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**Rimbaud's First Blood:**  
***Le lai du lait de Cabaner***

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In this brief exposé, I attempt to right a wrong of recent literary history, demonstrating that a scandalous episode from the youth of the immortal poète maudit Arthur Rimbaud involving a certain glass of milk, a certain bodily fluid, and the bohemian composer Étienne Cabaner, recounted most recently in the authoritative biography by the celebrated Graham Robb, in fact never took place. Rimbaud is a seminal figure, the *beau idéal* for avant-guard artists from Picasso, Breton, and Cocteau to Kerouac, Dylan and Jim Morrison, renowned as much for the extravagance of his life (especially his capacity as a young reprobate to *épater les bourgeois*, not least but not only by seducing the far more senior poet Verlaine away from his wife and family) as for the genius of his poetry. On close reading, Robb's own sources indicate that the episode in question was fabricated by Rimbaud himself, but this self-acknowledged hoax eventually—more than a century after the event in question didn't take place—took in Robb and others. The fact that this premeditated *succès de scandale* has survived for 130 years is an instructive commentary on the nature of iconography.

A holy vagabond, a beautiful reckless genius child for whom art could only proceed from a complete derangement of the senses and who was as much *voyou* as *voyant*,<sup>1</sup> Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)



Sketch by Fantin-Latour, 1872

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<sup>1</sup> We might render Rimbaud's status as *voyant-voyou* as 'seer-scoundrel', but *voyou* is ultimately untranslatable. It embodies qualities ranging from 'naughty' and 'mischievous' (once far more powerful pejoratives than they are today) to 'wicked', but its origin alludes to the child who runs the streets (*les voies*) with no tether or control. The "rogue state" in today's world is "un état voyou." The first great *voyant-voyou* of French letters was the medieval poet, thief, pimp, and murderer François Villon, who disappeared from sight at the age of 32 in 1463 and was never heard from again.

set the bar high for his disciples and votaries, a group that was to encompass the beats and other North American artists on the edge, both writers (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Burroughs) and musicians (Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith), to say nothing of his European apostles.

One habitat of the post-Baudelaire neo-Decadent/proto-Symbolist avant-garde in post-communard Paris was the Cercle des Zutistes, including Verlaine, Rimbaud, and other artists; their barman and co-founder was the composer Ernest Cabaner.

Cabaner by Manet



Famously described by Verlaine as “Jesus Christ after three years of absinthe”, Cabaner was a genial if absent-minded eccentric who lived on rolls and cheese and drank only milk. In his rooms in the Hôtel des Etrangers in the rue Racine, Cabaner hosted the Zutistes’ soirées of reading, drinking, piano-playing, singing, more drinking, and hashish. His “Sonnet des sept nombres” (1871), dedicated to Rimbaud, helped inspired the latter’s celebrated sonnet “Les voyelles” (“A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu...”) (Mararasso & Petitfils 1962: 101, Steinmetz 1991: 219).

So it was that in December 1871 Cabaner was putting the 17-year-old Rimbaud up on his sofa, and his graciousness was regularly returned in the young amoralist’s inimitable fashion. While Cabaner was suffering from pneumonia, Robb relates,

Rimbaud carefully circumcised and removed all his window-panes with a glass-cutter. This is typical of Rimbaud’s precise variations on the clichés of subversion: this was no idle smashing of windows. **On another occasion when Cabaner was out, Rimbaud found his daily glass of milk and neatly ejaculated into it.** The essence of these pranks was to pervert the usual state

of affairs while preserving an appearance of normality: the holes that might for a moment be mistaken for polished panes; a slight coagulation of the milk. The watered-down versions of the latter story completely miss the point by having Rimbaud adulterate the milk with urine.

(Robb 2000: 134, emphasis added)

Well, yes, such versions would indeed miss the point, if Robb is correct about the point, but in fact it is difficult to find any of the sources that promulgate these “watered-down” versions, and Robb does not identify any. In fact, the only source Robb does provide (Note 10, p. 483) for the tale of the glass of milk is the memoir by Rimbaud’s contemporary and friend Delahaye (1974).

