

# Études britanniques contemporaines

48 (2015)

Crossing into Otherness—Outlanding Woolf

---

Christine Regan

## 'Ghosts' and the Haunting of Harrison by Rimbaud

---

### Warning

The contents of this site is subject to the French law on intellectual property and is the exclusive property of the publisher.

The works on this site can be accessed and reproduced on paper or digital media, provided that they are strictly used for personal, scientific or educational purposes excluding any commercial exploitation. Reproduction must necessarily mention the editor, the journal name, the author and the document reference.

Any other reproduction is strictly forbidden without permission of the publisher, except in cases provided by legislation in force in France.

**revues.org**

Revues.org is a platform for journals in the humanities and social sciences run by the CLEO, Centre for open electronic publishing (CNRS, EHESS, UP, UAPV).

---

### Electronic reference

Christine Regan, « 'Ghosts' and the Haunting of Harrison by Rimbaud », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 48 | 2015, Online since 11 May 2015, connection on 08 June 2015. URL : <http://ebc.revues.org/2151>

Publisher: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

<http://ebc.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document available online on:

<http://ebc.revues.org/2151>

Document automatically generated on 08 June 2015.

© PULM

Christine Regan

## 'Ghosts' and the Haunting of Harrison by Rimbaud

- 1 'Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast' is the last poem in *The Loiners* (1970), Tony Harrison's first major volume of poetry. 'Ghosts' is dedicated to Harrison's daughter Jane and contains two epigraphs:

These rooms have been furnished by the League of Friends  
For your comfort and rest while illness portends.  
Take care of the things which from us you borrow  
For others are certain to need them tomorrow.

- 2 Inscribed in *The League of Friends* rest room, Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

"C'est mon unique soutien au monde, à présent !"  
Arthur Rimbaud, 2nd July, 1891. (*Œuvres*, p. 528) (Harrison 1970, 91)

- 3 Harrison described 'Ghosts' in the original book description for *Loiners*, held in manuscript form in the Alan Ross Collection, as 'a bitter, ironic affirmation of the need for poetry on many levels, a grudging autobiographical credo, the need for love, a celebration, an art, however difficult' (Harrison n.d).<sup>1</sup> The ironies of the poem's affirmation of poetry and love are illuminated through the life and letters of Rimbaud, whose importance for 'Ghosts' is signaled by the second epigraph, a quotation from one of Rimbaud's last letters (Rimbaud 1891b, 347). Harrison has read Rimbaud's letters and knows his biography, and the legend of his rupture with poetry and with the poet Paul Verlaine, and that he left Europe, finally re-emerging as a trader and explorer in colonial Africa. It is Rimbaud's struggle to survive as a poet, his decisive poetic silence, and the manner of his dying that haunt Harrison in 'Ghosts.' The significance of the epigraph to 'Ghosts' taken from Rimbaud's letter has not been explained in the scholarship on Harrison, but Rimbaud holds the key to understanding intimate dimensions of an enigmatic poem. Harrison's letters during the 1960s and 1970s also clarify some of the preoccupations of a poem whose political and dramatic truths are grounded in personal experiences. Reading 'Ghosts' alongside Harrison's and Rimbaud's letters, and observing its resonances with Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*, we discover one of the great unrecognised literary friendships between the dead and the living, and Rimbaud is one of the 'ghosts' haunting Harrison's imagination.

- 4 The title 'Ghosts' also alludes to the play *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen, the nineteenth-century Norwegian dramatist, and it identifies Harrison's poem as being like Ibsen's play: a modern tragedy with features of the fatalistic Greek tragedy. The narrator of 'Ghosts', implicitly the dramatic persona 'Tony Harrison', is a young man belatedly recognizing the forces determining his destiny and being a powerless bystander at pivotal early events. A miscarriage, the maiming of a child, and the retributive religion of a mother in the poem symbolically suggest the cycle of tragedy in which the young are destroyed by their parents. Harrison's poem and Ibsen's play share a focus upon the power of heredity and the dramatization of inherited ideas as destructive 'ghosts'. The poem, like the play, attacks the moral authority of the family and the church, and does so partly by dramatizing the disintegration of a son: in the play it is the dying Oswald and more subtly in the poem it is an anguished Harrison. A very different version of 'Ghosts' was first published in *Poetry and Audience* (Harrison 1960, 6–7) but one phrase is retained in the poem as it appears in *Loiners*, where Harrison is 'still afraid' 'about the next descent of night' (96), which echoes how the doomed Oswald is 'haunted by this ghastly fear' in Ibsen's play (Ibsen 98).

- 5 The epigraph to the first version of 'Ghosts' is 'I gave you life' and it is taken from Ibsen's play. Oswald tells his mother Mrs Alving that he has hereditary patrilineal syphilis, and asks her to kill him, but she suggests that this would pervert a natural moral order: 'But I gave

you your life' (100). Harrison slightly alters the line and uses it as the epigraph to indicate the poem's concern with his mother's moral claim of control over his life, manifest in her bitter opposition to a love affair. Although the epigraph from Ibsen is dropped, these preoccupations persist into the *Loiners*' version of 'Ghosts', where he attributes responsibility for his mother's view that a miscarriage was divine retribution for conception outside of wedlock to Queen Victoria's virulent puritanism. Addressing a statue of the 'Empress, Queen', symbol too of an unwelcome imperial presence in the Northern city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he expresses an implicitly ideological anger at the poisoning of private relationships by corrupt public codes of morality, and at the inhumanities of a Christian theology:

your clean-  
living family image drove  
my mother venomously anti love,  
and made her think the stillbirth just  
retribution for our filthy lust;  
our first (the one we married for)  
red splashes on a LADIES floor ...  
*inter urinam et faeces nasc-*  
*imur* ... issues of blood. (91)

