

# Lex Icon: Freud and Rimbaud

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Rimbaud's project of "Voyance," as articulated in certain letters and poems, engages linguistic processes which are proper to the activity of "unconscious ideation" which Freud discovers in jokes and dreams. For both writers, it is largely a matter of seeing as well as hearing language, a matter of language as matter, as writing. Freudian theory thus intersects with Rimbaud's practice, both writers suggesting something like an iconic experience of language. Their common opposition to a pointedly Cartesian mode of discourse binds desire with violence, of which the letter is the single, uncanny mark. When Rimbaud renounces his apocalyptic vision of a fleshly Word incarnate, we find that his flight to Africa connects with Freudian theory at another level: his letters home reveal his poetic adventure, and his rejection of it, as an encounter with the alien and familiar language of his father.

In the *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure juxtaposes the schematic image of a tree drawn from the realm of nature and the Latin word "arbor" drawn from his Latinate culture as a means of visually demonstrating the heterogeneity of words and things, in order to illustrate the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.<sup>1</sup> It is the nature of a tree to generate from the seed and take root in the ground, but the word "tree" has no roots in either tree or ground. It owes its existence to cultural conventions whose origins are not the concern of the structural linguistics Saussure is in the process of elaborating. What we learn from Saussure is that language is a form, not a substance; a word signifies by its difference from other words in any given lexicon rather than by any resemblance to the object to which it allegedly refers. Negative, opposite, relative in its very being, in its never quite being, it is the nature of the sign to have no nature of its own, no meaning which it has by its own as its own property. Language is unnatural, improper. There are words, there are signs, but what they are we cannot properly say. The linguistic sign is uncanny in the self-contradictory sense that Freud, through his consultation of multiple dictionaries, uncovered in that word: strange and familiar, ordinary and sinister.<sup>2</sup> It is out of such a sense of the disquieting familiarity of language that a certain kind of poetry is born, which takes issue with its own means of expression as

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well as with a world of forms external to it. As Rimbaud wrote in his famous "lettre du voyant":

*Trouver une langue – Du reste, toute parole étant idée, le temps d'une langue universelle viendra! Il faut être académicien – plus mort qu'un fossile, – pour parfaire un dictionnaire de quelque langue que ce soit. Des faibles se mettraient à penser sur la première lettre de l'alphabet, qui pourraient vite se ruer dans la folie (p. 271).<sup>3</sup>*

*(It's a matter of finding a language. What's more, since every word's an idea, the time of a universal language will come! You'd have to be an academician – deader than a fossil – to perfect a dictionary in any language whatsoever. For the weak, merely to begin to think about the first letter of the alphabet might make them run mad forthwith.)*

What is especially sinister about the uncanny, "das Unheimlich," is its very familiarity, its "Heimlichkeit" or homeliness, such that anything, even a word, even a letter, can be uncanny.

The uncanny thus finds its theoretical prototype in "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words" of which Freud speaks in his essay on Karl Abel's book by that title. Such words are to be found near the origins of culture; they are endowed with opposite meanings, like the Latin "sacer," which evokes something both terrible and wonderful, equally dangerous and beneficent in its potential. It is in this essay too that Freud, quoting Abel, registers his own perception of the diacritical character of words: "Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposite: he only gradually learned to separate the two sides of the antitheses and think of the one without comparison with the other."<sup>4</sup> Saussurian linguistics, with its structural notion of the differential, oppositional character of the sign, is but a programmatic revival of this consciousness. It is at this point that both Freud and Rimbaud part company with Saussure; in their view, consciousness is as problematic, as opaque, as the structure of discourse itself.

Primal words, "première lettre," dictionaries: in their refractory interrogations of culture, which both Rimbaud and Freud regard as repressive – the academy fossilizes language for the one, civilization represses primary impulses for the other – both authors are embarked on a problematic of origins centered on language, and more particularly on the alphabet in which language takes visible form. If a meditation on the alphabet can lead to madness for Rimbaud, the representation of the unconscious in Freud's essays frequently takes the form of writing. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, he speaks of their symbolism

as a kind of hieroglyph, pictographic script, cryptography or rebus.<sup>5</sup> In the case of each figure – Freud’s figures for language as figure, as trope – it is a question of stopping short before the accepted meaning of a word so as to apprehend language in its material density. For, “it is true in general that words are treated in dreams as though they were concrete things, and for that reason they are apt to be combined in just the same way as presentations of concrete things.”<sup>6</sup> Words are present in the unconscious in a way they are not for consciousness, which looks past them or through them for their lexically coded signification. Invisible to consciousness, language is visible in the unconscious and one can describe Freudian interpretation as an effort to make language uninvisible. This effort is in many ways closely akin to Rimbaud’s project of “Voyance,” as it is legible in the poetic homonym of that project, in the sonnet called “Voyelles.” A reading of these texts with Freud in mind will take us far afield – as far as Africa where Rimbaud spent the second half of his life – and bring us home again, to questions of family relations, homely relations – of father, mother, brother and sister – which is the specialty of Freudian psychoanalysis. This essay, then, is not centered on Freud but between Freud and Rimbaud, focusing on the interrogation of the letter common to their texts, on the laws and transgressions sanctioned by that interrogation.