But Delahaye’s picture is framed quite differently from Robb’s. He recounts Rimbaud confiding in him in 1872 about a *blague* or hoax he had recently pulled off:

C’est embêtant. J’ai maintenant une sale réputation à Paris. Causes: **les blagues des camarades, et aussi les miennes**, d’ailleurs. Je me suis amusé - c’était bête - à me faire passer pour un ignoble cochon. On m’a pris au mot. Ainsi, je raconte, un jour, que je suis entré dans la chambre de Cabaner absent, que j’ai découvert une tasse de lait apprêtée pour lui, que je me suis branlé dessus, que j’ai éjaculé dedans. **On rigole, et puis on va raconter la chose comme vraie...** [emphasis added]

*It’s tiresome. I now have a filthy reputation in Paris. Reasons: my comrades’ stories, and also my own. I amused myself—it was idiotic—in passing for a vile pig. I was taken at my word. So, I relate one day that I went into Cabaner’s room while he was out, that I noticed a glass of milk poured for him, that I beat off over it, that I ejaculated into it. **Everyone laughs, and afterward they’ll repeat the story as true.***

(Delahaye 1974: 197, translation mine)

While Robb attributes his own very different version of the anecdote to Delahaye, there may be another intermediary. One of Robb’s recent predecessors among the biographers of Rimbaud, cited by Robb once in his preface although not in this connection, is Nicholl (1997). And Nicholl does indeed vouchsafe his own rendering of the tale of Cabaner’s milk:

There is a mass of jest-book stories about Rimbaud’s appalling behaviour in Paris. He calls Banville an ‘old cunt’; he stabs the photographer Carjat with a sword-stick; he repays Cabaner’s hospitality, in an infamous folkloric incident, by masturbating into his cup of milk. The only source for the story is Rimbaud himself, who told Delahaye: ‘I went into Cabaner’s room when he wasn’t there, and I found a cup of milk that had been left for him, and I jerked off over it, and I ejaculated into it.’ ‘*Je me suis branlé dessus*’: the phrase is fairly impolite and quite unequivocal. The peeing version misses the essential reverberation of the anecdote, which is that Cabaner may well have drunk this confection, unaware of its extra ingredient.

(Nicholl 1997: 42)

Nicholl’s translation of Rimbaud’s *blague* is a perfectly accurate rendering of the part he has chosen to excerpt, but in neglecting to reproduce the frame he distorts the picture by

concealing that the whole episode WAS a *blague*, a joke or put-on<sup>2</sup>, while rendering his readers—including, it would appear, Robb<sup>3</sup>—incapable of recognizing it as such. In the end, Nicholl and Robb manage to fulfill Rimbaud’s wry prophecy to the letter: *on va raconter la chose comme vraie*, and so it has been.

Graham Robb is a renowned and laurelled biographer with earlier acclaimed lives of Hugo, Balzac, and Mallarmé to his credit. His biography of Rimbaud was awarded the Enid McLeod Literary Prize and the James Tate Black Memorial Prize for Biography in 2000 and short-listed for the Samuel Johnson prize for non-fiction in the following year. His Rimbaud biography was especially well received; Richard Howard in the *New York Times Book Review* (19 Nov. 2000) lauded it as “superb[...]the single best work to read about this haunting and haunted poet”, while John Simon in the *Washington Post* (26 Nov. 2000) concurred: “Wit, elegance, and thoroughness characterize this book.” Other readers (see Ormsby 2001 and the reviews collected at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) praise Robb for his scholarly, erudite, insightful, and unsentimental portrait of the poet and stress his skill at exploding the myths that have surrounded Rimbaud. But in fact his account of the tale of Cabaner’s milk is as sentimental as it is mythopoeic.<sup>4</sup> But why? What motive could have inspired Robb (and Nicholl) to overlook the last line of Rimbaud’s confession, and thereby to fall victim to the very hoax he explicitly confessed to Delahaye?

Perhaps it was the oldest motive for self-deception of all, that of “literary bias,” as described by Stephen Jay Gould (1991: 251). Human beings are born storytellers, deft spinners of (and rapt audiences for) tales—*blagues*—that impose order on confusion “by constructing narratives that imbue the totality with meaning...Our favored stories unroll along definite and limited pathways (we call them epics, myths, and sagas)” (Gould 1997: 344-45). In science, Gould observes, this tendency may take the form of the “publication bias” toward positive results, skewing the data and magnifying (if not inventing) correlations not substantiated by the actual studies. “I do not speak of fraud...I refer the all too wonderfully human love of a good tale and our simple and utterly reasonable tendency to shun the inconclusive and boring” (Gould 1997: 124).

But this tendency for self-deception also makes us vulnerable to the well-placed hoax. The classic hoax in American paleontology was the Cardiff Giant, the gypsum man planted by the cigar-maker and “general rogue” George Hull in October 1869 (Gould 1991: 42-45). Just two months after the “discovery” of the Cardiff Giant in upstate New York, a younger and far more ingenious “general rogue” or *voyou* would plant his own hoax 3000 miles to the east.

