

# **RIMBAUD: (a fragment)**

**Peter Weiss**

*translated by* **Hunter Bolin**

# TRIPWIRE

a journal of poetics

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## Translator's Introduction

With the publication of Joel Scott's masterful translation of the second volume of *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, anglophone readers are in a better position to appreciate Weiss' impact, one of the last great bodies of work to survive the Nazi assault on German culture, which put a definitive end to nearly 200 years of German literary and philosophical renaissance.

Peter Weiss' Rimbaud fragment was penned in 1969, in the aftermath of the upheavals of '68. Written between *Trotsky in Exile* and *Hölderlin*, the skit is one of Weiss' many attempts to engage with the mythology surrounding historical revolutionary figures. The play moves in 3 scenes. The first scene captures an image of Rimbaud's relationship with his mother, who appears as a symbol of the bourgeois work ethic. It is known that Rimbaud's mother put pressure on him from a young age to excel in his studies, and while this may have contributed to his precociousness, it also served as the primary impetus of his disobedience. The second scene gives an account of Rimbaud's relationship with his good friend Delahaye, and the former's hatred of the moronic, provincial town he was born in. In the final scene we see Rimbaud test his poetic formulas with his school teacher Izambard. Izambard makes a case for a work of art contemporaneous with the Enlightenment, invested with reason and capable of performing a moral function that ultimately benefits society at large. This image is a foil for Rimbaud's poetics, which Izambard characterizes as 'stammering' heard 'in insane asylums'.

The Rimbaud legend is one of the most hotly debated in all of modernist literature. The play's opening immediately characterizes the contradictory nature of the Rimbaud Myth, with Rimbaud explaining that his three names (Jean Nicolas Arthur) correspond with three different directions his life took. Indeed, Rimbaud's life is full of inconsistencies and about faces: famous for coining the Situationist catchphrase 'never work', he died from a tumor on his leg caused by overwork on horseback. Having written a book of poems called *Illuminations* describing the dizzying emergence of the modern metropolis, he becomes a geographical surveyor for the French state, drawing up maps of uncharted territory in Eastern Africa. After allegedly fighting for the liberation of the downtrodden in the Paris commune, he gets involved in the slave trade. Having renounced poetry, he gives lectures on the Qur'an in the desert of Abyssinia.

Yet in Weiss' notes for the skit, something interesting is noticeable. Weiss has Rimbaud running guns for Montezuma and other anti-colonial fighters in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). It is well documented that Rimbaud attempted to sell guns to King Menelik II, who would later successfully fight off Mussolini, making Ethiopia the only sub-Saharan African country to never be colonized. But the figure of 'Montezuma' appears as almost a complete mystery. Nowhere in Rimbaud's letters nor in the biographies I have read (which are admittedly limited to those available in English translation) can I find information about this Montezuma figure, nor any confirmation that he was selling guns to people fighting off European colonizers. Did Weiss simply make it up (as with his invented meeting between Hölderlin and Marx in the *Hölderlin* play) to complicate the negative aspects of the Rimbaud Myth and restore Rimbaud's emancipatory image?

Rather than consolidate an official version of the Rimbaud mythology, Weiss stacks the contradictions of Rimbaud's life, allowing for several versions of his life to play out without limiting them to one official version. Myth is treated here not as a foundational origin to which we might seek return, nor a stable fact to be instrumentalized in the service of this or that political end, but as a rupture in historical knowledge, the sort of knowledge that can always be contested or even looted from those who would seek to consolidate power in their own hands. What makes Weiss' work so unlike any other I've encountered is his passion for plundering classical and bourgeois mythology and reappropriating it for the oppressed. Thus, in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, the figure of Heracles, often a symbol of kings and rulers, becomes (in his absence from the Pergamon Altar) an allegorical figure for the absent leadership of the proletarian revolution. In another series of plays, the landscape of Dante's inferno is secularized and used to illustrate Nazi Germany.

