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Rimbaud: A Reconstruction and a Farewell: A Review of the Three-Volume Edition of *The Poetry of Rimbaud*

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Abstract: Professor Robert Greer Cohn (1922–) authored the three-volume work *The Poetry of Rimbaud*. Centering on the microscopic details embodied in Rimbaud’s poetic texts, this monograph conducts textual explication, associative imagination and derivative interpretation, and delivers a panoramic overview of the gifted poet’s poetic creation and life trajectory. As argued by Professor Cohn, Rimbaud established poetry as the fundamental domain of language, sustained the vitality and self-renewal capacity of linguistic expressions, and perpetually revitalized language eroded and depleted by daily triviality.

Key words: Rimbaud; Reconstruction; Innovator

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标题：兰波：一次重建与一次告别——重读《兰波诗歌》三卷本

摘要：罗伯特·格里尔·科恩（Robert Greer Cohn, 1922-）教授的《兰波诗歌》三卷本，聚焦于兰波诗歌呈现的细节，进行释义、关联性想象和衍生，对这位天才诗人的诗歌和生平进行了概述。科恩教授指出：兰波使诗歌成为语言的根据地，保持了语言的生命力、自我更新能力，不断刷新被日常所损耗的语言。

关键词：兰波；重建；革新者

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1

The three-volume work *Rimbaud's Poetry* (2015d) by Professor Robert Greer Cohn (1922-) serves as both a collection of poetic criticism and an unorthodox biography of Arthur Rimbaud. Following the chronological order of Rimbaud's poetic works, Cohn offers commentary on each poem individually, appending concise or elaborate notes after every line or stanza. This interpretative form resembles the traditional Chinese textual annotation and exegesis, yet it distinguishes itself fundamentally. Beyond explanatory notes on basic contextual facts, Cohn's commentary integrates the author's original insights, aesthetic reflections, and associative speculations. A core focus of his research lies in exploring the correlations between the lexical choices, syntax and imagery in Rimbaud's poems and the poet's life experiences, temperament and psychological state, striving to delineate a comprehensive spiritual portrait of Rimbaud.

Rimbaud's brief life falls into three distinct and clearly demarcated stages: a restless childhood, a poetic youth, and a wandering vagabond phase. Born in 1854 in Charleville, a small town in northern France, he grew up in a household marked by paternal absence and a stern, rigid mother. He began writing poetry at the age of sixteen and ceased all literary creation around the age of twenty, thereafter abandoning literature entirely to become a merchant and traveller until his death from illness at thirty-seven. Though his poetic career spanned merely five to six years within his compressed life, his verses have secured an enduring and resplendent place in literature. Self-proclaimed a "seer" and endowed with precocious poetic genius, Rimbaud has long been regarded as an unrestrained genius unfettered by conventional bounds. His poetry is imbued with innate ecstasy and perpetual unrest, achieving surreal and bizarre artistic enchantment long before he formed a conscious and definitive poetic mission. Rimbaud's post-literary life—his itinerant existence as a so-called "wind-walker"—amounted to a lived poetic performance art. He enlisted in the Dutch colonial army, worked as an interpreter for a circus caravan, escorted firearms and ivory for merchants, ventured into the

jungles of Africa, and wandered along the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. He seamlessly merged the fanaticism of an explorer with the prudence and diligence of a professional merchant.

His later life and poetic writings echo and illuminate one another. They embody the metaphysical concepts of genius, artistic inspiration, destructive impulses and other intuitive “visionary” faculties of human nature elaborated by Kant, Schopenhauer and other philosophers, rendering such abstract ideas tangible in literary expression. Furthermore, his life and works cast an enduring spell over modern poetry, divesting it of its traditional redemptive and soothing qualities and re-configuring it into an art of obscurity, secrecy, uncertainty and fragmentation, perpetually haunted by phantoms of madness.

Cohn makes no attempt to construct a holistic, unified portrait of the poet. In his own words, he seeks not to “tame” Rimbaud. For a poet who perpetually sought to remain “other”, all conventional biographical endeavors are inherently doomed to failure. Mirroring the fluidity embedded in his poetry and his recurrent acts of departure throughout life, Rimbaud refused to be confined to a single narrative or a fixed identity. Instead, Cohn’s critical methodology centers on the minute details of each individual poem, conducting textual interpretation, contextual association and extended critical reflection rooted in these particulars. Even in the introductory overview, he rejects conventional summarizing frameworks and adopts a mirrored, fragmented mode of presentation. Such an interpretative approach is inevitably fragmentary, yet its greatest merit lies in magnifying microscopic textual details. It enables readers to discern fragments of truth amid the labyrinthine artistic veil that Rimbaud deliberately wove for himself and his literary oeuvre.