In a letter just prior to his famous “lettre du voyant,” Rimbaud writes:

*Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre voyant: vous ne comprendrez pas du tout, et je ne saurais presque vous expliquer. Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens. Les souffrances sont énormes mais il faut être fort, être né poète et je me suis reconnu poète. Ce n’est pas du tout ma faute. C’est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: On me pense. Pardon du jeu de mots.*

*JE est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon, et nargue aux inconscients, qui ergotent sur ce qu’ils ignorent tout à fait! (p. 268).*

*(I want to be a poet, and I am working on making myself a seer: you won’t understand this at all and I wouldn’t know how to explain it to you. It’s a question of reaching the unknown through the derangement of all the senses. The sufferings are enormous but one must be strong, must have been born a poet and I know myself to be a poet. That is not at all my fault. It is false to say: I think. One ought to say: one thinks me. Pardon the play on words.*

*I is an other. It’s too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin*

and a fig for the thoughtless who argue about what they are altogether ignorant about.)

Critics have rightly insisted of late on the manner in which Rimbaud performs a deconstruction of Cartesian philosophy, particularly in its psychological implications.<sup>7</sup> The formula herein, later to be elaborated as “un long, immense, et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens” (a long, immense and systematic deregulation of all the senses) constitutes a rereading of Descartes’ *Règles pour la direction de l’esprit* as well as of his *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire la raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*. “Tous les sens” is preferred to Descartes’ “bon sens,” synonymous with “raison.” The logic which establishes “Je est un autre” proceeds from a literal disarticulation of the formula, “Cogito ergo sum”: “et nargue aux inconscients qui ergotent sur ce qu’ils ignorent tout à fait!” It is a very literal transformation: the anagrammatic play silences the “g” and “t” of “ergotent,” whence “ignorent,” such that “ce qu’ils ignorent” emerges by another name which Rimbaud anticipates Freud in calling “inconscient(s).” Otherwise stated, the “ergo” of the cogito is “nargué” as “ignorent,” “narguer” meaning “railler, braver avec insolence”: to mock.

Rimbaud’s word play makes the cogito, which gives pride of place to rational consciousness, the butt of a hostile joke of the kind that Jacques Lacan played on Descartes in the formula, “Je pense où je ne suis pas, donc je suis où je ne pense pas.”<sup>8</sup> The anagrammatic technique, or let us say, in deference to Descartes, method, that Rimbaud employs in verbally deconstituting consciousness, is precisely of the kind that Freud analyzes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In order to more directly represent the linguistic distortions at work in jokes, Freud had recourse to a graphic demonstration in the form of a diagram. Thus the witticism by which Heine avenges himself on the snobbery of a rich man – “I sat beside Solomon Rothschild and he treated me as his equal – quite famillionairely” – is illustrated as follows:

<b>FAMILI AR</b> <b>MS SSNNÄ R</b> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <b>FAMILIONÄR.</b>	FAMILI ÄR <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/> MILIONÄR <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/> FAMILIONÄR
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Figure 1: “It is true in general that words are treated in dreams (and jokes) as though they were concrete things. . . .”

Freud’s recourse to visible language is accentuated by his stipulation of the use of regular capital letters for the first printing, gothic type for the second, and thick letters for the third (Figure 1). Rimbaud’s anagrammatic play lends itself to similar schema:

cogito	ergo	sum
	ergotent	
	ignorent	inconscient
	nargue	

Reading his text “dans tous les sens,” it follows that “sum inconscient, ergo JE est un autre.”

Such mechanisms of condensation and displacement, which Freud locates in “unconscious ideation” common to dreams and jokes, have been found by subsequent speculation to resemble the operations of metaphor and metonymy in formal rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> We are dealing with tropes: literally “turns,” “twists,” “torsions.” What Freud’s joker and Rimbaud’s “voyant” do is to contort the bar separating signifier and signified so as to engage other signifiers, and consequently other signifieds, other meanings which are within the same phonemic vicinity. Other meanings are engaged, meanings other than conscious ones, meanings emerging from the other of consciousness, or the unconscious, of which the letter, in its mute facticity, is the mark or the representation. Rimbaud’s retort to Descartes is a genetic theory of the unconscious, just as Freud’s interrogation of the linguistic distortions operative in jokes and dreams is a genetic theory of poetry. For as Jacques Lacan has observed, Freud’s notion of condensation, “Verdichtung,” translates as a synonym for poetry (“dicht”: close, dense; whence “Dichtung”: packing, compacting, poetry; and “dichten”: compose).

It is in view of the tropes that are, as it were, built into language that Rimbaud makes his claim, in this same letter, for an “objective poetry” which he contrasts to “subjective poetry,” the expression of individual feelings. No such individual ego or cogito, identical to itself in its linguistic utterance, is in evidence. We are dealing rather with an objective necessity (“il faut”) which is no fault of the subject (“ce n’est pas de tout ma faute”). Rather it is a fault *in* the subject, through which language speaks. We are dealing with a breach of the kind that geologists discover beneath the surface of the earth, and Freud beneath the surface of consciousness; a lapsus, filled by language on its own, between what we call the subject and his discourse, whereby it is false to speak as if one speaks on one’s own authority: “C’est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: on me pense. Pardon du jeu de mots. Je est un autre.” “Je pense donc je suis” becomes “on me pense donc je est un autre” – “par don du jeu de mots.” The “I” (“je”) is the site of a play (“jeu”) of language, a necessity (“il faut”) and a lack (“c’est faux”) in whose ontological contradiction we recognize the force of a desire. It is just such a desire that speaks for itself, in place of the subject, in the progressive vocalization of consonants (from “p” to “b” to “v”) from

