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Rimbaud’s influence on Jayne Anne Phillips: from Sweethearts to Shelter

Stéphanie Durrans

1 If only because of his rebellious temper and reputation as the enfant terrible of French poetry, Arthur Rimbaud was bound to touch off a resonant chord in the American imagination of the 1960s. Ever since a certain Jim Morrison wrote to an obscure academic to thank him for translating Rimbaud’s poetry into English and making it accessible to young Americans, it seems that Rimbaud has not lost his hold upon the American imagination. Some may deplore that Wallace Fowlie subsequently rendered Rimbaud a poor service by presenting him to posterity in the shadow of an iconic pop singer¹ and revaluing his work in the context of a discursive economy that neglected the true value of his poetry, and Rimbaud’s literary influence on American writers has admittedly not received the same level of critical attention as that generated by his connection with the likes of Jim Morrison, Patti Smith or Bob Dylan, to name but a few.

2 Jayne Anne Phillips grew up as a teenager in the turmoil of the sixties and published her first stories in the early 1970s. As such, she is one of those writers whose ear could not fail to be attuned to the poetic virtuosities of Rimbaud—albeit in an English version like the one contributed by Fowlie in 1966. Rimbaud’s abiding influence is one she is quite willing to acknowledge. Such pieces as The Drunken Boat, Illuminations and A Season in Hell were most important to her, “especially as [she] was writing in short forms at one point,” she says.² Rimbaud also occasionally crops up in some of her essays on language and on the craft of writing. After evoking her perception of all literary writers as “part of a guild of outcasts,” she tackles the difficulty of conciliating a mundane, everyday life with the demands of her craft and goes on to recall Rimbaud as one of those writers who decided to give up writing but who probably fought all his life against the irrepressible urge to get back to it: “[y]et writing will not desist. There is no question of stopping. You can be like Rimbaud and stop actually writing the words, but you can't stop wanting to write, needing to; you can't stop leaning toward language” (“Why She Writes”).
reference is further elaborated upon in another essay devoted to the writer’s intimate relationship with his / her craft and to the life-sustaining power of writing:

The writer not writing is a wholly guilty party, like someone who through anger or terrible neglect has killed off his own life’s mate, counterpart, reason to live. Or the writer not writing is completely disengaged, a ghostly anarchist traversing Rimbaud’s desert mountains and plateaus, a purveyor of mule team commerce seldom in reach of a human voice and never the accents of home, a gun-running, slave-trading mentor to wild boys, for the fire that consumes itself leaves more than ashes. A mesmerizing remnant haunts the barren sand and stone streets of Abyssinian Harar, an unrelenting centrifugal force that pulls into itself those drawn to conflagration, to total surrender, as though we might know—in an instant of silence—all Rimbaud made himself forget, all he denied when he turned his back on writing and lived beyond it, in exile. (“The Widow Speaks”)

Rimbaud emerges from these essays as a continual source of fascination for Phillips at least until the 1990s, when both of these pieces were published. While the second quotation takes up most of the elements pertaining to the myth he generated, it casts them in a new light to focus instead on the tension between silence and artistic revelation and on the possibility to salvage some truth from the dregs of his life in the Abyssinian desert. One could expect no less from such a language-oriented writer as Jayne Anne Phillips. Starting from such premises, this paper will explore the underlying network of literary relations linking Rimbaud and Phillips from the 1970s (with the publication in a limited edition of her first collection of stories, Sweethearts) to the 1990s (with the crowning achievement of her second novel, Shelter). We will then go on to see how Rimbaud’s influence contributed to opening the springs of artistic creation for the young writer and helped move her to her most powerful expression in prose. I will first examine the patterns of convergence that unite Rimbaud and Phillips one century apart, focusing on their conception of language and their emphasis on “visionary writing,” before investigating the significance of such patterns on Shelter and exploring the stylistic affinities linking these two writers. For both of them, meaning does not arise so much from any specific message conveyed by language as from the power of words to interact and generate tension in a dynamic relationship. The rhythmic potential of words and sounds plays an essential role in this process while allowing both writers to transcend the opacity of language in the hope of fathoming the mysteries of a world rife with violence, death, guilt-consciousness and misunderstanding. Rimbaud’s rebellious take on life and poetry thus resonates hauntingly and most powerfully at a time when America—caught between the Cold War and the Vietnam War—was grappling with its own realization of lost innocence in the modern world.