According to a canonical Western dispensation, Myth and history stand in reciprocal exteriority: whereas history is represented as a series of established facts situated in linear and progressive time, the circular time of Myth hearkens back to an eternal present associated with the irrationality of primordial beginnings. Weiss' writing straddles both of these categories, deactivating the Modernist apparatus that rends and conjoins the two in their separation. In these works, Myth regains that magical symbolism so often (and in my opinion mistakenly) accused of obfuscating the kinds of knowledge we've inherited from the Enlightenment; at the same time, Weiss debunks the historical interpretations that keep those Myths captive in established literary canons, frozen in the past and fixed in museums. Thus Myth becomes a transcendental realm of perception, feeling, and thought that the imagination can grasp to escape the suffocating immanence of

nature and history, which too often circumscribe the limits of what is possible or conceivable. At the same time, works like *The Aesthetics of Resistance* illuminate and resituate forgotten figures in the history of revolution and resistance, as well as in the history of radical literature, reopening these histories to new partisan uses. The work of Peter Weiss allows us to indulge in Myth without falling prey to its stupefying or ‘irrational’ effects, while also reminding historians that what is possible is not reducible to what can be grasped by knowledge alone.

The translation is dedicated to the loving memory of Sean Bonney, who, in an email just weeks before his passing told me that he had finished an introduction for this translation, which alas remains irretrievable.

—*Hunter Bolin, 2020*



## I. PROLOGUE

*Rimbaud, on a stool, barefoot, in pants that are too short for him. A wrinkled blouse, unbuttoned. Bristly, unkempt hair. A pair of laced boots and other items of clothing on the floor. Off to one side, sitting huddled up, a girl in a long white night-shirt.*

RIMBAUD:

The curtain is being raised on a singular, an utterly incomparable life. The only thing that remains to be settled is who the main character really is. Jean Nicolas Arthur. They gave me three names. Three possibilities. They can't decide which of the three they want to have. They're already streaming off in three different directions. The first traverses remote stretches of the earth. He vanishes into the desert. He hurls himself into the ocean. The other is just now breaking out of jail, fleeing to the next jail, to the next court with a horde of police, notaries and racketeers on his tail. The third, what's with him, ah yes, there he is, rising up like a statue of himself, in gold, decked with laurels, people make pilgrimages to see him, they praise him, ah what fame, children gaze up at him in awe, scribes interpret every word he left us. Which of the three should I chase after? In whose name shall I capture this monstrous life? Hortense, Hortense, do you hear me?

*The girl raises her head, looks at him, remains motionless.*

RIMBAUD

In whom do you originate? Who conceives you? Hortense, my bride. Who, of all the different possibilities, is standing here before you? One name must be enough to suit me. Heartless. Heartless Rimbaud. Put in this position. Placed here on this stool. Suddenly present here. What a mad idea. And all that I say and do now: unique, irrevocable. Scrap everything always, down to the last possibility. Without being able to compare. Without discerning the purpose. This candor. This colossal candor.

*The mother appears in a black, high-necked dress. The girl folds back into herself. The mother steps up to Rimbaud. Buttons up his blouse. Spits on her hand, moistens his*

*hair, combs it, puts his jacket on for him and finally his boots. All the while speaking monotonously.*

MOTHER:

The fact that I have to dress you, button up your shirt, that I have to put your jacket on you, that I have to comb your hair, take you to school every day, because otherwise you would not budge, you wouldn't even get up, you'd stay in bed and do nothing at all, only sleep, while we slave away in the field and haul the baskets to the market, where do you think the food you devour comes from, someone has to harvest it, and cook it, and put it on the table, someone has to sew your clothes, someone has to run to the store and carry the expensive linen home, you can't even get up on your own while I've been on my feet since the crack of dawn, I have to button your coat, and stick the bread in your bag, and who baked the bread, I baked it, and the sausage, I slaughtered the pig and gutted it, I salted the ham and hung it, I have to pick you up from the school gate because you wouldn't find your way home, robbers would take you with them into the Ardennes, and you'd go feral in the undergrowth, even though your teacher said something good could come of you, all the vocabulary and numbers you keep in that brain of yours, you could work for the post, the municipal office, the tax office, you could become a lawyer, you'd make a good salesman, or even become mayor, if you weren't so lackadaisical, so lazy, you need to study, study, work, work, set a goal for yourself, and pray, seek help and solace in prayer, I'm telling you, you'll get the living daylight's beaten out of you, you'll fare terribly, if you think things will just fall into your lap, if you believe you don't have to be thankful for what others do for you, I have to kneel down, I have to kneel down and put your shoes on for you, and lace up your boots, I want to make a decent man of you, you'd go barefoot, a disgrace to me, and you haven't cleaned your nails, and you've got a stain on your pants again, and what is that grin on your face, what've you got to smirk at when I speak to you, you have to show me respect, and respect is what I'll teach you, with a rod I'll teach you respect, like that, and that, and that—

