



# A Season in Hell & Illuminations (Modern Library Classics)

By Arthur Rimbaud



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**A Season in Hell & Illuminations (Modern Library Classics)** By Arthur Rimbaud

Translated, edited and with an Introduction by Wyatt Mason

“The definitive translation for our time.”

—Edward Hirsch

From Dante’s *Inferno* to Sartre’s *No Exit*, writers have been fascinated by visions of damnation. Within that rich literature of suffering, Arthur Rimbaud’s **A Season in Hell**—written when the poet was nineteen—provides an astonishing example of the grapple with self.

As a companion to Rimbaud’s journey, readers could have no better guide than Wyatt Mason. One of our most talented young translators and critics, Mason’s new version of *A Season in Hell* renders the music and mystery of Rimbaud’s tale of Hell on Earth with exceptional finesse and power.

This bilingual edition includes maps, a helpful chronology of Rimbaud’s life, and the unfinished suite of prose poems, *Illuminations*. With **A Season in Hell**, they cement Rimbaud’s reputation as one of the foremost, and most influential, writers in French literature.



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## **A Season in Hell & Illuminations (Modern Library Classics) By Arthur Rimbaud Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #1020295 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Modern Library
- Published on: 2005-08-09
- Released on: 2005-08-09
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .60" w x 5.20" l, .44 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 240 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“It's quite likely that [the season's] most exciting new book of verse was stamped Made in France more than a century ago. É *Rimbaud Complete*, Wyatt Mason's bouncy new translation of the avant-garde poet's hallucinatory corpus, finds new music in the writing, revealing a classical artist.”

–Editor's Choice, A- *Entertainment Weekly*

“An important new rendering of a major poet.”

–*Library Journal*

“Mason's translations are confident and contemporary—muscular but without muscling in on the originals. There is no crabby diction, but neither is there that self-conscious pseudo-hipness with which it's all too tempting to render Rimbaud's lolling truculence of pose. Mason's approach has been to aim for common (as distinct from middle) ground between the literalist and the free, and the decision to translate successive versions and drafts pays off too, letting English-speaking readers see the genesis of poems and trace their often substantial alterations. Mason gets Rimbaud's range across impressively.”

–*The Times Literary Supplement*

“Mason does a splendid job in arrangement and translation.”

–*Tampa Tribune*

“Wyatt Mason's translations of Rimbaud's literary works manage, more than any others, to convey to contemporary ears the real sense of the work. Previous attempts had strained to maintain a sense of the French style or an equivalence in rhyme and form. For all their good intentions, these ideals forced the renderings into awkward locutions or pretentiously formal tropes, making Rimbaud sound as much like a biblical elder as a modern poet. Mason has finally given us an English Rimbaud we can read as we should, as if he were kin to Jack Kerouac, to Charles Bukowski, to Jim Morrison [É] his *Rimbaud Complete* will surely live on as the standard edition.

–*The Toronto Star*

“Wyatt Mason's [translations] capture the rigours of the original.”

–*London Review of Books*

“Exceptional new translator Wyatt Mason limns the afterlife of Arthur Rimbaud's 37 chaotic years on Earth É There is no small literary excitement in this, one of the best Rimbaud translations in English and certainly the most complete.”

–Editor's Choice, *Buffalo News*

“A monumental achievementÉa book to treasure.”

–*Scotland on Sunday*

#### Praise for Wyatt Mason's

*Rimbaud Complete, Volume 2: I Promise to be Good, The Letters*

“Perhaps you know him only by myth: Bad boy rebel poet, possibly gay but probably bisexual, lover of the

lesser poet Paul Verlaine, survivor of literary and romantic scenes worthy of Norman Mailer. [É] Wyatt Mason, in a word, detests all that; he shows us, in his straightforward translations of these letters from the second half of Rimbaud's life (ages 19 to 37), a man dedicated to factual information, a simple but elegant describer of the foreign lands [É] a man who gives up poetry to look at the world with a disciplined eye, who sleeps outdoors for the last 20 years of his life—now there's a writer you can sink your teeth into.”

—*The Los Angeles Times*

“The book is fascinating for the voice it reveals—the postpoetic Rimbaud, the man glimpsed in bracingly cold letters sent to his family. [É] Mason’s translation is crisp and lively, and his clear-eyed introduction is essential reading for anyone besotted with the image of the poet as tragic figure.”

—*Time Out New York*

“Mason, the American translator who last year published Rimbaud's collected poems in English [unveils] an Apollonian craftsman, one who took infinite pains to achieve perfection of expression [É]. Mason's an agile, skillful translator.”

—*Publisher's Weekly*

“Thanks to Wyatt Mason’s masterly translations, Rimbaud has, after a century and a half, recovered his gift.”