- 6 Harrison recalls the birth and death scene of his first child and he remembers the Latin words of Saint Augustine that we are born between urine and faeces. The Church Father's words, and the reference to 'issues of blood' on the floor of the 'LADIES' toilet, seems to reprise his mother's view of the indecent filthiness of his poetry. In 'Ghosts', his mother's puritanism is a metaphorical 'disease' and a matrilineal version of the patrilineal syphilis in Ibsen's play, which is also part of the literature of syphilis recurrently alluded to in *Loiners*. The poem takes up the metaphorical dimension of Ibsen's use of 'disease', and of 'ghosts' as metaphors for 'dead beliefs' that are passed from generation to generation and cause great suffering.
- 7 'Ghosts' is dedicated to Jane, Harrison's first surviving child. The tragic accident that is the catalyst for the poem is explained in a letter to Alan Ross, the editor of *London*
- 8 *Magazine* which published *Loiners*, and an early supporter in the literary world. On the day Harrison posted Ross the manuscripts of *Loiners*, 5 April 1968, 'my daughter, who is rare and beautiful, had both legs crushed under a ten ton lorry on the Great North Road' (Harrison 1968b). A month later he writes that 'the threat of amputation is still not removed' (Harrison 1968c). Harrison's poem for Jane recalls Rimbaud because the French poet had a comparable experience. Rimbaud's leg was surgically amputated on 27 May 1891. Little more than a month later, 2 July 1891, Rimbaud writes the line that becomes Harrison's epigraph in a poem occasioned by his child's accident: '*C'est mon unique soutien au monde, à présent !*' ['It's the only support I have in the world right now!'] (Rimbaud 1891b, 347). Rimbaud was literally referring to his left leg as his only physical support after the amputation of his right leg. Rimbaud's advice, if he were to be consulted by someone in a similar condition, was to die rather than allow the terrible suffering brought by amputation (Rimbaud 1891c, 416). In 'Ghosts', Harrison anticipates for his small daughter 'almost a lifetime's crippledom' and wonders if he should 'cut off/ your breathing with a last wet cough' (94). He once described Jane as 'my only solace' (Harrison 1963), and of the accident wrote that 'No-one could have devised anything more horrible to tear me apart' (Harrison 1968b). He finds support in the sincerity of Rimbaud's letters, which have deep resonances with the biographical experiences and melancholy layers of memory that 'Ghosts' is poetically composed of.
- 9 In the poem, as in life, the poet keeps a vigil by his daughter's hospital bed (Harrison 1968b), and meditates upon the parallel physical and existential struggles of the child and the man to live. Surreal elements of imagery in this highly visual long poem reflect the half-waking exhaustion of a man 'living in a strange state of tiredness' (Harrison 1968c), and mentally drowning in alcohol and mnemonic imprints of the accident:

I thrash round desperately. I flail  
my arms at sharks in seas of ale.  
Organs. Head-/lights/-lines. Black. White.  
The on/off sirening blue light;

heart/ lungs like a grappled squid;  
BLIND PARAPLEGIC'S CHANNEL BID (95).

10 The injection in these lines of the darkly comic into the tragic is paralleled in letters by sometimes humorous references to depression (Harrison 1969). In 'Ghosts', Harrison's immersion in the sea water and his surfacing, and the circles he walks through the city as night becomes day, symbolize depressive cycles that manifest a poetic sensitivity to the dialectic of dark and light in the human condition. Dark spirits are a theme and motif of a poem that intimates his recurring struggles to 'come alive again for a while' (Harrison, 1968d). A 'Weightless' 'shadow man' who can 'float past' (93) unseen through 'My element, the dark' (94), the poet himself is one of the 'ghosts' haunting the poem.

11 Harrison's sense of himself as an 'anxious ghost' on the move, suggested in the manuscript version of another *Loiners'* poem 'The Death of the PWD Man' (Harrison n.d.), is intensified in the hellish time that 'Ghosts' is about, and recalls Rimbaud's sense of himself as a walking ghost in *A Season in Hell*: '*Au matin j'avais le regard si perdu et la contenance si morte, que ceux que j'ai rencontrés ne m'ont peut-être pas vu*' ['In the morning I had so vacant a look and so dead an expression, that those I met *perhaps did not see me*'] (Rimbaud 2005, 270–71). The autobiographically based narrators of Rimbaud's and Harrison's poems are in the throes of '*Le combat spirituel*' ['a spiritual battle'] (302–03), one lost in '*patrie de l'ombre*' ['a land of darkness'] (294–295), the other walking in circles in 'the dark' (94). In *A Season in Hell* poetry and love are treasured sources of Beauty, but poetry also brings poverty and madness, while love brings sorrow and isolation, and here an essentially similar vision underlies 'Ghosts'. But where Rimbaud's prose poem foresees burying his dead, his poetic ambitions and the relationship with Verlaine, Harrison's verse poem reflects a despairing struggle to sustain his poetry and his family. *A Season in Hell* and 'Ghosts' also share a personal and political refusal of the received religious and moral order, a republican contempt for empires, a yearning for exploration in Africa, and an 'aesthetic of intoxication' and solitary walking.