“pis” to “bois” to “violon”: “Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon.” “On” stands out by its resonance earlier in the text as the suffix or precipitate of “viol” (rape), which stands out in turn for the violence of the desire it connotes. Rimbaud twits Descartes not by contradicting his logic but by representing his text phonically. It is like a musical performance, playing along the vertical axis of phonological associations as along the bass and treble clef of a musical scale. His reading of the Cartesian text is in every sense its violination, as he sounds out and strikes chords resonating unconsciously within it. In this rupture with linear syntax, “raison,” as Michel Deguy says of another poet, is made to “résonner.”<sup>11</sup>

Desire, music, poetry: Rimbaud’s ambition is to unite the force of the first with the form of the second, so as to create a poetry which is “Vie harmonieuse.” As he writes in his “lettre du voyant,” “En Grèce, ai-je dit, vers et lyres rythment l’Action” (p. 270). In this text, his tone is more peremptory, more strident, as brass replaces wood of the earlier letter, and the ascendancy of “on” is more telling:

*Car JE est un autre. Si le cuivre s’éveille clairON, il n’y a rien de sa faute. Cela m’est évident: 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 (p. 270).*

*(I is an other. If brass wakes up as a trumpet, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at the birth of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it: I strike with the bow: the symphony stirs in the depths, or bounds onto the stage.)*

The raised lettering, except in the instance of “JE,” is my own. It is meant to represent the objective effects of language as it is seen (“je la regarde”), as it is heard (“je l’écoute”) and above all as it is written (“je lance un coup d’archet”). For it is as a kind of ultimate writing, a visible language that would be fully telling to all five senses, that Rimbaud’s project is best imaginable: “Cette langue sera de l’âme pour l’âme, résumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs, de la pensée accrochant la pensée et tirant” (p. 270). (This language will be of the soul for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought grasping thought and pulling.) The bow of the violin is also that of the archer, whose explosive force is omnidirectional – “tous les sens en un” (all meanings/directions in one).

The sonnet “voyelles” is just such an explosion of meanings. The poet commands by the imperative anagrammatically inscribed in the title that we see language – “voy-elles” – even as we see a woman – “voy-elle(s).”

*A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,  
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes:*

The desire of a text reads as a text of desire; Rimbaud's exploration of the letter serves as well to emblazon the body of a woman, from abdomen through lips to eyes:

*A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes  
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,*

*Golfes d'ombre; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,  
Lances de glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles;  
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles  
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes;*

*U, cycles, vibrations divins des mers virides,  
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides  
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux;*

*O, suprême Clairon, plein de strideurs étranges,  
Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges:  
– O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux.*

*(A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,  
Some day I'll speak your hidden births:*

*A, black hairy corset of shining flies  
Which buzz around cruel stench,*

*Gulfs of darkness; E, whiteness of vapors and tents,  
Lances of proud glaciers, white kings, shudder of flowers;  
I, purples, spat blood, laughter of beautiful lips  
In anger or penitent drunkenness;*

*U, cycles, divine vibrations of verdant seas,  
Peace of pastures seeded with animals, peace of wrinkles  
Which alchemy prints on great studious brows;*

*O, supreme Clarion full of strange strident sounds,  
Silences traversed by worlds and angels,  
– O, the Omega, violet beam of Her/His Eyes.)*

It is not my aim to explore all the senses of this poem, but only to iterate the sense of language it betokens. For analysis here, like the Freudian kind, is interminable, and one's aim, in seeking out the author's intention, would always be amiss. We are in a realm very much like that of the Freudian unconscious, to which the poem seems to make a discreet allusion with its evocation of "hidden births." It is the realm of "indirect representation," where the rule of negation governing the identity of objects and the stasis of meanings is not in force; nor is the dia-

chronic temporality of linear syntax.<sup>12</sup> The disposition of Rimbaud's poem, with the vowels running horizontally across the page and then in somewhat irregular fashion vertically down the page, suggests a multi-dimensional reading. This is what Robert Delaunay has tried to capture in his 1914 rendering of a related text by Rimbaud, which the painter entitles "*L'Alchimie du verbe. Recherche calligraphique sur 'Une Saison en enfer'*" (Figure 2). Were polychrome reproduction possible, one could show that Delaunay makes of Rimbaud's text a play of light and color in a fashion analogous to Rimbaud's play with language. Delaunay, for whom "nature is no longer a subject for description but a pretext" for colorist exploration,<sup>13</sup> is contemporary to the cubist painters and participates in their break with fixed, figurative, "realist" representation. Whence the cubists' playful fondness for inserting words – bits of newspaper, shards of labels – in their paintings (Figure 3). Language no longer names the world as a transparent instrument of thought, as a mental tool of the uniquely thinking subject; it is an object in and of the world, and shares with the world an enigmatic opacity.

For the adolescent poet Rimbaud, language is already an object, much as for the child – and the schizophrenic and the dreamer – whom Freud describes as being closer to primary processes. At this stage,



Figure 2: "Language . . . shares with the world an enigmatic opacity."

what Freud calls “visual and acoustic memory traces” embedded in language emerge at every level of the sign – down to the letter. Thus in “Voyelles,” “U” evokes “cycles” by its provenance from the Greek upsilon (“y grec”), leading to “vibrements divins” and “virides” by the “i” sound as well as the “v” shape of Latinate “u.” The reversal of “U” and “O” in the order of vowels takes us virtually through all meanings, from the alpha through the omega of language. These letters are coterminous with the totality of the Greek alphabet, whose conjunction is a textual figure of the Supreme Being, the Lord God in His



Figure 3: From rhumb to delir(i)um.

