

Golden Chains: Sublime Indeterminacy in Rimbaud's "Phrases" and Other Poems

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Many individuals daydream about having unlimited power, although there are obstacles in the way of this realization. While the celebrated nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud has these wishes, he cannot help but notice human limitations. His literary predecessors, such as Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine, include ideas of political rebellion against Napoleon III in their poetry (Blackmore and Blackmore xvii). In this manner, men can feel they have importance if they act physically against the government. In comparison, Rimbaud transgresses boundaries in more ways than these men; he rebels against "schoolteachers, librarians, officials, poets, [and] God..." (xxix). Hence, people cannot find significance through any manmade institutions or divine beings. Even Charles Baudelaire claims to believe in the Devil or some evil force (xxi). For him, humanity can find meaning through evil. Thus, we see Rimbaud's break with his predecessors in that he recognizes humanity's insignificance in comparison with the universe. Man's reasoning and views of reality are correspondingly shown to be inconsequential in his poetry. Although he mocks mankind's attempts at grandeur, he ironically still wants to learn the secrets of Mother Nature and to overcome tradition (traditional views and logic of those in power) by liberating women; yet, he realizes death and the effects of nature separate him from these human desires.

In a manner dissimilar from that of previous poets, Rimbaud's writing expresses his belief that human power is relatively small. Despite this, we will see later that he earnestly does want there to be some eternal significance beyond death. Jean-Pierre Richard writes:

Rimbaud rejects all manifestations of depth, and it is this which marks his real divorce from Baudelaire. His visions display themselves on a shallow screen; film-strips supremely thin and yet

unbreakable for there is nothing behind them, neither volume nor abyss nor being nor nothingness nor god nor the infinite (Cited in Perloff 65-66; her translation).

Rimbaud's ideology challenges the presentation of "depth" in his predecessor's works, such as the "depth" Baudelaire finds in his concept of evil. For Rimbaud, man can only portray a surface identity, such as the "film-strips" without being. The language that gives significance may just be language and not truth. In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Marjorie Perloff writes that, in Rimbaud's poetry, "the identity of the 'I' is dissolved," and this is the "cornerstone of the new poetic indeterminacy" (62). In general, uncertainty in his poetry is built on stripping people of their identity. For instance, in "Bad Blood" from *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud writes: "It is quite evident to me that I have always been of an inferior race" (45-47, Peschel's translation). Thus, he believes his blood and ancestry are irrelevant in comparison with negative aspects of nature and death in general.

This abyss between humans and their wishes for nature's truths can be seen as a veil of nature; this is because ideas and hopes cannot be empirically observed. In *The Postmodern Explained*, Jean-François Lyotard summarizes Immanuel Kant's discussion of these imageless ideas (or abstract words): the sublime feeling occurs when "the imagination in fact fails to present any object that could accord with a concept, even if only in principle" (Lyotard 10). We have an idea of something that cannot be experienced with the senses. Similarly, Rimbaud's hope of transcendence is not empirical; it is an imageless idea. This notion corresponds to Kant's conception of Mother Nature in *The Critique of Judgment*. He writes:

Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil" (185, footnote 51).

The veil separates people from knowing the true qualities of nature, as they cannot merely learn the secrets of Mother Nature through aspiration. This frustrates Rimbaud, because he would like to rise above the laws of nature and the limitations of "reality". He shows himself transcending these laws in his poetry.

In addition, the poet also rebels against nineteenth-century views on women; he imagines that he can learn the secrets of life and spirituality by liberating them, for he approaches the unrepresentable in nature through the feminine. The term "unrepresentable" is something that is