“Fixing frenzies”: Rimbaud’s and Phillips’s *ars poetica*

What little we know of Rimbaud’s life both before and after he renounced poetry forever has conjured up a mythical image of the man as a young prodigy who occasionally wallowed in sloth and debauchery, lashed out at the conformity of bourgeois life and values and used drugs and alcohol in order to liberate his creative potential—only to take up a life of restless wandering and a commercial career at the age of twenty-one—or so the myth goes. Although a number of critics have sought both to question such an identity and revalue it, this judgment has had a remarkable tenacity and largely accounts for the fascination exerted by Rimbaud—a *poète maudit* whose career spanned hardly three years and whose only publication (in his lifetime) was a bitter failure.
When we take a closer look at the body of literary material Rimbaud left us, however, we discover a startlingly individual voice that draws from a magic, almost esoteric conception of language. The latter was best formulated by Rimbaud himself in the poem “Alchemy of the Word”:

I invented the color of the vowels!—A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green.—I regulated the form and the movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible some day to all the senses. I reserved all rights of translation. [...] I wrote silences, I wrote the night. I recorded the inexpressible. I fixed frenzies in their flight. (Rimbaud, 1961,51)

“Fixing frenzies” is also what Phillips set out to do right from the beginning of her career, as she was still seeking out new narrative and poetic forms before she could originate a suitable style and voice. The inherent tension between motion and stasis to be found in this expression is one that runs through all of her work: how can the poet “fix” on paper something that is by essence uncontrollable and unstable? How can he / she bring time to a stop—if only momentarily so as to give shape and direction to poignant feelings of loss and suffering? Like Rimbaud’s, Phillips’s fictional world is one of perpetually shifting forms, a world that takes shape in the very process of breaking apart.

This dazzling, shimmering mindscape is presented by both writers by means of identical images, that is variations on circular, often concentric patterns. In Rimbaud’s “Mystic,” “angels whirl their woollen robes in pastures of emerald and steel” while “the band above the picture is composed of the revolving and rushing hum of seashells and of human nights” (Rimbaud, 1957, 79). Likewise, in Shelter, “sounds seemed to fall straight down [...] There were screams. [...] But the refracted sounds seemed to circle, approach from all angles” (225). The whole novel is characterized by the recurrence of such imagery: people “spinning through space” (33), thoughts that “seem to roil and turn like black scarves in the black around her” (281), ears that are “delicately whorled as a shell [and] became a receptacle for secrets” (72), “letters with all their black jumping shapes [that] turned around this way and that” (83), “black spots that revolved like dividing cells” (94) and all manner of spirals and chiasmus that stylistically seek to reflect the eddying, whirling motion of such vertigoes. Such examples suggest that language in all its forms (be they as primitive as a scream, inchoate as thoughts or formal as written words) most often lies at the heart of such a process. It clearly becomes a prey to fragmentation in a world of chaos and turbulence that leaves individuals at a loss. The whole world itself becomes a shell whose long-held secrets fail to come out into the open—a shell threatening to implode under the pressure of words loaded with guilt and sinful thoughts, as will be shown in our analysis of Shelter. It also gives the reader a sense of the war’s ongoing implications—be it the Second World War which inspires Lenny’s father with a number of stories, the Korean War that wrecked Carmody’s mental sanity, the Cold War that serves as a backdrop for the novel, or the impending Vietnam War in which Buddy will probably fight, despite his mother’s determination not to make a soldier of him. Rimbaud’s fascination with vocalic sounds (free of the pressure of consonants that will inevitably lead to word formation and thus fixity of meaning) can be put down to a desire to go back to the earliest origins of language, when the authority of the Logos had not yet left its stamp on it.