ultimate revelation: "I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end," we read in the beginning, the middle and the end of the Book of Revelation, which closes the Christian canon of sacred scripture with the announcement of Parousia, the fulfillment of all creation in the divine Logos. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . .": Genesis (1:1); "In the beginning was the Word . . .": John (1:1), the presumed author of Revelation. Rimbaud's "verbe accessible à tous les sens" would be such a Parousia, in which signs would both be and signify – and be their signification. Nothing opposite, or relative, in the Kingdom: "Le poète . . . est chargé de l'humanité, des *animaux* même; il devra faire sentir, palper, écouter ses inventions; si ce qu'il rapporte de là-bas a forme, il donne forme; si c'est informe, il donne informe. Trouver une langue . . ." (p. 270). (The poet is responsible for humanity, even for animals; he will have to have his inventions smelled, felt, heard; if what he brings back from beyond has form, he gives form; if it is formless, he gives formlessness.) "Forme" and "informe" are absolute givens, not binary opposites. In its appeal to virtually all five senses ("puanteurs cruelles," "sang craché," "strideurs," "Yeux"), "Voyelles" is a search for such a vital language, and can be legitimately described as an essay in the mystery of the Incarnation, the word made flesh. The triumphal "clairon" announces this apocalypse and recalls as well the language of the "lettre du voyant." This language is present again in the chiasmic relation of "rayon" and "violet," which thus reads as the blue of the heavens (darkened by multiple superimposition, as read into "pourpres"), the music of the "violon" and the violence ("viol," "violé[t]") of the poet's desire for fulfillment.

The violence which largely informs Rimbaud's project of "Voyance," and which resurfaces in "Voyelles," emerges fully in "Conte," the apologue from *Illuminations*:

*Il voulait voir la vérité, l'heure du désir et de la satisfaction essentiels. Que ce fût ou non une aberration de piété, il voulut. Il possédait au moins un assez large pouvoir humain.*

*Toutes les femmes qui l'avaient connu furent assassinées. Quel saccage du jardin de la beauté! (pp. 178-79).*

*(He wanted to see the truth, the hour of essential desire and satisfaction. Whether or not it was a pious aberration, he wanted it. At least he has sizable human power.*

*All the women who had known him were murdered. What havoc in the garden of beauty!)*

Desire realizes itself here as violence, violence is unimpeded desire, of which the woman is the symbolic goal only as she remains unattain-

able, inviolate. For as we read in the preface to *Une Saison en enfer*, “Un soir, j’ai assis la Beauté sur me genoux. – Et je l’ai trouvée amère. – Et je l’ai injuriée” (p. 219). (One night, I sat Beauty down on my knees. – And I found her bitter. – And I cursed her.) “The violent bear it away,” as scripture reads; the kingdom will not be taken by force, still less by the force of a desire which is violence itself. After an orgy of destruction, the Prince meets a Genie who seems to promise a “multiple and complex love,” but instead of a glorious consummation, there is natural demise:

*Le Prince et le Génie s’anéantirent probablement dans la santé essentielle. Comment n’auraient-ils pas pu en mourir? Ensemble donc ils moururent.*

*Mais ce Prince décéda, dans son palais, à un âge ordinaire. Le Prince était le Génie. Le Génie était le Prince.*

*La musique savante manque à notre désir (p. 179).*

*(The Prince and the Genie probably vanished into ideopathic health. How could they not have died of it? Together therefore they died of it.*

*But this Prince passed away in his palace at a normal age. The Prince was the Genie. The Genie was the Prince.*

*Our desire lacks skillful music.)*

“Manque” combines phonetically the elements of “musique” and “savante,” as what is lacking to his desire, which is the very name for that lack, that “béance” or abeyance in the human being who differs from all other beings in the abysmal violence of his desire. It is by the violence of their desire, princely in its imperiousness, that children differ from adults, who are schooled and repressed by the law, by civilization, which structures discontent and masters it by productive displacements. It is this subtler violence that Rimbaud rejects, and with it the prestige that will attach itself to his writings. As he writes in his “Adieu” to poetry in *Une Saison en Enfer*, “J’ai essayé d’inventer de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux âstres, de nouvelles chairs, de nouvelles langues. J’ai cru acquérir des pouvoirs surnaturels. Eh bien! je dois enterrer mon imagination et mes souvenirs! Une belle gloire d’artiste et de conteur emportée!” (p. 243). (I tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new languages. I thought I took on supernatural powers. Well! I have to bury my imagination and my memories. So much for the glory of the artist and the storyteller!)

In “Alchimie du verbe,” Rimbaud restores the proper order of the vowels: “A noir, E Blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert.” It is the given order in a series of letters to whose contingency, as to that of all creation, he declares himself reconciled: “Il faut être absolument moderne. Point

Haufen zusammengestellt. Späterer Zusatz: Die beiden Mädchen gehen Wasser holen und müssen dabei wie in einen Fluß steigen, der bis ins Haus oder in den Hof reicht\*.

