

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on any article published in *PMLA*, or on matters of scholarly and critical interest to readers generally. Such letters, if accepted by the Editor, will be sent to the author of the work commented on, who will be invited to reply. The usual rules regarding courtesy and avoidance of personalities will be enforced, and the Editor reserves complete discretion in deciding whether or not to publish any letter. Letters should not exceed 1,000 words of text. Footnotes are discouraged and should be included only when absolutely necessary.

Phonetic and Visual Spirals in “Voyelles”

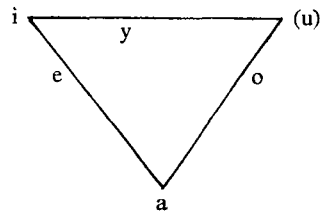
To the Editor:

On reading Claudine Hunting’s recent article, “La Voix de Rimbaud: Nouveau point de vue sur les ‘naissances latentes’ des ‘Voyelles’ ” (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 472–83), I had a strange sensation of déjà vu, or rather, of *déjà entendu*: most of the points she makes were brought out by the students or the professor in an explication de textes seminar I took under Jacqueline de La Harpe at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1959–60. Insistence on the sounds as well as on the color symbolism in the sonnet, the various levels of interpretation which Hunting brings out, the circular or spiral pattern at the poem’s philosophical center (death-childhood-maturity-old age-death, but this time opening up to the infinite), all this was discussed in the seminar, and more.

What would be “nouveau” for the members of the seminar who have not kept up with Rimbaud scholarship would be the demonstration of Hugo’s influence on Rimbaud and the indication of parallel expressions in Baudelaire, the discussion of the vowel’s pattern of alternating action and repose, and the neat tying together of the various elements analyzed, a significant contribution indeed. Hunting also shows, by implication, how perfectly the form of the poem corresponds to its content. I think her argument could be made even stronger by the inclusion of the following remarks, which complement her analyses and her presentation, and which are presented here in outline form.

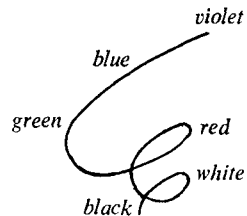
There are at least two corresponding circles or spirals that parallel the central spiral pattern of the poem, one of them phonetic (a rather serious oversight in an approach that stresses sound, and one that Professor de La Harpe’s seminar also committed), the other visual. The choice of the pattern of sounds a-e-i-u-o makes a single spiral or circle in the vowel triangle familiar to French teachers, rotating in clockwise fashion from

the point at the bottom and returning in the direction of the point of departure:



(The symbol [y] represents the French pronunciation of “u” as a letter of the alphabet.)

By contrast, the pattern of the visual spiral is double: first, a small loop of a spiral is formed by the group *a noir-e blanc* (pace Hunting, it is black and not white that represents the absence of color; fortunately, this minor error does not mar her argument); then the group *i rouge - u vert - o bleu/rayon violet* traces a larger loop, which moves rapidly and without transition from red to its opposite color on the color wheel, green, and then progresses more slowly in the direction of red via blue and violet. This spiral pattern can be represented as follows:



Interestingly enough, the phonetic spiral places old age closer to vigorous adulthood than to a rebirth-in-death,¹ whereas the visual spiral places old age closer to death and eternity than to vigorous adulthood. In

any case, these spirals, subtly interwoven with the poem's central philosophical spiral—thereby blending color and sound with thought, sensation with intellectualization—increase the sonnet's density, tighten its construction, and help make it the perfect union of *forme et fond* that has fascinated critics for over a century.

THEODORE E. D. BRAUN
University of Delaware

Note

¹ If the letter “u” is taken to represent the sound [u], the circular pattern would be maintained and the phonetic spiral would resemble the visual spiral; but [u] is, in French, an unusual pronunciation of the letter “u.” There are some who believe that Rimbaud intended a pun that is rather unpleasant: *u vert ouvert*; and although this pun could be interpreted seriously (old age and death open up the way to rebirth and eternity), such an interpretation seems to me rather farfetched, and would appear unlikely to have been in Rimbaud's mind while he was writing the poem.