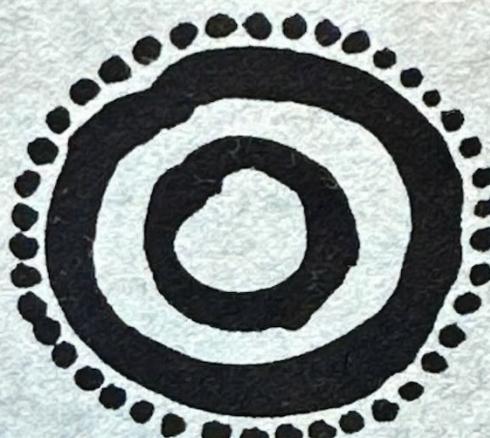


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THE APOLOGY OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD

A DIALOGUE

BY

EDWARD SACKVILLE WEST

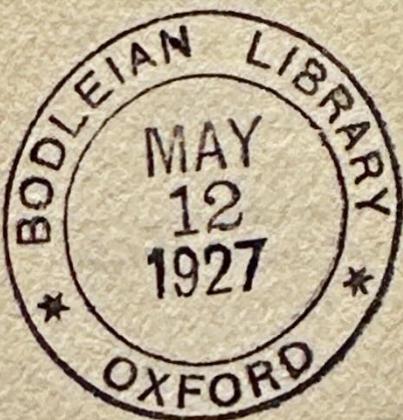
*"Je crois . . . qu'aimer quelqu'un, c'est
le préférer et l'induire en tentation de
se préférer à Dieu."*

MARCEL JOUHANDEAU,
M. Godeau Intime.



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THE APOLOGY OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD

To sleep is to accomplish a half-circle, the rest of which is described during the hours of waking. Our essential self—not that part of us which we project outwards for others to see, admire, or dislike—but that which we, in a knowledge shared by none, know as most truly ourself, remains for ever in the centre of a circle that is larger or smaller according to the mental capacity of a single day of our life. This—we will call it, if you please, the soul—stands poised on a horizon, with sleep below and waking life above it. On the days when it has fulfilled but few of the implications of its existence it projects that part of it which others are permitted to experience but a short

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distance, and then the circle is small; the meridian is reached without effort, without ecstasy, and the descent below the horizon into sleep, down to the nadir and up again to the surface, is as brief and as uneventful. But on the days when we have felt to the utmost extent of our powers, when perhaps we seem to ourselves to have released a new spring of energy within us, then does our soul shoot us out from inside itself like the first beam of the dawning sun; we swing in a wide circle, reaching at length a meridian of unrivalled height and splendour, and when we dip down into sleep the descent is long and slow. The emotional adventures of our waking life shine down at us through the transparent sea of sleep, and are transmuted for us into new experiences such as waking life cannot provide. The deeper we go into this sea the more profoundly does it transmute the colours

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of our rainbow that shines down from above it; on these occasions, when we reach the nadir, the wealth is there so great that we long to stay, the better to partake of it. When we are still near the surface our sleep is light, but the deeper we descend the harder it becomes to recall us.

.
On the particular day which is here in question I had risen higher than usual, in consequence of reading that most dense and enigmatic of poems, Arthur Rimbaud's *Sojourn in Hell*, risen high and sunk again in the certainty that my sleep would be deep and eventful.

Of the scenes, the faces, gestures, and actions that I saw in the first part of the dark ellipse, I remember little. The phrases of Rimbaud's poem, that are so near to music, carried me on my way. After a time my eyes became

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sightless, until they should be opened again for what I was to see. I knew that I was moving at a great speed, though I felt no rush of air against my head, and my hands were quiet beside me; it seemed to me that I was the wind itself, rushing down into a waste place, to fill it. In my ears was a booming silence. Then I heard my own voice speaking, though my lips did not move in speech. "Slaves! Curse not life!" it said, and, "Eternity is re-discovered." I recognised the words as Rimbaud's, and knew what it was that I should soon see—when my flight should be at an end—when I should have reached the nadir of my sleep.

Quite suddenly I was at rest and my eyelids were lifted. I saw before me a fiery arabesque that glowed and flamed against the glittering dark; its shape was that of a wrought-iron gate, white-hot, and tilted slightly sideways.

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Upon it was stretched the huge body of a man, the muscles and tendons articulated like the long curving leaves of a plant. His hands and feet, of enormous size, were spread out against the corners of the arabesque; these were turned into whorls round which the fire ran in a ceaseless stream. His face was oval, with high red cheek-bones, and his eyes, which were wide open, held the tarnished light of pools of mercury. His long, dark hair fluttered upwards against the flaming bars like wisps of burnt paper.

He opened his wide, shapeless mouth and laughed.

“This is the New Crucifixion,” he said.

Self. And I am here to find out what you have done to deserve it.

Rimbaud. You should know. You have read my confession.

S. That is not enough. You must

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admit that you have made it as difficult as possible for one to discover your sins—whatever they were. I have read what you wrote, I have read what others have written about your poems and about your life, and I think I understand. But I cannot *know*.

R. Do you think that you will know, when I have told you—if I do? I might lie to you.

S. The dead never lie: it isn't worth their while.

R. Why not?

S. Because they presumably do not care what the living think of them.

R. That is not true. I do care, and for that reason will not lie to you. I consider my life to have been of the first importance, and am angered by the misinterpretations that since my death have been put upon my words and actions. My brother-in-law—

S. I think you might ignore him—

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if only out of kindness. He was in duty bound to misinterpret you, though I do not question his sincerity. Others—Claudel, for example—are more to blame. The truth, surely, is to be sought in your poems and nowhere else. You used to wish that you had never written them. Do you still wish that?

R. No. Up to the moment of my death I was never able to see my life as a whole, because the idea of its coming to an end was so abhorrent to me. I forced myself to think of what it was going to be, in the future, so that anything like a review of it, taking for granted the end as well as the beginning, was impossible. While the end of any sequence remains unknown, the beginning is more or less unintelligible. Now, however, that I know it all, I see that my poems were as important as anything else.

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S. More important.

R. No, not more. That is the mistake you must correct.

S. You must help me to do so. I think you will admit that it is not surprising that to most people your life seems unconquerably graceless. That, you will say, is not to the point, and there I am prepared to agree with you. But, if you want me to correct mistakes, you must make many things clearer to me than they are at present. Your mother—

When I had spoken these words, one of the flames lengthened and swept over Rimbaud's face, hiding it for a moment from my sight. When I saw it again it was charged with memory—revived like a watered flower.