b) Haupttraum\*\* : Sie steigt von hoch herab\*\*\* über eigentümliche Geländer oder Zäune, die zu großen Karos vereinigt sind und aus Flechtwerk von kleinen Quadraten bestehen. Es ist eigentlich nicht zum Steigen eingerichtet; sie hat immer Sorge, daß sie Platz für den Fuß findet, und freut sich, daß ihr Kleid dabei nirgends hängen bleibt, daß sie im Gehen so anständig bleibt††. Dabei trägt sie einen großen Ast in der Hand†††, eigentlich wie einen Baum, der dick mit roten Blüten besetzt ist, verzweigt und ausgebreitet§. Dabei ist die Idee Kirschblüten, sie sehen aber auch aus wie gefüllte Kamelien, die freilich nicht auf Bäumen wachsen. Während des Herabgehens hat sie zuerst einen, dann plötzlich zwei, später wieder einen§§. Wie sie unten anlangt, sind die unteren Blüten schon ziemlich abgefallen. Sie sieht dann, unten angelangt, einen Hausknecht, der einen eben solchen Baum, sie möchte sagen — kämmt, d. h. mit einem Holze dicke Haarbüschel, die wie Moos von ihm herabhängen, rauft. Andere Arbeiter haben solche Äste aus einem Garten abgehauen und auf die Straße geworfen, wo sie herumliegen, so daß viele Leute sich davon nehmen. Sie fragt aber, ob das recht ist, ob man sich auch einen nehmen kann§§§. Im Garten steht ein junger Mann (von ihr bekannter Persönlichkeit, ein Fremder), auf den sie zugeht, um ihn zu fragen, wie man solche Äste in ihren eigenen Garten umsetzen könne\*\*†. Er umfängt sie, worauf sie sich sträubt und ihn fragt, was ihm einfällt, ob man sie denn so umfassen darf. Er sagt, das ist kein Unrecht, das ist erlaubt\*\*†. Er erklärt sich dann bereit, mit ihr in den anderen Garten zu gehen, um ihr das Einsetzen zu zeigen, und sagt ihr etwas, was sie nicht recht versteht: Es fehlen mir

\* Zur Deutung dieses als „kausal“ zu nehmenden Vortraumes siehe S. 215.

\*\* Ihr Lebenslauf.

\*\*\* Hohe Abkunft, Wunschgegensatz zum Vortraume.

† Mischgebilde, das zwei Lokalitäten vereinigt, den sogenannten Boden des Vaterhauses, auf dem sie mit dem Bruder spielte, dem Gegenstand ihrer späteren Phantasien, und den Hof eines schlimmen Onkels, der sie zu necken pflegte.

†† Wunschgegensatz zu einer realen Erinnerung vom Hofe des Onkels, daß sie sich im Schlafe zu entblößen pflegte.

††† Wie der Engel in der Verkündigung Mariä einen Lilienstengel.

§ Die Erklärung dieses Mischgebildes siehe S. 218: Unschuld, Periode, Kameliendame.

§§ Auf die Mehrheit der ihrer Phantasie dienenden Personen.

§§§ Ob man sich auch einen herunterreißen darf, i. e. masturbieren.

\*\*† Der Ast hat längst die Vertretung des männlichen Genitales übernommen, enthält übrigens eine sehr deutliche Anspielung auf den Familiennamen.

\*\*† Bezieht sich wie das Nächstfolgende auf eheliche Vorrichtungen.

ohnedies drei Meter — (später sagt sie: Quadratmeter) oder drei Klafter Grund. Es ist, als ob er für seine Bereitwilligkeit etwas von ihr verlangen würde, als ob er die Absicht hätte, sich in ihrem Garten zu entschädigen, oder als wollte er irgend ein Gesetz betrügen, einen Vorteil davon haben, ohne daß sie einen Schaden hat. Ob er ihr dann wirklich etwas zeigt, weiß sie nicht\*.

Ich habe natürlich gerade an solchem Material Überfluß, aber dessen Mitteilung würde zu tief in die Erörterung neurotischer Verhältnisse führen. Alles leitete zum gleichen Schluß, daß man keine besondere symbolisierende Tätigkeit der Seele bei der Traumarbeit anzunehmen braucht, sondern daß der Traum sich solcher Symbolisierungen, welche im unbewußten Denken bereits fertig enthalten sind, bedient, weil sie wegen ihrer Darstellbarkeit, zumeist auch wegen ihrer Zensurfreiheit, den Anforderungen der Traumbildung besser genügen.

#### e) Die Darstellung durch Symbole im Traume. Weitere typische Träume.

Wenn man sich mit der ausgiebigen Verwendung der Symbolik für die Darstellung sexuellen Materials im Traume vertraut gemacht hat, muß man sich die Frage vorlegen, ob nicht viele dieser Symbole wie die „Sigel“ der Stenographie mit ein für allemal festgelegter Bedeutung auftreten, und sieht sich vor der Versuchung, ein neues Traumbuch nach der Chiffriermethode zu entwerfen. Dazu ist zu bemerken: Diese Symbolik gehört nicht dem Traume zu eigen an, sondern dem unbewußten Vorstellen, speziell des Volkes, und ist im Folklore, in den Mythen, Sagen, Redensarten, in der Spruchweisheit und in den umlaufenden Witzten eines Volkes vollständiger als im Traume aufzufinden. Wir müßten also die Aufgabe der Traumdeutung weit überschreiten, wenn wir der Bedeutung des Symbols gerecht werden und die zahlreichen, größtenteils noch ungelösten Probleme erörtern wollten, welche sich an den Begriff des Symbols knüpfen\*\*. Wir wollen uns hier darauf beschränken zu sagen, daß die Darstellung durch ein Symbol zu den indirekten Darstellungen gehört, daß wir aber durch allerlei Anzeichen gewarnt werden, die Symboldarstellung unterschiedslos mit den anderen Arten indirekter Darstellung zusammenzuwerfen, ohne noch diese unterscheidenden Merkmale in begrifflicher Klarheit erfassen zu können. In einer Reihe von Fällen ist das Gemeinsame zwischen dem Symbol und dem Eigent-

\* Ein analoger „biographischer“ Traum ist der unter den Beispielen zur Traumsymbolik als dritter mitgeteilt; ferner der von Rank ausführlich mitgeteilte „Traum, der sich selbst deutet“; einen anderen, der „verkehrt“ gelesen werden muß, siehe bei Stekel p. 486.