What is at stake for both writers is the vital need to devise a new poetic language in which the concrete and the abstract both come into play as interchangeable facets of one single reality. In the same way as Rimbaud envisages a world in which an idea can actually sit down, Phillips sees “the truth [stretching] round [Buddy] vast and circular as
a dead world” (236) and the “darkness in the shack [swelling] a little around Preacher’s words, [rippling], [shivering] like the skin of a horse” (14). She would probably concur with the French poet that “one must, I say, be a visionary, make oneself a visionary. The poet makes himself a visionary through a long, a prodigious and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself. He consumes all the poisons in him, keeping only their quintessences” (Rimbaud, 1957, 377). This is another of the contradictions with which Rimbaud had to grapple in his search for a new language. To the arduous task of “fixing frenzies” is added the wish to deregulate his private world of sensations through a self-conscious, self-imposed training that might involve the use of drugs or hallucinogens. The aim is to reach another level of perception and discover new ways of apprehending the world that challenge traditional logic. Normative language thus gives way to a new form of expression that hinges on the poet’s transgression of the most elemental linguistic codes. The poet consequently becomes, as Rimbaud puts it, “the great criminal, the great sickman, the accursed” (Rimbaud, 1957, 377)—something which Phillips elaborates upon when she develops her vision of the writer as the member of a guild of outcasts and as an outlaw by nature. The visionary faculties that are called for by Rimbaud also lie at the heart of Phillips’s poetics as she repeatedly leads her characters to dismiss traditional modes of vision in order to perceive what lies beyond the visible, in a world of fluctuating shapes that holds the key to the characters’ deepest memories. This led both Rimbaud and Phillips to devise a representational order that appeals to all senses, regardless of any external logics—hence the importance of dreams, snatches or remnants of which occasionally return to the surface of diurnal consciousness.

The experiments in genre which Phillips conducts within the formal framework of her first collection of stories corroborate such patterns of influence. Sweethearts is actually more like a collection of vignettes or prose poems than a collection of stories strictly speaking. This poetic dimension is further emphasized by the absence of page numbers in the original Truck Press edition, which makes it look like a long prose poem. French criticism often credits Rimbaud with bringing prose poetry to a state of near perfection—although the genre itself was made popular by Baudelaire’s Little Poems in Prose (1869). The state of continuing tension and adjustment between poetry and prose narrative that one finds in Sweethearts is one that is characteristic of Rimbaud’s poems, some of which have even been seen as embryos of novels (Sacchi, 2002, 164). In any case, this early text contains many specific elements which prefigure the tone and texture of later works such as Shelter. One finds in the title itself a possible allusion to Rimbaud’s “Mes petites amoureuses,” translated into English by Louise Varèse as “My Little Sweethearts.” Phillips’s predilection for one-word titles without an article (16 out of 25 in this collection) also recalls Rimbaud’s compact, unmediated titles in Illuminations. These vignettes offer revealing glimpses of her nascent artistic personality and some of them were later reprinted in Black Tickets, her first collection of stories in a commercial press. Together with her second novel, Shelter (1994), these two collections contain some of the texts in which Rimbaud’s influence can be most forcefully felt.

An intertextual reading of Shelter

Phillips’s early stylistic experimentations culminate indeed in the achievement of Shelter—her most Southern novel, resonating with echoes of Flannery O’Connor and Faulkner.
While focusing on ten days spent in a summer camp in the Appalachian mountains by four young girls, the story of *Shelter* moves back and forth between the past and the present in order to bring back to the surface of the text their deepest fears, traumas and childhood dreams. It also charts their first direct confrontation with evil in the form of an ex-convict on parole called Carmody who is himself without knowing it under the constant surveillance of Parson, his old cellmate now bent on protecting the children from Carmody’s evil designs. Like *A Season in Hell*, *Shelter* can be read as a treatise upon the fall of man combined with desperate attempts to retrieve the lost Golden Age of innocence, even as the story climaxes with the murder of Carmody at the hands of the children.

