

On Rimbaud's "Vowels," Again: Vowels or Colors?

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Arthur Rimbaud's sonnet Vowels presents a poetic vision based ostensibly on a quasi-psychedelic or synesthetic experience. It has inspired writers, critics, painters, and singers for over a century mainly because of its often obscure form and content. From the first verse of the text, for instance, the author juxtaposes each of the normal five French vowels printed in capital letters with what appears to be a random choice of an "appropriate" color. As a result, the majority of readers assume that these colors somehow correspond, semantically speaking, to the selected vowels. In making such connections, however, our poet suggests that his specific fusion of basic colors and sounds is capable of generating not just one but multiple significations, be they religious, erotic, aesthetic, even anthropological. Yet the poem itself - an irregular French sonnet - already derives much of its obscurity from another odd feature: the faulty order of French vowels used by Rimbaud: A to O instead of A to U or Y. Formal explanations are often cited to justify this so-called "mistake." This paper demonstrates that his poem hides a different interpretation of the words used to expand upon these sound/color combinations. After all, vowels are metonymically linked to sounds, since they constitute the minimal elements of the latter. Contemporary linguists have discovered, however, that in almost all languages, colors come in the same fixed order of words - Black, White, Red, Green and Blue - that Rimbaud proposes. Indeed, in countless documents created over millennia, people in dissimilar societies have tended to identify the same basic colors in the same sequence, for reasons we can only begin to explore here. This previously unnoticed coincidence thus provides further proof that Rimbaud's sonnet thematically conflates ideas about the historical Beginnings and Endings of various civilizations. Thanks to this chronological conflation, the poem also develops more effectively than previously thought three major themes: the Apocalypse, the Final Judgment, and the future of poetic language. Through its form and content, it thus specifically illustrates the future of French poetry, which Rimbaud compares elsewhere, paradoxically, to Ancient Greek poetry.

Keywords: ancient languages, Arthur Rimbaud, clairvoyance, symbolist poetics, synaesthesia, the Apocalypse of St. John

Introduction

Rimbaud wrote his famous sonnet *Voyelles* [Vowels] in 1871 or 1872. But it was not published until 1883, when it began to cause quite a stir; one felt especially in bohemian circles frequented by writers like his elder and, at that point, erstwhile lover, Paul Verlaine. The poem continues moreover to make waves today. To a certain degree this is due to what is often thought to be an egregious error on his part. The so-called error concerns his (mis)use of French vowels, which consisted of switching the normal sequence of the penultimate and final vowels of his native tongue, O & U. This deliberate reversal of regular order begins in the very first line of the poem and lasts until the very end. Instead of

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reproducing the canonical sequence A-E-I-O-U (and sometimes Y) taught to every schoolchild in France and many other countries where a similar alphabet is in effect, Rimbaud's text thus proposes a baffling new order: A-E-I-U-O. This anomaly has left countless scholars confused as to how they should understand it.

To help our own readers follow our arguments more carefully, we must first reproduce the full sonnet in French along with an English translation:¹

Voyelles

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes:
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,

Golfes d'ombre; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,
Lances des 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:
—Ô l'Oméga, rayon violet de ses Yeux!

And here is a recent English translation by A.S. Kline in 2003:²

Vowels

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels
Someday I'll talk about your secret birth-cries,
A, black velvet jacket of brilliant flies
That buzz around the stench of the cruel,

Gulfs of shadow: E, candour of mists, of tents,
Lances of proud glaciers, white kings, shivers of parsley:
I, purples, bloody salivas, smiles of the lonely

¹This version conforms to the autograph manuscript by Rimbaud. See Rimbaud (2009: 167). The volume includes two other versions on pp.168 and 169. The first is a "Copie de Verlaine", the second was published in "Les Poètes maudits. II. Arthur Rimbaud," de Verlaine, "Lutèce," 5–12 Octobre 1883. That so much of what Rimbaud wrote comes down to us via copies of the manuscripts he produced raises all sorts of questions, of course, about their authenticity, accuracy, etc. Nonetheless, everything we discuss here is based on well-known and widely accepted publications that appeared after our poet abandoned creative writing all together, except for his rather abundant letter correspondence.