R. I hated my mother, but I could never entirely get away from her. I used to make her angry on purpose, so

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as to harden myself against her and in defence of my life—as one sharpens a knife on a stone. Once, when she refused to let me have a piano to play on, I cut the dining-room table into the shape of one. When I saw her face—so like my own—freezing with anger, I felt myself harden inside. She would have been horrified if she had known what she was doing to me—winding me up like a clock, tighter and tighter, so that sooner or later I must fly out and set my life going at a speed as furious as her anger. When I wasn't at school I used to escape from my mother and sit in a boat moored on the river. I never tried to row it about; I just sat huddled up in it, looking forward to something at once definite and indefinite. There was a row of thin poplars on the opposite bank; the wind seemed to come out of them. They blew hot and cold on my thoughts,

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making a noise like rain on a window, looking sometimes like a storm of bright silver coins, at others like mere dark, still masses. Now, of course, I have made metaphors of them; but in those days —even as early as that—the symbol and the symbolised were often one in my mind, and so it was with the poplars.

S. Even so, I suppose, poetry had not yet become your first preoccupation. There must, I should have thought, have been a difference in quality between your attitude to experience then—at Charleville—and that which eventually landed you in Paris.

R. Of course there was. Life, with a capital L, was then still my object, though a more or less unconscious one. The unfortunate thing was that it could not be preserved as it was; it became fatally diverted, dissipated, and reassembled into poetry. That came

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about largely through Izambard, though I cannot blame so finely understanding a character as was his. He was much older than I, a master—as you know—in the school. I became even fonder and more admiring of him when I saw how much my mother disapproved of him. It was through him that I came to anticipate my Paris and London existence. I began to write poems.

S. I remember. “Long live the garish taverns, full of the cries of drunkards banging tin pots together and often the candlesticks too!” That was your way of looking forward.

R. Yes—but to life, not to art. Don’t forget that. One half of François Villon was in me already, the other half was to come, then the whole was to pass away from me into Verlaine.

S. I don’t think that the parallel between you and Villon is worth making; he was a sentimentalist of the

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first water—like Verlaine—and you were never that.

R. There you are right. But, all the same, there was much of Villon in me at one time—the coarseness, for example. I came to take a delight in all kinds of crudity. Always, throughout my life, I enjoyed schoolboy humour of the grossest sort, and this was the time at which I began to indulge in it. The poems that I wrote were either bitter satires on my mother, or else expatiations on the kind of themes I have just mentioned.

S. Some people would say that the *Louse-Hunters* was one of your finest poems. I'm not sure that I don't think so myself.

R. But that poem belongs to a later period, when I was nearly up to the neck in literature. You anticipate too much.

S. I apologise. Please tell me more

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of the days when you made your first escape from your mother.

R. The remembrance of that occasion is disgusting to me. It was the prelude to my first great disillusionment. My love of crudity had led me into a worship of war for its own sake —a lamentable fallacy, which I speedily got rid of, but not until it had come near to breaking me. I was full of republican principles, founded on hatred of my mother's tyranny, and I longed to let fly in some violent action. My mother and I and my sister were sitting in a field near the river where I used to sit so often alone. I could see the row of poplars from where I sat among the tall grass; they seemed to give me back the vivid thoughts I had when I was alone with them and to urge me to take my chance. I told my mother I was going off on a walk by myself. She said I was not to be away long, as

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she wanted me at home for something or other. I ran and ran. It was a very hot day.

S. You can't have seen much of the war.

R. I saw enough to find it hideous and sordid. It was not life at all, in spite of the noise and movement. There was something horribly artificial about it, like a game in which children lose their tempers.

S. Yet I think, perhaps, that if you had not seen the war you would not have written the *Illuminations*, the *Sojourn in Hell* — certainly not the *Drunken Boat*. Life would have succeeded in keeping you away from art.

R. It defeated its own object, in showing me war. But the defeat was a little more gradual than you might think. I didn't give in at once; my passionate desire for the life heroic remained with me for some time after

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the war had laughed in my face—as I furiously put it to myself at the time. You see, from my earliest childhood I seem to have known exactly what my life would be in its three phases.

S. You foretold it correctly.

R. In my poems, yes. It is that which strengthens my conviction that my ultimate pursuit of life was right—right in that that was the way in which I should in the deepest sense fulfil myself. For that is the goal, isn't it? That is morality?

S. So it seems to me. But I am not yet convinced that your poems were not the fulfilment. I am not a sceptical man, in an eighteenth century sense, but where the justification of art is called in question, I am naturally up in arms.

R. Naturally—but wrongly. You are probably one of those who say: "Oh! how can anyone live without

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books—without something to take them away from mere humdrum living!” Now that is rubbish. Mere living is not necessarily humdrum, even when it means doing the same thing—and what may seem superficially to be a dull thing—every day. Sometimes the people referred to have discovered the thing for which art is a substitute.

S. Do you claim to have found that thing?

R. Eventually, yes. But not in 1870. As I have told you—or rather you have told me—the war prevented me from doing so that time. It flung me headfirst into the sea of literature, in which I was never happy. All the time, at the back of my mind (and not always at the back), I knew that what I was doing was not really to the point. At first I nearly deceived myself into believing that it was; but this became increasingly difficult to do, and the

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more I wrote the less I cared for it all.

S. Even at first—in Paris?

R. That was the best time. If I remember right, I thought “my life was a banquet where all hearts, all wines, overflowed.” But there, again, those words were really a prophecy rather than a looking-back.

S. You were determined to get to Paris; you tried so often. Was that for life or for art?

R. For both, I think; though, as it turned out, art was to get the upper hand, once I was there. That was Verlaine’s fault. But at least I got a sensation of freedom, momentary as it was. However often I was dragged back to Charleville I knew that eventually I should get clean away, for a time at least. I wrote the *Drunken Boat* and resigned myself to art.

S. Did you make no farewell to life?

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R. Yes. My farewell was a woman —a young girl. I dare say you know the story. . .

S. It is hinted at, but some have doubted it altogether.

R. It is true enough. My friends used to tell me that I did not know what real love was; they told it me for the last time on the night before I went to Alexandria, leaving them all for ever. It wasn't true, but I didn't want to have to explain to them how wrong they were.

S. Was the girl very much in love with you?

R. Yes. She was a simple soul, with no inkling of my character to guide her. I never let her see what I was like. I think that if she had tried, or cared to try, she could have kept me at home; I might have married her later and settled down at Charleville. You may judge from this how much I

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loved her. But she didn't know; she was completely dependent on my will, and once she had come to Paris with me her chance was over. I sent her away from me; we had a terrible scene—in the early morning—on one of the boulevards. She begged me to let her stay with me. I did not know what to do: I could not take my eyes from her face, and in it I saw the mirror of the life that I was determined to leave. I loved her, yet in her eyes I could see reflected only the ugly barrenness of the war, as I had seen it. If it had not been for that I might have given in and have let her stay. But because of what I saw, I could not think her love enough; so I sent her away. She walked, dragging her feet and crying in the greyness of the empty street. I put my fingers into my ears so that I should not hear her, and sat down on the bench with my eyes shut. When I opened

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them she was gone. After that, though I returned again and again to Charleville, my chain became weaker and weaker, and eventually it broke. I was in Paris—with Verlaine—and had forsaken life.

