ALAIN BUISINE

Crossed Drawings* (Rimbaud, Verlaine and Some Others)

Un jour peut-être il disparaîtra miraculeusement
—Délires I, Une Saison en Enfer

He runs, he runs, the ferret, and it really isn’t easy to catch him, to seize him as he passes by. But where exactly has he got to in this year 1876, Arthur Rimbaud, the eternal absoinder, the indefatigable vagabond? What has become of him? What is he doing? What has happened to him? How is he and how does he live? Is he still on the road, or has he set himself up provisionally, like some merchant or other, before returning, once more, to his distant wanderings? In France, his friends, with Paul Verlaine at the fore, speculate about his wild peregrinations and make fun of his misadventures, affabulating his activities and his discourse:

Oh la la, j’ai rien fait de ch’min d’puis mon dergnier
Coppée ! Il est vrai qu’j’en suis chauv’ comme un pagnier
Percé, qu’j’sens queut’ chos’ dans l’gosier qui m’ratisse
Qu’j’ai dans le dos comm’ des avant goûts d’un rhumatisse,
Et que j’m’emmerd’ plusseuq’ jamais. Mais c’est-n-égale
J’aurai prom’né ma gueule infecte au Sénégal
Et vu Sainte-Hélen’ ! [merde à Badingue !] un’ rud’ noce,
Quoi ! Mais tout ça n’est pas sérieux. J’reve eud’ négoce
Maint’nant, et plein d’astuss’, j’baluchonn’ des vieilles plaqu’s
D’assuranc’, pour revend’ cont du rhum aux Kanaks.*

*Because of the transfer of the Fonds Doucet to the Bibliothèque Nationale, we were regretfully unable to supply the relevant pictures for this article.

In this rough translation I do not attempt to reproduce Verlaine’s slang, his imitation of Rimbaud’s accent or wordplays such as c’est-n-égal/Sénégal. Wherever possible, I have used published translations, and all such quotations are attributed. Where no reference is supplied, the translation is my own.—Translator’s note.


YFS 84, Boundaries: Writing & Drawing, ed. M. Reid, © 1994 by Yale University.
Oh dear, I haven’t been on the road since my last 
Coppée! It’s true that I’m as bald as I’m 
Broke, that I feel something scratching in my throat 
That in my back, I’ve got the beginnings of rheumatism, 
And that I’m more fed up than ever. But no matter 
I’ll have shown my ugly face in Senegal 
And seen St Helena! [Shit to Badingue!]† A hell of a time, 
What? But none of that was serious. I’ve got business on my mind 
Now, and, very shrewdly, I pack up old insurance plates 
And trade them for rum with the canaks.

It was doubtless the very end of 1876 or the very beginning of 1877 when he learned that Rimbaud, having got as far as Java in a round trip that took him via Brussels, Rotterdam, Le Helder, Southampton, Gibraltar, Naples, Suez, Aden, Sumatra, the Cape, Saint Helen, Ascension, the Azores, Queenstown, Cork, Liverpool and Le Havre—“un petit voyage, presque rien” [a little trip, really nothing to speak of], quipped his friend Delahaye—was finally back in Charleville, that Verlaine wrote this ten-line poem, in the center of which he drew an astonishing Rimbaud en canaque. Rimbaud as a Negro, his face tattooed, a thick lock of hair sticking up from his skull, with earrings and a huge bracelet on his wrist: he is smoking a pipe [of opium?] and holding a large glass, most likely of rum. But even more remarkable than the pittresque nature of this figuration is its position: properly, concretely intratextual, the drawing is surrounded by Verlaine’s coppée, literally coiled-up among its verses. As though the disenchanted words which the poet lends him have the power to evoke his face, to restore his form.* A near-magical evocation like that of the ancient homeric nekula which brings the dead back from Hell—and the Bridegroom was, in his time, infernal!* It should therefore come as no surprise to note that in his poems, however lewd and slangy the coppée, Verlaine also meticulously respects Rimbaud’s Ardennes accent. Had he not written in the margin of an earlier drawing of 1876, “Dargnières nouvelles” [Latest News]‡

*Badingue was the nickname of Napoleon III.—Translator’s note.
*“d’evoquer son visage, de lui rendre figure” literally: to evoke his face, to render/restore his form/face.—Translator’s note.
†This is a reference to the Bridegroom of A Season in Hell, usually rendered in English as the Satanic Bridegroom.—Translator’s note.
‡Also imitating Rimbaud’s accent.—Translator’s note.

2. Letter to Ernest Millot, 28 January 1877, quoted by Frédéric Eigeldinger and André Gendre in Delahaye témoi̇n de Rimbaud [Neuchatel: A la Baconnière, 1974], 254.
which represented Rimbe stark naked [having been stripped by a cab driver in Vienna]: "L’accent parisiano-ardennais desideratur?" [The Parisiano-Ardennais accent desideratur?] Verlaine, who textualises his drawings by having them emerge from the poems themselves, hopes in these coppées to recover Rimbaldian orality, as though the restitution of the particularities of his voice could also conjure up his image, and if many of his drawings [including "Ultissima verba" and "La sale bête!" are accompanied by a Coppée, it is in order that the words lent to the other also render him figurally present.* In this, Verlaine is simply conforming to a device of Rimbaud’s, if for the author of the Illuminations, the joining of vision is indeed fundamentally subordinate to sonority and its aural reception, to musicality and orality, and the hallucinatory capacity of the poet first requires an audio-oral stimulus.3

By a significant reversal, in Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud’s portrait is the phylactery of reconstituted orality. However parodic, satiric and derisory these dizains—doubtless scribbled down in haste between two straight absinthes—may be, they nevertheless constitute a magic act, securing an iconic presentation of the poet. To provide himself with an image [far more than an idea] of Rimbaud: this, for Verlaine, is the primary object in reproducing the voice of him who was the master of the “Vierge folle” (“the Foolish Virgin”).