One pivotal analytical tool adopted by Cohn is psychoanalysis. He pays meticulous attention to the psychological undercurrents reflected in Rimbaud’s poetry, tracing such mental phenomena back to the poet’s childhood through psychoanalytical reasoning. Cohn argues that the upheavals of Rimbaud’s early life “undoubtedly intensified his precocious sensibilities and propelled him toward an extraordinary poetic career... Rational analysis enables us to apprehend the sufferings of his adolescence and their far-reaching repercussions.” He continuously identifies textual evidence across Rimbaud’s poems to substantiate this argument.

In Professor Cohn’s view, nearly every psychological fragment and personality trait forged in Rimbaud’s childhood—his estrangement from and resentment toward his mother, the profound void left by his absent father, his persistent desire to flee, his yearning and frenzy, and his perpetual resistance against life—finds a fixed symbol or recurring imagery in his poetic works. For instance, his memories of his mother are inextricably linked to the colour blue, the hue of her eyes, a shade invariably bound up with unpleasant sensations: “She has lying blue eyes.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, p. 13)

Meanwhile, golden yellow stands for his absent father, constantly intertwined with intense hallucinatory visions. Furthermore, numerous male figures in Rimbaud’s verse embody his imaginative projections of the missing paternal presence. The blacksmith in the poem *The Blacksmith* serves as a telling example; out of admiration, Rimbaud “magnifies him to colossal, legendary proportions.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p. 41) From a

psychoanalytical perspective, paternal absence and the deprivation of maternal affection inflict enduring spiritual trauma on a child and erect multiple barriers to their growth. Plagued by a discordant family milieu, Rimbaud, an “extraordinary soul”, harbored singular needs for affection. “The primal tragedy of his vulnerability, compounded by parental neglect, once setting the depth of his emotional rhythm, would repeat itself incessantly and irrepressibly.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, pp.8-9) Subconsciously, Rimbaud’s poetic creation became an extraordinary compensatory means of self-vindication. On this basis, Cohn argues that “the central figure of Rimbaud’s poetry is a child (or adolescent), wandering curiously along woodland paths, country lanes and urban streets.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, p.9) Through poetry, he sought to reconstruct his lost childhood and complete the construction of self-hood. Rimbaud’s obsessive immersion in childhood, or in the past, was an endeavour to pursue his authentic existence. (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, p.3) This hidden creative drive—the self-reconstruction of childhood through verse—also foreshadows his ultimate renunciation of literature in later life. Once his self-construction was accomplished, the fundamental motivation for composition faded away, followed by a definitive farewell to poetry. Cohn nevertheless leaves an open-ended question: had Rimbaud’s life not ended at the age of thirty-seven, who could say with certainty that he would never have returned to writing? Should he have revisited poetry in his later years, would he have cast off the fragility and vacillation of his youthful genius to evolve into a powerful, vigorously visionary poet of extraordinary creative energy, or would he have lapsed into mediocrity?

2

Professor Cohn’s interpretation guides readers to focus on the poet’s inner spiritual world while engaging with poetic texts, discerning the spiritual narrative woven into verses and thereby drawing closer to the poet himself. Such a mode of reading proves vital to the understanding of any poet, for it enables a genuine comprehension of the reality inherent to poetry. Cohn underscores the value of “rational analysis” in reading, fully embodying his confidence and authority as a literary critic. Much like his contemporaries in criticism, Cohn acknowledges that “Rimbaud relied far more than most people, even most poets, upon himself and his innate nature... He retreated increasingly into the unreal realm of intense voyance.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, p.3) Nevertheless, when confronting this visionary poet, Cohn persists in critical rationality—a faculty that allows readers to penetrate the visions of voyance and access the multilayered realities embedded in Rimbaud’s poetry.

The first layer of reality is Rimbaud’s personal reality.