S. But if the war of 1870 disgusted you so deeply, why did you join the army of the *Commune*?

R. Because some of my revolutionary illusions still remained, I suppose. In any case, you are wrong: I was never a *communard*; I did not get to Paris in time. So that idea died a natural death. What remained was the *Drunken Boat*—a strong enough illusion, I think you will allow!

Rimbaud's mouth widened and relaxed. The bright colour had gone out of his cheeks, sucked away by the fire which burnt more fiercely round his head, throwing out little flames. Throughout the next part of our con-

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versation it burnt so blindingly that I could scarcely distinguish Rimbaud's face: it seemed to have become a part of the fire, and his voice came to me as if out of the void of darkness beyond.

S. And what exactly do you think it was worth—that illusion, as you call it?

R. It was worth Verlaine's first letter to me. And what a letter! I ought to have seen through it even then—seen through poor Verlaine's love of gush for its own sake. He had to pour himself out over someone, and he soon found that his wife was a poor subject for that sort of thing. But I didn't see through it all the same. What I thought was: "Here is someone who will not look upon me as my mother does."

S. And when you got there you found another Charleville—a bourgeois interior, such as you detested.

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R. Exactly. It was, as you have guessed, just Charleville over again, with Madame Mauté instead of my mother. Of course they all hated me at sight—except Verlaine, who kept on heaping food on to my plate at supper, to show me the welcome they were withholding.

S. I think that it was partly your own fault that Madame Verlaine and her mother hated you. If you hadn't been so surly and ungracious——

R. Ungracious! It was never my way to be gracious. If they had accepted me as I was, all would have been well.

S. But you must admit that you did not speak a word all through that first evening. I don't think you could have expected them to stomach that.

R. Well, I was tired; if they had looked they could have seen it. Why couldn't they have left me in peace till

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the next day? I was ready enough to talk then.

S. But not pleasantly. You did nothing but deride them all and sow dissension between Verlaine and his wife.

R. That isn't true. I did nothing of the sort. Verlaine and his wife were in a state of dissension when I arrived. Do you really believe that, if I had never met Verlaine, he and his wife would have remained long together?

S. I dare say they would not; but that doesn't excuse your behaviour, which must have hurried on the breach, however little you actively did to precipitate it.

R. The sooner they parted the better it would be for Verlaine. I saw that at once. He was a born Bohemian and the Mautés were the pursiest of bourgeois; the whole thing was hopeless from the beginning. It was just

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like Verlaine ever to have thought that such a *ménage* could succeed! He considered the whole affair a huge joke, but it disgusted me, and I became more and more sulky. The life was far from what I had expected it to be, and I found it difficult even to write poetry.

S. You don't seem to have found the literary world of Paris any easier than the Mautés to get on with.

R. Do you wonder at that? They—I mean Verlaine's friends—infuriated me. They were always trying to get things out of me—to make me commit myself in conversation. So I would hardly speak at all. I felt that I was up against them, with their literary jargon and good manners. They made me feel like a peasant—which was what, eventually, they wanted to do. Oh! I've no doubt I was intolerable; but then, so were they. I used to have scene

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after scene with Verlaine about it. He said that I was spoiling all his friendships, alienating all his friends. So I told him that he must choose between them and me—romantic that I was in those days! Of course, the moment I said that he stopped scolding me. Sometimes he burst into tears. But always he ended by saying that he loved me more than any of them; that he didn't care if they all left him, so long as I stayed: that I would stay, wouldn't I? And he would stare very closely at me with his prominent, fish-like eyes. But I never would promise anything. I knew that if I did he would throw it back at me at some awkward moment, and I didn't want to be tied, especially to someone for whom I had lost all respect.

S. I am surprised that you should ever have felt any, after his first letter to you. "Come, great and dear soul,

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we await you, we want you." Are these the accents in which a respectable person would address for the first time someone he had never seen?

R. Perhaps not. But I was so anxious to escape from Charleville, as I have emphasised before, that I paid little attention to the manner of Verlaine's address. It was only after a prolonged course of emotionalism that I realised that I could not respect him. He gave himself away to me continually; I almost hated him for having so little sense of self-preservation. He was disgustingly pathetic. The last straw was the rumour that our relationship was a sexual one.

S. I shouldn't have thought that you would have cared about your reputation.

R. I didn't. If the story had been true I shouldn't have cared at all. But the fact that it wasn't made it gratuitous.

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tously irritating to me, all on edge as I was. My sexuality was always normal. The story put the cap on my hatred of Verlaine's friends. They had to think of some way of getting their own back out of me for my insulting behaviour to them. Besides, I dare say they thought that it was true. Judging alone by Verlaine's manner to me (he seemed pleased rather than vexed by the story!) it ought to have been. But it wasn't, and I couldn't stand the strain of such a life any longer.

S. Was that why you suddenly decided to go away?

R. Of course. I didn't really care by that time whether Verlaine came with me or not: I was sick of him and of everything connected with him. So I just told him that I was going away, not really believing that he would go to the length of leaving his family to follow me.

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S. That was stupid of you. If Verlaine loved you as much as you make it clear that he did, then it should have been plain to you that he would go with you, especially with his irresponsible character.

R. But his wife was ill. I thought that he would have been moved by that. So I was adamant in my decision to go at once, just to see what he would do. The moment when he agreed to come with me was the first time that I felt any admiration for him.

S. Callousness does not seem to me in the least admirable, though I am not surprised that you should find it so.

R. It wasn't callousness. What would have been the good of Verlaine's sitting maundering at the bedside of a woman he didn't love—almost, in fact, disliked—and who had ceased to love him?

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S. Had she?

R. She had indeed. I had seen it in her face many a time.

S. In any case his impulse was purely selfish.

R. And rightly so. Everything that was genuine in him, however sentimental and self-deceived he may have been, was connected with me. The Mautés were completely alien to him; he owed it to himself to get away from them.

S. And to you? It is possible that he thought he owed it to you.

R. It is possible, but it isn't true. I think that the first impression upon him of my decision must have been very strong. It was my saying, "*We* are going away," instead of "*I*," that originally made the outcome certain. Anyhow, as you said, his impulse was purely selfish. I wasn't even artistically a help to him. He did not understand

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my later poems, though he professed to admire them. As for his, I hated them, though I had not yet taken to saying so. One of the things my Paris life taught me was the kind of poetry I really disliked and despised. Verlaine's sentimental caterwauling filled me with disgust. I admit that he had metrical ability, but that was all the merit I could ever see. The only things he wrote that I liked at all were those obscene poems; they amused me. I expect that you've read them, or some of them; he wrote them by the score.