This passion of Verlaine for Rimbaud’s face, his “visage parfaitement ovale d’ange en exil, avec ses cheveux châtain-clair mal en ordre et des yeux d’un bleu pâle inquiétant” [perfectly oval face, that of a fallen angel, with its dishevelled light-brown hair and troubling pale-blue eyes]4 would never fail. If, in the preface to the Poètes Maudits, which he added to the 1884 Vanier edition, he insists on the authenticity of all the portraits which he supplies in the volume, it is apparently Arthur’s face which most preoccupies him:

Étienne Carjat photographiait M. Arthur Rimbaud en octobre 1871. C’est cette photographie excellente que le lecteur a sous les yeux, reproduite . . . par le procédé de la photogravure.

N’est-ce pas bien “L’Enfant sublime”, sans le terrible démenti de Chateaubriand, mais non sans la protestation de lèvres dès

*“Sa présence figurale:” his figural or facial presence or form.—Translator’s note.
longtemps sensuelles et d’une paire d’yeux perdus dans un souvenir très ancien plutôt que dans un rêve même précoce? Un Casanova gosse, mais bien plus expert ès aventures, ne rit-il pas dans ces narines hardies, et ce beau menton accidenté ne s’en vient-il pas dire: “va te faire lanlairé” à toute illusion qui ne doive l’existence à la plus irrévocable volonté? Enfin, à notre sens, la superbe tignasse ne put être ainsi mise à mal que par de savants oreillers d’ailleurs foulés du coude d’un pur caprice sultanesque. Et ce dédain tout viril d’une toilette inutile à cette littérale beauté du diable!

Etienne Carjat photographed Mr. Arthur Rimbaud in October 1871. It is this excellent photograph which the reader has before him, reproduced . . . through the process of photoengraving.

Is this not the “Sublime Child,” without the terrible démenti of Chateaubriand, but not without the protest of lips that have long been sensual and of a pair of eyes lost in a very ancient memory rather than in a yet precocious dream? A boy-Casanova, though far more expert in love-affairs, does he not laugh in his bold nostrils, and doesn’t his handsome, rugged chin seem to say “go to hell” to any illusion which does not owe its existence to the most irrevocable will? Finally, to my mind, only knowing pillows, crumpled by an elbow in a pure sultanesque caprice, could meddle with this superb mop of hair. And the entirely virile disdain for a toilette superfluous to this literally diabolic beauty!”

It is known that anyone who came into contact with Rimbaud felt the fascination of his face. Ernest Delahaye, evoking the Rimbaud of 1871, insists on the extreme beauty of his “yeux d’un bleu pâle irradié de bleu foncé—les plus beaux yeux que j’ai vus—avec une expression de bravoure prête à tout sacrifier quand il était sérieux, d’une douceur enfantine, exquisite, quand il riait, et presque toujours d’une profondeur et d’une tendresse étonnantes” [eyes of a pale blue irradiated with dark blue—the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen—with an expression of gallantry, as if ready for all sacrifices, when he was serious, of exquisite, childlike gentleness when he smiled, and almost always of an astonishing depth and tenderness]. When he saw him again in 1879, he was once again struck, in this face in which the “fraîche carnation d’enfant anglais” [rosy complexion of an English child] had given way to the


"teint sombre d’un Kabyle", [dark coloring of a Kabyle], by “ses yeux, si extraordinarily beaux!—à l’iris bleu-clair entouré d’un anneau plus foncé couleur de pervenche” [his eyes, so extraordinarily beautiful!—with a pale-blue iris, ringed by a darker periwinkle-blue]. It was Verlaine, who, more than any other, created this veritable fixation with his former lover’s face. He “commentait et critiquait de près les portraits qu’il connaissait de lui—tous insuffisamment ressemblants—, enquêtait sur ceux qu’il n’avait jamais vus, essayait d’en faire exécuter d’autres. Iconographe de Rimbaud, il projetait d’établir “une édition aussi complète que possible” de ses œuvres “de grand luxe”, dont “la great attraction subsidiaire” devait être cinq portraits du poète par lui-même, Forain, Régamey, Manet et Fantin-Latour [commented on and minutely criticized the portraits of him which he knew—all insufficiently lifelike—made inquiries about those which he had never seen, and tried to have others executed. Rimbaud’s iconographer, he planned to put together “as complete an edition as possible” of his works, an édition de luxe whose “great subsidiary attraction” was to be five portraits of the poet by himself, Forain, Régamey, Manet et Fantin-Latour].

Verlaine, iconographer of Rimbaud—this is an understatement: he was manifestly an iconophile. Everything was done as though it were essential, primordial to make Rimbaud visible, to recover his nearest likeness, as he emphasizes in his “Arthur Rimbaud” “1884,” which includes a [posthumous!] portrait of “Arthur Rimbaud, Twelve Years-Old” by Paterne Berrichon, dated Roche, 29 April, 1897.

Ne pas trop se fier aux portraits qu’on a de Rimbaud, y compris la charge ci-contre, pour amusante et artistique qu’elle soit. Rimbaud, à l’âge de seize à dix-sept ans qui est celui où il a fait les vers et faisait la prose qu’on sait, était plutôt beau—et très beau—que laid comme en témoigne le portrait par Fantin dans son Coin de table qui est à Manchester. Une sorte de douceur luisait et souriait dans ses cruels yeux bleus clair et sur cette forte bouche rouge au pli amer: mysticisme et sensualité et quels! On procurera un jour des ressemblances enfin approchantes. [Oeuvres en prose complètes, 803.]

One should not put too much faith in the portraits we have of Rimbaud, including the caricature opposite, however amusing and

artistic it may be. At sixteen or seventeen, the age at which he composed the poetry and wrote the prose which we know, he was handsome—even very handsome, rather than ugly, as Fantin-Latour's portrait of him in *The Corner of the Table*, now at Manchester, suggests. A kind of gentleness shone and smiled in his cruel pale blue eyes and on that strong red mouth with its bitter crease: what mysticism and what sensuality! One day we will finally obtain resemblances which come close.