While Phillips takes up the image of the wandering convict which arouses Rimbaud’s fascination in “Bad Blood” she actually endows Buddy (a little boy who becomes easy prey for Carmody) with some of the characteristics attributed to Rimbaud’s tormented speaker, starting from a troubled relationship with God and religion. The last chapter of the novel, entitled “Buddy Carmody: His Kingdom,” resonates with echoes from “Bad Blood” (fifth section) when Buddy tries to cover the entrance of the cave where the children have buried Carmody’s body and suddenly “stands up and begins to dance, slower at first and then faster, jumping like a banshee, turning and whirling, yelling out loud” (298). Torn between the awareness of his doom and hopes of redemption, Rimbaud’s speaker similarly declares: “I enter the true kingdom of the children of Ham. / Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself?—No more words. I bury the dead in my belly. Shouts, drums, dance, dance, dance, dance! […] Hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance!” (Rimbaud, 1961, 19). That the little boy carries the germs of damnation in himself is also suggested by the systematic association of his name with Carmody’s (in whose name one also finds an echo of the “accursed, ” from the French word *maudit*) in the chapter titles whereas the other children used as focalizers only have first names. Although the subject of *Shelter* would more likely suggest affinities with Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell*, it actually follows more closely the pattern of *Illuminations*, if only by virtue of the 43 pieces that compose it (one epilogue and 42 chapters).

Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* opens with the poem “After the Deluge” in which can be found a number of images that will be further developed by Phillips. The deluge itself is used by Phillips as an ominous sign in the opening pages when she compares the camps to “the dwellings of nomads in flight from floods” (6). Buddy’s reference to “[n]ext spring [when] the river would be thunder and kill their voices and suck the heavy pipes into itself” (108) echoes Rimbaud’s invocation to the waters of the pond to “rise and launch the Floods again” in the penultimate stanza. Like the poem, the novel unfolds between these two framing images of recent or impending disasters while “children in mourning” stand out as a pivotal image in both texts (“She saw that there was no world but this world now, full blown and dense with shifting air; they were born into it, mourning,” 260). Other points of convergence include recurrent motifs like hares or rabbits, beavers, pelting rain, bridges, the conjunction of blood and milk, and the description of a watchful, observing nature. As in the poem, the children in *Shelter* are constantly associated with pictures (115, 137, 156, 182, etc.). At one point Lenny even remembers the “color plate of an angel holding a rod that became a flowering branch” (214-215)—a significant detail insofar as “colored plates” is assumed to be the second title given by Rimbaud to his *Illuminations*. Above all, the cryptic reference to gemstone imagery which frames the poem finds its way into *Shelter* where it is refracted in a myriad of images (mainly...
diamonds, pearls, topaz or unspecified references to jewels). Carmody, once saved, “becomes [...] a treasure loved above all” (209)—a treasure that is “hiding” at the beginning and “buried” at the end, just like the “precious stones” in Rimbaud’s “After the Deluge.” This unexpected association suggests the transmutation that is at stake throughout the novel and that Parson seeks to bring to its completion (how to change evil into good, suffering into hope, or how to transform base metals into the gold of redemption).

13 Like “After the Deluge,” Shelter presents itself as a mosaic of variegated scenes that the reader has to put together again from one chapter to the next as he is given access to the perception of yet one more character. Phillips’s formal aesthetics is thus very similar to Rimbaud’s. The ghostly universe in which the characters are plunged is typical of the imaginary world of childhood in that it is both familiar and unknown—a sensation that is best conjured up by Rimbaud’s fragmentary visions of an overdetermined world in “After the Deluge.”