S. I've read *Hombres*, if that's what you mean. They didn't seem to me to have much merit. To tell you the truth, I found them very dull—as dull as pornography always is.

R. There I can't agree with you. I have always enjoyed obscene literature—at any rate in certain moods. Verlaine and I, especially when we were

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drunk, used often to write indecent poems together, capping each other's lines. There was one poem, of which I was supposed to have written the alternate verses, and which has since, I believe, been used to prove that I had sexual relations with Verlaine. Oddly enough, this poem is one in which I had no hand; the verses that I am said to have written were parodies, by Verlaine, of what he considered to be my poetical style. If you read this poem carefully you will see that the verses in question are obviously fakes.

S. I had already come to that conclusion. But what about your own poetry?

R. It had crystallised. Images had definitely become the reality for me. This was the final effect of literature—the ousting of life by art, which had taken place within me. The free substitution of one symbol for another—

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the shaping of a world in which each thing could be substituted for another without injuring the meaning, this was my preoccupation. Where other poets, in using metaphor, have included both the comparer and the compared, I came gradually to neglect the latter and to leave only the former. To speak more accurately, the two grew together in my mind.

S. And what of the place of music in this scheme?

R. The highest place. In the invention of a poetic idiom that would touch all the senses at once, such as I desired to attain, music was at once the stepping-stone and the rock upon which my poetry was to be built.

S. In your later poems it seems almost as if you had used some of the common dynamic combinations in music to give the effect of a movement that is, in an entirely peculiar sense,

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unspatial. It is as though the emotional content of the poem were the constant centre of a circle, the circumference of which was always shifting its position. The *Sojourn in Hell* is a great *crescendo!* the movement throughout becomes slower in direct ratio to the increase in dynamic power, until, at the end, the whole seems to open out into a ringing, metallic vacuum, in which a brilliance of light has destroyed the meaning of both sound and movement.

R. Beyond that I could not go. My mistake was to have pushed thus far, for such regions of art are necessarily uninhabitable. One arrives there only to die—which is what happened to me. Had I stopped short I might have continued to write poetry to the end of my days, which would then probably have been more than they were. But external forces (among them Verlaine)

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pushed me on into the airless region until the artist in me died, giving place to that other life which had been asleep in me for so long.

S. I like to speculate as to what would have happened if you had both remained in Paris, instead of going to London. You might have "re-invented love," as you called it, equally well in either city.

R. That unhappy phrase! It, too, has been used against me in the crudest fashion. No one seems to have been able to realise that the love I sought could not be approached through sexuality, whether or no the latter were eventually to play a part in it. The love that obsessed my thoughts was coldly calculated, and more concerned with things than with people. My journey to London was necessary—inevitable.

S. The London of the seventies must have been a depressing place, especially

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in the squalid circumstances in which you and Verlaine lived.

R. The squalor of our life and its environment came in the end to amuse, rather than to disgust me. It symbolised so effectively the tremulous inequality of our minds, the hopeless inefficiency of our common effort. I was a Don Quixote who soon grew tired of his Sancho Panza, but, like him, I created material hostilities in the fever of my brain. I became more than ever conscious of the shapes of everyday objects. Did my mind figure an unhandseled unit of misery? There it was on the wall of my room, winding from the ceiling in a slither of damp. Did the poem I was writing present some peculiar difficulty? The fog flattened its yellow nose against the bleared window and gazed stupidly at the perplexity within. The very table on which I wrote seemed to thrust

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proof of my apostasy up to my eyes. Sharp edges, dulled so that I could not see them by the smoky gloom of the winter city, hedged me in from stair, pavement, and house wall. My hands, too, became an agony for me. They did not seem part of me and I feared to see them move. For this reason I kept them in my pockets as much as I could. When I wrote, my attention was distracted from the stream of words by my long, knotted fingers grasping and constraining the pen. Between my hands and my soul it was a battle, and if my soul won, my body revenged itself at last. The tragedy of all this was not lighted from within.

S. The gaslight of those days must have been suitable indeed.

R. I shall never forget the horror of those flares. To me they were the essential characteristic of London. In the course of our enormous walks the

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lighting-up of the staring, hissing gas
used to guide us on from point to point
—Verlaine and I—luring us like an
ignis fatuus into the sordid darkness of
the docks—or of Clerkenwell.

S. You wore a top-hat.

R. I did. In it I carried always the reflection of the livid gaslight. The lamp of poetry was dying a noisy, brilliant death, of which the symbol, like everything else in those days, was continually thrust before me. The crudeness which I had practised as a child now informed all the outside world. In that glare I encountered the open butcher's shop, yawning on to the street like a carcase turned inside out; the leering public-house, its misted windows glowing on to the wet pavement. You know that we never resisted that: drunkenness was an escape—not such a very blessed one. It did not conceal from me the horrors that

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stood just out of my sight, so that by squinting I could but catch the edges of their dark cloaks. I knew the life that I was leading, and the knowledge was very bitter to me; it made me more irritable than ever. But it was Verlaine who revealed me to myself. He wanted to imprison my soul; he wanted to "run" me. It was because he knew that, fundamentally, he could never tame me, that he used to get so angry. If I had given in, then I might never have escaped; it was only by holding back that I succeeded in saving my soul from being swallowed up in the tepid stream of sentimentality that he was always pouring over me. It killed the remains of romanticism in me; after that I only wanted hard fact, the harder the better,—concrete things; I had done with ideas, with literature.

S. Yet the last poem of the *Illuminations*, though it is called *Remnant Sale*,

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does not seem to me a record of artistic bankruptcy. Behind your despair seem to lie new wells full of poetic imagery.

R. The flesh was willing, but the spirit was becoming weak under the stress of incessant quarrels. *Illuminations* was indeed a significant title—the incandescent glare of gaslight on the ruined chambers of my brain. I was ripe for defeat—yet I won. Against a stronger soul than Verlaine's I might not have been proof. But he was pathetic, and of all types of character I loathe the pathetic most. He lowered my standard of happiness, seeming actually proud of the sordid life we were leading—and that just because we were leading it together, and he liked to think of us both striking a gesture in the sight of everyone. His helplessness dragged me down inside myself, as it were something wet and clinging. He wanted me to give him spiritual

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support and to sap my strength in that way. It was his idea that I should restore to him his ancient innocence, as if I had not trouble enough to preserve my own! I hated all that clinging together and spiritual mauling. I wanted to stand alone in myself: that was always my condition of friendship, and Verlaine would not even try to observe it.

S. There is an English couplet—you know English, don't you?

R. Yes.

S. You wouldn't know its author—Blake. It goes like this:

Till thou dost conquer the distrest,
Thou shalt never have peace within
thy breast.