*She hits him with the rod. Rimbaud stands bent over, grinning. The girl begins to whimper, then screams louder and louder.*

*Darkness.*

## II. THE SCHOOL FRIENDS

*Rimbaud and Ernest Delahaye*

RIMBAUD

Why are you moping around in the shadows, Ernest? Are you afraid of that gaseous mass up there? That thunderous, flagrant heavenly body?

DELAHAYE

Why should I let myself fry when I prefer the cold?

RIMBAUD

The rays can parch me, turn me to coal for all I care. Let them stab into this terrible skull with its terrible thoughts.

DELAHAYE

What kind of thoughts have you got that you need to obliterate them?

RIMBAUD

That box there, that cage, that mausoleum, you lot call it school, you go there as if it were the most natural thing in the world. You strap yourselves to these torture racks as if there were no alternative. How can you do this, Ernest, how can you just lie down in the grave between these fossilized snails and pressed flowers, between so many unnecessary slaughters and obsolete grammatical rules? These dust baths, they crush my lungs, they snatch away my breath. Where are we supposed to end up if we begin like this, in these morasses of trash, these heaps of rubble.

DELAHAYE

I don't understand you. We all envy the way you put those Latin hexameters together. Everything is a piece of cake for you, history and geography, your compositions are read aloud in class, and all you do is complain.

RIMBAUD

Because I'm a corpse. Only corpses can absorb what's dead, rammed down their throat by senile mentors. My jaw blathers away about things that would be torture for the living. We're cowering down there like skeletons. We re-chew things that were puked up and petrified long ago. O hell, I'm conditioned. Conditioned to a hollow echo. These words are merely spewing out of me. I, I am not that person extemporizing with gob agape.

DELAHAYE

And it's said you're the best student in this city.

RIMBAUD

City. You call these encrusted streets, these baked-together buildings, these utterly moldy and crumbling arcades, these little towers, you call this a city?

DELAHAYE

But Charleville is your home too.

RIMBAUD

Charleville, which Charles is this rubble named after? Perhaps the mass murderer who expanded the Kingdom of the Franks across Western Europe? We're standing in a field of corpses. Ernest, what's going on here is a disgrace.

DELAHAYE

We already know, Arthur, but soon we'll put all of that behind us. With your accolades you'll go to Paris, the Parnassians will publish your poems, you've already got one foot in the academy.

RIMBAUD

And take my place among those that are not even decrepit old men, but already skeletons.

DELAHAYE

But Gautier, Banville, Hüge, Verlaine. And Izambard is here after all. You've got him to thank for everything. Didn't he give you all the books worth reading? School still irritates you. But you're long since beyond it.

RIMBAUD

I'm not beyond anything at all! I've still got everything before me. I've not yet been born.

DELAHAYE

Nonsense! God you're standing right here.

*He steps forward, gives Rimbaud a shove.*

And your mother is coming any minute to pick you up, so you don't get up to any mischief.

RIMBAUD

That I came out of her stomach, that I fell out of her cunt, suckled her tits, only the most villainous, the sleaziest of traitors could claim that. Just as there was no dick from whence I eddied into the egg, so there is also no world there that would receive someone like me.

DELAHAYE

And just where does this Rimbaud live then, the one I know, who tries so hard to be the best in class, who has such maddening ambition to stack all the laurels atop his head, where do we find him then, where does he live?

RIMBAUD

There, up there in the forests, in a cave, crawling between cracking branches, gathering roots, nuts, living with a doe.

*The mother calls from outside: Arthur! Arthur!*

*Darkness.*

### III. WITH HIS TEACHER IZAMBARD

IZAMBARD

You're 16 years old, still a minor, Rimbaud. The police will pick you up if you run away.