beyond nature, and he transgresses its laws a number of times in *The Illuminations* through the figure of a sorceress; this is because she possesses immortal secrets. As we shall see, he does not truly believe he will possess immortal knowledge, but he still has the desire to have it. In *A Season in Hell*, he attempts to find a language that he says “will liberate men, animals, language and poetic form... Even women will be freed” (Cited in Peschel 9). Thus, he has a passion for endowing women with freedom. This quote's 'even women' hints at nineteenth-century views on the feminine. This era tried to produce “an ambisexual, ‘social’ model of citizenship” (Moscovici ix). The ambisexual view of genders comes from eighteenth-century philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau, who suggests that men are androgynous in mentality and women are merely men with reproductive capabilities. He believes that these abilities cause women to be overly passionate and emotional; thus, they supposedly do not have the “asexual, or masculine, equanimity needed to manage the public domain” (x). Many writers during this time maintained Rousseau’s view. For instance, Baudelaire believes that “‘invocation of God (or spirituality) is a longing to climb higher [and] invocation of Satan (or animality) is a delight in going downwards’ – and ‘love for women must be attributed to the latter’” (xxiii). Hence, he holds the view that men are more rational, since he associates women with “animality”. In this manner, Rimbaud’s views on women were progressive in his time period. He speculates about breaking the veil of nature through them. The poet writes:

When the endless servitude of woman will be overthrown, when she will live for herself and by herself, man, -- hitherto abominable, -- having given her her release, she will be a poet, she also! Woman will discover some of the unknown! Will her worlds of ideas differ from ours? -- She will discover strange, unfathomable, repellent, delicious things; we shall take them, we shall comprehend them (Cited in Peschel 9).

He believes that women would have interesting things to say if they were unshackled from societal constraints. The poet wants to discover spiritual truths by giving them a voice and, therefore, power.

In “Phrases” from *The Illuminations*, we eventually see Rimbaud accomplishing this; he shows himself gaining immortality and secret knowledge through women, since he believes some of them (particularly sorceresses) hold a special power. We might notice that the use of

hypothetical phrases (subjunctive mood) makes the utopian situations in the poem ambiguous. He writes in French: « Que j'aie réalisé tous vos souvenirs, - que je sois celle qui sait vous garrotter, - je vous étoufferai » (128). In this passage, he uses the subjunctive words “aie” and “sois.” I would translate this passage as saying: “Supposing I made real all your memories, -- Supposing I am the girl who knows how to tie you [an old man] up, -- I will choke you.” This phrasing makes us doubt that he is able to make memories real or to tie up the man. Hence, he may not actually believe he will eventually possess immortal knowledge. Still, he wants to think he can. Rimbaud is only able to choke the old man when he takes on a feminine form; we shall see later that this man represents traditional, political society. Thus, the female has control over social hierarchy or power. In this, we can see the extent to which Rimbaud tries to transgress written and unwritten laws about the state and women during the time. As previously mentioned, many nineteenth-century writers do not think that women have the rational capacity to have authority over society. However, critic Charles Chadwick notes in *Rimbaud* that one of the poet's main passions is to protect the downtrodden; hence, he is not at one with the treatment of women during this time period (117). This is why we see this emphasis in “Phrases.” Near the end of the poem, the poet asks: “What sorceress is going to rise out of the white sunset?” He waits expectantly. After this, public funds run out due to festivals, and it can be inferred that she is the cause. Consequently, this woman has economic authority too. Furthermore, she can give direction to an object in space, the sun. These combined images show her power over the universe in general. In addition, Rimbaud writes; “I throw myself on the bed, and, turned toward the darkness, I see you, my daughters! my queens!” (131). He sees women. This suggests that he has hope in them for the future. He deludes himself into thinking their immortal knowledge will save mankind. All of these women seem to possess some veiled secret. Both of his desires to

liberate women and to transcend the laws of nature are attempts to transgress certain “laws”. Since he wants to lift up the downtrodden (such as women), his writing no longer coincides with the agenda of other male writers.