R. That is good . . . I tried to conquer him by running away, but he got me back. It was difficult to break with him. I despised myself for going

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back to him in London, when he was ill and wrote for me to come. But I went all the same. It was foolish in me to have done so, for matters went from bad to worse. I used to annoy him in every way I could think of, in a last effort to stave him off. I would not allow myself one gracious word. There was never a silence between us at that time. If one seemed about to occur I felt the volcano of emotion rising up in him, and knew that if I did not start to gibe it would come pouring out and I should become the slave of a spiritual invalid. The strain of inventing means by which to vex him was intolerable, especially as one way would not serve for many occasions. It was like a disease that must be warded off with stronger and ever stronger medicines, until at last nothing remains but to let it pursue its course. I went with women, and that drove him mad. If

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only he had realised how little they meant to me! Venal love never held the smallest attraction for me. Then I mocked at his poems—a thing I had always wanted to do. I told him that they were just like himself, and I exposed his personality to him at length, treading on all his tenderest spots. I teased him like—

S. Like a street arab.

R. That's it: like a street arab. I made schoolboy jokes the order of the day—and of the night, when he woke me up to rave of his spiritual insolvency. My heart went mad and jerked with skeleton twangs, galvanised by the current of our mutual failure. My soul wove cords from steeple to steeple of the city, from star to star, and on those cords it danced, wearing itself into a merciful death . . .

S. But in the end he had had enough and left you.

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R. If only it had been for ever! But I hadn't a penny, and when he sent for me to Brussels I had to go, cursing myself all the way. Then, at last, it was the end, and you may be sure that I was thankful.

S. I am surprised that he did not lose his head earlier.

R. At any rate he lost it altogether then. Perhaps it was as well that he suppressed his hatred (for it had become hatred) for so long, otherwise its outbreak might not have been violent enough to set me free.

S. I think that up till that time, probably, he had not allowed himself to give up hope of catching you in his net. Remember, his soul was in a desperate state: he had completely let himself go.

R. He seemed to realise all of a sudden that it was futile, that he could never hope to keep me with him. I

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could see that in his mind his life was crumbling away into a heap of shards and leaving him to face himself. That was too much for him, and he shot at me, partly out of revenge, partly to prevent me from carrying on my life apart from himself.

S. Did you guess that he was going to shoot at you?

R. The thought crossed my mind. But then I was sure that he would not have the courage.

S. That was short-sighted. You might surely have seen that an end had come.

R. My first feeling, when he had done it, was of surprise, then of admiration. I looked at his eyes and saw in them an absolute blank—as when one looks in at a dark window and sees an empty room. With the shot had spirted out of him all his hatred of me and contempt of himself. I felt suddenly the

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odious futility of all I had done pierce my arm with an intolerable pain. . . . And I was sorry for him. I might have given in and stayed, if he had remained in the state of mind which made him fire at me. But of course he broke down at once, and that made me angry. I saw all the old emotions rushing back into his eyes, and I could have shouted my passionate decision to have done with them all. I wasn't going to let him see that I was sorry for him then; that would have been fatal. He wanted me to shoot him, but I laughed and said that I would not even give him that satisfaction!

S. Yet even then you had not seen the last of him.

R. I had seen the last that was really to affect me. The trial was simply nothing: I cannot even remember it. I was too much overjoyed at the thought of escape. I travelled back to

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Charleville with my wounded hand; the pain was getting better, and I saw in it the symbol of the literary attitude to experience which was leaving me so fast, now that I had really got away. Only one thing remained—to make my last will and testament. Back at Charleville once more, I made it in the agony of a final deliverance. You have read it; it is called *A Sojourn in Hell*. Over it I shed the tears of what seemed to me so many wasted years. For I knew clearly enough what it was that I wanted now. Life had come back to me, and I was in a hurry to embrace it.

S. Why did you burn your testament?

R. Because, the moment I had finished it, the last vestiges of aesthetic emotion fell from me, and the experience that I was eager to make, of the potentialities of living in its purest significance, made such a gesture seem

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to me the merest folly—a childish toy, unworthy of the man I was to become.

S. You should not have done it. The world has a dearth of such fires that smoulder, then suddenly crackle and throw out a shower of sparks that fill the sky with innumerable stars. You owed it—that fire—not so much to the life you had left behind with Verlaine as to the life that you had re-conceived; your soul had changed before you began to write it. If it had not done so, should we have heard that new music, that lengthening *crescendo*, that devastating retardation, and, at last, that ringing, blinding vacuum, that was to be filled by the continent of Africa? For what, really, was the leading clause of your will?

R. "SLAVES! CURSE NOT LIFE!"

His voice echoed round in the dark cave and the flames died down, softened like undulating chords of music, and

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Rimbaud's head appeared again, defined in strong lines against the glare. During the final part of our discourse, his face was so vivid to me that I was forced to consider it like a picture—to reconstruct it consequently for the fulness of its intention.

S. I confess that now I am impressed by the almost incredible symmetry of your life—impressed into a conditional acceptance of your own interpretation. For symmetry never fails to strengthen the conviction to which the manner of its assemblage points. A solution of a problem which fits the facts is hard to disprove (though one may be persuaded that it is false), except by the discovery of an equally plausible solution. Such an one, at the moment, I find myself unable to put forward.

R. My solution is yet to be exposed. So far, you have only followed me as

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far as Stuttgart. I hope that you will not leave me in that antipathetic neighbourhood; its memory is further darkened for me by a most unnecessary and farcical scene.

S. Farcical, you think? Perhaps, in actual fact, it was so. But here again I condemn your callousness, though it fascinates me.

R. I assure you that I was even more justified then than before. Remember the new direction of my resolve, and the strength which I had given to it by writing—and still more by burning—my last will and testament. “I succeeded in stifling every human hope within me. I leapt stealthily, like a wild beast, to strangle every joy.”

S. You certainly leapt to strangle Verlaine. Was he then a joy?

R. Hardly. So glad was I of my escape that, when Delahaye told me that Verlaine was clamouring to see me

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again, I was surprised at myself for feeling so little horror at the thought. That showed me how far I had come in a short time. I felt that I simply did not care and I told Delahaye so: the idea of Verlaine and all that he represented had ceased to impinge upon my consciousness. But when it came to the meeting, the sight of his sickly grey face nearly made me turn and run away. I had heard all about his conversion to Catholicism—the final resort of his feeble soul—after my support had been removed; and it added the last straw to my contempt. My habit of trying to vex him returning involuntarily, I proceeded to address him only as “Loyola.” But he refused to be annoyed; I suppose his confessor had been lecturing him about “turning the other cheek.” At first he tried to talk to me about poetry, but I cut him short, saying that all that had ceased to have

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any interest for me. He didn't seem to take it in at all, and went mumbling on about his latest volume of poems. He was still where I had left him, except for the religion, and that was no kind of progress—only an aggravation of his usual mental dry-rot.