14 In the next poem (“Childhood”) Rimbaud once more evokes the woods as the heart of mystery and poetic ecstasy (Davies, 1975, 29) while inserting reminiscences of another, possibly happier world from the bygone days of childhood. This poem marks the demise of childhood in contemplating the advent of “the end of the world ahead” and of a “night without end” (Rimbaud, 1957,313, 315). “I am master of silence,” eventually claims the disenchanted speaker as bitterness, absurdity and depression get the better of him. As underlined by Paule Lapeyre, Rimbaud’s poetic quest results in a highly paradoxical situation with, on the one hand, the wish to discover the absolute language that could express what cannot be expressed, and on the other hand, some sort of nostalgic longing for a state anterior to words and language that is the state of infans (i.e., etymologically, the child who cannot speak yet) (Lapeyre, 1981, 337). Faced with this paradox, language takes up a form of expression situated halfway between articulated language and bodily expression verging on frenzy—shouting (Lapeyre, 1981, 338-339). Phillips’s search for an absolute language in Shelter follows a similar progression as she also emphasizes the impotence of words in a world where the children and their parents can only resort to shouts: “Alma, curved into cool, hard rock, could still hear the sounds Audrey had made, a kind of yelling, Oh, Ohhh, Oh, circular and endless” (188); Buddy’s ritualistic dancing and yelling mark the completion of his project in the last chapter (298), and on the last night at the camp it is significant that the girls organize a wild feast in which “words soon [give] way to high-pitched melodic howls. [...] Anyone who wasn’t doing a specific sound in time simply yelled or screamed, and Lenny stood on top of a table to conduct the various parts” (218-19). The liberating potential of such limited forms of expression is suggested when one reads that “Alma wanted to feel the anger rain down on her, wanted a series of screams that opened out until the earth shook, howls that would shatter glass and stone, cries that were empty like the wind is empty, a voiceless keening that would let Alma go, let her betray her mother” (129-30). Like Rimbaud’s persona in “Childhood,” the children eventually become “masters of silence” as they all pledge never to tell anyone about what happened deep in the dark woods when they faced evil and death. Paradoxically enough, though, this intense awareness of silence as the ultimate “shelter” goes hand in hand with the writer’s attempt to recover a form of language likely to express the sum of all sensations, experiences and feelings.
From silence to the quest for an absolute language

15 Faced with the failure of normative, institutionalized language to convey the depth of a traumatic experience, the children have no choice but to take refuge in a world of silence that seals their ideal of brotherhood but provides no adequate outlet for much-needed expression. This is what leads Buddy to “fall into the white space between the letters” on the card Lenny sends him from her new home (295). The verb “fall,” however, sounds an ominous note while acquiring more Biblical connotations in such a postlapsarian universe. The world of silence in which the children are all trapped at the end does not seem to provide any hopeful resolution beyond cementing a spirit of community that transcends time and space, especially since the novel closes on the eve of Kennedy’s assassination and clearly foreshadows another era of violence and suffering for all.

16 Silence is obviously not an option for the language-oriented writer seeking to destabilize the foundations of normative discourse. Like Rimbaud, Phillips had no choice but to “write silences, to write the night” and thus find a way to put down on paper the sum of all the traumas experienced by this generation of Americans. To do so, she needed to adopt an altogether different mode of expression likely to convey the depth of meaning contained in the “white space” of writing itself. Her debt to Rimbaud consequently finds expression in a particular set of representational strategies based on some of the poet’s most distinctive stylistic hallmarks and aimed at making the reader see things afresh through the defamiliarization of language.