*In Verlaine's Eyes*—the expression is appropriate—writing about Rimbaud was necessarily to reactivate the memory of his face, as life-like as possible. For his edition of the *Complete Works* of Arthur Rimbaud, published by Vanier in 1895, he drew from memory two famous portraits. In the first, "Arthur Rimbaud: June 1872," the poet, who has his hands in his pockets and is smoking a pipe, resembles, with his long hair, his hat and his smart cardigan, a young peasant lad dressed up in his Sunday best and on his way to town. His body, somewhat awkward, slender and even rather meager and skinny, is exactly that of a young adolescent just past childhood. In the second drawing (of which there are actually several versions), we see Rimbaud wearing the same hat, leaning on his elbows at a table, and dreamily smoking. Why this imperious necessity to figure the poet when publishing his works? Was it mere nostalgia on the part of an inexpressible lover who would never again find so seductive a companion? In reality, Verlaine, in his desire to graphically freeze and fix "*l'homme aux semelles de vent*"* is simply playing out to its final consequences this will to *identify* Rimbaud which no one can avoid feeling in reading his work-life. For his many sketches, be they cruelly sarcastic around 1876 or melancholically touching around 1895, are identity-drawings, just as we speak of identity-photos. And if Verlaine seeks an ever greater resemblance to the original, is it not because he in fact feels that Rimbaud never resembles himself, that he continually escapes the narrow and constraining identificatory configuration of self-resemblance? Always *other* to the way in which he was imagined... elusive, unfigurable...

During the same year of 1876 in which Verlaine put his vengeful *cop-pées* in the nomad's mouth, Ernest Delahaye made three drawings of Rimbaud as a savage. In the first, "*A Missionary Who Comes from

*As Verlaine baptized Rimbaud: "The man with the wind at his heels," or literally, "the man with soles of wind."—Translator's note.
Charleville," one sees Rimbaud, face and chest tattooed, wearing a sort of loin-cloth and a hat pierced by an arrow, brandishing an enormous bottle of "fire water" and equipped with a "Hottentot dictionary" attached to his belt by a strap, busy training a ring of boisterous savages, the men stark naked and the women bare-chested. In the background some palm trees and a cactus seem to confirm that Rimbaud is now in some distant and exotic elsewhere. In the second drawing [penciled on the back of the first], Rimbaud Among the Kafirs, wearing a cowboy hat, a bracelet on each wrist, his nose pierced by an arrow, and with a tie floating on his bare chest, tattooed with a glass and a bottle (one of his arms is also tattooed with two crossed pipes), the poet exclaims to a native: "These Kafirs, wonderful hips!" Lastly, in a third drawing, still from 1876, Rimbaud King of the Savages, the poet, complete with pipe and crown and protected by two body guards, is curled up absurdly on the seat of his royal throne while two imploring subjects, respectfully prostrate at his feet, await his sovereign decisions.

Still in 1876, Germain Nouveau, in a letter sent to Verlaine on 4 August, drew a young man running after his top hat which has blown off. When we recall that this letter contains a poem entitled "Negro Landscape," it is not impossible to imagine that this drawing (there is no need for supplementary evidence given the very high degree of complicity between the two poets), refers to Rimbaud, off on his African adventures. All these images prefigure the "Rimbaud, Now King of a Tribe of Savages," of which Maxime Gaucher would later speak, very pejoratively, in his Causeries littéraires, 1872–1888, a work published in 1890, in which he criticizes the "decadents," without, of course, understanding that this African destiny is already inscribed in the work of the poet who "aboutit au nègre comme figure privilégiée de l’altérité voulue, ou même la seule altérité possible mais en même temps interdite" [ends up as Negro—the privileged figure of willed alterity, or even, the only alterity possible, but at the same time, forbidden];9 "Je suis une bête, un nègre" [I am a beast, a Negro] exclaims the poet in Une Saison en Enfer.10 In a contradictory double movement, Verlaine and Delahayes' drawings accord Rimbaud (even before he settled in Africa) the alterity of negritude which he had been claiming

since *Mauvais Sang*, while in large measure annulling it, since the figuration confers a unique and determinate—and thus reassuring—identity on him who would always escape both others and himself. By depicting Rimbaud as a Negro, Verlaine and Delahaye fail to capture him, especially given that, once firmly established in Harar, Rimbaud, relentlessly working to amass a small capital and secure a life-income for an improbable old-age, was retransformed into a White, faithful to the commercial and capitalist values of the West. It is not inconceivable that in Harar, Rimbaud expended a considerable part of his energy in eluding all identification *in act*, as he had formerly done *in poetry*: Life “elsewhere” as the passage to action of the poetic.

In short, the function (if not the only, then at least one of the principal functions) of this epistolary triangle, constituted at the time by Paul Verlaine, Ernest Delahaye, and Germain Nouveau seems to be the figuration of Rimbaud, whose wanderings never ceased to remove him from their sight. The three correspondents send a network of intersecting illustrated letters to compensate for Rimbaud’s absence. They play at “cross-drawings” so that they may hold on to the illusion of knowing who their former friend was. When Ernest Delahaye writes (28 January 1877) that “la débauche illustratoire . . . vaut mieux que tout commentaire” [of illustrations debauchery . . . is worth more than any commentary] (*O.C.*, 302), he means first and foremost that it alone harbors any hope of catching up with Rimbaud, of recapturing and sabotaging him, in other words, of unmasking him and determining his identity. On 1 May 1875, Verlaine, who in the first part of his letter to Delahaye, has just affirmed (by denial, of course) his superb indifference towards Rimbaud, nevertheless concludes with this symptomatic *post-scriptum*: “Ne tarde pas trop à m’accabler de paragraphes et de dessins et de nouvelles. Nouveau y compris, puisque Nouveau il y a.” [Do not hesitate to bombard me with paragraphs and drawings and news. Nouveau (the new) included because *Nouveau* (new) there is.] In the same vein, in a letter dated 3 September of the same year, he addresses this pressing advice to him: “Renseigne, can-canne, dessine” [ibid., 109] [Inform, gossip, draw.] Even though Ernest Delahaye was the author of many drawings, it was Verlaine who acted as foreman, requesting, inciting, and activating their production. For, far more implicated and compromised by his past than either Delahaye

or Nouveau, he needed to convince himself that the "Oestre" was, up to a certain point, the same.