S. The thought of your conversation is displeasing, as talk at cross purposes on important subjects invariably is. I am glad that I was not there to hear it.

R. No one was there to hear it, otherwise I should probably have been arrested for knocking Verlaine down.

S. What made you violent?

R. His endeavour to convert me to Catholicism. Did you ever hear of such miserable folly? What was the good of talking to me—to *me*, in the fixity of my purpose, my life set and determined and clamped firmly to this earth—about the Virgin Mary? . . . At first I only laughed, but he insisted and insisted.

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The painful thing about the whole conversation, as you have remarked, was the hopeless discrepancy between our levels of emotional understanding. I would not go down to his, and he would not come up to mine, so there we were. In the end I became, through extreme boredom, really annoyed and knocked him down. I saw that that would be the only way of getting rid of him. I could not stand the thin, pietistic singing that his voice had become—like a sort of mosquito!

S. After you had knocked him down, did he not try to get up and follow you?

R. No. He just lay there. I think he was stunned. Anyhow, I didn't care, nor did I stay to see what would happen. It really *was* the end, that time.

S. After that your life became in some sort a search. It must have been hard to have to begin again at the begin-

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ning—for that was what virtually you had to do. You had sought Paris as a blind man might seek the centre of a maze; to lodge yourself in Africa was obviously an even greater struggle.

R. I rose to it, however, and became increasingly energetic. The more difficult life became, the more I loved and embraced it, finding delight in victories over small circumstances.

S. One of which was your mother.

R. She could hardly be described as "small," but she was, intermittently, a circumstance, and one which did its best to dominate me once more. She was now as furious with me for ceasing to write as she had once been with me for persisting in doing so. The poor woman couldn't understand what I was about; I was simply a burden to her, but she could not make up her mind to throw me off. Though as hard as nails, her instincts were fiercely maternal.

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The word “Africa” made her fly into a passion.

S. I suppose you always had Africa in your mind, as your goal, though you characteristically pursued a number of wide circles on your endless journey towards it.

R. I had decided upon Africa for these reasons: What I wanted was not any particular country—not Africa more than anywhere else—for its own sake, but a synthetic land, where life could be realised on its intensest plane. I knew that Africa would give me most nearly what I was looking for, so I made it my object to get there.

S. Yet your literary imagination never wholly left you. That is my chief point against your theory: even at the climax of your life your letters show the poet—dead, if you will, to poetry, but alive to the quite passive beauty of the spectacles which you witnessed.

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Art, striving to find a way out, lived again in the grand sequence of your actions.

R. Of course I know that I never quite got away from my literary imagination, as you call it. The memory of my poems remained with me, but only as springboards to action. You seem to wish to blur the distinction. I repeat, it was Life that obsessed me now. I confess that when I was a foreman in Cyprus I did not go to Famagusta, as I might easily have done, for fear of arousing "literary" feelings, such as I detested and feared.

S. So you did fear them?

R. I feared them as everyone fears their vices. Instead of those formal images, set down on paper, what I wanted was the living realities which they sought so feebly to imprison. I wanted the sea of the *Drunken Boat*, the streets and houses and people of

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Towns, the fields and trees and water of *Childhood*. It was thus that I aspired to “live beautifully”—to mount on to the top of literature and find there life transfigured by the fact of the ascent.

S. That ascent would be the only condition on which I could accept your theory, in its dogmatic finality. Without the fact of art, life can be nothing; *after* it, perhaps, life might be everything.

R. Never, during the ascent, did I experience the ecstasy I was afterwards to feel. I sought to know the very quality of living in itself, as one can only realise the peculiar sound of a word one habitually uses, by attentively repeating it to oneself, over and over again. Thus Africa was, for a time, “the Place,” and exploration “the Formula.”

S. I myself have known the most

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complicated satisfactions in the varying conditions of travel—though mine has been narrow in comparison with yours . . . and I never even thought of joining a circus.

R. That was a serious attempt at laughter, which I enjoyed considerably.

S. But surely the rôle of clown is crudely, tiresomely allegorical—

R. There are clowns and clowns. . . . I should not like to have missed the experience. Anyhow, it had nothing to do with art, and the people I fell in with were most instructive.

S. Did you positively enjoy the thought of leaving your friends for ever? It is a feeling which I can understand—a not mean gesture.

R. The last time that I saw my old friends was at Roche. They did not realise the implications of my farewell. But I did, and I knew that I should not care if I were never to see them

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again. The gesture meant little to me, I think. I was happy enough in other ways. For one thing, I was itching to see the last of Europe. I was once more in search of my eternity.

S. I am glad, for your sake, that you did not find it in Aden. A more abominable spot——

R. You are being flippant, and flippancy impairs the tone of a conversation like this. Aden was a most important prelude, a corner-stone of my life at that time. It hardened me physically.

S. I should not have thought that you needed that.

R. One always needs it.

S. That life may have given you an illusion of hardness, but it is my opinion that it really laid the foundation of your cancer. That hostile country bore you a grudge for your temerity.

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R. It was certainly hostile, and I came to hate it, with a deadly hatred that was indistinguishable from love. I wrung my gold from it and trampled its brown baked earth with the treading of my determined agony. I got what I wanted: I attained the tragic life. "We carry our flag into a filthy land, and our dialect smothers the sound of the drum."

S. There again you prophesied with astounding accuracy.

R. "To the hot and thirsty lands—in the service of the wickedest military and industrial exploitations! We bid farewell to wherever we may be. Conscripts of good-will, we will entertain a savage philosophy." My heart was heavy with a peculiar and intentional joy. That was a climax, for only at the end of supreme effort can joy be successfully intended.

S. It was, I suppose, as a thank-

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offering to that joy that you took an Abyssinian wife.

R. Rather was she a part of the joy. She was also the second woman only whom I really loved. You might say, if you wished, that with her I re-invented love. The re-invention was not what I had originally intended, but it sufficed, for there were other and more important things. This she knew, as no European woman would have known, though I never spoke to her of it. Our life together was very tranquil: she was a woman of few words. From her I learnt gentleness, a feeling for which I had never before had a use.

S. Ah! I see. For I confess that I was surprised, when I read your letters from Africa, to find how agreeable and —well, tame, you had become.

R. It was at last possible for me to be that. Mastery of one's world is the only permissible condition for agree-

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ableness of demeanour. I had always been a slave—to my mother, to art, to Verlaine's emotional crises. Now I was a slave no more to anything and could afford to smile. Not that, in point of fact, I ever smiled much, at any time!

S. Did you *think* much during this climax?

R. Yes, but in a purely practical manner. I gave my mind over to geography and the getting of gain. Hence all those reports which I used to send home to France. I enjoyed writing down bare concrete facts, a pastime I had not indulged in before. The satisfaction which this activity gives is very great—especially if the facts you record have been discovered by yourself.

