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Rimbaud's Silence

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KARL SHAPIRO

## Rimbaud's Silence

*The living being who is unarmored does not seek a meaning or goal of his existence for the simple reason that he functions spontaneously—without a “thou must”—meaningfully and purposefully.*

—WILHELM REICH

**T**O POSSESS *truth in one soul and one body*: these are the final words of *A Season in Hell*. This was shortly before the poet burned his manuscripts and all the copies of the book he could lay his hands on; shortly before the famous silence which literature can never forgive. Rimbaud had shaken off the armor of literature and had entered the silence of *homo normalis*.

The silence of Rimbaud is a musical rest that extends to infinity, a silence so long and deep that it has given literature a major thrombosis. What wouldn't Culture give to erase that silence, to have Rimbaud commit suicide, for instance, at the age of nineteen! If only the bullet of Verlaine had found its mark! *Sauve!* as Rimbaud would sneer. But it didn't work out that way. Verlaine was led off blubbering to jail, “to paw the rosary” as Rimbaud put

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Preface to a Greek translation of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, edited by Nicos Spanias and recently published in Athens.

it. And Rimbaud set off to the ends of the earth, to write his silences.

His life is evenly divided into two parts: the first half the life of the poet, the second half the life of the inarticulate wanderer. *Je ne sais plus parler!* And he really did teach himself to forget how to speak.

Mallarmé, who wanted to include Rimbaud in his galaxy, called him a meteor—a bad mistake. Rimbaud wrote the silence behind the meteor, a silence more famous than the works of Shakespeare. What does it mean? Hundreds of books have been written about it. Modern poetry, as I say, is catatonic because of this silence. Perhaps it was the act of an adolescent criminal, a piece of vandalism so perfectly conceived and executed that nothing short of a new heaven and new earth can rectify the damage. Nothing short of *Noël sur la terre*.

This is the daydream of a child who has been denied Christmas, who despises the false religion that has betrayed him. The monstrous hatreds of this child for his mother, the Church, and *la patrie* all fuse into a cry of hatred against our civilization, which is the theme of the poem. Verlaine, the lover, is the foil. He is properly skewered, especially in the masochistic *Delirium* where, as the Foolish Virgin, he is allowed to analyze Rimbaud mercilessly. What a parting gift for Verlaine! And what an irony for literature that Verlaine should become Rimbaud's literary executor.

We cannot understand Rimbaud and his poetry unless we admit (as literature will never do) that the silence explains the poetry better than the five hundred books written about it. This silence is the great discovery of the creator after interminable agony. It is the mystical night from which one awakens into action. The awakening for Rimbaud takes the form of the meanderings of a petty adventurer who dreams of having a son who will become a famous engineer, "a man made rich and powerful through science." He is certainly no Odysseus, this one.

Nothing horrifies the modern poet or critic more than this statement of Rimbaud's. It is the supreme insult to Art and it is put down to every cause from peevishness to syphilis. No one, apparently, attributes it to the poet's awakening, to the reunion of body and soul, to spontaneous functioning (as the psychologist puts

it). For instead of the poet, we now have the man who refuses to answer a letter from Verlaine, but who writes a report for the Geographical Society.—It is too much for literature to swallow.

Literature persists in maintaining the image of Rimbaud the rebel, the antichrist, the hallucinated imp of the perverse. But that is only half the story. Having destroyed Church, mother, France, and poetry, he is for the first time free. Free to be “idle and brutal”; free to be “mixed up in politics.” Free to be a bourgeois. Free also for the next incarnation of slavery—Science. But even Science is better than civilization.

As succeeding generations recapitulate the anger of Rimbaud this anger becomes increasingly pointless. The scientific State is already such that it can tolerate and even be stimulated by adolescent criminality. All of the popular arts are devoted to ritual murder and sexual frustration, both essential ingredients for the scientific Utopia. The literature of rebellion is therefore only half faithful to Rimbaud. “Wealth and power through science” is the other half, as much as we hate to think so. And in this character Rimbaud is neither cynical nor critical. He has already put foot in the twentieth century.

In modern literature (especially American literature) the heroes grow progressively younger, the writers more prone to sabotage. The adolescent genius of Rimbaud is therefore heroic. Poetry is just where Rimbaud left it, even though a phony classical mausoleum has been erected over the corpse. Poetry is one sleeping beauty that is really dead.

Rimbaud was the first to enter the Age of the Assassins without malice. Crippled in body and soul by what he calls his “filthy education,” by the climate of art in France, by the obscenity of his deathbed conversion, by his own vision of our century (hideously accurate, too), he crosses over into our time. He is himself too shattered to do more than be detained; nevertheless he has made the final voyage. In him there is an unexpressed hope so immense and so piteous that it resembles the brutal sentimentality of a thousand musical comedies.—All of which is stated in the silence.

*A Season in Hell* is without question the masterpiece of adolescence—the gangster age. There is probably nothing like it in any other literature. The closest thing to it in English is *Alice in Won-*

*derland*, another work that only the innocent can understand. Both books go in disguise, one as a nonsense tale for young girls, the other as a record of a rebellious love affair. Published within a few years of each other, both books condemn without mercy the religion, the society, the culture of Europe which sacrifices the child to the laws of the adult. *Leaves of Grass* and *Huckleberry Finn* are weak by comparison.

Rimbaud the gangster poet and Rimbaud the engineer manqué are one and the same person. Both are children dreaming of their birthright. Both in a tantrum of cosmic proportions smash everything they can lay their hands on. Both are pre-Christian, pre-pagan, prior to Good and Evil—in a word, *Modern*.

That is why he is great, this raw adolescent of the poetry of our time. That is why he still lives, while all his famous contemporaries are dead. And why he will continue to rage like a childhood disease until it is all over with us, or until there is indeed *Noël sur la terre*.

*JOSÉ MARTÍ (1853-1895)*

## The King's Image, by Law

*Translated from the Spanish (Cuba)  
by Robert Lima*

The king's image, by law,  
Is borne by State stationery:  
The child was executed  
By the rifles of the king.

Celebrating the feast is the law  
Of the king: and in the holy feast  
The child's sister sings  
Before the king's image!