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Dear Colleague:

At one of the University of Wisconsin Press offices I remember seeing a muscle-bound Stallone toting a machine gun. It is, of course, an advertisement for Rambo, only this being the learned Press, Rambo is spelled Rimbaud. Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91), one of the greatest poets of modern times, was also a geographer. Whereas everyone who has even a slight familiarity with French letters knows about Les Illuminations, few geographers are aware that this poet whose works are said to have altered the course of modern literature also contributed papers to a geographical journal. True, when Rimbaud was a boy of eight, he did not care for geography or history and expressed his sentiment (resentment) thus: "Pourquoi apprendre de l'histoire et de la géographie? On a, il est vrai, besoin de savoir que Paris est en France; mais on ne demande pas à quel degré de latitude..."

Rimbaud was a restless child. At age sixteen he escaped to Paris, slept wherever he could find shelter, drifted into a barrack of the National Guard, and perhaps predictably--because at sixteen Rimbaud looked angelic--he was sexually abused by drunken soldiers. The experience must have been excruciatingly painful, for up to that time Rimbaud led a very sheltered life. He wrote a poem called "Coeur Supplicié" as a sort of balm for his wound but because it contains a few impolite words--preeminently "ithyphaliques" (phallus in erection)--he lost the good opinion of his only friend and teacher, George Izambard, who, not knowing the circumstance of its composition, thought it in the worst of taste--disgusting. Actually "Coeur Supplicié" is a beautiful poem, and in just about every anthology of French verse you are likely to find this work of a hurt teenager.

Rimbaud gave up poetry at the age of nineteen. He was an authentic genius. In modern times, perhaps only the mathematician Evariste Gallois (1811-32) matched him in precocity. For Rimbaud, the years that followed the giving up of poetry were listless. He traveled all over the world, and in his mid-twenties was employed as an agent for a coffee merchant. His territory included some of the most inaccessible parts of Ethiopia. Rimbaud suddenly found a new vocation in geography and in exploration. He wrote to his mother asking her for books and surveying instruments. He acquired detailed knowledge of the country around Harar, wrote a paper on this strange land and sent it to the Société de Géographie in Paris, which published it in its proceedings in 1884. The Société de Géographie was so taken with his work that it wrote him asking for his photograph and biography. Silence. For, alas, although Rimbaud became a hard-nosed explorer-geographer he retained the impractical soul of a poet. (See Enid Starkie, Arthur Rimbaud, 1961).

Here is a scenario for the proximate future. It is based on reality, though somewhat exaggerated for effect. We descend a flight of steps to a sort of decompression antechamber. There, through a slightly open door we can hear the sound of whirling electronics and the quick tap-tap of computer keyboards. Three scientists are at work before a bank of screens, the unearthly glow from which illuminates

the intense faces of their human colleagues. This is the war room and a war game is in progress. On one screen, graphs rise and plunge with the fate of robot armies, on another, simulation strategies in the upper stratosphere are staged. In this mock battle, the good guys are clearly winning. The scientists stand up to welcome us. Well, they are all prepubescent boys--Jason, Brian, and Joshua! The adults have come down for a visit, not so much to a place as to a time that doesn't belong to them, and they must be humored. The children put their computers on "control save" and politely explain to us what they are up to in a simplified technical language suited to our years. The war-game part doesn't bother me: as a child in Chung-ch'ing my favorite toy was a bomb that exploded on contact with the pavement (at a time when Japanese bombs were raining on my head!)--and look what a peacenik I have become. No, I wasn't bothered but I was and am immensely impressed by the children's sheer competence in the midst of all that mind-stretching (right-hemisphere, no doubt) machinery. Oh, Brave New World.

Best wishes,

J - Lu