\*\* Vgl. die Arbeiten von Bleuler und seinen Züricher Schülern Maeder, Abraham u. a. über Symbolik, und die nicht ärztlichen Autoren, auf welche sie sich beziehen (Kleinpaul u. a.). Das Zutreffendste, was über diesen Gegenstand geäußert worden ist, findet sich in der Schrift von O. Rank und H. Sachs, Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für die Geisteswissenschaften, 1913, Kap. I.

de cantiques. Tenir le pas gagné" (pp. 243-44). (We have to be absolutely modern. No hymns! Hold on to the ground we've gained.) Modernity is, etymologically, temporality: hold to the given line, moment after moment, and pursue it; a matter of coping, not troping. "Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre! Paysan!" (p. 243). (I! I! who called himself angel or magus, dispensed from all morality, I'm back down to earth, with a duty to find and rugged reality to embrace! Peasant!) It is as if he is renouncing, with "alchimie du verbe," the "syllabic chemistry" by which Freud describes the linguistic distortions of the unconscious.<sup>14</sup> The word "distortions" is repeatedly Freud's own, and we have seen that it implies turns, figures, tropes, substitutions, short-cuts. Dreams, according to Freud, are "the royal road to the unconscious," and jokes are its rising to the surface of everyday life, as "short circuits" in the economy of thinking, as transgressions, violent or obscene, of cultural taboos.<sup>15</sup> Dream-work, joke-work and art work, in their multifarious distortions, are subject to the law of torts, to which the author of *Une Saison en enfer* submits in the very last words of that text: "– et il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps" (p. 244). One body and one soul, according to law: "loisible."

The arbitrariness of the law follows upon that of the sign, in which the law conceivably originates. Both Freud and Rimbaud were exposed to cultural phenomena which, in different ways, would have brought that arbitrariness home – to the letter, in which it stands out most flagrantly. The German tradition of variegated typeface and spacing in which Freud is reading and writing, and which he exploited amply (Figure 4), lends a text to multiple readings. With the spacing nearly equidistant between whole words and single letters, with the varying sizes and density of the letters themselves, the "free-floating attention" which Freud pays to the dream narrative of the analysand is induced to roam over the printed page in similar manner. There is also the fact of his inevitable exposure to Hebrew scripture, a signifying system utterly alien in its form and import to the profane intellectual tradition of his adoption. When Freud was given to conceive himself as Moses, it was perhaps less as founding father than as parricide, exile, wanderer. It is in this homeless direction that he recalls the experience of Rimbaud.

The inspiration of "Voyelles" is notoriously multiple. Sources range from the multicolored alphabet books to which children of Rimbaud's era, as of our own, were exposed, to an esoteric tradition which attached hieratic, substantial significance to individual words and even letters. This tradition is somewhat continuous with that of Hebrew

scripture via the Kabbalism and illuminism which meander alongside the mainstream of Western thought from the Middle Ages through surrealism. Knowledge of this tradition is something which Rimbaud shares with a number of nineteenth-century French writers, Balzac, Nerval, Baudelaire, and Hugo among them. Hugo, in his late maturity, his visionary period, embarked on an exploration of the meaning of letters. In the case of Nerval, the quest is more poignantly bound up with his madness, as he desperately searches for meaning in a desacralized universe.<sup>16</sup> An analogous source of Rimbaud's inspiration is suggested by the title of the collection of poems from which "Génie" is taken. *Illuminations*, according to Verlaine, is to be understood as "painted plates," as with illuminated manuscripts of medieval times. In this textual tradition, which predates the printing press and the standardization of the printed book, the word is literally filled with images, letter by rubriced letter (Figure 5). The universe is circumscribed by a transcendent deity, origin of language as of all things, and its space is full; its every object and every sign are eschatologically meaningful. Rimbaud's apocalyptic aspirations are accompanied by a yearning for this semiological pleroma, which he advertises sardonically in "Solde": "A vendre les applications de calcul et les sauts d'harmonie inouïs. Les trouvailles et les termes non soupçonnés, possession immédiate" (pp. 208-9). (For sale applied computation and unheard of flights of harmony. Unsuspected finds and terminologies, immediate possession.) This continuum of sign and image is preserved, if only vestigially, in the rubrics of Catholic missals and hymnals past the middle of this century.

But Rimbaud's linguistic adventure differs even from this western tradition by an experience we deduce from his correspondence from Africa. The poet Gérard Macé has suggested convincingly that the straight and narrow path upon which Rimbaud embarks after *Une Saison en enfer* is one already described by his own father.<sup>17</sup> When he is seeking employment with the American navy, he identifies himself as a member of his father's regiment in the French army. If the quest for origins is always ultimately the quest for the father, Rimbaud continues that quest via his African adventure. He writes home of returning to Europe to marry a widow – which his mother had become as a result of his father's eventual desertion of the family household – and of having a son, an engineer; and he dies, upon his return, of gangrene poisoning, at thirty seven, his father's age when he married his mother. Rimbaud repeats in reverse the career of his father, who prior to his marriage was stationed in North Africa and became an accomplished Arab linguist. Thus Macé rightly regards Rimbaud's progress through Africa as a regression. One need only consult the literal, letterly facts to see this is the case.