17 Synaesthesia (i.e. the simultaneous perception of altogether different sensory impressions) is probably Rimbaud’s most famous technique for attempting to recreate and “fix” images of vertigo. This technique is appropriated by Phillips with striking effects of confusion that further contribute to the “disordering of all the senses” that Rimbaud strove to achieve. Visual impressions, taste, smell, hearing and touch are blended in strange associations, as when Buddy “could feel the shapes of their calls and screams expanding in curves and bells all through the dark” (234). Elsewhere, “[h]e could see the air whisper through the leaves, track its movement, like some form made of air was in the trees” (63). Smells are given colors (“a dark smell,” 89) or associated with incongruous elements (Alma’s “dream smelled of water,” 145). Lenny’s “listening with her skin” (37) perfectly encapsulates the need to do away with traditional modes of perception to apprehend the unknown world they are faced with.

18 Oxymoron (or the incongruous association of two elements that are usually incompatible) allows both writers to take this process of deregulation one step further by neglecting the very principle of identity. Rimbaud’s fascination with fire and water (especially ice) finds its way into Shelter, a novel suffused with the scorching heat of summer but in which Phillips also frequently uses images of snow and ice: “the lake would have a silence around it that was clear, like ice, the air so cold it burned, no one could taste it” (92). Other examples include a “smoky vapour” (53), “wet smoke” (11) and “some frozen, smoking cube” (159). Light and dark also fuse together at times, as when the girl in Parson’s dreams “was only light, dark neon turning like an eel” (my emphasis, 152) or when Parson is a prey to “[o]nslaughts of light and dark, rising and falling through a rush of days and nights” (209). These two worlds eventually clash with the adjective “sun-dark” (137, 160), which powerfully synthesizes the inherent contradictions of such bewildering experiences and inevitably recalls the black sun (or sol niger) which, in the
alchemical process, symbolizes the death and putrefaction of the metal prior to its resurrection in a new form (Abraham, 1998, 186). Once more, regeneration appears as the ultimate aim of linguistic deconstruction.

One variation on the use of oxymoron can be found in the two writers’ tendency to join the earth and the sky in strikingly incongruous images. Phillips imagines “the whole sky sobbing potato juice” (Phillips, 1979, 29-30) while Rimbaud sees “A lacrymal tincture [that] washes / the cabbage-green skies” (Rimbaud, 2005, 77). Beneath the slightly irreverent, comical references to potatoes or cabbages, there surfaces the same pivotal image of tears being shed. The use of nature to express hidden pain or suffering is also a recurrent feature of Shelter: “the night [is] bruised with moonlight” (54); “the stream […] bled its sound” (87); the flowers on the water are “deep red, like wounds in the cold water” (94). The inadequacies of language to articulate trauma and help the children negotiate their way into a new world are thus laid bare. While the children eventually become aware of the failure of language to “translate” (278) their emotional wounds, the natural world appears to take over by gradually substituting human language with its own communication patterns: fish jump “like a comma” (241), Lenny listens to the sound of the leaves “as if there were words in their lissome rattle” (260), the call of the owl across the water is like “a question and exclamation” (263) and the logs Buddy uses to cover the entrance of the cave are inscribed with “a near language of little forms, circles, maps, and pictograms” (293).

Rimbaud’s idiosyncratic use of the article has also been much-discussed in academic circles. Most remarkable is his use of the indefinite article to determine such notions as the sky, the sea, the snow, the moon or the sun: “devant une neige” / “before a snow” (“Being Beauteous”); “comme un sable” / “like a sand” (“Sun and Flesh”). This stylistic feature finds a number of parallels in Shelter: “a water” (10), “a smoke” (230), “a black” (233), “a dark so soft” (233), “he erupts in fire like a hunger” (237), “a silence” (258). In the face of some overwhelming force threatening to engulf humanity (be it water, smoke, darkness, hunger or silence), conceptual frameworks become individualized and Phillips explores the possibility of unity within chaos by assigning singular identities to such potential enemies. Inversely, she also often does away with the definite article at the beginning of sentences in order to unsettle our frames of reference and plunge the reader straight into a world of confusion: “[a]ir smells of pine […] Old weight of the snake in his arms” (153). One also notes in the second half of this fragment her striking use of nominal sentences which also abound in Rimbaud’s poetry (Lapeyre, 1981, 396-397) and contribute to the creation of a world in which all action is suspended to the benefit of powerful visual impressions.

