of the author and that resolving his mystery would contribute little to the analysis of his literary product. I also agree that, in respect to literature, the value of Rimbaud lies in his work and not the person separate from his writing. However, if an intimate understanding of the flawed humanity we share with him expands our appreciation for the exceptional quality of his genius, the heightened sense of awe will only serve to redirect our
attention back to the text, where we the readers can be fixed in time with the author, standing on his boat of discovery, anticipating the unknown.
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