Figure 5: The Full Letter.

Even while in Africa, Rimbaud never abandoned his metaphysical quest for a knowledge that would be at once universal and practical. In his letters home, his range is encyclopedic in his request for useful, summary manuals: engineering, chemistry, forestry, astronomy, ordinance, optics, architecture – God only, in His presumed omniscience, knows what. His most insistent request is for a *Dictionnaire de la langue amhara*, “avec prononciation en caractères latins.” An utterly foreign language in its inscrutable script, doubled by its western vocalization. Grammé and phoné as alien to each other as both are to their reader. The experience of a language, which presumably Rimbaud needs to learn for his explorations, could never be more foreign, more strange. What is uncanny is that it connects with an experience familiar to Rimbaud as a child. For this linguistic doubling repeats another, familiar, paternal doubling: he also requests from his sister a copy, from among the papers, his father’s, at home, of the Koran, with the “Arabic text on the opposite page.” It is a manuscript, lost to us, which Rimbaud must have seen as a child. One need only consult an edition of Islam’s Holy Book to conceive of the effect of its ornate, elegant pages, overflowing with object-signs, on the child’s illiterate imagination (Figure 6). The son’s quest is a request, as for the holy book of the father – “cela en manuscrit très soigné,” as Isabelle Rimbaud tells us of her father’s copy, the copy of the father’s own hand. The son is the copy of the father. His vaunted cognition – “Car il arrive à l’inconnu! Puisqu’il a cultivé son âme, déjà riche, plus qu’aucun!” (pp. 270-71). (Because he arrives at the unknown! Since he has cultivated his soul, already rich, more than anyone!) – is a desperate, refractory, failed recognition. The poet is truly a stealer of fire: “Donc le poète est vraiment voleur du feu” (p. 271), but the father in fact has stolen his thunder. This son, in his revolt against the mother, against her narrow piety, is but a bastard copy of the father, who is himself, for the son, but a copier of the bastard wisdom of Islam, the bastard son of Christendom in which the son refuses to recognize himself: “Je n’avais pas en vue la sagesse bâtarde du Coran,” we read in *Une Saison* (p. 240). (I had not in view the bastard wisdom of the Koran.)

“Il arrive à l’inconnu, et quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l’intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues!” (He reaches the unknown and when, maddened, he finishes by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them), writes the “voyant”: “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 affaissée!” (p. 271) (Let him die in his leap through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin with the horizons where the other collapsed!) “L’Autre,”

## ( سورة المؤمنون )

عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ مِثْلَ أَيْبِكُمْ إِبرَاهِيمَ ۚ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ  
 الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا لِيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ شَهِيدًا  
 عَلَيْكُمْ وَتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ فَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ  
 وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِاللَّهِ هُوَ مَوْلَاكُمْ فَنِعْمَ الْمَوْلَى  
 وَنِعْمَ النَّصِيرُ ﴿٧٨﴾

(٢٣) سُورَةُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ مَكِّيَّةٌ  
 وَأَيَّاتُهَا ١١٨ نَزَلَتْ بَعْدَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾ الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي صَلَاتِهِمْ  
 خَاشِعُونَ ﴿٢﴾ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنِ اللَّغْوِ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾  
 وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِلزَّكَاةِ فَاعِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ



## (الجزء السابع عشر)

الْمُنْكَرِ يَكَادُونَ يَسْطُونَ بِالَّذِينَ يَتْلُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِنَا  
 قُلْ أَفَأَنْتُمْ بِشِرِّ مِزْدِكُمُ النَّارِ وَعَدَّهَا اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ  
 كَفَرُوا وَيَسَّ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٧٦﴾ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ ضَرْبٌ مِثْلُ  
 فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ ۚ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَنْ  
 يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ ۚ وَإِنْ يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْعًا  
 لَا يَسْتَنْفِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوبُ ﴿٧٧﴾  
 مَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٧٨﴾ اللَّهُ  
 يَصْطَفِي مِنَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ رُسُلًا وَمِنَ النَّاسِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ  
 بَصِيرٌ ﴿٧٩﴾ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ ۚ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ  
 تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ ﴿٨٠﴾ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ارْكَعُوا وَاسْجُدُوا  
 وَعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَأَفْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٨١﴾  
 وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ ۚ هُوَ اجْتَبَاكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ



Figure 6: Considerations of Unreadability.

the other, turns out to be the father, whom the son did not have "en vue," to whose holy book he nonetheless returns, "texte arabe en regard," as to the origins of his "madness," his "delirium," his verbal alchemy, as he describes the visible language of his poetic inspiration in *Une Saison*:

*J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs (p. 232).*

*(I loved idiotic paintings, door panels, stage sets, curtains of travelling circuses, signs, popular engravings; outmoded literature, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels of our grandmothers, fairy tales, little baby books, old operas, dumb refrains, naive rhythms.)*

"Romans de nos aïeules" and "contes de fées" might come under the heading of what Freud has called "family romance," by which he means the delusions conjured up by the child as to his origins and prestige.<sup>18</sup> Rimbaud's story is a family romance with a difference, with the difference that writing makes as it repeats and masks an origin, denies and returns to the father by turns, twists, tropes and figures, metaphors, substitutions, *qui pro quo*, whose fabulous beginnings can be traced to the adventures of the father:

*Je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple: je voyais très-franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine, une école de tambours faite par des anges. . . .*