The human animal loves a good story, and in particular cherishes a narrative that embeds privileged knowledge that “they” want to keep from us, whence the urban legend. Nine months after the Great East Coast Blackout of 1965, there was a spike in the number of

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<sup>2</sup> No English word exactly translates *blague*, which corresponds variously to ‘yarn, tall tale, joke, hoax’; see websites like <http://www.blague.net> for the referential range. In this case, Rimbaud’s *blague* may eventually have graduated into more of a *canard*.

<sup>3</sup> Notice that Nicholl’s version also anticipates Robb’s in attacking those unnamed revisionists for their watered-down version of the tale. Unlike Robb, though, Nicholl does cast some doubt on the veridicality of the story in his allusion to its “jest-book” quality. This doubt is imparted subtly enough for Nicholl’s readers, e.g. Tranter (1997), to have accepted the spiked milk tale as gospel truth.

<sup>4</sup> For much more on the myths of Rimbaud, see the massive four-volume study by Étiemble (1954-1961).

babies born in hospitals in the affected areas, as widely reported at the time—except there wasn't (cf. <http://www.snopes.com/pregnant/blackout.htm>). The Cubs and Red Sox snatch defeat from the jaws of victory yet again—this can only be because of the goat-inspired hex and Bambino-sized curse on the respective teams.<sup>5</sup> The linguistic correlate of this thinking is one fork of a dichotomy within the category of folk etymology overlooked by traditional and recent scholarship (e.g. Rundblad & Kronenfeld 2003) on the phenomenon. While standard examples of first-order or naïve folk etymology involve a morphological domestication of an opaque and often foreign form (*ros marinus* 'sea dew' > *rosemary*), there is another process which (in postings to the American Dialect Society e-mail list and in Horn 2004) I have dubbed ETYMYTHOLOGY. Etymology is the lexical version of the urban legend, a fable—or more generously a piece of culturally based arcane wisdom—not transmitted by scholarly research but passed on by word of mouth (or computer).<sup>6</sup> The locus classicus is the faux acronym. A quick search of the internet will provide (false) support for each of the following derivations:

COP: 'Constable On Patrol'

FUCK: 'For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge' or 'Fornication Under Consent of the King'

GOLF: 'Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden'

POSH: 'Port Out, Starboard Home'

TIP: 'To Insure Politeness/Promptness'

WOG: 'Wily/Wealthy Oriental Gentleman'

One of the more *recherché* derivations is that for *Ivy League*, supposedly so-called because there were originally four colleges in the group, whence "*IV League*", although there is no evidence for this postulation—the more plausible explanation in terms of ivy creeping up brick and stone walls being evidently too uninspired to accept.

Nor is etymology restricted to the acronym. Courtesy of Stouffer's (inter alia), your local grocery vends boxes of "Welsh Rarebit", a concoction of toast and cheese that can be baked or microwaved. But what exactly is a rarebit? This isn't exactly a new item:

A light supper of course. I am exceedingly fond of Welsh rarebit. More than a pound at once, however, may not be at all times advisable. Still, there can be no material objection to two. And really between two and three, there is merely a single unit of difference. I ventured, perhaps, upon four. My wife will have it five;

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. in this connection Gould's discursus (2002: 69) on "the tale of Buckner's legs, where we misstate easily remembered and ascertainable facts in predictable ways because these facts did not unfold as the relevant canonical stories dictate"—viz. the reconstruction of this tragic incident as one that transformed certain success in breaking the post-1918 curse into irrevocable disaster, when in fact the score was already tied when Mookie's grounder rolled under Buckner's glove, and the loss only resulted in tying the series 3-3, with Game 7 still to come.

<sup>6</sup> The effects of these legends may not always be as innocuous as in the examples considered here, especially when etymology feeds deep-seated ethnic grievances. Washington, DC mayoral aide David Howard temporarily lost his job in 1999 for the perceived "racial overtones" in his statement that he would "have to be niggardly" with a budgetary allotment. Similarly, *picnic* has been associated with an unspeakable—but in fact, nonexistent—practice in which African-Americans were chosen for lynching as a lunchtime diversion; see <http://www.snopes.com/language/offense/picnic.htm> for discussion.