12 The dying Rimbaud also expresses his sense of death in life, of being a still breathing ghost, and the suffering that possesses him, in a letter to his sister Isabelle: '*Pour moi, je ne fais que pleurer jour et nuit, je suis un homme mort*' ['All I do is weep day and night. I have ceased living'] (Rimbaud 1891a, 446–447). In 'Ghosts' Harrison speaks through Rimbaud's letters to express his sense of ghostliness, of a fading emotional and existential grip on life. In 'A Kumquat for John Keats' (1981) he recollects, in relative tranquility, the crippling grief he experienced in the time that 'Ghosts' is about:

days, when the very sunlight made me weep,  
days, spent like the nights in deep, drugged sleep,  
days in Newcastle by my daughter's bed,  
wondering if she, or I, weren't better dead, (Harrison 2007, 222)

13 The lyrical cry of 'Ghosts' is refracted through letters where Rimbaud wrote that 'I am very afraid' and 'I sleep no more than two hours per night' (Rimbaud 1891b, 347), allowing Harrison to give fuller expression to his own sleeplessness and fear.

14 A kindredness of sorrows between Harrison, Rimbaud, and Jane is also evoked in 'Ghosts' through his metaphorical identification with the maiming of their bodies. Harrison eases his spirit by walking through the streets 'while Newcastle sleeps' (94), but intimates that the crippling of his daughter renders her body an objective correlative of his wounded interiority, and that the reclusiveness of the writer's life bears resemblance to the marginality of the vulnerable: 'You'll live,/ like your father, a contemplative' (96). Harrison also presents a symbolic affinity between his mind and Jane's body in the short prose piece 'Shango the Shaky Fairy' (1971), where he pairs 'The unbalanced poet and the lame daughter' (Harrison 1991, 89), playfully concurring with the general view that poets are mad, or mentally 'unbalanced'. The image of the unbalanced poet also suggests Harrison's imaginative identification with Rimbaud's 'lack of balance' after his leg is amputated very high up, and his fear of falling (Rimbaud 1891b, 347). 'Shango' describes how Jane and an injured friend 'compared sufferings and became immediately close' (99). 'Ghosts' similarly suggests that Harrison finds comfort by comparing his daughter's suffering and his own with Rimbaud's, and that

Rimbaud's double burden of being both poet and cripple makes him, implicitly, a brother in spirit to father and daughter. Reading the dead poet's letters and poems helps the living poet's spirit survive 'this newest sorrow' (95).

15 The manuscript of the original book description for *Loiners* suggests that the poem is about writing poetry 'as the laying of ghosts' (Harrison n.d), as a way to make peace particularly with the complex legacies of his relationships with the three generations of women addressed in the poem: 'Mother, wife and daughter, ghost -/ I've laid, laid, laid, laid/ you, but I'm still afraid' (96). One 'ghost' addressed here is the stillborn child laid to rest and another is the poet himself, an intimate yet enigmatic figure using the shared medium of the poem to privately wrestle with his dark spirits. The partially occluded causes of his despair include the difficult rapprochement between familial love and commitment, and the solitude needed to write the poetry that his life importantly depends upon. Domestic life is subtly contrasted with the world of writing and, implicitly, it is in the quiet hours 'before Breakfast' that he can write 'some Words'. In a later letter Harrison describes 'a life of quiet despair, as before', alluding to Thoreau (Harrison 1973). On the day of Jane's accident he wrote that 'I seek cures elsewhere than booze and blue pills (I mean work)'. Harrison commented in a television interview that he regards the tragic vision found in Greek drama as the nearest to 'an accurate vision of our life', and believes that 'poetry has to try to help us' (Bragg). 'Ghosts' reflects his humanist view that art can give greater form and solace to the human spirit than religion.

16 The tempered affirmation of poetry in 'Ghosts' is first signaled by the contrasting forms and content of its two epigraphs, which together associate poetic verse with support in times of need. The first epigraph is in the form of metred verse, whose rhythms Harrison describes in an interview as being 'like a life support system', and 'like the pulse' (Hoggart 43). Poetry is metaphorically comparable to the blood transfusions keeping his daughter alive: 'Blood transfusion, saline drip,/ "this fiddle" and "stiff upper lip"/ Have seen us so far' (95). 'This fiddle' refers to 'Poetry', appropriating the words of the American modernist poet Marianne Moore (Moore 1968, 36). The 'us' Harrison refers to is the family circle. The first epigraph signifies the concept of supportive human community, particularly familial and civic community, whose obligations include hospitals to care for its ill. Harrison read the statement that became the first epigraph in 'Ghosts' in *The League of Friends*'s rest room at the RVI, where his family went to support his daughter.

17 *The League of Friends* also symbolizes in the poem a wider humanist fraternity comparable to the 'precious idea' Harrison contemplates in 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' (1971), an author's statement in which he quotes the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: 'that affection that comes from those unknown to us who are watching over our sleep and solitude ... widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things!' (Harrison 1991, 32). The unseen friends invoked in 'Inkwell' and 'Ghosts' especially includes the invisible community of writers, readers, and kindred spirits from the world of literature. The word 'league' often occurs 'in poetical or rhetorical statement of distance' (*OED*) and is alternately a measure of distance in a traveller's itinerary, recalling the importance of travel to Harrison, and to Rimbaud. *The League of Friends* signifies in the poem a conception of friendships which exist across spatial and temporal distances, and for Harrison Rimbaud is both an intimate and distant fellow traveller.