There is someone who blocks Rimbaud from finding out this knowledge of nature: the old man, who represents the power of traditional society; yet, the feminine gives him power over the man. After Rimbaud ties up the man, the poet is able to choke him. He only gains this opportunity for rebellion through the female. There are two reasons why the poet wants to harm the man: money and immortal power. The old man is “calm and beautiful, surrounded by an ‘unheard-of luxury,’ – and [Rimbaud] is at [the man’s] knees” (128). Thus, the man is wealthy. In addition, his composed demeanor suggests that he has a type of confidence because of his social status. Given that Rimbaud is at the old man’s knees, this also indicates that the man has some type of power. The poet may benefit from the riches, confidence, and authority through the man’s death. After Rimbaud chokes him, he stretches “ropes from steeple to steeple; garlands from window to window; chains of gold from star to star, and [is] dancing” (131). This control over the universe suggests that he transcends his human limitations, and the power over the steeples suggests that he has a type of godly power. Since Rimbaud was not able to do this until after the man’s death, we see the man was holding him back from spiritual power. There are a few things the old man could represent, since he must be tied up to reach immortal knowledge. These possible representations of traditional society include the following: those with wealth, God, reason, traditional views of women, and political leaders; he is probably a combination of all of these. The old man could symbolize the Christian God, because God would not want Rimbaud to have superhuman alchemic powers. Also, the old man could be reason or traditional views of women, and Rimbaud tries to break away from these. He seeks in his poetry to give

women a voice and mocks reason. When women acquire a voice, Rimbaud receives a personal benefit: knowledge. Upon overcoming the old man, the poet gains wealth, political power, and the ability to transcend human limits. Of course, as previously mentioned, the poem begins in the subjunctive mood. So these acquired assets are merely dreams or hallucinatory ecstasy.

There is a critic, Robert Greer Cohn, who suggests in *The Poetry of Rimbaud* that the old man is actually Rimbaud, but this view does not take into account the entirety of the poem and Rimbaud's life. Rather than being someone who helps the poet, Cohn sees the girl as a femme fatale who causes the poet to choke himself (294-295). However, this reading does not make sense for several reasons. First of all, the poet is very young, and does not have the power in society that the old man has. Furthermore, Rimbaud has delusional, positive visions of women at the end of the poem, and this suggests he is not angry with womankind. He did not experience any negativity from a femme fatal. Therefore, the elderly man must be a separate individual, and the girl is not working against the poet.

In "After the Flood," Rimbaud also imagines that the key to unveiling nature is a woman, who is a sorceress. He continues trying to convince himself falsely that he will lift the veil of Isis. Rimbaud describes imagery that encompasses both the calm and the chaotic elements of life. The calm times consist of flowers, precious stones, and surprisingly slaughterhouses. He writes: "Blood flowed, at Bluebeard's, - in slaughterhouses, - in circuses, where the seal of God whitened the windows. Blood and milk flowed" (109). This statement is surrounded by the images of flowers, beavers building, and children. By placing "slaughterhouses" in the calm section, Rimbaud shows the necessity of sacrifice for peaceful living. The Floods (his capitalized word), which represent tremulous times, include water, sorrows, lightning and thunder. When the floods vanish, "the Queen, the Sorceress who kindles her coals in the earthen pot, will never be

willing to tell us what she knows, and what we do not know” (111). This woman possesses invaluable secrets about all aspects of life, including sacrifice. She knows something beyond what others do. As Edward J. Ahearn notes in *Rimbaud: Visions and Habitations*, she gives Rimbaud “victory over the limits of the natural world” in this poem (256).

Still, Rimbaud is not the only one who would like to know nature’s secrets, and many people delude themselves into hoping that their views will encompass all of nature’s truths; the poet mocks this reasoning behind individual and societal views of reality, even though he too would like to possess the standard for common sense. According to the poet, reason is both the beliefs of society and a person’s individual ideology. Since leaders in society claim to possess certain truths, Rimbaud mocks their reasoning. In “Bad Blood,” he argues that everyone has his own reason, especially criminals. He writes: “When I was very young I used to admire the hardened convict... He had more strength than a saint, more common sense... [only he] was a witness to his own glory and rightness” (15, Schmidt’s translation). Rimbaud abhors the law and admires the convict, because the convict has his own reason. People often assume that laws are reasonable. However, criminals often believe that society is unreasonable, and they make their own laws. While Rimbaud scoffs at others’ logic, he paradoxically still holds the wish to retain his “place at the top of this angelic ladder of common sense” (57, Peschel’s translation). This desire for prominence of his own ideas demonstrates his human side, even though he does not truly believe he can possess universal common sense.