²Poetry in translation (n.d.) *Rimbaud, Selected poems*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/31Vz8WV>. [Accessed 24 April 2019].

With lips of anger or drunk with penitence:
 U, waves, divine shudders of viridian seas,
 Peace of pastures, cattle-filled, peace of furrows
 Formed on broad studious brows by alchemy:

O, supreme Clarion, full of strange stridencies,
 Silences crossed by worlds and by Angels:
 O, the Omega, violet ray of her [or his] Eyes!

Many incompatible solutions to this vowel enigma have been put forth, including one (Metzidakis 1988) by a co-author of the present article. The title of his earlier article (*Did Rimbaud really know his alphabet?*) rhetorically asked whether the great French Symbolist had in fact made an egregious mistake and whether he actually knew his alphabet. The textual impetus for this tongue-in-cheek article title was precisely the troubling error in the order of capital French vowels. This co-author's true argument, however, was that no such error exists and that by choosing this odd vocalic order, Rimbaud succeeded in creating a different alphabet from the one to which he and his native speaker readers were accustomed. The reason behind his unusual stylistic tactic was that it formed part of a larger strategy for the entire poem; one that allowed the young writer to conjure up an original vision of a radically different mode of expressing himself through a "systematic derangement of normal senses." The latter phrase is our translation of the celebrated formula found in his later editorially compiled *Lettres du Voyant* or *Letters from the Seer*, in which he describes both his writing practice and preferred life style qua Seer as requiring just such a *dérèglement systématique de tous les sens*. Later on we will provide more details on this specific vision.

The other co-author of the present essay, who usually works in fields outside of philology per se, became fascinated with questions that more often pertain to diachronic linguistics and, even more generally, anthropology. Thanks to his relatively new found interest, he recently began reconsidering the historical appearance of particular sequences of words designating colors in some of the 6,000 to 7,000 languages - nobody knows exactly how many - that are either still spoken or have disappeared at some point after the supposed destruction of the Tower of Babel in the Land of Shinar, Babylonia. One will recall that following that Biblical event people were reportedly dispersed over the face of the earth, at least according to *Genesis* (11:1-9). But, since God suddenly made them forget the only language they had learned before this diaspora, the people had to start all over again to recover their language, their words, including those that signify colors in their "new" languages. Though they were naturally able to distinguish the fact that to a large extent trees were (very often) green, and that flowers tended instead to exhibit more shades of reds, blues, yellows, etc., postdiluvian people had to (re)invent the relevant words.

It just so happens, however, that the words they discovered - or merely recreated - fell into the following fixed order, regardless of their tribe: Black and White first, followed by Red, Green and Blue. Step by step, they forged other words for some of the infinite number of related colors the human eye can distinguish. Perhaps this is also the order in which Rimbaud discovered

them himself or simply learned them in school. In any case, the co-authored essay offered here will now first present a few of the compelling solutions philologists have previously put forth to resolve these enigmatic vowel-color connections. The recent anthropological find just mentioned will then allow us to add yet another intriguing level or dimension to this literary puzzle for future scholars to consider and explore further.

Philologists at Work

Many readers of *Vowels* have wondered, for example, whether, metrically speaking, the poet simply wanted to avoid the so-called *hiatus* problem described in French classical versification when inverting the O and U. Avoidance of the hiatus constituted a well-known "rule" that was widely respected by major poets writing in that language until at least the mid-19th century. What the rule prohibited was the placement of consecutive vowels at the end of one word and the beginning of the next in "proper" French verses. Thus, if the initial line in Rimbaud's poem had read "...O bleu U vert" the proximity of the sounds *bleu* & *U* would have violated this norm. Many critics therefore opine that this is why he made this "mistake." For countless others scholars, the said anomaly resulted instead from his typical "bad-boy" behaviour. According to this reading, by attempting to propose a new type of alphabet in lieu of the usual one, he was merely engaging in another of his infamous provocations. Still other critics have remarked that in changing the traditional vocalic order, Rimbaud underscores the Greco-Roman origins of the French alphabet rather than repeat the Gallicized one he and his fellow writers and countrymen all learned in school. And indeed, one cannot help but notice that in the final line of the sonnet, the poet explicitly evokes Greek vowels and reprises the capital letter O, calling it, "*Omega*." As it bookends the implied Alpha that initiates the text, this vowel explicitly refers to a well-known, apocalyptic description of Jesus Christ, who describes himself in St. John's vision, as the beginning and end, the Alpha and Omega, of human history itself.