Both Rimbaud and Phillips favour equivocation, as shown by their common use of personal and possessive pronouns that do not refer to any clearly-identified object, and to a large extent this accounts for the enigmatic nature of Rimbaud’s Illuminations. Such ambiguities can be found in the prologue of Shelter where the pronoun “they” that seems to refer to the “bodies” lying in the tents suddenly gives way to “[a]nd they are scattered along Mud River walk […] their occasional cries no louder than the sounds of the invisible birds” (3). Like Rimbaud, Phillips often closes a chapter on an elliptic reference, as in the end of “Buddy Carmody: Dark Parable”: “parting the white sheets” (277)—without any further explanation as to what those white sheets could be. There ensues a suspension of meaning that creates a halo of mystery and contributes to the deliberately cryptic dimension of her writing.
Rimbaud is also well-known for his tendency to use certain intransitive verbs in a transitive construction, especially the verb “to dream” with the consequent effect of endowing the dreaming process with the power to act upon and instantly create its own object. Phillips uses the same technique with such significant verbs as “to swim” and “to float,” that is verbs that pertain to the imagery of water. This suggests a direct access to the world of water, as well as the ubiquitous presence of an element that forms part and parcel of the surrounding world, that is not a mere medium or interface but something integral to their identity: “[the girl was] swimming the darkened main corridor of the cell block” (152); “he saw [...] a gold dust swim the air” (230); “They [...] floated the news through town” (280); the river is “floated with leaves that rush away” (291).

Even if such points of convergence cannot always be proven to result from direct patterns of influence, there is no doubt that words are used by both writers as part of some incantatory magic that is meant to liberate the dream potential they have inside them. This is best achieved in Phillips’s prose through the use of polyptoton. Transmuting the blackness of these words into the gold or silver of pure language is what both writers are trying to achieve: “the words are a dark crusted black that cracks. Black as wine or water” (Phillips, 1979, 250). In alchemical terms, the dissolution of matter is a necessary stage before the eventual regeneration and unification of body and spirit, or words and their soul. The gemstone imagery that a similar interest in alchemy led both Rimbaud and Phillips to explore inspires them with neologisms as a first step towards the dissolution of traditional forms: Rimbaud’s “amygdales gemmeuses” (“gem-like tonsils,” Rimbaud, 2005,117) are thus echoed by Phillips’s vision of a criminal “gem-stepping down the alley” (Phillips, 1979,253). The same impulse is definitely at work beneath the shimmering surface of their texts as their writing taps into the primal roots of dream, loss and desire to unravel the psychic traumas of a whole generation. In Shelter, Phillips invests the themes and images she borrows with even greater poetic intensity than in her early texts. She achieves a striking fusion of intellectual and sensual experience, demonstrating a sure command of her material through a number of images that press upon our consciousness with the same haunting power as Rimbaud’s poetry. There is no doubt Rimbaud would have seen in her one of those “horrible workers” who would take up the torch after his death:

[The poet] arrives at the unknown: and even if, half crazed, in the end, he loses the understanding of his visions, he has seen them! Let him be destroyed in his leap by those unnameable, unutterable and innumerable things: there will come other horrible workers; they will begin at the horizons where he has succumbed. (Rimbaud, 1957, 377)

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NOTES

1. Almost thirty years later Wallace Fowlie published a comparative study of Rimbaud and Morrison (Rimbaud and Jim Morrison: The Rebel as Poet) in which he also explains how he used Morrison as an entry into the poetic world of Rimbaud for young students who knew nothing of French poetry. The debatable merits of this book have been discussed by Phillippe Desan in an article entitled “De Rimbaud à Jim Morrison ou comment mettre la poésie au goût du jour.”