18 The second epigraph in prose is taken from a letter written about fifteen years after Rimbaud had severed himself from poetry and it is a grief-stricken cry of being without support, emotional and physical: '*C'est mon unique soutien au monde, à présent !*' ['It's the only support I have in the world right now!']. Rimbaud was terrified that his remaining leg would also be amputated (Rimbaud 1891b, 347). The biographer Graham Robb writes that 'for Rimbaud, amputation was the worst thing that could have happened' because 'his size-41 feet had always been ... a means of escape ...' (Robb 426). From late childhood until the 'hammer blow' below the knee (Rimbaud 1891c, 414), the illness that presaged his death, much of Rimbaud's travel involved walking extraordinary distances, sometimes hundreds of kilometers between European cities and across African deserts, because walking was free and freeing. Walking also figures importantly in many of Rimbaud's poems, and *A Season in Hell*

remembers his childhood of vagabondage, of being '*Sur les routes, par des nuits d'hiver, sans gîte, sans habit, sans pain*' ['On the roads, on winter nights, without clothes, without bread'] (270-71). But in '*Ma Bohème (Fantaisie)*' ['My Bohemian Life (Fantasy)'] the poet as tramp mends his tattered clothes with his rhymes and '*Comme des lyres, je tirais les élastiques/ De mes souliers blessés, un pied près de mon cœur !*' ['Like lyres I plucked the elastics/ Of my wounded shoes, one foot near my heart!'] (Rimbaud 2005, 66-67). Rimbaud's loss of the ability to walk and lost connection to poetry haunt Harrison in 'Ghosts', where walking and poetry are similarly depicted as what is sustaining and freeing for him.

19 In 'Ghosts' Harrison is, implicitly, mentally composing the lines of his verse while walking the city's darkened streets, an urban parallel to Wordsworth's composing lines while walking in daylight and in nature. Wandering through the bleak cityscape becomes an objective correlative for the internal journey involved in writing the poem to lay the ghosts that still walk. Like the circular character of his movement through the city, however, 'Ghosts' ends with the resurfacing of his fear 'about the next descent of night' (96). Harrison has said that 'it's an existential need, the metrical form, for me' (Hoggart 43) and he associates metrical rhythm 'with the heartbeat, with the sexual instinct, with all those physical rhythms which go on despite the moments when you feel suicidal' (Haffenden 236). This sense of the physicality and momentum of poetic metre is part of its connection to walking and to geographical exploration in the imaginations and lives of these two poets. Rimbaud's journeys by foot, horseback, train, and ship were also driven by his wish to become 'someone else', '*Je est un autre*' ['I is someone else'], a poetic concept whose meanings include escaping himself and the causes of his suffering through seeming transformations of identity in the series of lives that he lived (Rimbaud 1871b, 374-375). In 'Ghosts', Harrison is also walking away, in nocturnal interludes, from his own identity and history, and his grim striding through the dark gives physical expression to an urgent quest for an elusive inner peace.

20 The poem meditates upon Rimbaud's poetic silence, and upon a line of prose that he wrote when he was alone in the *Hôpital de la Conception* in Marseille, the line quoted in the epigraph to 'Ghosts'. A tragic irony implicit in the poem is that one of the greatest poets in Harrison's and in European literature's canon was without poetry in a time of desperate need. However, 'Ghosts' also reflects upon the powerlessness of poetry and love, and their roots in the tragedy of our mortality. Helplessly observing how his child's exhaled breaths resemble 'death throes', he knows neither poetry nor love can make the beloved any 'less/ the helpless prey of Nothingness-' (92). He grieves for Rimbaud's loss of poetry and his loneliness in, ironically, a poem about the impotency of poetry and about struggling to survive 'issues of blood' and familial love. The intense independence of Rimbaud emerges as a bleakly attractive alternative to Harrison's experience, in 'Ghosts', of being 'a stranger caught/ loosely flapping on my mother's grate', isolated in a life scripted and framed by the expectations of his family (93).

21 Harrison's private struggle to stay connected to the 'life support system' of poetry, while honoring the now consuming dues of love, is intimated in 'Ghosts'. The subtextual anxiety about writing in the poem is clarified by letters lamenting how little he has written, and explaining that 'All my energy is going into Jane's restoration and I find little left for poems' (Harrison 1968c). When he metaphorically describes himself being 'caught/ loosely flapping on my mother's grate' he also likens himself to paper drafts thrown on the hearth. He again equates himself with failed drafts of poems, this time consigned to black disposal sacks:

- In each black  
PVC disposal sack,  
I see two of my dimensions gone  
into a flat oblivion. (93)

22 The poet's identity is largely defined by his writing, but his capacity to sustain the poetry is undermined by familial circumstances, and the implications of this resonate with Rimbaud's realization, in *A Season in Hell*, that '*Je suis trop dissipé, trop faible*' ['I am too worn out, too weak'] for '*domestique bonheur*' ['domestic happiness'], and instead he finds and renews

himself through the work: '*La vie fleurit par le travail, vieille vérité*' ['Life flowers through work, an old truth'] (272–273).

23 Essential affinities exist between Harrison and Rimbaud, across spatial and temporal distances, but a defining difference in the choices they make is that one stays and the other leaves poetry and loved ones. Yet, ironically, both find themselves 'strangers' essentially alone in their different situations, and this is an aspect of his identification with Rimbaud in 'Ghosts'. However, Harrison makes a mysterious symbolic reference to a ghostly pedestrian who shadows him when he walks at night: 'The black spot crossing; on both sides/ a blank male silhouette still strides' (94). Rimbaud regarded himself as '*un piéton, rien de plus*' ['a pedestrian, nothing more than that'] (Rimbaud 1871c, 386–387), presenting himself as an ordinary working man through a metaphor that also conveys the importance of walking for the kind of person and poet he was. Mirroring Rimbaud's aesthetic of the solitary walker is one of the ways Harrison conjures his presence in 'Ghosts'. But it is as if the ghost of Rimbaud is one of the dead friends accompanying Harrison through the dark (Haffenden 1991, 245).