An uncompromising rebel, Rimbaud embodied his defiance in his declaration “I is another”, as well as in his poetic output and the itinerant life he led after renouncing literature. His rebellion may be interpreted as an impulse to sever the connection between empirical reality and spiritual self-hood, seeking to envelop a flawed world with the power of imagination. As one critic observes, Rimbaud “established a fundamental unity grounded in metaphysics and poetry” (Cohn, R. G., 2015c, p.249). His metaphysical construction unfolded not only in his verses but also in the erratic trajectory of his post-literary life. “We are beyond the

world,” (Cohn, R. G., 2015a, p.8) Rimbaud once wrote, an echo of Plato’s discourse on the world of Ideas versus the material world of appearances. To him, empirical reality was illusory, and transcendence of such illusion constituted the only path to authentic being. Cohn, however, incisively argues that Rimbaud’s metaphysical impulses constitute a covert narration of his personal reality. His lyrical return to childhood, much like his lifelong wanderings that perpetually circled back to Penelope— “his mother” (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p.245)—epitomizes a realist posture of perpetual self-effacement and self-renewal for new beginnings. It follows that even the most hermetic poetry remains deeply anchored in the poet’s personal reality, encompassing both tangible temporal events and intangible psychological experiences shaped by spatial contexts. This fundamental truth was also recognized by René Char, the eminent modern French poet, who contended that while Rimbaud ought to be judged primarily through his poetry, his life and work resonate inseparably in unparalleled coherence.

Specifically, Rimbaud’s metaphysical poetics manifest in his abstraction of lexical meaning, his infusion of colour and musicality into linguistic texture, and his advocacy for the creative fusion of vision, hearing, touch and other senses to dissolve the boundaries between disparate perceptions. This aptitude defines his identity as a visionary. Historically, the term “psychics” originated as a religious epithet before being appropriated by Romantic poets and imbued with mystic connotations to denote poetic insight into cosmic mysteries. Rejecting its religious and mystical baggage, Rimbaud redefined voyance as an essential poetic faculty—the power of “systematic derangement of the senses”, attainable through sustained, disciplined cultivation.

In analyzing Rimbaud’s visionary imagery, Cohn lays bare their underlying realism. In *Vowels*, for instance, the association between the letter A and blackness, alongside the imagery of flies clad in fuzzy black coats; in *The Punishment of Tartuffe*, the depiction of sombre sacred robes and gloved hands. Such motifs evoke a Baudelairean aesthetic of evil, with their interwoven associations and synaesthesia projections rooted in Rimbaud’s lived experience and fraught relationship with his mother. Her coercive enforcement of Catholic piety left an indelible aversion in his mind, which ultimately metamorphosed into rebellious imagery across his poems.

The second layer of reality pertains to Rimbaud’s contemporary contextual reality.

Among the cultural conditions of his era, Rimbaud regarded the historical decline of poetic language as the most urgent concern. He and his fellow Symbolist contemporaries acutely perceived the depletion of poetic expression, driven by a pressing need for linguistic innovation and the exploration of new expressive resources. The deterioration of Western verbal language can be traced in George Steiner’s seminal work *Language and Silence*. Steiner chronicles the gradual erosion of linguistic authority in Western civilization. Prior to the seventeenth century, Western culture inherited from ancient Greece an unshakable faith in language: “In the beginning was the Word.” Language ordered the tangible world and structured human cognition and expression. Civilizations once bore solemn witness to the conviction that all truth and reality, save for a

marginal sphere of inexplicable anomalies, could be contained within the bounds of language. (George, 1998, p.14) This faith began to wane in the age of Milton. First, the rise of mathematical logic reshaped the very forms of thought, emerging as an autonomous, even authoritative, linguistic system independent of verbal expression. Second, modern art—including painting and music—deliberately distanced itself from linguistic interpretation, embracing abstraction, non-figuration and semantic indeterminacy. While the territorial scope of verbal language contracted externally, the language itself suffered internal degradation, losing its former grandeur and refinement. Though modern vocabularies expanded quantitatively, lexical usage contracted drastically. The rise of mass culture eroded literary sensibility, diminishing the scope of reality that language could articulate. “As Western consciousness came to rely less on verbal resources for organizing experience and articulating spiritual life, words forfeited precision and efficacy.” (George, 1998, p.25) In essence, language, overused and over exploited, grew stale with time, while concessions to the communicative demands of mass culture reduced it to mediocrity. (George, 1998, pp.13-26.)