Still on the part of the author of the *Fêtes Galantes*, there was this same desire to bring Rimbaud back through the art of caricature which, according to Delahaye, he adored: "Il aimait la caricature—pour la gaieté et l'imagination qui en font une sorte de poème—et aussi à cause de son goût pour le grotesque et la contorsion. Gill et Alfred Le Petit étaient ses favoris, . . . . Puis les choses d'Edm. Morin, à cause de leur vie intense et de leur non-prétention "à la ligne" [Delahaye témoign de Rimbaud, 194] [He loved caricature—for the gaiety and imagination which make of it a kind of poem—and also because of his taste for the grotesque and for contorsion. Gill and Alfred Le Petit were his favorites. . . . He also liked Edm. Morin's things for their intense life and their lack of pretension "to the line"]. In drawing, Rimbaud appreciated "l'attitude, le geste curieux, ou bien l'interprétation amusante, forcée, perverse, des traits et des mouvements: régé pour le poète des Assis" [ibid., 194] [posture, the curious gesture or the amusing, forced or perverse interpretation of features and movements: majestic for the poet of the Assis]. We still possess a few caricatures in Rimbaud's own hand, notably his Daumieresque short-winded, nervous Bourgeois, one of whom has just received a kick in the behind. Rare drawings, very rare drawings, really no more than a few drawings in letters to Ernest Delahaye and in the *Album zutique*, as though Rimbaud himself, for whom creation was first and foremost a matter of oral imagination, had wished to leave as few properly figurative traces as possible.

Of course, the drawings of Verlaine and his friends are derisory mockeries, that one should not be too quick to inflate with an overly weighty metaphysical significance. In this sense, it is not entirely wrong to consider them the simple caricatures of a few undisciplined schoolboys prolonging beyond adolescence the practices of their schooldays: little sketches in the margins of textbooks or dictionaries or on the back of the plates in a Geography Atlas, marginalia rapidly pencilled alongside the exercises in notebooks; caricatures deeply engraved for future generations in the wood of classroom tables, or circulated on little pieces of paper under the master's nose; sketches made in real life situations, on the corner of a café table, by Verlaine, who always liked to draw in pencil rapidly, nervously the faces and postures of his friends. But this is precisely the point. . . . This was a practice that was careless and clandestine, swift and humorous. These drawings do not, strictly speaking, constitute a work, they are not in any
sense monumentalized, like those of a Victor Hugo, for example. Moreover, a good many of them belonged to a correspondence. Fragile and threatened, precisely because of their aleatory postal destiny, which could ensure only a precarious survival (and there is no doubt that many of them have been lost), capricious and epidermic because they repercute the daily moods of the correspondents, they are all the more symptomatic because they do not constitute a work.

It is apparent by now that the goal of my analysis is not to compare the graphic practice of a writer with his literary work, in an attempt to determine the modes of articulation, aesthetic, phantasmal, or other, of writing and drawing. My concern is rather to measure how the graphic interventions of his friends literally symptomatized reaction to the Rimbalidian posture, with all that was inconceivable and even unbearable for those who had by no means decided to go to such extremes or to take such risks. I also want to examine how these interventions, even if they were burlesque in tone, attempted to normalize his situation by integrating the ex-poet within a relatively coded destiny which, if not completely banal and predictable, at least conformed to certain existential schemas with which others had already experimented. Thus, when around 1876, Verlaine drew a Rimbaud in suit and top-hat, arriving at the station and shouting “M... à la Daromphe! J’foul’camp à “Wien!“” [Sh—to Daromphe! I’m off to “Wien], he reduces the escape to the kind of passing crisis which all adolescents experience at some time or other, by entitling his sketch “Les voyages forment l:jânesse” [Travel broadens the mind of the young]. So this is just a case of momentary rebellion against the mother. . . . One reassures oneself as best one can!

“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’d have such a lost look and such a dead countenance that those whom I encountered possibly did not see me], writes Rimbaud in Une Saison en Enfer (O.C., 97; SH, 53). If Rimbaud takes pains to underscore these few words, it is because he is referring to Saint Matthew’s Gospel [XIII, 13]: “because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”12 Rimbaud would remain invisible to those who encountered, without really seeing him. Already absent, in other

words, impossible to delimit and to identify, even when he was still physically present . . .

This being the case, one can better understand why, in the only sketch which represents the three comrades, Delahaye, Verlaine, and Nouveau together, the artist represents himself with a telescope which he needs to see the poet. This drawing, Rimbaud "vers des horizons inconnus," is by far the most complex of the series undertaken by Delahaye. Lazily sprawled on a mountain slope, with his back turned to the scene, Germain Nouveau puffs at his cigar: "Nouveau qui s'en fiche" ['Nouveau, not caring less'], specifies Delahaye. Under the sea, just beneath the surface, floats Rimbaud's face. "La lune qui rigole" "sert de chapeau à Rimbe" ['The laughing moon' 'is a hat for Rimbe']. A modern version of Aeolus, the ancient god of the winds, Verlaine blows into his pipe the lid of which is actually a "marvellous" steamer, carrying the poet off "vers les horizons inconnus," as, from the boat's chimney, there rises a vast plume of smoke. In other words, this subaquatic Rimbaud, as he heads for the farthest destinations, is no longer visible to his friends: Nouveau has completely given up trying to see him; Delahaye persists with the aid of a telescope. As for Verlaine, far from trying for the umpteenth time to meet with, to catch up with his friend, he now blows to hasten his flight. And if the solid steamer which bears Rimbaud away is nothing like a drunken ship [bateau ivre] it will carry the poet off all the more surely on his definitive exile.