24 'Ghosts', and the epigraph taken from Rimbaud's letter, together evoke the different choices made, the different prices paid, and how the memory of Rimbaud's freedom more fully explains Harrison's brooding ambivalence in the poem. Claustrophobia is triggered by his brief visits to the airless hospital waiting room, but also seems to be a wider psychosomatic response to the restrictions of domestic life and 'grizzling kids': 'Air! Air! There's not enough/ air in this small world' (93). A sense of suburban confinement could only be heightened by reading Rimbaud's letters from foreign lands, describing how 'the world is very big and full of magnificent places' (Rimbaud 1885, 430–431). Rimbaud needed his 'wandering free existence' and Harrison had also found that travel 'is the only thing that brings me out of myself' (Harrison 1973). The narrator of 'Ghosts' also yearns to explore vast new spaces. His cry, 'O caravanserais!', likening a pair of tankers transporting Newcastle beer to desert caravans (95), recalls the caravans Rimbaud travelled and traded with in Africa, and Harrison's interrelated fascination with 'the dark continent'. He lectured at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria, from 1962–66, but was unable to pursue other academic positions in Africa and the opportunities for travel they provided, because of the family circumstances referred to in the poem and in letters (Harrison 1968a).

25 However, the relationship between familial 'generations' is metaphorically described in 'Ghosts' as 'this/ brave trophallaxis of a kiss' (92–93), as fundamental as food and characterized by elemental courage. The line, 'this/ brave trophallaxis of a kiss', and the quiet desperation permeating the poem, bespeak the poet's material struggle 'so that food is again in the gobs of the children' (Harrison 1980). Harrison 'scratched' a sparse living together at this time mainly, the letters indicate, with intermittent teaching, book readings, and payments for poems (Harrison 1968e). The year *Loiners* was published he wryly wrote in a letter that the only break from 'enforced slimming' was a basket of food delivered by a local charity worker, a little old lady who said 'we heard about you' (Harrison 1970). A displaced commentary about his experiences of poverty can be found in Harrison's 1975 translations of Palladae of Alexandria, epigrammatist of the fourth century A.D. and one of 'the world's great pessimists' (Harrison 1991, 133), where with wrathful irony 'poverty' is praised as 'the soul/ of temperance and self-control' (Harrison 2007, 83).

26 There was also the pressure of concern from traditional working-class parents. His dad, 'worn out on poor pay' laboring in a bakery all his life (Harrison 2007, 137), did not understand why his brilliant, highly educated son 'didn't do a job with a decent living' (BBC 2, 1985). His 'mam', whose formidable energies were constrained by domestic labour (Harrison 2007, 174), 'was very keen that I get on' in a respectable profession such as a schoolmaster (BBC 2, 1985). Serious financial problems plagued the poet and his young family intermittently for at least the next decade despite a few Fellowships and acclaimed commissioned plays in the theatre. In a letter from 1970 Harrison writes that 'it has been really bad this year, and in the end so bad I couldn't work properly ...' (Harrison 1970). Comparatively secure academic positions left him without time 'for my own work,' but when he devoted himself to poetry his health and concentration were undermined by the attendant poverty (Harrison 1964).

27 In 'Ghosts' Harrison identifies with Rimbaud as a poor man from a provincial region who struggled for material survival as a poet, and as an outsider in the literary world. Rimbaud's legendary rejection of poetry must be considered in the context of the failure of his fierce efforts to survive as a professional writer, and the poems and letters reflect his enduring hunger, homelessness, and a pariah status. In *A Season in Hell* he exclaims '*J'exècre la misère*' ['I despise poverty']: '*Eh bien! je dois enterrer mon imagination et mes souvenirs! Une belle gloire d'artiste et de conteur emportée!*' ['Well! I have to bury my imagination and my memories! A fine reputation of an artist and story-teller lost sight of!'] (302–303). Living in precarious circumstances, no longer in the deeply fraught relationship with Verlaine, who had been '*seul ami*' ['my one friend'] (Rimbaud 1873, 396–397), ostracized by the French literary community and without publishers, Rimbaud was aware his poetic burial was a tragedy, and Harrison sees this loss of poetry in a similar way.

28 The example of Rimbaud, the '*Shakespeare enfant*' as Victor Hugo dubbed him, is, for Harrison, one of literary history's most devastating 'threat[s] to the most hubristic poetic self-confidence' (Harrison 1991, 34). Although *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*, masterpieces of modern European literature, were written before Rimbaud had turned twenty he was unable to survive as a poet. Before *Loiners* was published an impoverished and little known Harrison repeatedly vowed that he had 'irrevocably given up writing' (Harrison 1968e). Rimbaud wrote that he was born a poet (Rimbaud 1871) and in *A Season in Hell*, anticipating his leave taking of poetry, asks: '*Un homme qui veut se mutiler est bien damné, n'est-ce pas?*' ['A man who tries to mutilate himself is surely damned, isn't he?'] (274–275). 'Ghosts' implicitly echoes Rimbaud's knowledge, and that of his contemporary the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, that he would be amputating himself alive from poetry, and discloses Harrison's fear that he too may be driven into the self-mutilation entailed by such unnatural poetic silences.