2. Private correspondence with Jayne Anne Phillips (11th February 2012).

3. Except when specified otherwise, all translations of Rimbaud’s works into English are borrowed from the New Directions bilingual editions of Illuminations and A Season in Hell and the Drunken Boat, both of which were translated by Louise Varèse. These are also the editions in
which Phillips originally read Rimbaud’s verse. In this case, “I fixed frenzies” seems to me a more accurate translation of Rimbaud’s “je fixais des vertiges” than what was later suggested by another translator of Rimbaud, Wallace Fowlie, when he opted for “I described frenzies.” Not only should we take into account the powerful antinomic value of the terms chosen by Rimbaud (somehow diluted in the choice of the verb “describe”), but the influence of alchemy on his vision of life and poetry may also have led him to choose a verb that also refers to the process of “fixation,” i.e. “the converting of spirit into body so that it can endure the fire and not fly away” (Abraham, 1998, 78).

4. For instances of spirals, see 204, 256, 267 and 276. For variations on the chiasmus, see 235 and 244.

5. “After the Deluge” opens with this disturbing image: “[a]ussitôt que l’idée du Déluge se fût rassise,” which literally translates into “as soon as the idea of the Flood had sat down again.”

6. See Phillips’s essay “Outlaw Heart.”

7. See Durrans’s article on “Fast Lanes” in which this aspect is developed using French critic George Didi-Huberman’s distinction between the visual and the visible. References to blindness (whether partial or permanent) actually abound in Phillips’s work, as if to suggest the primacy of this other mode of vision in the apprehension of truth.

8. See Nakaji, 122.

9. See Sacchi, 62. The critic underlines how Rimbaud’s striking use of definite articles leads us to see in such a description the landscape of childhood, both unique and unfathomable.

10. These examples are borrowed from Paule Lapeyre (386) who provides one of the best discussions to date of Rimbaud’s poetic style.

11. The indefinite article was not kept by either Fowlie or Varèse in their respective translations, however, but the presence of the original text on the opposite page might have made Phillips aware of such stylistic peculiarities.

12. This cryptic dimension has been well documented and analyzed by Sarah Robertson (though from another angle) in her book The Secret Country: Decoding Jayne Anne Phillips’ Cryptic Fiction.

13. See 393-395 in Lapeyre.

14. See for instance 8 (“At night the shack was darker even than the night beyond it […] He seemed to be in utter darkness, the dark that is in the inner guts of living things”) and 51 (“and in the dark of her something cracks, loud as the crack of a gun, keeps cracking apart”).

ABSTRACTS

Arthur Rimbaud emerges from Jayne Anne Phillips’s essays as a continual source of fascination. This paper explores the patterns of convergence that unite these two writers one century apart while aiming to provide a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of Phillips’ accomplishments in Shelter. It focuses on Rimbaud’s and Phillips’ conception of language and their emphasis on "visionary writing", before investigating the significance of such patterns on Shelter and exploring the stylistic affinities linking their respective works. In the end, linguistic deconstruction and regeneration appears as one of the ways in which both writers seek to express the hidden traumas of a society in the grips of violence.

A en juger par les quelques essais de Jayne Anne Phillips dans lesquels il est mentionné, Arthur Rimbaud semble avoir exercé une véritable fascination sur la jeune nouvelliste et romancière...
américaine au moins jusque dans les années 1990. Cet article explore la filiation littéraire entre deux auteurs mus par un même souci de renouveler la langue par l’élaboration d’une « écriture visionnaire », à rebours des cadres normatifs et de toute pensée logique. A ce titre, le roman Shelter (1994) apparaît comme l’hommage le plus appuyé rendu par Phillips au poète français, notamment par le double processus de déconstruction et de régénération linguistique qui permet à son auteur d’exprimer les traumatismes individuels et collectifs d’une société hantée par la violence.

INDEX

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