Moreover, Rimbaud ridicules societal views of reason, because they are often based on greed and change depending on the person. In “To a Reason” from *The Illuminations*, Rimbaud portrays the instability of logic. When the personified figure of Reason taps her finger on a drum, all men follow to the new harmony. He writes: “One step of yours, it’s the levy of new men and

their order to march” (127). In general, whenever she turns her head or steps, men follow. Most humans follow whatever society deems reasonable, and Reason has the power of music to overtake the masses. Children chant to her and beg: “Change our lots, destroy the plagues, beginning with time” (127). They want her to give them their fortunes and their desires. Even the way reason moves is questionable, because it is often based on greed. Rimbaud ends by writing: “Having arrived from all times, you’ll depart on all sides” (127). Reason changes according to the age and ideology (for example, it was once reasonable to burn witches). Hence, reason behind human ideas about reality cannot always be trusted, given that there is an egotistical agenda behind personal reasoning.

Furthermore, the figure of Reason could be either male or female, given that Rimbaud often portrays women in his poetry as possessing knowledge; however, some suggest that Reason is definitely male. For instance, critic Cohn associates reason with masculinity and not femininity in “To a Reason”. He says that women have a “fleshly hollow” (a womb), and men have a “psychic hollow”. Since men cannot give birth, they try to satisfy their void with creativity; however, they cannot (288). According to Cohn, in this poem, Rimbaud wants his daemonic father to satisfy this void. This father is reason, creativity, intensive, and (of course) male (290). This interpretation does not seem to correspond to Rimbaud’s general attitude toward women. Rather, it conforms to the views of eighteenth-century philosopher Rousseau. Both this philosopher and Cohn suggest that men are more reasonable and women are not due to their reproductive capabilities. However, as we have seen, Rimbaud wants to liberate women from societal views toward them. It would be out of character for him to agree with the commonly-held view that reason is exclusively a masculine quality. Therefore, I think that ever-changing Reason in this poem could be male or female.

In a similar way as reason, society's conception of reality also changes; for instance, their perception of one person, Rimbaud, does not remain the same. The poet's social position changes over the course of his life. In "Farewell" from *A Season in Hell*, he writes: "I who called myself a seer or an angel, exempt from all morality, I am restored to the earth, with a duty to seek, and rugged reality to embrace! Peasant!" (103). Rimbaud grew up as a peasant; therefore, social circles would label him a "peasant" by birth, because this was reality. However, the poet mocks this label, because he wants to believe that he is more than a peasant. His label changes, because he becomes a great writer. Consequently, society's reality does not remain eternal, even though it may be temporal. In addition, Rimbaud's ego causes him to desire significance, even though his own ideology negates individual meaning. During the time period when he wrote this poem, Rimbaud had feelings of solitude because of his break with Verlaine. This is why critic Chadwick suggests that the poet uses "Farewell" to rise above his sadness and think optimistically (130-131). Therefore, his feelings of grandeur may also be momentary. The poet says, "Spiritual combat is as brutal as the battle of men," and he proposes that he will possess truth in spirit and in body (105). He wants to believe he will overcome the reality of his original "peasant" label through spiritual battle, and this hope gives him comfort.

Although Rimbaud retreats to his imagination here, reality mocks him in other of his poems; for instance, he cannot cause language to affect all the senses. In "Deliriums II: Alchemy of the Word," Rimbaud says he invented the color of the vowels: "A black, *E* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green [...] I flattered myself on devising a poetic language accessible, one day or another, to all the senses. I withheld the translation" (77). Rimbaud sounds sarcastic about his ability to reach transcendence through language, because vowels could never have permanent colors and poetry could never affect all the senses. He claims to know the "translation," but he is

making an excuse for his failure. Moreover, according to Chadwick, this poem suggests he is having difficulties with literary activities (119). Since Rimbaud eventually abandons poetry to spend the rest of his life in Africa, this may foreshadow his rebellion against poetry itself. The poet is unable to transcend the limitations of his writing.