29 'Ghosts' is in part a memorial to Rimbaud as a figure of great poetic and personal importance for Harrison. Rimbaud's last letter is addressed to the director of a shipping company and enquires about the price for travel from Aphinar to Suez. It expresses his extraordinary will to keep moving and his capacity to be funny in his own tragedy:

*Tous ces services sont là partout, et moi, impotent, malheureux, je ne peux rien trouver, le premier chien dans la rue vous dira cela.*

*Envoyez-moi donc le prix des services d'Aphinar à Suez. Je suis complètement paralysé: donc je désire me trouver de bonne heure à bord. Dites-moi à quelle heure je dois être transporté à bord.* [All the services there are everywhere, and I, infirm, miserable, I cannot find anything, the first dog in the street will tell you so. Please send me the price for services from Aphinar to Suez. I am completely paralysed. I would therefore like to be on board well in advance. Tell me at what time I should be carried aboard.] (Rimbaud 1891d, 446–449).

30 Aphinar does not exist on any maps and the letter refers to one of many journeys Rimbaud imagined as he lay dying. The letter was dictated to his sister Isabelle, who cared for Rimbaud in the hospital in the last weeks of his life, and who describes in a letter to their mother how Arthur was ending his life in a 'deliberate dream' and 'with art' (Rimbaud 1891b, 423). Rimbaud was once again artfully escaping reality and finding support in an imaginary story which affirmed his essential identity as a poet and an independent and solitary traveller. Harrison came to 'love Rimbaud' through his poetry and letters<sup>2</sup>, and the epigraph to 'Ghosts' is also an epitaph for the man and the poet.

31 Another poem '*Fonte Luminosa*' is also haunted by Rimbaud and centres round the crushing of Jane's legs and Harrison's need to walk. His daughter's tears 'as once more you start coming through' 'your seventh anaesthesia' remind him of a luminous fountain in Brazil, the *fonte luminosa* (Harrison 2007, 107), an instance of the recurring symbolism of illumination in his poetry. '*Fonte Luminosa*' is the second of the four parts comprising the long poem 'Sentences' and was first published in 1978, but it draws on Harrison's travels in Brazil and Cuba in 1969. '*Fonte Luminosa*' also recalls his life in England and Africa in the 1960s. He walks past 'the crossing/ where you had your legs crushed' (106):

Walking on the Great North Road

with my back towards London  
 through showers of watery sleet,  
 my cracked rubber boot soles  
 croak like African bullfrogs (106).

- 32 The poem associates Harrison's walking on the Great North Road in Newcastle-upon-Tyne with his travels in Africa, and the associative image of the poet walking also recalls Rimbaud, '*le piéton de la grand'route*' ['the wanderer along the main road'] (Rimbaud 2005, 312-13), often journeying by foot through Europe and Africa. The Northern poet turning his back on the Southern metropolis and its literary coterie also mirrors Rimbaud's rejection of Parisian literary milieu. In '*Fonte Luminosa*' Harrison's determined singularity and existential need to move is again shadowed by Rimbaud.
- 33 'Ghosts' and '*Fonte Luminosa*' evoke, mainly through allusion, the personal importance for Harrison of Rimbaud's life and writing, and correspondences between their experiences and perspectives, but do not imitate Rimbaud's art in the way that, for example, 'A Kumquat for John Keats' quotes from and emulates Keats' poetry. Instead 'Ghosts' and '*Fonte Luminosa*' are predominantly reflective of some of the fundamental differences between Harrison's and Rimbaud's aesthetics. The two poems are characteristically Harrisonian, amongst his non-dramatic verse, in, for example, their implicit use of the persona 'Tony Harrison' and in achieving a conversational idiom using formal meter, in which he talks about his life and establishes a shared intimacy with the reader. Both Harrison and Rimbaud are highly metrically educated poets but Harrison always writes in formal, rhyming poetic meters, and the iambic pentameter, the main traditional meter of English poetry, is important to his work. By contrast, Rimbaud in the prose poems *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations* and in earlier poems worked to dismantle the alexandrine, the formal line of much French poetry since the Renaissance. Like Harrison, Rimbaud began by mastering the classical forms and rhythms of their respective languages and of Latin, but Rimbaud's rapidly evolving poetic trajectory was towards free verse and the emerging form of prose poetry. While continuing to work within traditional verse forms, Harrison often bends the meter to accommodate the Leeds demotic and other voices traditionally excluded from high culture, perhaps most famously in his state of the nation poem v. (1984). In this urban elegy set in Leeds, Harrison expresses an identification with Rimbaud in part by paraphrasing and dramatically enacting Rimbaud's poetic dictum '*Je est un autre*' (Harrison 2007, 271). In v. Harrison becomes someone else, his imaginary alter-ego, an illiterate vandal whose vernacular and obscenities are articulated in rhyming quatrains modeled on Thomas Gray's canonical *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751).
- 34 It is Rimbaud's early subversion of traditional verse forms, and his poetic use of non-aesthetic elements, obscenities, and rhymes that require regional pronunciation, that most influence aspects of Harrison's aesthetic. In *Loiners* Rimbaud's aesthetic influence can be best found in, for example, the 'Zeg-Zeg Postcards', a sequence of mainly parodic and sometimes pornographic short poems about the sexual exploits of a homosexual English professor and poet in colonial Africa. This sequence seems partly inspired by the *Album Zutique*, a series of homo-erotic parodic poems written by members of the *Vilains Bonhommes*, a group of poets that included Rimbaud and Verlaine. The 'Zeg-Zeg Postcards' are set in Africa and like all the poems in *Loiners*, and in many subsequent poems, Harrison's travels and literary geography are important, and in this too Rimbaud, particularly in *Illuminations*, is a significant influence. 'Zeg Zeg' was the name in the Middle Ages for the region now known as Zaria, the Nigerian state where Harrison lived in the 1960s. The shifting locations in different poems in *Loiners* mirror Harrison's wide-ranging travels in the 1960s, and his circling back to his native North and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the setting for the last poem of the volume.
- 35 The importance of walking in 'Ghosts' includes its continuity with other forms of exploration undertaken by 'loiners', local argot for citizens of Leeds, in other poems from *Loiners*. As 'the PWD man', a loiner who has travelled from Leeds to Lagos, explains, 'Life's movement and life's danger and not a sit-down post' (Harrison 1970, 52). Rimbaud's need to move was so great that he combined tramping with measures like legal expulsion as a foreign immigrant and joining merchant navies in order to travel extensively without money through Europe and