S. The composition was not a literary one; otherwise, I suppose, you would not have undertaken it.

R. Certainly not. If it had been in any way literary, the satisfaction—akin

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to some expenditure of purely physical energy, like digging in the earth—would not have accrued.

S. Even so, had your mother sent you the surveying instruments which you asked for, instead of locking up the money, I believe that the resulting work would have been remarkable from a literary, as well as from a practical, point of view. Your sense of words and feeling for vivid images would have got the better of you sooner or later, if you had embarked on a book of any length. I regret bitterly the loss of what could not have failed to be a curiously interesting production.

R. I like to think that you would have been disappointed. I had too firm a hold upon myself by then to have allowed images to escape me.

S. Well, at least I can sympathise with you over the slackening of that hold.

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R. My only consolation was the comparative suddenness of my failure. A gradual decline would have left me ample time for self-pity, pessimism, and all the feelings that I most abhorred. You must not forget that, compared with the lengths of the other phases of my life, that of my African adventure was quite inordinately long. Because so little is known about it, and because it may seem lacking in the dramas of my earlier life (a fallacy, that), people are apt to telescope this period in their minds into as many months as there actually were years. I had my day, in a fuller sense than perhaps you imagine. But triumph cannot last long, being essentially an ephemeral manifestation of the human spirit's relation to its environment. I could always reflect upon that, and did so freely. I could feel that I had "had my fling," as you might say. Arguing with Menelick at

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Ankober was better than arguing with Verlaine. We wrestled on a basis of fact, instead of on a quicksand of emotion. But I had not anticipated the onset of physical pain; it took me by surprise and completely undermined my vitality. I got tired of life, instead of rejoicing more and more in it; at my lowest ebb I wanted to settle down at Roche and vegetate—with a commonplace wife. Even then I felt that my desire to live beautifully was a right desire, greater than any other ambition. But physical health, a possession that it had never entered into my head to value, simply because I had always had it, is a prerequisite for the kind of life I had moulded, and the two left me together.

S. Your retreat from life was worse—more difficult for you than your retreat from art.

R. I accustomed myself to regard it

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as a judgment. It was the earthly form of this crucifixion, which I foresaw just as I had foreseen all the phases of my life.

S. If you had not struggled back to Roche, you might have lived.

R. I dare say. But I had planned to return there and I had a fixed idea that, if I could force events to turn out as I had imagined them, the disease would give in and let me live. But by that time pain had transformed all my sequences of thought, melting them down into an amorphous mass of despair. I was, at long last, good for nothing. I did wrong to despise poor Verlaine, for in the end art came back to me in the form of the Catholic religion. My conversion was a visionary metamorphosis of my poems, which in themselves I had long forgotten. Such an abdication was as little distressing to me as possible, so weak had I become.

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My grip on life failed suddenly, when I got into the hospital, and I only wished to die.

S. Perhaps your sister did right . . .

R. Right according to her lights, but not according to mine. She really knew nothing of me; how could she? Yet I am grateful to her. She remained to me as a dream of life, and thus it was that love became for me the sister of death.

S. She made you what you must have hated to be—pathetic. She comforted you.

R. Oh! I knew that I was pathetic then, but I didn't care any more. I wanted comfort and I got it.

There was a pause in our conversation, —a pause which I felt it my duty, I cannot say why, to fill.

S. My opportunities for useful reflection are, I see, coming to an end.

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The final passages of your life fill me with an intolerable sense of futility, compelling me to regret even the brief triumph you did have. The magnitude of that abdication, too, might not seem so great in the life of another man; but your short life was indubitably equal, in extent of experience and development of soul, to the seventy-five years of the proverbial man; as in the case of the dog, each year of your life was equal to five of that of an ordinary man. So we must reckon nearly five years of physical and mental decay in the record of your life. I do not question the grandeur of the preceding years, but I consider their significance to some extent impaired by your subsequent surrender.

R. I cannot blame you now for even so pale a reflection of contempt. Having failed in the eyes of the world to accomplish what in myself I believed that I

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had accomplished—if only for a brief period—I can scarcely expect you to alter your opinion of my goal. But still I hold to the perfectibility and the value of it, above all other purposeful activities. You yourself belong to the type from which I seceded; your peculiar heaven lies in the true definition of the quality of your imaginative life. May you find it! I wish you well. . . . But I know that there is a greater thing, and that I came near to possessing it permanently, had my body not failed me at the crisis. For, however great the ecstasy to be enjoyed from the evasion of life that is art, and however great the tranquillity attained by such a synthetic appreciation, it must in the final analysis of value be the fountainhead—life itself—which takes the most important place. If you could triumph over yourself in pleasure and pain, taking freely of both but giving to neither, then life, instead

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of holding the terrors that drive you into art, would be for you an all-sufficient activity. I made this out for myself: that was what I did to deserve this crucifixion. I tried to make my heaven upon earth. I would not wait for the other, that might (or might not) come after death; I was impatient to understand what I could mean to myself, as all should be; not only such as you, who seek to escape from life by making of it an intellectual abstraction, but those poor creatures who can find nothing better to desire than death.

“SLAVES! CURSE NOT LIFE!”

S. If what you strove for were to come true, universally, I still think that the world would be the poorer for it. But it can never come true, in the nature of things and of minds, and you must know that.

R. I do know it; it was the secret of my tragedy on earth.

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S. A beautiful tragedy, in itself a sufficient work of art.

He left me the last word, but I got no satisfaction from it, seeing him crucified on that tangled shape of fire, his face set with the memory of his struggle. He spoke no further word, and then, before I had time to take a last look at his face, the sun of my waking life rose over the sea of sleep.