Furthermore, the poet becomes conscious of his humanity, because his life is mortal. In “Night of Hell,” Rimbaud says: “I am going to unveil all the mysteries: mysteries religious or natural, death, birth, futurity, antiquity, cosmogony, nothingness. I am a master of phantasmagorias [...] I shall produce gold, cures” (63). Gold is associated in alchemical practices with eternal life. Hence, Rimbaud implies here that he has discovered an endless existence, because he is able to produce gold. However, the rest of the poem contradicts this statement. After the claim to great powers, he writes: “My life was nothing but sweet follies, regrettably” (65). These contradicting statements show that the previous claim is naught. Furthermore, Rimbaud asserts that he is sinking into nothingness, which suggests that he lacks real significance in the universe. Perhaps he cannot “unveil all the mysteries.” Chadwick also concurs that here Rimbaud “recognizes that his inordinate ambition to reform the world sprang from a pride and vanity which he now mocks” (128). The poet does not truly believe he can transcend the laws of nature. Furthermore, there is a “pillow over [his] mouth” (he is suffocating), and is being deformed (63). These images are only associated with mortal humans. Next, he talks openly about his mortality: “I am dying of weariness. This is the tomb, I am going to the worms, horror of horrors!” (65). Death’s reality destroys Rimbaud’s belief that he will achieve immortality by understanding the secrets of nature.

Rimbaud and science cannot pierce into the universe’s mysteries through observation, since the desire to do so and interpretation only lead to a form of metaphysics; this is equivalent

to an artifice. Lyotard recapitulates the theory of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno that “science and industry are just as open to suspicion with regard to reality as art and writing” (Lyotard 9). The reality of science and the reality of literature are both constructs of the imagination. Our view of reality does not consist of actual substance. In “The Gay Science: Book V” from *The Portable Nietzsche*, Friedrich Nietzsche says that there is a...

...metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests... we godless ones and anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire too from the flame which a faith thousands of years old has kindled: that Christian faith, which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine... (450).

Anti-metaphysicians still need to have a scientific faith in metaphysics. In modern time, it would be difficult not to believe in a heliocentric universe. Still our beliefs are based on evidence gained by the few select observers of phenomena; we do not observe the evidence ourselves. Furthermore, if astronomers were to announce that a meteor is definitely going to crash into the earth, we would believe and trust the scientists, which is a clear example of faith rather than empiricism. These beliefs are metaphysics, but they are not based on our own scientific observation. Therefore, maybe this theory is metaphysics, but it is the metaphysics for anti-metaphysicians.

This reality principle does not allow scientists or Rimbaud to lift the veil of nature, as reality is always limiting. Even the reality of scientists is an artifice, because it is based on faith. The separation between man and the truth is demonstrated when his imagination has an idea with no images. As we have seen, Rimbaud approaches this subject of truth through dreams and women. On one hand, he thinks that he can learn the secrets of nature by liberating them, and the sorceress possesses some secret knowledge that he cannot tap into. Also, Rimbaud's mythical universe is about transgressing the laws of “reality” through expressing his desires in his poetry. Moreover, his language rebels against those who possess power in society, and he wants to

believe that his reality will include wealth, political power, and spiritual power. This is his hallucinatory dream, and he does not truly believe in it. Rather, he believes that man's significance cannot be found through institution. This causes him to differ from the other writers in the nineteenth century, since they believed that humanity can find significance in political action or evil. In general, Rimbaud mocks the reasons behind our visions of "reality," because he thinks that reason is based on greed and it changes depending on the person. The language of reason furthers one's agenda. Moreover, our conception of reality can change over the course of our lives. Still, reality mocks Rimbaud, and this frustrates him. This is the paradox in life that he presents. He recognizes that the veil between his desires and the reality of death is there. Although unsatisfied with this answer, the poet concludes that humanity in general cannot discover the reality of itself and the secrets of nature. Kant would describe this indeterminacy of nature's meaning as sublime, since the desire to know still remains.

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