Throughout the poem, the reader thus encounters the same *faulty* opening-line vocalic sequence (A to O) structuring the other lines. In the process, the author seems intent on developing previously unknown semantic and metaphorical connections between vowels and - of all things - colors. He accomplishes all this by immediately pairing or fusing each vowel he mentions with a "corresponding" color. As a result of such inventiveness, Rimbaud's sonnet is often seen as a poetic illustration of the mental phenomenon known as synaesthesia. In fact, so common is this belief that even serious contemporary researchers currently working on mapping out the workings of the brain and its synapses cite this very same poem when attempting to explain such mental aberrations. A propos of the same text, it is even said that Rimbaud confided the following to his friend Ernest Delahaye (as cited in Dehaene 2009: 215): "I believe that I sometimes saw or felt in this manner, and I say it, I talk about it, because I find it just as interesting as anything else." Yet Rimbaud himself never provides any full length, logical explanation

for the apparent randomness of the vowel-color pairs, which already form the first verse:

A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue

So, is he primarily trying to stress supposedly new semantic connections between sounds (vowels) and colors, or to suggest something else, something more?

Nor does he ever explain the potentially innumerable literal or figurative connections readers have made or might make between them, as we, too, shall do presently. One other such extensive, nearly exhaustive reading, was published years ago by the now deceased and controversial anti-Semite, Robert Faurisson. In an influential, albeit highly debatable, study published before his darker racist side was revealed, Faurisson (1961) argued that the sonnet is primarily erotic and used evidence like the visual shapes, not sounds, of the vowels that compose it to prove his points. One major problem with his approach, however, is that it requires readers to re-imagine the vowel E, for instance, as standing on its side in order to represent a woman's breasts. Or to reread the title *Voyelles* as *Vois-elles*, i.e. *See them*, meaning: This title invites or instructs us to see all the other parts of the woman portrayed in the sonnet, just as students of French Literature learn to observe and admire similar feminine traits in Renaissance love poems known as *blasons*. The truth is, however, that little about this poem really compels us to read it this way, or to reject any number of other extraordinary critical interpretations or reconfigurations of the signifiers which actually appear on the page. Nor, finally, does Rimbaud recommend certain readings or interpretations of said connections over others, although he does provide clues which the aforementioned article (*Did Rimbaud really...*) brings together to build its central argument.

In any case, along the otherwise traditional fourteen lines of the sonnet form, the text assumes an overall acrostic shape running down the page in the following strikingly visual manner:

A ...
 ...E ...
 I ...
 U ...
 O ...

By apostrophizing the final vowel in this seemingly Hellenized sequence in the fourteenth line of his poem — "*Ô, l'Oméga*" — Rimbaud thus makes clear that on some level, as we've said, he has chosen to re-imagine the normative order of French vowels as Greek ones. Why? To summarize and recapitulate our earlier essay here, this is primarily due to certain crucial, intertextual references. Principal among them is the allusion to the figure of Jesus Christ as he appears in the prophetic biblical text commonly known as the *Book of Revelations* or the *Apocalypse of Saint John*. In linking these two works, Rimbaud illustrates, metonymically, the future of all French poetry. His sonnet manages to do this, first, because both texts speak of things that shall come to pass; and second,

because both continually mention colors whenever sounds (or vowels, which, after all, are the building blocks of most human sounds) are evoked.

Additionally, in the biblical prophecy Jesus says of himself several times, "I am the Alpha and the Omega [...] the beginning and the end." The rationale for Rimbaud's "error" then becomes much clearer, since elsewhere in his work and correspondence the poet describes himself, as well as his idealized vision of the future poet, as a Seer or *Voyant* in French. He also explicitly states that in the future the ideal language for French poetry will again be *a little like Ancient Greek poetry* // "... ce serait un peu la Poésie grecque." Last but not least, the final two words of the sonnet are "*Ses Yeux* [*His Eyes*]." Those words are significant because, while alluding to the eyes of God, this semantically potent phrase has an extra formal advantage pertinent to the poem's major theme(s): it contains yet another capitalized vowel, the letter Y, one which supplements the other five vowels in the earlier sequence. It therefore compensates, as it were, for the "missing" (semi) vowel Y, just as Rimbaud's poetic/prophetic vision comes to a close.