—**Askold Melnyczuk**

“Modern Library’s *Rimbaud Complete*, translated and edited by Wyatt Mason—includes all of Rimbaud’s poetry as well as uncollected writings ranging from Latin school compositions to fragments of poems reconstructed by his acquaintances. This is now joined by *I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud*, the largest sampling of the poet’s correspondence yet to appear in English.” —*The New Yorker*

“Mason's elegant translations flow smoothly off the page.”

—*Library Journal*

“Wyatt Mason’s translation of Rimbaud’s letters is a swashbuckler of a book, nothing less than a resurrection of a remarkable like. As such, it is worth companion to Mason’s fine translation of the poems. No admirer of Rimbaud will want to be without it.”

—**Arthur Goldhammer**

“The letters themselves are bizarre, twisted, and oddly welcoming. [É] Mason's introduction is invaluable. It grounds the details from Rimbaud's letters in a concrete narrative, filling in gaps without the benefit of other people's return letters, the other half of Rimbaud's conversations. Mason acts as conductor, whispering into our ears through footnotes that treat their subject playfully and respectfully at the same time.”

—*San Francisco Bay Guardian*

About the Author

Wyatt Mason is a contributing editor of Harper’s magazine, where his essays regularly appear. He also writes for The London Review of Books and The New Republic. The Modern Library has published his translations of the complete works of Arthur Rimbaud in two volumes. His translations of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and Montaigne’s *Essays* are in progress.

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ENGLISH

Long ago, if my memory serves, life was a feast where every heart was open, where every wine flowed.

One night, I sat Beauty on my knee. —And I found her bitter. —And I hurt her.

I took arms against justice.

I fled, entrusting my treasure to you, o witches, o misery, o hate.

I snuffed any hint of human hope from my consciousness. I made the muffled leap of a wild beast onto any hint of joy, to strangle it.

Dying, I called out to my executioners so I could bite the butts of their rifles. I called plagues to suffocate me with sand, blood. Misfortune was my god. I wallowed in the mud. I withered in criminal air. And I even tricked madness more than once.

And spring gave me an idiot's unbearable laughter.

Just now, having nearly reached death's door, I even considered seeking the key to the old feast, through which, perhaps, I might regain my appetite.

Charity is the key. —Such an inspiration proves I must have been dreaming.

"A hyena you'll remain, etc. . . ." cries the demon that crowns me with merry poppies. "Make for death with every appetite intact, with your egotism, and every capital sin."

Ah. It seems I have too many already: —But, dear Satan, I beg you not to look at me that way, and while you await a few belated cowardices—you who so appreciate a writer's inability to describe or inform—I'll tear a few terrible leaves from my book of the damned.

## BAD BLOOD

My Gallic forebears gave me pale blue eyes, a narrow skull, and bad reflexes in a fight. I dress as barbarically as they. But I don't butter my hair.

The Gauls were the most inept animal-skinners and grass-burners of their day.

They gave me: idolatry, a love of sacrilege, and every vice: anger, lust—glorious lust—but above all, deceit and sloth.

I find even the thought of work unbearable. Masters and workers are all peasants. There's no difference between a hand holding a pen and a hand pushing a plow. An age of hands! —I'll have no part in it. Domesticity goes too far too fast. Begging—despite its inherent decency—pains me. Criminals are as bad as eunuchs: so what if I'm in one piece.

But. Who made my tongue so truthless that it has shepherded and safeguarded my sloth this far? Lazier than a toad, I've gotten by without lifting a finger: I've lived everywhere. There is not a family in Europe I don't know. —Which is to say families like mine which owe everything to the Declaration of the Rights of Man. —I've known every young man of means.

If only I had one predecessor in French history!

But no, none.

It's clear to me that I belong to a lesser race. I have no notion of rebellion. The only time my race ever rose up was to pillage: like wolves on carcasses they didn't even kill.

I know French history, know the Church's eldest daughter. Had I been a boor, I would have journeyed to the holy land; in my head are roads through Swabian plains, views of Byzantium, ramparts of Jerusalem; both the cult of Mary and of pity on the cross comeingle in me amidst a thousand profane visions. —I sit like a leper on broken pots and nettles, at the foot of walls eaten away by sun. —Later, I would have been a mercenary bivouacking beneath German nights.

But there's more! I dance on the sabbath, in a red clearing with old women and children.

I don't remember anything prior to this earth and this Christianity. I don't see myself anywhere but in that past. And always alone; without family, speaking what language? I never see myself in Christ's councils; nor in the councils of Lords—Christ's delegates.

What was I last century? I only see myself now. No more vagabonds or nebulous wars. The inferior race has spread, everywhere—people or, as we now say, reason: nationality and science.

Oh, science! We've remade the world. For body and soul—as viaticum—we have medicine and philosophy—home remedies and cover-versions of popular songs. Princely amusements and the games they forbade. Geography, cosmography, mechanics, chemistry . . . !

Science, the new nobility. Progress. The world turns. Why wouldn't it?