Africa. There is uncertainty about what caused the paralysis that ended Rimbaud's journeys but he may privately have suspected syphilis, which he contracted in Africa while playing a part in French geographical exploration and economic imperialism (Robb 322, 418, 425). Rimbaud's presence in 'Ghosts' is consistent with the interest in *Loiners* in the intertwined literary history of empire and of syphilis. Rimbaud the great outsider was also an involuntary member of a nineteenth-century French literary club of syphilitics, whose other 'cursed poets' included two whom Rimbaud regarded as rare seers, Baudelaire and Verlaine (Rimbaud 1871b). In the last poem of *Loiners*, Harrison summons into the present the ghost of Rimbaud who still walks, 'his long legs moving calmly and regularly . . . his beautiful eyes fixed on the distance, and his face entirely filled with a look of resigned defiance, an air of expectation – ready for everything, without anger, without fear' (Delahaye and Harding xxxviii). Rimbaud haunts the imagination of Tony Harrison, Loiner.

---

### **Bibliography**

BBC 2, 'Arena', *Them & [uz]: A Portrait of Tony Harrison* (1985).

BRAGG, Melvyn, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', 'The South Bank Show', London Weekend Television, 1999.

DELAHAYE, Ernest, 'Letter to Berrichon' (21 August 1896), *Delahaye, Témoin de Rimbaud*, eds. F. EIGELDINGER and A. GENDRE, Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1974, 155.

HARDING, Jeremy and John STURROCK, 'Introduction', Arthur RIMBAUD, *Selected Poems and Letters*, eds. and trans. Jeremy HARDING and John STURROCK, London: Penguin Books, 2004, xviii-xlii.

HAFFENDEN, John, Interview with Tony Harrison (1983), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil ASTLEY, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 227–246.

HARRISON, Tony, 'Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast', *Poetry and Audience* 7.22 (1960): 6–7.

———, *Loiners*, London: London Magazine Editions, 1970.

———, 'Shango the Shaky Fairy' (1971), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil ASTLEY, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 88–103.

———, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' (1971), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil ASTLEY, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 32–5.

———, 'Preface', *Palladas: Poems* (1975), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil ASTLEY, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 133–135.

———, *Collected Poems*, London: Viking, 2007.

———, Letter to Silkin (28 February 1963), The Jon Silkin Collection, BC MS 20c Stand/3/HAR-11, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Silkin (8 November 1964), The Jon Silkin Collection, BC MS 20c Stand/3/HAR-11, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Ross (5 April 1968), The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions*/1/9/1/1, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Ross (4 May 1968), The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions*/1/9/1/1, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Silkin (16 June 1968), The Jon Silkin Collection, BC MS 20c Stand/3/HAR-11, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Silkin (13 September 1968), The Jon Silkin Collection, BC MS 20c Stand/3/HAR-11, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Silkin (22 October 1968), The Jon Silkin Collection, BC MS 20c Stand/3/HAR-11, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Ross (22 May 1969), The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions*/1/9/1/1, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

———, Letter to Ross (7 October 1970), The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions*/1/9/1/1, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