Obviously then, we must recognize that Rimbaud was neither illiterate nor unsure about the *correct* alphabet to use for his visionary sonnet. Instead, he composed it for reasons about which he may have been either conscious or unconscious. It really does not matter much which, since the alert reader inevitably makes the connections. In the former case (conscious), he might simply have put into poetic use some exceptional knowledge he had acquired during his adolescence while experiencing either an actual episode of synaesthesia, or more likely, as a kind of quasi-mystical "illumination." In fact, later in Rimbaud's relatively short writing career, this type of vision took many other textual shapes and helped him formulate his inspired eponymous collection of prose poems.

Linguists at Work

A Levinasian reading of Blanchot's novellas shall answer the questions raised above by examining the following: First, how Blanchot's negative discourse allows for a *double parole* to occur and for the text to take the form of the face of the other - a speaking entity - that according to Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) imposes itself onto the listener, in our case, the reader. Second, how the author's desubjectivized narrators fuel the text's *double parole* all the while insinuating that the truth of the text is to be found neither in the plot, nor in its words but only in "the silence of essence, essence or essencing (*Wesen*) that resounds in [each] poetic word" (Llewelyn 2008: 134) and that resonates in the reader through his or her engagement with the text. Third, how Blanchot's textual fragments create an experience of the Levinasian *il y a* that fosters "the secret of the birth (*connaissance*) of thought" (Levinas 1987: 125) in the text, and allows the reader to develop a better understanding of the self as well as of "the face that speaks" (Levinas 1987: 120), the textual artifact, through active engagement with the text.

In the latter (unconscious) case, however, he may have been led to these peculiar vowel-color connections merely because he was doing what people throughout the world have evidently always done. What we mean is that Rimbaud may also have just correctly guessed the order in which words for colors were first discovered and articulated by our ancestors and their descendants. According to the Old Testament, one of the major sources of Western, Judeo-Christian tradition which Rimbaud certainly studied, readers learn that after God destroyed the Tower of Babel, His people all started to speak different languages. But though humans can distinguish several millions of color differences, since the range is made of a three dimensional continuum defined by the wavelength of reflected light, the quantity of reflected light, and the dilution of the color with white (brightness) or its difference from black (for instance, light or dark blue), in his wisdom, God distributed the words for colors in a very scant way. Some populations only know Black and White; others add Red to this. If the language contains four words, the fourth is either Green or Yellow. Languages that contain five words have both Green and Yellow. Then comes Blue. The number of terms used to denominate basic colors thus varies across languages. English has eleven words that everyone knows - Black, White, Red, Green, Yellow, Blue, Brown, Orange, Pink, Purple, Grey - while the Bolivian Amazonian language, Tsimane, has only three - Black, White and Red.

But there is more than the fact that populations have only a selected number of words for colors. It also turns out that, among the words constitutive of our many and varied languages, one almost universally discovers the same fixed order of words - Black, White, Red, Green, and Blue - found in Rimbaud's sonnet: A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue. In the various languages, there is no word Red before Black and White, no words for Green or Blue, before there is a word for Red...

To be sure, this unexpected coincidence requires more explanation and justification. So here is what we can state with some scientific certainty today. Berlin and Kay (1969) showed that the words for colors appear in a relatively fixed order across cultures and languages. Some populations have words for Black and White only, for instance. Yet, although they could probably distinguish other colors as well, these same populations had no specific words for them.

As already mentioned, Tsimane has only three colors — Black, White and Red. A population that has a word for Red, furthermore, already has words for Black and White. The reverse order never occurs, however. Red was also followed by Green or Yellow in some civilisations or Yellow and Green in others; then came Blue. The terms for Brown or Purple appear only after the distinction between Green and Blue.