Numerical visions. We close in upon the Animus. What I say is irrefutable, oracular. I understand, and not knowing how to explain myself but in pagan words, I'd be better off shutting my mouth.

Pagan blood returns! The Animus nears, why won't Christ help me, grace my soul with nobility and liberty. But the Gospel is gone. The Gospel! The Gospel.

I await God, hungrily. I am an eternal member of an inferior race.

There I am on the beaches of Brittany. Cities blaze in the night. My day is done: I'm leaving Europe. The marine air will burn my lungs; unknown climates will tan my skin. To swim, trample grass, hunt, and above all, smoke; drink liquors as strong as molten metal—like our cherished ancestors around their fires.

I'll return with iron limbs, dark skin, an imperious gaze: my mask will mark me as member of a powerful race. I'll have gold: be lazy and merciless. Women pamper fierce invalids returned from hot countries. I'll enter politics. Saved.

Now, though, I'm cursed: I can't stand my country. The best I can hope for is drunken sleep, by the shore.

But we don't leave. —We take the same roads, burdened with my vice, vice that since the age of reason has sunk its roots right into my side—climbing skyward, beating me, toppling me, dragging me along.

The final innocence and the final humility. That does it. I won't hump my disgusts and deceits across the world.

We're off! The march, the burden, the desert, the boredom, the anger.

What flag will I bear? What beast worship? What shrine besiege? What hearts break? What lies tell? —And walk through whose blood?

Better yet: steer well clear of Justice. —The hard life, simple brutishness—lift the coffin's lid with a withered fist, sit inside, suffocate. Neither old age, nor danger: fear isn't French.

I feel so forsaken I orient my instinct for perfection on any sacred image. O self-sacrifice; o magnanimous charity! All for me, of course! De profundis Domine—what a fool I am!

When I was very young, I admired hardened criminals locked behind prison doors; I visited inns and taverns they frequented; with their eyes, I saw the blue sky and the blossoming work of the fields; I tracked their scent through cities. They were more powerful than saints, more prudent than explorers—and they, they alone, were witnesses to glory and reason!

On the roads, through winter nights, without a home, without habits, without bread, a voice strangled my frozen heart: "Weakness or strength: Those are your options, so strength it is. You know neither where you're going, nor why you're going, entering anywhere, answering anyone. You're no more likely to be killed than a corpse." By morning, I had developed such a lost, dead expression that those I met may not have even seen me.

In cities, mud suddenly seemed red and black, like a mirror when a lamp is moved through an adjoining room, like treasure found in a forest. Good luck, I cried, and I saw a sky flooded with smoke and flame; and to my left, to my right, all the world's riches burned like a billion thunderbolts.

But orgies and womanly companionship were denied me. Not one friend. I saw myself in front of an angry mob, facing a firing squad, weeping incomprehensible sorrows and forgiving them, like Joan of Arc: "Priests, professors, masters: you falter bringing me to justice. I was never one of you; I was never Christian; my race sang upon the rack; I don't understand your laws; I have no moral compass, I'm a beast: you falter . . ."

Yes, my eyes are shut to your light. I'm an animal, a nigger. But I can be saved. You're all fake niggers, you brutal, greedy maniacs. Merchant? No: nigger. Magistrate? Nigger. General? Nigger. Emperor—you itchy old scab—nigger. You drank Satan's duty-free booze. —Fever and cancer thrill you. Cripples and codgers are so decent they ask to be boiled. —The wisest move would be to leave this continent, creeping with madness, a madness that seeks hostages for lost souls. I set out in search of the true kingdom of the children of Ham.

Do I really know nature? Do I know myself?—No more words. I bury the dead in my belly. Shouts, drums, dance, dance, dance, dance! I can't imagine a moment when whites will arrive and I'll tumble into the void.

Hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance!

Whites arrive. A cannon! I submit to baptism, dress, work.

My heart is struck by grace. And I never saw it coming!

I've done nothing wrong. My days bring no burden, I'll be spared repentance. I won't have to suffer the

torments of a soul dead to decency, whose harsh light rises as if from funeral tapers. The fate of the favorite son: an early grave, blanketed with limpid tears. Of course debauchery is as stupid as vice. Cast rot aside. But no clock will ever do more than merely mark our hours of purest pain! Will I be carried off, like a child, to play in paradise, forgetting all my misfortune!

Quick: are there other lives? —It's impossible to sleep surrounded by riches. Riches are supremely public. Only divine love grants the keys to science. I see that nature is only a spectacle of goodness. Farewell chimeras, ideals, mistakes.

The angels' prudent songs rise from the ship of souls: divine love. —Two loves! I may die of earthly love, or of devotion. I've left souls behind whose suffering will swell with my departure! You pluck me from the shipwreck; are those who remain not my friends?

Save them!

Reason is born within me. The world is good. I bless life. I will love my brothers. These are no longer idle promises of youth, nor a hope of evading old age and death. God is my strength. I praise God.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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