Cohn fully contextualizes Rimbaud within this linguistic and cultural crisis. Rimbaud’s poetic rebellion entailed a deliberate resistance against the degenerative trajectory of Western language. He strove to craft a linguistic style characterized by the subtlety, delicacy and fluidity of Impressionist Pointillism, in stark contrast to the diffuse rigidity of Neoclassical diction, thereby endowing his writing with unfamiliar aesthetic power. (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p.243) Rimbaud’s acute awareness of linguistic decline and his radical remedial poetics redefined the mission of subsequent generations of poets: to revitalize and preserve linguistic texture against the atrophy of overuse. His ultimate abandonment of poetry may well stem from a profound sense of futility: even reinvented language inevitably succumbs to stagnation, and individual creative innovation cannot counteract the inevitable ageing of discourse. Might he have deemed absolute silence the ultimate bulwark against linguistic decay?

The third layer of reality resides in the poetic tradition that shaped Rimbaud.

Though disinclined to “tame” Rimbaud into conventional critical frameworks, Cohn situates the poet within the broader continuum of literary evolution. His close textual readings balance microscopic detail with macroscopic perspective, interconnecting Rimbaud’s imagery and verses with those of Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Sartre and other canonical writers. Such contextual alignment emancipates Rimbaud from the label of an isolated prodigy, embedding him within a profound poetic lineage and revealing the internal logic of literary development alongside his textual exegesis.

Cohn observes that in *The Drunken Boat* and subsequent compositions, Rimbaud achieved tangible progress in syntactic fluency and openness, yet his writing remained indelibly anchored to a specific historical moment, geographical setting and literary tradition. “Rimbaud is also ‘one of us’—an almost foreseeable, infinitely compelling French youth...” (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p.245) This subtle assessment delineates Rimbaud’s pivotal position in French poetic heritage, echoing Mallarmé’s famous analogy: Rimbaud blazed across literature like a fleeting meteor, transient in appearance yet eternal in legacy. His centrality to French

poetry derives not from isolated genius, but from his transitional poetics, which synthesized the innovations of his predecessors and charted new directions for modern verse.

Cohn further offers incisive generalized observations: “In a sense, many French writers grow up without a paternal figure. Fathers instil in sons the codes of masculine fortitude, emotional restraint, communal adaptation and autonomous existence. Deprived of such guidance, one seeks to redefine existential roles through radical, creative vision.” (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p.8) The integration of such psychoanalytical arguments with close textual analysis yields expansive, thought-provoking critical insights. From this perspective, one may envision the refined, delicate ornamentation adorning Versailles, the Louvre and the Muséed’Orsay, and the opulent aura emanating from their artworks; one may picture the glamorous women of Paris, whose elegance and prominence overshadowed traditional masculine vigour, infusing French masculinity with understated grace, calm and softness; one may recall the iconic French men of letters—Rousseau, Musset, Flaubert, Proust, Camus—united by pale countenances, melancholic temperaments and an immersive literary sensibility, who substituted lived experience with written creation. Against this cultural backdrop, Rimbaud’s emergence in France emerges not as a fortuitous anomaly, but as an inevitable product of his time and literary milieu.

3

Professor Cohn’s rational analysis unveils the inherent reality within Rimbaud’s poetry, conveying a clear argument: every canonical poetic genius is deeply embedded in the broader poetic tradition and constitutes an indispensable link in its evolution. This is the most grounded dimension of poetic genius.

Such intrinsic reality consolidates Rimbaud’s status as a poetic innovator and grants him landmark significance in the landscape of modern poetry. His innate linguistic gift and rebellious temperament enabled his work to resonate profoundly with the historical context. By subverting established linguistic conventions, his revolutionary writing fulfilled the vital function of linguistic redemption. Through dismantling linear time and causal logic in language, bridging the divides between disparate senses, and infusing verse with musicality and chromatic texture, Rimbaud restored to language the primal wonder and magic gradually eroded over time. His dreamy verses and hermetic poetics foreshadowed the defining features of modern poetry. Furthermore, he established poetry as language’s final and most resilient stronghold, safeguarding its vitality and capacity for self-renewal. Poetry thus preserves a fertile reservoir of linguistic richness amid the persistent depletion and mediocrity wrought by mass culture.