He has gone. . . . But then who saw the poet before his departure? And indeed, was he really seen? Yes, he was in fact seen, as Félix Fénéon finds it necessary to emphasize, remarking, in a fine article published in The Symbolist in October 1886 that, "tandis que l'œuvre, enfin publiée, enthousiasme plusieurs personnes et en effare quelques autres, l'homme devient indistinct. Déjà son existence se conteste, et Rimbaud flotte en ombre mythique sur les symbolistes. Pourtant des gens l'ont vu, vers 1870. Des portraits le perpétuent" [while the work, which has at last been published, fills some with enthusiasm and others with trepidation, the man is becoming indistinct. His existence is already being contested, and Rimbaud floats like a mythic shadow over the symbolists. However, people did see him in around 1870. Portraits recall him].

necessary to give proof of his existence, to compensate for his disappearance.

The sun, shining with all its rays wore a broad smile that day, the better to show how generously it warms the Earth. In a field, a thin, bearded peasant wearing a tall, pointed hat with a bird perched atop, rests for a few minutes, leaning on his spade. Along a path, another peasant comes towards him, he too is wearing clogs and a tall, pointed hat. The first peasant, noticing the arrival of this acquaintance whom he had doubtless not expected to see exclaims: "Well, well!" while the other immediately replies: "Oh, sh—!" Needless to say, the former is none other than Verlaine, at the time when he was doing his best to take care of his rural affairs in Juinville, to the south of Rethel, and the latter Rimbaud who, scarcely thirty kilometers away, was working for his mother at the Roche farm, prior to his imminent departure for Cyprus. This drawing by Delahaye, "Rencontre imaginaire de Rimbaud et de Verlaine," which was executed some six years after those analyzed above, is like a full stop, bringing to a close the attempt at a graphic resurrection of Rimbe. It's over! The poet of The Illuminations has finally torn himself away, and even the sketches of earlier days will no longer serve any purpose.

Is it pure chance that the victim of one of the most memorable disputes between Arthur Rimbaud and one of his contemporaries, was the photographer Étienne Carjat, who produced portraits, notably of Rimbaud himself? It was in 1872, at the time when Verlaine and his friends held their assises* "on the first floor of a wine merchant occupying the corner of the rue Bonaparte and Place Saint-Sulpice, opposite a second-hand bookstore." (Preface, O.C., 963). One February or March evening at the Vilains Bonshommes [a literary dinner], Rimbaud, excited from too much alcohol, apparently punctuated with a resounding "shit" an abusive recital of an unending stream of poems. "Sur quoi, M. Étienne Carjat, le photographe-poète de qui le récitateur était l'ami littéraire et artistique, s'interposa trop vite et trop vivement . . . , traitant l'interrupteur de gamin. . . . Rimbaud, qui se trouvait gris, prit mal la chose, se saisit d'une canne-épée à moi . . . , et par dessus la table large de près de deux mètres, dirigea vers M. Carjat . . . la lame dégainée” [Upon which, M. Étienne Carjat, the photographer-poet of whom the reciter

*A rough equivalent would be “held court in. . . .” —Translator's note.
was a literary and artistic friend, intervened too hastily and with too much force . . ., calling the offending speaker a brat . . . Rimbaud, who was drunk, took it badly, seized a sword-stick of mine, and across the table, which was almost two meters wide, aimed the unsheathed blade at M. Carjat. . . .”) Reportedly, M. Carjat, horrified by this attack, even if he had suffered only a very minor graze to his hand, destroyed, with the exception of the two which still survive, all the other photographic plates of Rimbaud which he kept in his studio in rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Even if this is mere legend, it is appealing and satisfying because it already inscribes an initial effacement of Rimbaud’s face. And how can one not relate the destruction of these negatives to the disappearance of the four self-caricatures of Rimbaud, which Verlaine was so fond of and which he had left with his wife in the rue Nicolet? When these disappearances (accidental or not, this is no longer at issue), begin to form a series, they also shape a destiny.

A further consequence of this scandalous outburst against Carjat was that some of the artists originally approached by Fantin-Latour to figure in his Coin de Table did not wish to be present in the canvas beside the couple formed by Verlaine and Rimbaud. It was thus that the poet Albert Mérat refused, and that Fantin-Latour compensated for his own defection with a huge vase of flowers. The presence of Rimbaud was thus sufficient to create an absence, to erase a face . . .

Rimbaud, he is impossible to figure out and impossible to figure? But had not his sister Isabelle succeeded in representing him in a drawing which she had given to the editor Léon Vanier, A Rimbaud in oriental costume, playing the Abyssinian harp? One might in truth wonder how such a graphic exploit had proved possible, given that Isabelle had never been to Abyssinia! In reality, Isabelle Rimbaud (as Steve Murphy has demonstrated) had merely traced a drawing by a certain E. Ronjat, based on a photograph taken by Messieurs Chefneux and Audon to illustrate an article by Audon, published in the Tour du Monde in 1889 and entitled “Voyage au Choa.” Though it is true that Audon (one of the creditors of his associate Labatut) suffered the same misfortunes as Rimbaud, since, following a gangrenous infection he had to have his right foot amputated and return to France, there is absolutely no reason to think that his harpist was in fact Rimbaud. And in any event, this harpist was actually a Negro whom Isabelle whitened: her sketch “garde fidèlement la position que le dessin du Tour du Monde donnait à la tête, se contentant quant à elle de la rendre plus émaciée, de la doter
d'une moustache plus européenne qui cache le haut des lèvres et de réduire l'apparence crépue des cheveux” [faithfully retains the position of the head in the drawing which appeared in Round the World, merely rendering it more emaciated, endowing it with a more European moustache which conceals the upper lip, and reducing the kinky appearance of the hair]. But the most astonishing thing is that, having seen this sketch at Vanier’s, Verlaine was so convinced by it that he wrote a poem “Des clients perdus se tanneront. A. Rimbaud: La Saison en enfer” [Lost clients will get tanned. A. Rimbaud: The Season in Hell], dedicated “à Arthur Rimbaud, d'après un dessin de sa soeur” [to Arthur Rimbaud, after a drawing by his sister]:

Toi mort, mort! mort! Mais mort du moins tel que tu veux,
En nègre blanc, en sauvage splendidement
Civilisé, civilisant négligemment...