—but, clearly, she has confounded two very distinct affairs. The abstract number, five, I am willing to admit; but, concretely, it has reference to bottles of Brown Stout, without which, in the way of condiment, Welsh rarebit is to be eschewed.

(Poe 1847: 363)

Poe's contemporaries recognized *Welsh rabbit* as an alternate label for this dish, but regarded this as an unfortunate if inevitable corruption:

The most remarkable feature connected with this process of giving new forms and new meanings to words, which are perfectly unconnected with their history, is that even English nouns should have been thus ill-treated...A Welsh rarebit became a Welsh rabbit; gorseberries were made into *gooseberries*, as gossamer is often called *goose-summer*.

(De Vere 1866: 205)

The common people are all amateur etymologists, and the like to put into every word some familiar glimmer of sense. They make sad work at it sometimes, however. Thus the Welsh rarebit becomes a *rabbit*; gorseberries, *gooseberries*;...asparagus, *sparrow-grass*; the redingote, a *riding coat*...

(Wakeman 1869: 850)

But which came first, the rabbit or the rarebit? Note that while *goose-summer* and *sparrow-grass* are indeed simple first-order folk etymologies, the *gooseberry* has nothing to do with *gorse* (deriving instead from Fr. *groseille*), while the *redingote* is not the source of the *riding-coat* but the 18<sup>th</sup> century French adaptation of it. And indeed, it is the *rarebit* and not the *rabbit* that represents folk etymology, or more precisely etymology. The OED characterizes *Welsh rarebit* as ‘an etymologizing alteration of [Welsh rabbit]’, pointing out the lack of independent evidence for [non-Welsh] *rarebit*.<sup>7</sup> As Hendrickson (1997: 313) puts it, *Welsh rabbit* is “country humor” that “conveys the idea that only people as poor and stupid as the Welsh would eat cheese and call it rabbit.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than *Welsh rabbit* serving as a corruption of *Welsh rarebit*, the latter is a post-hoc, urban-legendary rationalization of the former. Literary bias has claimed another victim.

The poet and musician Jim Morrison (1943-1971), the creator and lead singer of The Doors, was profoundly inspired by the poetry, life, and rebel soul of Arthur Rimbaud. He would often quote Rimbaud's verse (see, for example, the memoir by his drummer, Densmore 1990), and it was his connection to Rimbaud's legacy that eventually helped draw Morrison to Paris, escaping from his rock star persona in the U.S. as Rimbaud himself had fled his poetry and his Paris for Africa a century before.

By the end of the 1960s, Jim Morrison was spinning out of control. The turning point of his career and life, according to many (including his common-law wife; see Keneally 1992: 47), was the “Miami incident.” Arriving at a concert booking in Miami on March 1,

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, a pub near the University of Sussex serves an open-face grilled ham, cheese, and pineapple sandwich and calls it “Hawaiian rarebit” (Lynne Murphy, p.c.). But this is, of course, simply *Welsh rarebit à la hawaïenne*.

<sup>8</sup> This is actually a relatively frequent process, particularly when the ethnic slurs reflect a systematic national chauvinism, such as English antipathies toward the Irish or Dutch; cf. Farmer & Henley (1890-1904) for examples ranging from *Irish apricot* ‘potato’ or *Irish kiss* ‘slap in the face’ to *Dutch milk* ‘beer’ or *Dutch widow* ‘prostitute’ and see Horn (2004) for expanded discussion of such ironyms.

1969 obviously soused and surly, Morrison went on stage late and proceeded to abuse and incite his audience in his best *bourgeois-épatering* manner. There is general agreement (cf. e.g. Hopkins & Sugerma 1980, Williams n.d.) that one point he removed his shirt and unbuckled his belt, while chanting “There are no rules, there are no limits”, but what happened next is still in dispute. There are photographs revealing Morrison on stage holding a young lamb,



but none of him engaged in the acts of “indecent exposure” or “lewd and lascivious behavior” for which he was later indicted and tried. The national inquisition led by President Nixon, the FBI, and the minions of the “Moral Majority” after the Miami concert was the beginning of the end for Morrison and the Doors; their albums were set ablaze in bonfires, their bookings cancelled, and their songs banned from commercial radio.

We will never know what actually happened that night at the Dinner Key Auditorium, but we do know that Morrison was not above engaging in his own mythopoeia. While generally acknowledging in public that he was wearing boxer shorts at the time of his “exposure”, he was not above embroidering his legend, channeling his Rimbaldian muse. At the bar of Barney’s Beanery in Hollywood, relate Hopkins & Sugerma (1980: 275), Morrison was goaded by his friend Tom Baker, “Come on, Jim, tell us once and for all” what really happened on the stage in Miami.