Cohn frequently draws parallels between Rimbaud’s innovative vision and the philosophical thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, for Sartre fully recognized Rimbaud’s radical contributions. In comparing Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Sartre describes Baudelaire as a mere rebel, while crediting Rimbaud as a genuine revolutionary who “smashes reality as one smashes a money box”, (Cohn, R. G., 2015b, p.245) tearing away the illusory veil shrouding the world. Meanwhile, Rimbaud’s rejection of all constraints, his pursuit of the aberrant even

the mad in poetic creation, and his rootless post-literary existence resonate closely with Foucauldian philosophy. Beyond innate talent and the faculty of *voyance*, rebellion and madness functioned as indispensable spiritual catalysts shaping his poetry. Throughout his life, he waged a primal, essential form of resistance. In *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud identifies himself as a “savage”: “I belong to the race that sings under torture; I know no laws, no morality. I am an uncivilized savage...” (Rimbaud, A., 2011, p. 178) and “Yet I have always been alone and homeless; I cannot even name the tongue I speak.” (Rimbaud, A., 2011, p. 175) Cohn delivers a penetrating assessment of Rimbaud’s unyielding, unregulated nature, arguing that the poet possessed a unique artistic “integrative power”. This faculty allowed him to forge “monolithic works” and grant voice to madness, rescuing it from perpetual silence and obscurity. Such integrative power draws an insurmountable boundary between genius and insanity, and between Rimbaud and his mediocre epigones. Many aspiring writers possess raw talent yet lack Rimbaud’s artistic cohesion, reducing their gifts to unmediated madness incapable of self-expression. Others, devoid of his poetic genius, reduce rebellion to hollow, fruitless posturing and superficial performance art.

Since the twentieth century, modern poets including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot have advanced along the literary path pioneered by Rimbaud. Acutely conscious of the oppression inflicted upon language, they upheld linguistic preservation as the central mission of the poet. (Eliot, T. S., 1989, pp. 243–245) Eliot emphasized that renewing modern civilization hinges largely on redeeming language, maintaining its precision and subtlety amid the complexities of contemporary life. Pound championed linguistic innovation, contending that modern language has broken free from subservience to empirical experience and acquired ontological independence. For Pound, poetry’s social purpose lies in safeguarding language: this duty lies not in ideological persuasion, but in preserving the purity of intellectual tools and the integrity of cognitive materials. Human communication relies entirely on stable language; once discourse becomes verbose, imprecise and degenerate, rational thought and social order will inevitably collapse. (Eliot, T. S., 1989, p. 29)

Similarly, linguistic innovation remains a formidable challenge for contemporary Chinese poetry. Shaped by China’s unique modernization trajectory, modern Chinese is sharply severed from classical literary heritage, failing to fully root itself in profound cultural soil. Already inherently deficient, it suffered further depletion from successive political movements and the surging tides of commercialization. Unlike the ageing language of Rimbaud’s era, modern Chinese suffers not from obsolescence, but from paucity, monotony and fragility. It cries out for cultural accumulation, creative renewal, and visionary innovators to rebuild the linguistic lineage of modern Chinese poetry. In evaluating such trailblazers, we may adopt the critical criterion set forth by Cohn: the possession of authentic artistic integrative power.

For all its merits, this three-volume commentary is not without limitations. Preoccupied with microscopic analysis of individual words and imagery, Cohn often touches upon thematic connections without elaborate elaboration. Nevertheless, his associative insights offer valuable interpretive clues, guiding readers to further explore Rimbaud’s entanglement with poetic tradition and his enduring enlightenment for modern poetics. In

the second volume, the translator appends an essay by Suzanne Bernard on Rimbaud, which lucidly reconstructs his formative years, temperament, literary influences and poetic evolution. This supplementary material complements Cohn's close textual readings and enriches the overall critical framework.

For domestic Chinese critics, this work offers invaluable methodological inspiration. The textual difficulty of modern poetry often alienates general readers, while many contemporary critics evade rigorous close reading by invoking ambiguity, polysemy and indeterminacy as convenient excuses. Traditional Chinese critical discourse has long favoured intuitive impressionistic commentary and generalized evaluation, lacking sustained models of detailed textual analysis. Centering on Rimbaud—an extraordinarily difficult, visionary genius—Cohn's three volumes conduct unflinching rational analysis of his fragmented, seemingly illogical language and surreal imagery. Regardless of the absolute validity of his conclusions, his rigorous interpretative method sets an exemplary benchmark for critics and readers alike: poetry is inherently definable and merits rational comprehension, even the visionary verses of Rimbaud.

In recent decades, French philosophy and art have exerted growing global cultural influence. Yet insufficient translation and the limited dissemination of French language learning in China have resulted in widespread neglect of French poets compared with their Anglo-American counterparts. Gratitude is owed to Professor Yang Deyou for translating this uniquely structured commentary on Rimbaud, bridging the cultural gap and bringing Chinese readers closer to the essence of French poetry.

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