You dead, dead! dead! But at least dead as you wish,
As a white Negro, as a savage splendidly
Civilized, civilizing negligently. . . .

There can be no doubt that Verlaine wanted nothing more than to be convinced. What a pleasure for him to see his Rimbaud reincarnated in a lyrical image, even if deep down he suspected that this naive image was a mere counterfeit! Too bad! What counted was that he manifest himself, that he appear to his worshippers.

This initial sketch by Rimbaud’s sister was to generate a whole line of faux-Rimbauts, since Paterne Berrichon’s Rimbaud vers trente ans was inspired by it, and Isabelle herself returned to this first matrix in later sketches. Thus, for example, the drawings of Rimbaud shortly before his death, which she claimed to have done from memory in 1896, are in fact nothing but clumsy variations on this initial tracing. Her Arthur Rimbaud mourant conserves the inclination of the head and a trace of the hair from the drawing which appeared in the Tour du Monde. As for her Rimbaud à Roche of 1891, which strangely resembles a colonial soldier, one of Pierre Loti’s Spahis surprisingly lost in the Ardennes wilderness, it once again has recourse to the same physiognomy.

And as if this were not enough, Isabelle would feel herself obliged to

14. Steve Murphy, “‘J'ai tous les talents’: Rimbaud harpiste et dessinateur,’ 34.
produce drawings—purported to be in Rimbaud’s own hand!—of the distant countries in which he had sojourned, and this by the same method—tracing. In fact, as Steve Murphy has shown, these drawings (“Environ de Farré. Abyssinie”, “La maison de Soleillet,” “Ankober”), which have sometimes been attributed to Rimbaud were in fact traced by Isabelle from illustrations which appeared in the *Tour du Monde* which she had bought to inform herself about this mysterious region of Choa where her brother was trafficking.

In short, it was once again, as always, a question of compensating for a lack, a haunting absence. For it does not suffice to say that Isabelle sought to consolidate and turn to profit her brother’s growing fame by churning out faux-Rimbauds. In a more profound sense, she too symptommatized the unbearable impossibility of having a picture of her brother on hand. “La vie étrange et légendaire de Rimbaud, son destin haché et les mystères qu’il exhale constituent une véritable provocation aux identifications” [The strange and legendary life of Rimbaud, his fragmented destiny and the mystery which emanates from it constitute a veritable incitement to identification],16 and Isabelle would respond to this incitement by engendering, with the self-serving assistance of her husband, a whole, reassuring line of Rimbauds, which has comfortably survived to the present day, a reflection of our incapacity to figure the “true” Rimbaud. When Yves Bonnefoy insists that it is “indécent que l’on s’acharne à suivre les traces de qui a fait retour à l’existence anonyme” [it is indecent to pursue the traces of someone who has returned to an anonymous existence,]17 he is incontestably right, except that in this case—and this changes almost everything—the anonymity, far from being the simple result of circumstances and distance, is also a Rimbaudian gesture, a creation. In his case the effacement is concerted.

Indeed, all this trumped-up and inflationary iconography produced by the family would ultimately meet its match in the most derisory self-portrait imaginable: purely abstract, as we now say of a certain kind of painting. But before reaching this extreme, Rimbaud had first tried to short-circuit his legend through his photographic self-portraits. The

move from drawings to photographs is in itself already significant: a 
move from the old techniques of representation to the industrial age of 
technical reproducibility. It is obviously always possible to overinvest, 
affectively and aesthetically, in the three negatives which we possess 
of Arthur Rimbaud, to overemphasize their dramatic sobriety. It nev-
ernetheless remains true that they represent a degré zéro of exoticism 
when compared to the flashiness and picturesqueness of Orientalist 
iconography, mass-produced in France in the wake of the famous plates 
which Maxime du Camp brought back from his journey to Egypt in the 
company of Gustave Flaubert. Nothing could be starker than Rim-
baud’s self-portraits: if one of them represents him “les bras croisés, 
dans un jardin de bananes” [arms folded, in a garden of banana-trees] 
whose [very relative] luxuriance could, up to a certain point, evoke the 
fertility of an oasis, the two others, on the other hand, select ascetic 
decors: in the first, he is half-way up a stony hillock covered with 
scrawny scrubs, in the second he is on a terrace, one hand on the 
railing, the other pressed to the collar of his jacket. In neither is there 
anything which might cause his family to fantasize about the fabulous 
dimension of his exotic odyssey. And this complete absence of pictur-
esque appears even more pronounced when these self-portraits are 
compared with any of Rimbaud’s other negatives—those which were 
meant to be sold, commercialized—his douboulas-maker photo-
graphed in Harar in 1883, sitting next to two large columns, makes a 
good pseudoethnographic post-card, of the kind favored by the innum-
erable photographers who held sway in the French colonies at the 
beginning of the twentieth century. In the same way, when Sottiro is 
also photographed next to some banana trees [though this time they 
were in the foreground, so that their indented foliage would give the 
effect of an oasis], he takes on an appearance which is both picturesque 
and martial, very Tartarin de Tarascon, complete with hat and his gun. 
To all appearances, Rimbaud scrupulously reserves for others anything 
which creates a spectacle. As for himself, he recoils from it . . . 
“Ceci est simplement pour rappeler ma figure, et vous donner une 
idée des paysages d’ici” [This is only to recall my face and to give you an 
idea of the countryside hereabouts], 18 Rimbaud warns in a letter to his 
family on 6 May 1883, to which he adjoins two of his self-portraits. In 