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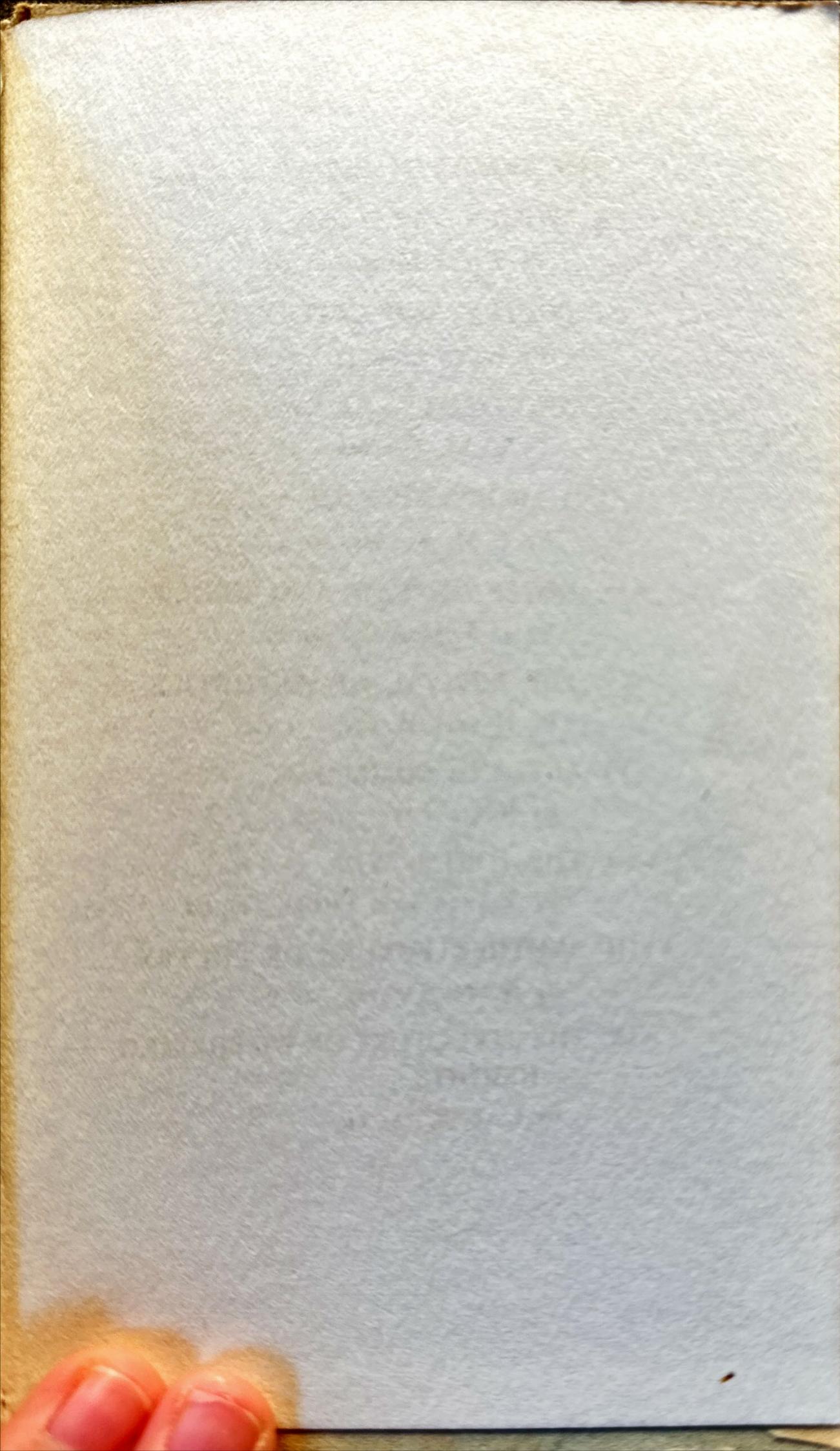
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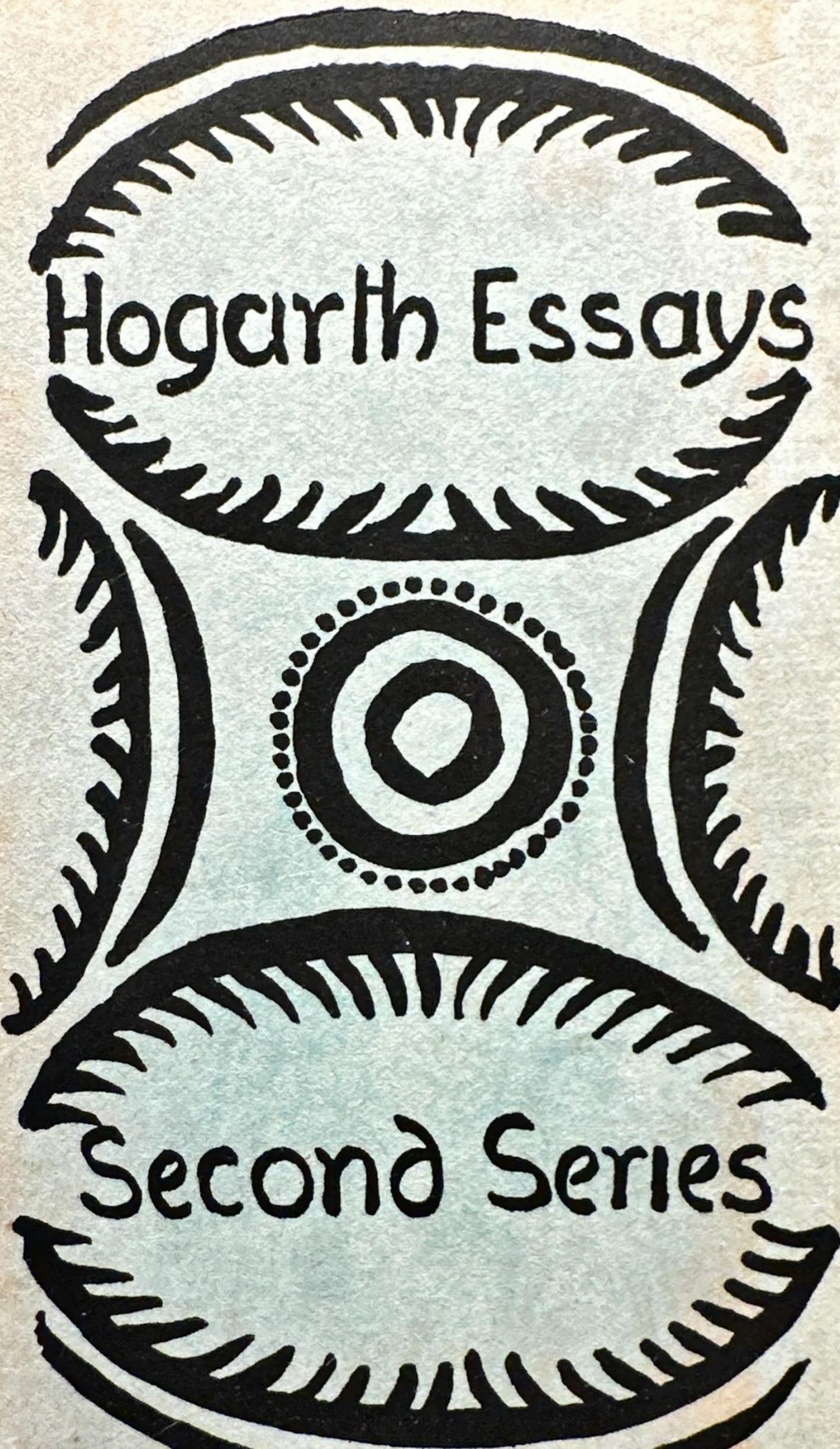
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