“Yes, I did it.”

“Did what?”

“I showed my cock.”

“Why, Jim?”

“Well, I wanted to see what it looked like in the spotlight,” Morrison explained; he “grinned mischievously” at his *blague* while his companions burst out laughing (and presumably Rimbaud smirked from above, or elsewhere).

By the summer of 1970, when Morrison stood trial for his alleged exhibitionism in Miami, he denied that anything untoward had occurred<sup>9</sup>, but the ambiguity of the circumstances, the tenor of the time, and Morrison’s own well-established *sale réputation* had done their damage, and he was convicted of indecent exposure (though not of lewd and lascivious behavior). The downward spiral continued, leading to his departure from the Doors, his flight to Paris, and his doom.

For his chroniclers Hopkins & Sugerma (1980: vii), Jim Morrison’s mysterious and precocious death in Paris assured him “a place in the pantheon of wounded, gifted artists who felt life too intensely to bear living it: Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Lenny Bruce, Dylan Thomas, James Dean, Jimi Hendrix,…” Morrison’s apotheosis to this pantheon occurred in 1971, two years after the Miami incident—or non-incident—and exactly 100 years after Rimbaud supplied—or, as it happens, did not supply—an organic additive to Cabaner’s milk.

If Morrison stands on the left flank of Rimbaud’s ghost, the right is occupied by the legendary Vietnam Vet and ex-Green Beret, Arthur’s distant cousin John Rambo:

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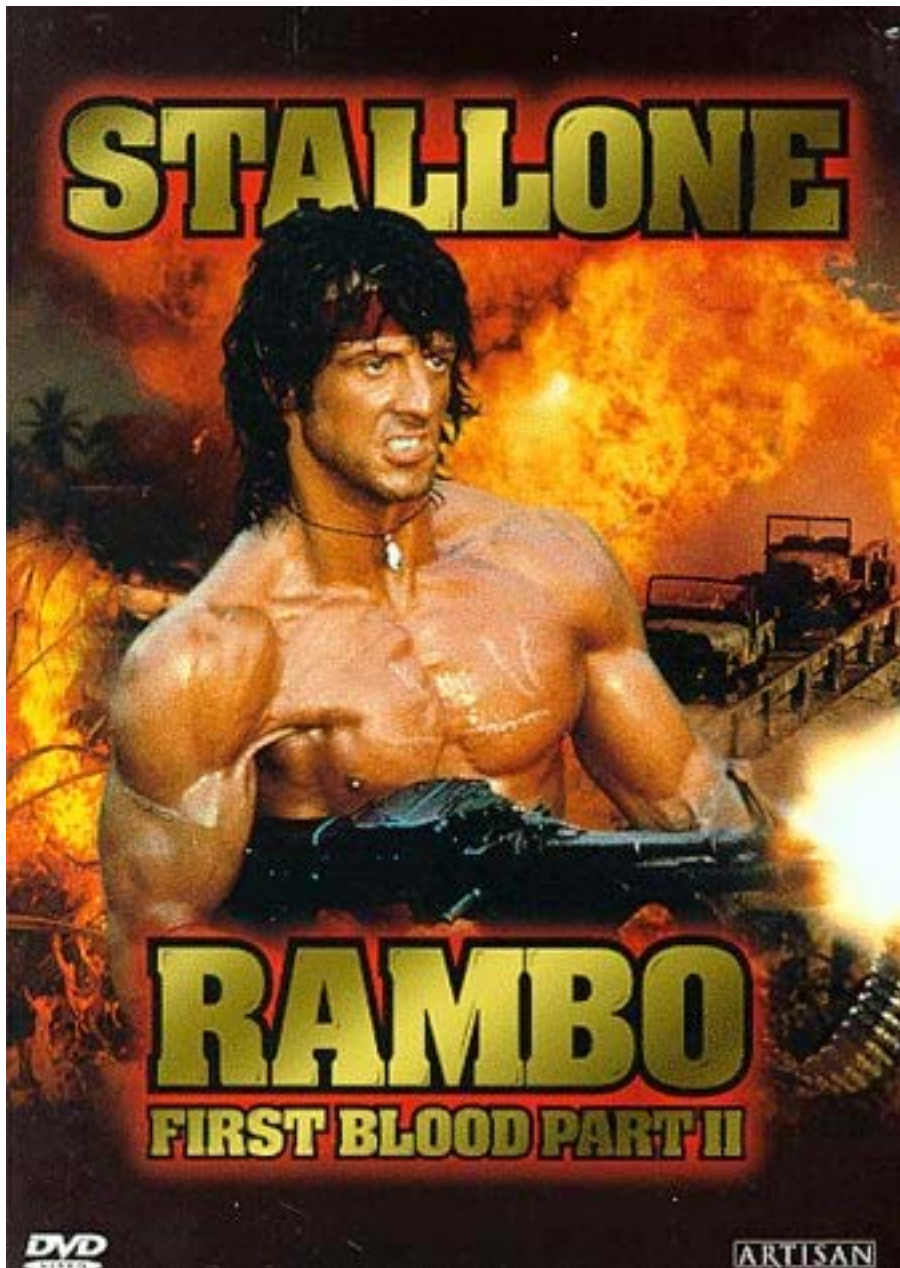
<sup>9</sup>Note this exchange from Morrison’s questioning on direct by his attorney Max Fink:

Q: “Did you at any time for five seconds or eight seconds or any other length of time exhibit any [!—LH] male organ of your body?”

A: “No, sir.”

(testimony in re *State of Florida v. Jim Morrison*, Dade County Criminal Court, 17 Sept. 1970, recorded at <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Palladium/1409/miami3.htm>)





As embodied by Sylvester Stallone in the eponymous 1985 movie, Rambo returns to Vietnam ostensibly to rescue missing American prisoners of war, but in fact to do nothing less than refight the Vietnam War—and this time win it for the U.S.A.<sup>10</sup> The enemy are cardboard villains, the cause patently just if not God-ordained. In a broader sense, however, Rambo’s quest was prompted by the need to overturn the standard historical narrative.

In a related mythopoeic exercise, our military defeat by the Vietnamese is attributed to a stab in the back by inhuman bureaucrats and treasonous elements on the home front who renounced the war and resented the warriors, whence the 1970’s- and 1980’s-era narratives that depicted returning Vietnam veterans in print and song as being confronted, maligned, and spat upon in airports by women or “unmanly men” (gays, long-haired hippies). In fact,

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Along the way he’s tortured, flexes biceps, grunts, and then disposes of the bad guys by the dozen in one of film’s bigger dead body parades. Best enjoyed by testosterone-driven fans of the genre.’ (Connors & Craddock 1999: 729)

no documentation of such encounters has ever appeared; cf. Lembcke (1988) for discussion. For Lembcke, these uncorroborated narratives constitute an American “urban legend” or an expression of false memory syndrome. In an earlier generation, as recounted by Theweleit (1987, 70ff.), the defeat of the valiant German soldiers of the Great War was similarly ascribed to the satanic *Flintenweiber* (‘rifle-women’, typically pistol-packing Spartacists, “proletarian whores,” or seductive Jewesses), who then met their righteous come-uppance at the hands of the ruthless, indomitable (and proto-Nazi) Freikorps in the fantasy revenge novels that made the best-seller list in post-World War I Germany. For the Freikorps as for Rambo, the narrative serves to both rationalize and avenge an otherwise inexplicable and humiliating defeat.

In the face of such *blagues* against humanity, the creation of Rimbaud’s little exercise in mythopoeia and the susceptibility of our biographers to its charms may be forgiven. Nor should we condemn the Miami jurors who chose to ignore eye-witness testimony and convict Jim Morrison of indecency: if the stories fit, we can’t acquit. But it is not inevitable that a biographer should have fallen under the sway of an immor(t)al fibster. In his monumental (1242 page) biography of Rimbaud, Lefrère (2001: 388) revisits the scene of the “crime” at the Hôtel des Etrangers, but unlike Nicholl and Robb he is careful to note the elephant-sized shadow of doubt that Delahaye’s transmission of the tale casts on the veracity of the story. For Lefrère, Rimbaud’s “bravades” served to reinforce his perceived birthright as the heir to Baudelaire, who in his own day never hesitated to pass himself off as a Jesuit or parricide or to claim to have eaten children’s brains; the aim was not to join the fellowship of his readers and friends but to inspire their horror and disgust. For Rimbaud, the *blague*-r par excellence—as for Baudelaire before him and Morrison after him—the aim in playing the *gamin mal élevé* was simply to put his world-class “génie de la perversité” (Goncourt 1822-1896, entry for 18 April 1886) on general display.

No need, then, to cry over spoiled milk.

### Acknowledgments

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