Monolingual Zuni speakers and English speakers have the same color categories with the exception of Yellow and Orange for which Zunis have only one term while English speakers have two (Lenneberg & Robert 1956).

In some languages (a dialect of Amazigh, the language of Berbers in North Africa), there is only one term for Green and Blue. On the other hand, in the Bantu language, Swahili, Green and Blue have no words. They are described respectively by *rangi ya mayani* (the color of grass), and *rangi ya angwa* (the color of the sky).

Pashto, an Indo-Iranian language spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan, uses the word *shin* for both colors. But when it gets difficult to understand to which color *shin* relates, they add "plants" or "sky" like in Swahili. Greek makes a difference between a light shade of blue called *ble* (μπλε) and a darker one called *ghalazio* (γαλάζιο). According to Thierry et al. (2009), this leads to "faster perceptual discrimination of these colors in native speakers of Greek than in native speakers of English...which establishes an implicit effect of language specific terminology on human color perception."

Brown and Lenneberg (1954), and Lenneberg and Roberts (1956) were among the first to use experiments to investigate the idea that lexical differences result from cognitive differences. Berlin and Kay (1969) found that colors are hard-wired in our cognitive system. The debate switched from one extreme to the other and can be summarized by the following two questions formulated by Kay and Regier (2006):

1. Is color naming across languages largely a matter of arbitrary linguistic conventions?
2. Do cross-language differences in color naming cause corresponding differences in color cognition?

Many papers followed choosing one of the two directions or even creating new ones. Gibson et al. (2017), for instance, show that the problem has much less to do with perception than with usefulness of a color: "It is now established that native language affects one's perception of the world. However, it is unknown whether this effect is merely driven by conscious, language-based evaluation of the environment or whether it reflects fundamental differences in perceptual processing between individuals speaking different languages." And three years after Kay and Regier (2006) formulated the two questions quoted above, Regier and Kay (2009) changed the order of their names and responded by: "With respect to question (1), color names do influence color perception - but primarily in the right visual field, and less so in the left. With respect to question (2), color naming across languages does reflect universal tendencies, as shown in earlier work - but also some degree of local linguistic convention."

After he wrote this poem and many others, Rimbaud left for Abyssinia, knowing full well that French had eleven words that the rest of us all know: Black, White, Red, Green or Yellow, Green and Yellow, Blue, Brown, Orange, Pink, Purple, and Grey; all other words are mere nuances or shades. By that we mean that a word like Yellow is what we may call a fugitive color, since when it meets Blue, it becomes Green. And we surmise that as Rimbaud was seemingly concerned in this particular poem with something basic, something ordinary, he preferred to ignore it.

Yet, other nuanced, fugitive colors do appear elsewhere in the body of his published works, including *Vowels* itself. Rereading it quickly reveals the explicit presence of at least shades of purple, violet, and viridian. The important difference though is that they are not attached immediately to any of the vowels cited, as we see in the text's first line. Rather they appear in the lyrical descriptions and expansions of each of the five vowel/sound-color couplings. In the very first of his

"Illuminations" too, titled *Après le Déluge* [After the Deluge], for example, Rimbaud evokes several other colors and shades of color such as Purple, Blue, even an entire enchanted rainbow in which he bathed his personal splendid vision of a wholly cleansed and utterly renewed universe: a symbolically rich goal projected by a truly revolutionary artist for his own longed-for paradise on earth. Yet, there as well we find no strict merging or seamless correlations established by the author between the principal vowel/sounds and colors in our target poem. Something important, something unique, therefore, seems to have been at stake in this legendary, if brief, work.

Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine then how in a text he specifically titled *Vowels* Rimbaud would have used any colors other than the most basic, common, and universal. For his visionary text clearly has Biblical overtones, along with originary and teleological images. Images, in other words, that dramatically depict the beginning or end of a given civilization. Our poet was also limited, by definition, to the five actual vowels in the French language. As a result, there were obviously only five colors he had at his disposal to combine with an equal number of vowels. Thanks to the new linguistic evidence about early language formation presented above, however, we can now comprehend better and appreciate much more why he picked the particular order(s) he did, not only for the latter but also the former.

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