RIMBAUD'S 'BARBARE':
THE FLOATING AND REVERBERATING TEXT

Abstract

The article sets out to explore the semantic and linguistic properties of 'Barbare', generally agreed to be one of Rimbaud's most inaccessible poems and one of the most controversial of the Illuminations among Rimbaldian scholars. It posits the dual structuring principles of reverberation and the floating fragment as central to the composition of the poem. After a résumé of previous critical readings [Osmond, Little, Hackett, Wing et al.], the paper argues that through its innovative use of punctuation, its emphasis of the substantive over the verb and its internal musicality 'Barbare' emerges as a key example of the Rimbaldian experimentation with the prose poem. A close reading of the text is undertaken in order to vindicate this evaluation and to highlight certain other important features. In the course of the analysis attention is paid to the sexual code possibly contained in the poem, to the piece's concluding line as an illustration of Rimbaud's predilection for the disorientating finale, to patterns of elemental imagery encountered in the text and to the insights provided into 'Barbare' by the work of Atle Kittang and Paule Lapeyre. The paper concludes that 'Barbare' is very representative of the Rimbaldian desire for upheaval both visionary and linguistic.

'Barbare' is one of a select group of prose poems in Arthur Rimbaud's Illuminations that are consistently designated as "mysterious" and "inaccessible" texts. Together with 'Dévotion' and 'Fairy', it is frequently contrasted with other allegedly more readable pieces from the collection, such as the triad of fairy-tale poems that we find in 'Conte', 'Royauté' and 'Aube'. In their 1987 edition of Rimbaud's work Suzanne Bernard and André Guyaux have this to say about 'Barbare':

On trouve dans cette pièce, plus que le désir d'exprimer ou de décrire, un effort pour créer une structure «musicale» très sensible, avec pour double thème le rouge et le blanc. . . .

One's attention is usefully drawn here to the musical potential of the poem. Rimbaud's interest in music is widely advertised in his work in general and in the Illuminations in particular, these prose poems being brimful of references to musical instruments, the persona of "musicien" which he often assumes and the ideological implications of "la nouvelle harmonie". More specifically, we have the Rimbaldian theory, as adumbrated in the 'Lettre du voyant', of the poet as medium through whom a multiplicity of new chords will be played and who can justifiably lay claim to having become an "opéra fabuleux". Not surprisingly, a host of commentators have identified the musical dimension of 'Barbare' in their readings of the poem and, before adding to these readings in this article, it will serve our purpose well to recapitulate the more important of these commentaries now.

In his 1976 edition of the Illuminations, Nick Osmond approaches 'Barbare' as a journey towards a visionary experience "reaching to an
ultimate suavity in which contrary extremes of sensation are reconciled". Stressing the central importance of the fusion of elemental opposites in the poem, Osmond concludes that "this cosmic interchange makes music". In line with numerous other critics, he sees the concluding words "Le pavillon . . ." as evidence that the process described is a cyclical one which is ready to begin all over again. Roger Little concurs concerning the text's cyclical structure and its pattern of elemental mingling, but he touches on a structural feature of some significance when he refers to the title word 'Barbare' as "anticipating in its echoing syllables the swirling repetitions of the text". Little proceeds to focus on the poem as a possible case study of Rimbaud's celebrated "hallucination des mots", stresses its surrealist credentials and draws attention to the ambiguous attitude of the poet to his own artefact. However, it is this identification of reverberating sound patterns as a key constituent of the text which we will develop as fundamental to our own reading of it later in this study. C. A. Hackett's analysis usefully takes to task the many that strive to explain the poem in terms of volcanoes, national flags and even Freudian imagery. The net effect of such endeavours, as Hackett implies, is really to take one away from the textual fabric and into the realm of inevitably fruitless speculation whereas one might much more usefully consider Rimbaud's wish "to exploit the aesthetic possibilities of ambiguous meanings and multiple interpretations". Hackett sensitively directs us to the "floating" qualities of the poem, its effects of imprint and fade, it suspended and open ending and, of course, its musical nature as a poem "whose function . . . is to harmonise extreme and different elements".

Jean-Pierre Richard, one of the leading "thématiciens" to have written on Rimbaud, sees 'Barbare' as constructing a sort of "intemporalité provisoire" in which state the cherished Rimbalidian dream of chaos cannot assert itself:

Le chaos barbare reste figé dans une discontinuité pathétique: l'avenir y demeure enfermé dans ses limbes.

More recently it has become fashionable to draw attention to the typographical disposition of the *Illuminations* and there is clearly a connection between these impressions of a willed chaotic state and what Claude Zissmann has designated "une forme typographique qui ne soit ni celle de la prose ni celle de la poésie". This mixed typography is a reflection of the extent to which words in 'Barbare' have been released from their moorings, as it were, to drift freely in a play of new associations and relationships where euphonic considerations are just as significant as semantic ones. This prioritizing of sound over sense is a governing factor of composition in many of the *Illuminations*, as we shall briefly illustrate in our conclusion. Finally, in this brief review of some of the more significant of responses to 'Barbare', it would be unwise to overlook the eleven page analysis of Nathaniel Wing in his 1974 study *Present Appearances: Aspects*