RIMBAUD

How will they ever find me amidst the battles? The Prussians are marching on Paris. I can hide out there.

IZAMBARD

And what are you going to live off?

RIMBAUD

You've explained it to me yourself, Mr. Izambard. The revolution is going to break out. The people will no longer tolerate despotism. I'll be there when their class rule is overthrown. I'll help build barricades. They'll give me a rifle, share bread with me.

IZAMBARD

Be patient, Rimbaud. Another year and you'll be off to university with the highest distinctions.

RIMBAUD

So that I can become just like you? A teacher rotting away amongst idiots in a small town?

IZAMBARD

Don't throw all your opportunities out the window. If you do that you won't be able to pursue your studies, to educate yourself more and fulfill your vocation, your calling.

RIMBAUD

How do you know what my calling is? All that I've written up till now is shit. The same old childish rhymes that generations of asinine poets have regurgitated. I don't yet know what I will eventually write. But not this stuff. Not this gimmickry. What I want, I won't learn here, not in this ancient museum, nor in the rotten Sorbonne.

IZAMBARD

You're so nasty, Rimbaud, so morose. I know, this nest exasperates me from time to time as well. Yet think about how much solace we get from reading the classics: knowing how to appreciate the silence, the solitude. Bide your time. You will mature. You will achieve great things.

RIMBAUD

Wasn't it just yesterday while reading Plato that we came across sentences that set me ablaze? Words that glow inside of me? He said that the great poets don't compose their poems according to the rules of art, they write them because they're possessed. Poets like that are crazed, they're in the clutches of a musical force that pervades them. Those who don't reach that state are powerless, they achieve nothing.

IZAMBARD

That too must be learned.

RIMBAUD

No, never! Whoever wants to learn that will become a scribbler, a butcher. A punctilious clerk, a poet functionary. The age of the seer has been over for 2,000 years. And in its wake: only replicas, thumb-twiddling.

*Izambard shrugs.*

## RIMBAUD

Sure, a few exceptions. Dante, Villon, Rabelais, Voltaire, and the marvelous Baudelaire. But don't most of them usually feel like sinners when they create something? Don't they all want to cling to this place out of fear, they may hollow themselves out and disintegrate? Aren't they trapped in the same dreadful morality that molded them? Sure, they dream of freedom, each in their own way, but they end up neither on the gallows nor in the ditch. They rave, they poison themselves, but they never hazard the last step that would set them apart from everything recognizable, from every existing order.

## IZAMBARD

Because if they did, their art would be done for. What would an art be that we could no longer hear, what would become of an image that wasn't visible? Didn't we learn through endless effort, through utmost concentration, that the work of art is the highest expression of our perceptive faculties? Isn't art the most manifest medium to explain our world, above all, for those of us who would call our age the scientific age? You speak in a fever, Rimbaud, you feel boxed in, bound up, and you think you can find your way out, crawl out of this mess with those poems of yours that express nothing but confusion. Calm yourself. What you're thinking of is the stammering that we hear in insane asylums, it's the pitiful drivel that falls from the mouths of those who can no longer stand this world. Do we not want to heal those people? Do we not seek reason, reason that will finally overcome the pointless grinding down of our energy, the destruction of people?

## *Appendix: from the notebooks*

### **Skits towards a piece on Rimbaud**

E. Delahaye, Rimbaud

R. Isabell, Mon frère

Rimbaud, Letters, Hamburg 1964

Rimbaud, Collected Poems, Munich 1963

Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil, Frankfurt 1966

#### **1. 1870 (19 July)**

The curtains open

Sister Isabelle – Hortense

Izambard introduces him to modern authors and revolutionary thinking

War is declared. Negation of the Kaiserreich

School friend Delahaye

#### **2. 1871 April-December**

Joins the ranks of the Commune's national guard

Poetic manifesto. Negation of society. Missives against churches

He writes 'Mort a Dieu' on the walls.