other words, from his point of view, such portraits contain nothing of the aura that was beginning to surround him in France. Their only value was that of a “degré zéro” of figuration and of the face. A mimetic objectification of the current state of his person, purely mechanical, which corresponds to his new dreams of engineering. He also remarks that “touT cela est devenu blanc à cause des mauvaises eaux qui me servent à laver” [It has all become pale because of the bad water I have to use for rinsing them] [Rimbaud, O.C., 396; Schmidt, 259], as though the threat of effacement must inevitably overtake any portrait of Arthur Rimbaud.” . . . Il me blanchit un cheveu par minute. Depuis le temps que ça dure, je crains d’avoir bientôt une tête comme une houpppe poudrée” [. . . it is turning me white at the rate of one hair a minute. With the time that it takes, I fear that my head will soon be like a powder-puff], [ibid., 382], Rimbaud would write to his mother in 1890. The blanching of negatives and hair. As though all things were indeed in league to prevent the image of Arthur from ever crystallizing.

Less than two years later, in the letter to his family dated 15 January 1885, Rimbaud abandons even this simple mimetic reminder of his person “Je ne vous envoie pas ma photographie, j’évite les frais inutiles. Je suis d’ailleurs toujours mal habillé; on ne peut se vêtir ici que de cotonnades très légères” [I am not sending you my photograph; I carefully avoid all useless expenses. Moreover, I’m always badly dressed; all one can wear here is very light cotton].

But do the cost of the views and the relative, very relative eccentricity of his clothing really serve to justify the abandonment of these photographic dispatches? In this case, the expense is doubtless a mere pretext, justifying the way in which he himself contrived his own effacement by refusing to transmit his image. His refusal of all vestmentary baroque is in keeping with this concerted strategy, for it signifies Rimbaud’s refusal of all visible signs which might bring him to another’s attention. The result: a virtually anonymous Rimbaud, except to the members of his family, who knew him before and could recognize him in spite of his changes. As early as 1883, when the Secretary General of the Geographical Society of Paris, which at the time wished to “collect in its Albums the portraits of those people who had made a name for themselves in the geographical sciences and in travel [Schmidt, 382], asked

him to send his photograph, Rimbaud did not respond to the request. And even if he confided to his family his fear of disappearing “au milieu de ces peuplades du Harar, sans que la nouvelle en ressorte jamais” [in the midst of these tribes, without news of me ever getting out] (Schmidt, 365, Fowlie, 343), he actually seemed to do everything in his power to program this forgetting.

Rimbaud’s last drawing would radicalize this occultation of his body. Since the beginning of the year 1891, his knee had been swelling continuously, and was increasingly causing him atrocious pain. It was absolutely essential that he return to France to be treated, but the pain was by then so intense, the ankylosis so debilitative, that he could no longer either walk or ride. He therefore decided to have himself transported on a stretcher, and at the beginning of April he himself drew up a plan for its construction. This litter strangely resembles a coffin awaiting its corpse. It was actually a sort of long crate with two shafts for the bearers, simply surmounted at either end by stems woven into an upside-down V, bound together by another bar, doubtless supposed to support a cloth which would protect the invalid from the oppressive ardor of the sun. An almost abstract geometry of design, an engineer’s working drawing, bare and arid like the travel journal which he would keep during his evacuation. L’Itinéraire de Harar à Warambot is indeed nothing more than a minimalist listing of time-tables, departures, arrivals and names of places traversed, of a terrible stenographic dryness, in the same way that the stretcher is itself reduced to the bare minimum.

Self-portrait of the poet in the form of an empty stretcher—it was all as though Rimbaud retained only the empty frame: frame of the litter and frame of the painting. The body had disappeared. In other words, the Rimbaldisian silence, which has provoked so much discourse, is complemented, reduplicated by his visual effacement. Rimbaud was so forcefully propelled into all his undertakings, even his catastrophic return to Europe, that he left nothing tangible or visible behind him: “l’existence de Rimbaud paraît comme n’ayant pas de chemin de retour, comme n’étant pas une construction. Elle ne peut se stabiliser, ne peut prolonger le présent, présent qui n’existe même pas parce qu’il se consume avant même de s’installer, comme une trace qui s’efface au moment même où elle se marque” [Rimbaud’s existence appears to have no return road, not to be a construction. It cannot be stabilized, it cannot prolong the present, a present which doesn’t even
exist, for it is consumed before it can even take hold, like a trace erased in the very moment that it is made].

"Tout écrivain laisse après lui, aux yeux de son lecteur, une sorte de spectre. Mais s'il est tellement difficile de se représenter Rimbaud [et d'abord physiquement], n'est-ce pas parce que nous éprouvons à le lire la vaine obsession qui fut la sienne: voler un jour, en même temps que le feu, sa propre image?" [In the eyes of their readers, all writers leave behind them a kind of ghost. But if it is so very difficult to represent Rimbaud (to begin with, physically), is it not because in reading him, we feel his own vain obsession of one day stealing, along with fire, his own image?]

But steal it from whom? From himself, in order to avoid seeing himself rapidly ageing in his absurd commercial evolution into a shopkeeper? Or from others, to prevent them from contemplating his portrait because, no longer a poet, he is no one? In fact, it is really a matter of stealing it simultaneously from others and from himself. Of fleeing from any recognizable image which would involve a congelation, a fixture of identity.

Is there any need to emphasize that Rimbaud produced the most abstract image of himself at a time when his body was making its horrible return in the most caricatural manner possible? He became his very own caricature—Arthur Rimbaud as a pumpkin:

... je suis réduit à l'état de squelette par cette maladie de ma jambe gauche qui est devenue à présent énorme et ressemble à une énorme citrouille.

... I have shrunk to the state of a skeleton through this sickness in my left leg which has now become huge and looks like a huge pumpkin.

["Letter to his mother and sister," O.C., 665; Fowlie, 361.]