*Puis j'expliquai mes sophismes magiques avec l'hallucination des mots! (p. 234).*

*(I got used to hallucination, pure and simple: I saw, frankly, a mosque where a factory should be, a school for drummers taught by angels. . . .*

*Then I explained my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words!)*

For the hallucination of words is incarnate in writing. For Saussure, as for Plato and Rousseau, writing is the usurper of the law become a law unto itself.<sup>19</sup> It is double talk, devil talk: "'Tu resteras hyène, etc. . .,' se récrie le démon qui me couronna de si aimables pavots. 'Gagne la mort avec tous ces appétits, et ton égoïsme et tous les péchés capitaux'" (p. 219). ("You'll remain a hyena, etc. . .," yells the demon who crowned me with such delightful poppies. "Get to your death with your lusts, your egoism and all the deadly sins.") Rimbaud "le voyant," *Rimbaud le voyou*,<sup>20</sup> the bastard, the son of a bitch, the blasphemous,

obscene rebel who writes “Merde à Dieu” on the park benches of his native Charleville, cannot recognize his own poetry – “Absurde! Ridicule! Dégoutant!” he is recorded as responding to later inquiries about it – any more than he can recognize the hand his father had in the writing of, say, “Mauvais Sang”: “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’aurais jamais ma main. Après, la domesticité mène trop loin” (p. 220). (I loath all trades. Foremen and workmen, all peasants, base. The hand at the pen is no better than the hand at the plough. – What a century of hands! – Afterwards, domesticity takes you too far.) Too far, even to far off Africa. One wonders, with Freud, where domesticity, homelife, does not lead, since Rimbaud’s poetry and his renunciation of poetry, since even his flight to Africa, show signs of his father’s handiwork. One wonders too, with Rimbaud, where family romance ends in a desacralized universe, since he cannot have his say, since he is already spoken for in a dead language – “Moi, je ne puis pas plus m’expliquer que le mendiant avec ses continuels *Pater* et *Ave Maria*. *Je ne sais plus parler!*” (p. 242). (I can no more explain myself than the beggar with his continual *Paters* and *Ave Marias*. *I no longer know how to speak!*) – which tells of another relation to father (“fiat voluntas tua . . .”) and to mother (“ora pro nobis peccatoribus . . .”), in which desire has no role.

1. (Paris: Payot, 1965), p. 97.
2. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), XVII, 217-53, henceforth: *S.E.*
3. *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Editions de la Pléiade, 1963). All subsequent references to Rimbaud are to this edition.
4. *S.E.*, XI, 155.
5. These references are to be found in the J. Strachey translation (New York: Avon, 1971), pp. 130, 312, 386. A more global version of the unconscious as writing is put forth in “A Note on the Mystic Writing Pad,” *S.E.*, XIX, 227.
6. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 330.
7. My reading of Rimbaud in this regard is much illumined by the essays of Jean-Louis Baudry, “Le Texte de Rimbaud,” *Tel Quel*, No. 35 (1968) and No. 36 (1969), and of Shoshana Felman, “Arthur Rimbaud, Folie et modernité” in *La Folie et la chose littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).
8. “L’Instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient” in *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 517.
9. *S.E.*, VII, 16-19. For alternate configurations of word play anent Freud, consult Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *La Fourche* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 138-69, in which Figure 1 is to be found as well.
10. Lacan, “L’Instance de la lettre,” p. 516.

11. *Tombeau de Du Bellay* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 25. Consider as well Jacques Lacan on the linearity of the signifying chain in Saussure: "Mais il suffit d'écouter la poésie, ce qui sans doute était le cas de F. de Saussure, pour que s'y fasse entendre une polyphonie et que tout discours s'avère s'aligner sur les plusieurs portées d'une partition. Nulle chaîne signifiante en effet qui ne soutienne comme appendu à la ponctuation de chacune de ses unités tout ce qui s'articule de contextes attestés, à la vertical, si l'on peut dire, de ce point" (p. 503).
12. "The Unconscious," *S.E.*, XIV, 205, et passim.
13. *Du Cubisme à l'art abstrait* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1957), p. 66.
14. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 332.
15. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 647; *Jokes*, Chaps. III, IV.
16. A certain sense of the mysterious density of language is thus common to a number of nineteenth-century French writers, whose conception and experience of language differs radically from its normative conception as a transparent instrument of communication between autonomous subjects. For Hugo, consult Guy Robert, *Quelques Remarques sur l'oeuvre de Victor Hugo, Annales littéraires de l'université de Besançon*, 1976; for Nerval, Michel Jeanerret, *La Lettre perdue: Ecriture et folie dans l'oeuvre de Nerval* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).
17. "Rimbaud recently deserted," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, No. 303 (April 1978) and No. 304 (May 1978).
18. *S.E.*, IX, 235-44.
19. Consult Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).
20. The title of Benjamin Fondane's provocative essay on Rimbaud, reprinted by Ramsay (Paris, 1979).

Figure 1: *Diagram from Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.*

Figure 2: Robert Delaunay, "L'Alchimie du verbe: Recherche calligraphique sur 'Une Saison en enfer' d'A. Rimbaud," 1914 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

Figure 3: Juan Gris, "The Bottle of Martinique Rum," 1914 (The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice). Reproduced from the catalogue, n.p., n.d.

Figure 4: Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Leipzig, 1921)

Figure 5: Initial "S" from the *Livre des Miracles de Ste. Foy*, XIth century (Bibliothèque Humaniste, Celestat)

Figure 6: Koran, circa 1900.