- , Letter to Ross (21 July 1973), The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions/1/9/1/1*, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
- , Letter to Jeffrey Wainwright (18 December 1980), The Jeffrey Wainwright Collection, BC Ms 20c Wainwright, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
- , 'The Death of the PWD Man', Northern Arts Ms. Collection Vol. 6, 'Tony Harrison', The Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, undated.
- , Original book description for *Loiners*, The Alan Ross Collection, BC MS 20c *London Magazine Editions/1/9/1/1*, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds undated.
- HOGGART, Richard, 'Interview with Tony Harrison' (1986), *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil ASTLEY, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991, 36–45.
- IBSEN, Henrik, *Ghosts. A Public Enemy; When We Dead Awake*, trans. Peter Watts, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- MOORE, Marianne, *The Complete Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1968.
- NICHOLL, Charles, *Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa 1880-91*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1997.
- Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, <http://dictionary.oed.com.virtual.anu.edu.au>, last accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013.
- RIMBAUD, Arthur, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed., trans., and with an Introduction by Jeremy HARDING and John STURROCK, London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- , *I Promise to be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud*, trans. and ed. by Wyatt MASON, New York and Toronto: Modern Library, 2004.
- , *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- , Letter to Paul Demeny (13 May 1871), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 370–373.
- , Letter to Paul Demeny (15 May 1871), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 373–381.
- , Letter to Paul Demeny (28 August 1871), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 386–389.
- , Letter to Verlaine (4-5 July 1873), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 388–391.
- , Letter to his Family (15 January 1885), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 430–431.
- , Letter to Isabelle (23 June 1891), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 446–447.
- , Letter to Isabelle (2 July 1891), *I Promise to be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud*, trans. and ed. by Wyatt MASON, New York and Toronto: Modern Library, 2004, 347–348.
- , Letter to Isabelle (15 July 1891), Arthur RIMBAUD, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed., trans., and with an Introduction by Jeremy HARDING and John STURROCK, London: Penguin Books, 2004, 413–416.
- , Letter to the Director of the Messageries Maritimes (9 November 1891), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005, 446–449.
- RIMBAUD, Isabelle, Letter to her Mother (22 September 1891), Arthur RIMBAUD, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed., trans., and with an Introduction by Jeremy HARDING and John STURROCK, London: Penguin Books, 2004, 419–420.
- , Letter to her Mother (28 October 1891), Arthur RIMBAUD, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed., trans., and with an Introduction by Jeremy HARDING and John STURROCK, London: Penguin Books, 2004, 422–423.
- ROBB, Graham, *Rimbaud*, London: Picador, 2000.
- STARKIE, Enid, 'On the Trail of Arthur Rimbaud', *The Modern Language Review* 38.3 (1943): 206–216.

---

## Notes

1 This paper draws on archival sources including some of Harrison's manuscripts and a number of his letters, primarily those held in Special Collections, Brotherton Library, at the University of Leeds. Some

items including the original book description for *Loiners*, which is held in manuscript form in the Alan Ross Collection, are undated and unnumbered. All quotations from Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* are from *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (1966), trans. with an introduction and notes by Wallace Fowlie, revised and with a foreword by Seth Whidden, bilingual edition, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Most but not all quotations from Rimbaud's letters are also from the *Complete Works, Selected Letters*. 2 Harrison, with whom I had a conversation at the National Theatre in London in April 2008 commented on his 'love' of Rimbaud.

---

## References

Electronic reference

Christine Regan, « 'Ghosts' and the Haunting of Harrison by Rimbaud », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 48 | 2015, Online since 11 May 2015, connection on 08 June 2015. URL : <http://ebc.revues.org/2151>

---

## Author

### Christine Regan

Christine Regan recently completed a dissertation on the poetry of Tony Harrison at the Australian National University and is now completing a monograph study of his work, and preparing an annotated edition of *The Loiners*.

---

## Copyright

© PULM

---

## Abstracts

### « Ghosts », ou comment Rimbaud hante Harrison

La vie et l'œuvre d'Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), poète français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, est de toute première importance pour l'idée que Tony Harrison (1937-), poète du nord de l'Angleterre, se fait de lui-même en tant que poète. L'importance de Rimbaud sur la définition de l'identité poétique d'Harrison n'a pas à ce jour été reconnue par les experts mais est au centre de ma présentation. Harrison s'identifie en effet avec Rimbaud, le poète voyou, dans son poème renommé sur l'état de la nation v. (1984). Cet article examine l'affinité élective qui lie Harrison et Rimbaud par le biais de l'interprétation d'un poème important mais jusqu'à présent négligé composé près de quinze ans auparavant v., 'Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast' (1970). En me fondant sur sa correspondance des années 60 récemment devenue disponible et sur sa lecture des lettres de Rimbaud et en relevant les résonances entre « Ghosts » et *Une saison en enfer* de Rimbaud, nous découvrons l'une des grandes amitiés littéraires entre les morts et les vivants jusqu'ici passée sous silence. Ce sont la lutte de Rimbaud pour survivre en tant que poète, son silence poétique décisif et les circonstances de sa mort qui hantent Harrison dans « Ghosts ». Rimbaud détient la clé permettant de comprendre les dimensions intimes d'un poème énigmatique et dans mon interprétation de « Ghosts » je viserai à illuminer la présence de Rimbaud dans ce poème et la façon dont il hante l'imaginaire d'Harrison.

The life and work of the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91) is of the first importance for the Northern English poet Tony Harrison's (1937-) idea of himself as a poet. Rimbaud's importance for Harrison's identity and poetic and his presence in Harrison's poetry has not been recognised in the scholarship but is examined in this essay. Harrison identifies with Rimbaud the hoodlum poet in his famous state of the nation poem v. (1984). This essay explores Harrison's elective affinity with Rimbaud through an interpretation of an important but neglected poem written almost fifteen years before v., 'Ghosts: Some Words before Breakfast' (1970). Drawing on Harrison's newly available letters from the

1960s, and his reading of Rimbaud's letters, and observing the resonances between 'Ghosts' and Rimbaud's « *Une saison en enfer* » [*A Season in Hell*], we discover one of the great unrecognised literary friendships between the dead and the living. It is Rimbaud's struggle to survive as a poet, his decisive poetic silence, and the manner of his dying that haunt Harrison in 'Ghosts.' Rimbaud holds the key to understanding intimate dimensions of an enigmatic poem, and the interpretation of 'Ghosts' in this essay seeks to illuminate Rimbaud's presence in the poem and the way he haunts Harrison's imagination.

***Index terms***

***Mots-clés*** : Harrison (Tony), Rimbaud (Arthur), hantise, lettres, résonance, silence

***Keywords*** : Harrison (Tony), Rimbaud (Arthur), haunting, letters, resonance, silence