Arthur Rimbaud as hunchback, as a hopping marionnette:

... De temps en temps, je me lève et sautille une centaine de pas sur mes béquilles, et je me rassois. Mes mains ne peuvent rien tenir. Je ne puis, en marchant, détourner la tête de mon seul pied et du

bout des béquilles, la tête et les épaules s’inclinent en avant, et vous bombez comme un bossu. Vous tremblez de voir les objets et les gens se mouvoir autour de vous, crainte qu’on ne vous renverse pour vous casser la seconde patte. On ricane à vous voir sautiller. Rassias, vous avez les mains énervées et l’aisselle sciée, et la figure d’un idiot.

... Every once in a while I get up and hop a few steps on my crutches then I sit down again. I can’t hold anything in my hands. When I walk, I can’t turn my face from my single foot and the ends of my crutches. My head and shoulders sink, I look like a hunchback. You tremble when you see things and people moving all around you, for fear they’ll knock you over and break the leg you have left. People laugh to see you hopping around. You sit back down, your hands are worn out, your shoulder is sawed through, you look like a lunatic. [“Letter to his sister Isabelle,” 15 July 1891, O.C., 690; Schmidt, 293]

Even in their most malicious sketches, for example, when they imagine Rimbaud in a cellar, lying dead drunk in front of two barrels, Delahaye and Verlaine had not dared to go so far. Once again, Rimbaud had roundly defeated them. He himself became the grotesque puppet, the living caricature, even more lopsided than the “doddering old fools” (“gâteux”) whom he had mercilessly sketched as a child. Already, with his stay in Harar drawing to a close, he felt himself becoming an object of curiosity:

Je regrette de ne pouvoir faire un tour à l’Exposition cette année. ... Ce sera donc pour la prochaine; et à la prochaine je pourrai exposer peut-être les produits de ce pays, et, peut-être, m’exposer moi-même, car je crois qu’on doit avoir l’air excessivement baroque après un long séjour dans les pays comme ceux-ci.

I’m sorry I can’t come to visit the Exposition this year. ... I’ll save it for the next one; and at the next one maybe I can exhibit the products of this country, and maybe exhibit myself; I think you must get to look exceedingly baroque after a long stay in a place like this.

[“Letter to his mother and sister,” 18 May 1889, O.C., 543; Schmidt, 274.]

In other words, first a little in Harar, and then very brutally when his leg swelled monstrously before it had to be amputated in Marseille, Rimbaud took on the appearance of the caricatures which had delighted his friends, but at an inopportune moment, ten years later. Now
that his works were more and more widely circulated, and his fame as a poet was being established, he became the grotesque by which he had once been portrayed. Yet again, he escaped the image which might be held of him.

By way of an apologia to these few annotated vignettes whose sole purpose is to mark the effects of impossible identificatory assignation always produced by the false presence of the poet, I offer this last return of Arthur Rimbaud, in the sacred form of an icon. It was on 8 June 1899 when, in a church, the mother saw, once again, in a kind of hallucination, her Arthur who had been dead for seven long years:

Hier donc, je venais d’arriver à la messe, j’étais encore à genoux faisant ma prière, lorsque arrive près de moi quelqu’un, à qui je ne faisais pas attention; et je vois poser sous mes yeux contre le pilier une béquille, comme le pauvre Arthur en avait une. Je tourne ma tête, et je reste anéantie: c’était bien Arthur lui-même: même taille, même âge, même figure, peau blanche grisâtre, point de barbe, mais de petites moustaches; et puis une jambe de moins; et ce garçon me regardait avec une sympathie extraordinaire. Il ne m’a pas été possible, malgré tous mes efforts, de retenir mes larmes, larmes de douleur bien sûr, mais il y avait au fond quelque chose que je ne saurais expliquer. Je croyais bien que c’était mon fils bien-aimé qui était près de moi.

So yesterday, I had just got to Mass, I was still on my knees saying my prayer, when someone came up beside me, I wasn’t paying attention to him; then before my eyes, I saw a crutch like poor Arthur had being layed against the pillar. I turned my head to look, and was completely overcome: it was Arthur himself: same height, same age, same face, his skin a grayish white, no beard, but a little moustache; and then he had one leg missing too; and this boy was looking at me with such extraordinary tenderness. I couldn’t in spite of all my efforts, hold back my tears, tears of pain, of course, but deep down there was something which I can’t explain. I truly believed that it was my beloved son who was by my side.22

Rimbaud, finally resembling himself so that his mother could recognize and bless him. The Assumption of the hallowed son [cf., Gérard Macé, “Rimbaud ‘recently deserted,’” 70–71]. The hallucination thus

22. Letter from Mme Rimbaud to her daughter Isabelle, 9 July 1899, quoted in Madame Rimbaud, essai de biographie suivi de la correspondance de Vitalie Rimbaud-Cuif by Suzanne Briet [Paris: Minard, Lettres modernes, 1968], 108.
had exactly the same function as the earlier sketches by Verlaine and Delahaye: that of giving a face to the one who had always frustrated others' desire to capture him.

In the same guise, when Allen Ginsberg, mythical figure of the Beat generation, told his friends that he clearly saw the ghost of the poet when in 1982 he slept at 5 bis, quai de la Madeleine, where Rimbaud had lived with his mother, what was he saying if not that Rimbaud, now in the heaven of poetry, is a saint, and can appear to the faithful? And indeed it suffices to be a believer, as Verlaine already was. But when one considers the relentlessness with which Rimbaldians track Rimbaud, piously collecting the most minor documents and testimony, to attain a better knowledge of who he was, are they not all, are we not all, believers? For this is doubtless the only way of coming to an acceptable and bearable compromise with the Absolute, which sustains only in its perpetual withdrawal.23

—Translated by Madeleine Dobie

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


23. To reduce the number of notes in this article to a minimum, I am providing here an alphabetically arranged bibliography of the principal books and articles devoted to the drawings of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. See Select Bibliography.