Flicks lice at priests. Spits on their path

Wants to meet Verlaine

Serious negation of contemporary poets

Meets Verlaine

Meets Germaine Nouveau

In literary cirkels [sic]

Rummaging through trash bins    tattered    full of lice

Employment at a bar    smokes hashish (Musician Cabener)

Recites his poems, attendees are “Shit”    gets into it with literatis

### **3. 1872**

Verlaine fights with his wife

7 July Verlaine abandons wife and child. Takes off to Belgium

September in London. Life of misery.

London – interacts with the communards Vermersch, Regamey and Andrieu

### **4. 1873**

Brussels in July. Fight with Verlaine. Strung out and drunk, Verlaine shoots at him.

Verlaine sentenced to two years in prison

### **5. 1875**

Stuttgart. Private tutor. Verlaine visits him. Fight. Split.

Wanders on foot through Wüttemberg, Switzerland, Italy

Sick in Milan. An Italian woman takes care of him

On his journey towards Brindisi (his goal is the Orient) Sunstroke

### **1876**

Vienna. Robbed. Deported by officials

19 May enlists in the Dutch colonial army

23 July arrival in Batavia. August desertion. Returns to Liverpool on an English ship. From Le Havre to Paris on 9 Dec.

**1877**

Ticket salesman for Loisset's circus  
Denmark and Sweden

Dock worker in Marseilles

Departs for Alexandria

Sick in Citavecchia

**1878**

Wants to go to the Orient

October in the Vosges by foot, through Switzerland, over the Alps to Lugano.  
Train to Genoa. Alexandria by ship. From there to Cyprus. Work as stone quarry  
foreman.

**1879**

Sick. Typhus.  
Delahaye visits him

Are you still interested in literature?  
I don't think about that anymore

**1880**

Egypt.  
Can't bear the climate  
To Aden  
French trading house

**1881**

In Harar

**1883**

His poems are published by Verlaine

**1884**

Lives in Harar in Ethiopia

**1885**

Contract with arms dealer Labatut. Caravan with 2000 rifles to king Menelik of  
Shewa. Arms trade according to interests of French politics. Against the English.

## **6. Till 1890**

Arms trade slave trade (-) Weapons for Montezuma and others fighting against the colonialists.

## **1891**

In Harar

Swelling of right leg.

20 May Marseilles amputation

Paralysis of all limbs    Cancer

10 November death in Marseilles.

1.

He lays over the stool

His mother beats him

Isabelle – Hortense huddled up on the floor

His mother's speech

She adjusts his clothing

Combs his hair with spit

Forces him to his knees

Prays with him

I expect so much of you

4 kids and my husband left us

Description of him

Shadow mouth violet eyes

What are you talking about you're a child you don't have any views of your own

Yes I bow down I am enslaved conquer me

Isabelle screams screams

2.

With Izambard

The curtains open

The classics

Ancient art

The modern poets

Revolutionary thought

The awards he wins in school    Congregations    Laurel branch

The war

A revolution must come to sweep everything away

I want to leave

You are too young you're still a juvenile only 16 years old

I want the art of living

Isabelle (?)

He pulls her towards him

Mother enters

Isabelle screams screams

3.

Paris

Commune

Soldiers

His experience of brutalization

Blanqui

Disappointment

Cynicisms obscenities

The revolutionaries are young

Barricades and robberies looting

Is that the revolution?

This puddle of filthy water this whore's bed

What I want is not from this world

Search for another world

4.

With Charles Bretagne

Poetics Kaballa Occultism Eastern philosophy

His future wife

(Isabelle)

Blasphemies

The preists spitting

Mention of Verlaine

Recommendations to Verlaine

Re-write Dante

the seer

the other world

5.

Arrival to Verlaine

Fight with his wife

**Hunter Bolin** is a writer and translator. Writings and translations, pseudonymous and otherwise, can be found in Tripwire, The New Inquiry, Mask Mag, E-Flux, Ill-Will-Editions, and Spoil.

**Peter Weiss** (1916-1982) was a German author, filmmaker, and painter. He is known for plays like Marat/Sade and The Investigation, and his three-part epic novel Aesthetics of Resistance. Weiss' work is notable for combining autobiography, avant-garde literary traditions and historical research on proletarian movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to several volumes of hitherto untranslated plays, novels and notebooks, Weiss also authored at least two books of essays on various topics.



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