

Ciaran Carson

IN THE LIGHT OF

after *Illuminations*
by Arthur Rimbaud



Gallery Books

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Author's Note

I

There are many enigmas surrounding the life and work of Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), not least in the matter of the background, origin and composition of the *Illuminations*, a possibly unfinished collection of forty prose poems and two in free verse. The manuscripts, so far as we know, are undated, without any indication as to how the poems should be ordered; but it is generally thought that they were written sporadically between 1872 and 1875, in various locations, including Paris, London and Belgium, and that some of them may (or may not) constitute Rimbaud's last poetic work. What we do know is that the manuscripts were once in the possession of Rimbaud's erstwhile lover, the poet Paul Verlaine, and that the majority of the poems were first published in 1886 by the Symbolist review *La Vogue*, which referred to their author as 'the late Arthur Rimbaud' and 'the equivocal and glorious deceased'. It seems Verlaine had written to Rimbaud, then in Africa; receiving no reply, he assumed he was dead. Later in 1886 *La Vogue* published the *Illuminations* in volume form, with a preface by Verlaine in which he explained: '*Le mot Illuminations est anglais et veut dire gravures colorées* — coloured plates', though it is unclear whether Rimbaud himself chose the title. If he did, it might conform to his eccentric or playful use of 'English' titles for the poems 'Being Beateous', 'Bottom' and 'Fairy', for 'Illuminations' is not, as Verlaine states, an English word meaning 'coloured plates'.

The only definition for 'illumination' in the Oxford English Dictionary which resembles Verlaine's is 'formerly, also, the colouring of maps or prints', as in '1678 E. Phillips *New World of Words* (ed. 4), a laying of colours upon Maps or Printed Pictures; so as to give the greater light, as it were, and beauty to them'. This is not quite 'illumination' in the English sense of decorating letters in a text (*enluminure* in French), which might lie at the back of Verlaine's 'coloured plates'; but *illuminations* can also be a show of festive lights, or, appropriately for Rimbaud, divine or poetic inspiration. In his famous '*lettre du voyant*', Rimbaud declared: 'One must, I say, be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer through a long, prodigious and

rational disordering of all the senses.’ However we gloss the title *Illuminations*, the poems flit within the inward eye like brightly-coloured magic lantern slides, pictures from a marvellous book, visions of another world, scenes from an avant-garde film. Rimbaud was avant-garde before the Avant-garde; a surrealist before Surrealism; and, environmentalist *avant la lettre*, his critique of industrial society in some of these poems is still relevant today. In all those senses he was indeed a seer.

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In 1998 I published *The Alexandrine Plan*, translations or adaptations of sonnets by Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. My concern in that book was not so much to give a ‘literal’ meaning of what the poems might be saying, as to reproduce the original metre in English, and see what interpretations might emerge from those constraints, both of rhyme and the twelve syllables of the classical French alexandrine. Shortly afterwards I thought I might attempt a translation of some of the poems in *Illuminations*; but, try as I might, I could not arrive at any form of words that did justice to the originals, to my understanding of what they might imply or mean, or to my sense of their music. What I did seemed inert, flabby, prosaic, and too close to whatever English translations I had consulted to augment my passable French. I could find no edge to the matter. I retired defeated and forgot about the whole brief affair.

Then, on 3 April 2012 (Shrove Tuesday, as it happened), I received an email from Colin Graham of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, asking if I might be interested in doing versions of seven of the prose poems from *Illuminations*, which would then be worked on by graphic designers for an exhibition in the new ‘Illuminations’ gallery at Maynooth. I had not done any kind of poetry for some time, and the invitation seemed serendipitous. On Spy Wednesday I had a kind of illumination of my own: rather than translate the prose poems as prose poems, I could perhaps adapt them to an Alexandrine format of twelve-syllable rhyming couplets — Rimbaud crossed with Racine, as it were. I set to the next day, Holy Thursday, and somehow within a week I had arrived at twenty-two such versions. I spent the next

few weeks tweaking and tinkering, and added three prose versions to frame what had now become a book: not the book that is Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, but another, taken from that book.

At first, it seemed perverse to translate prose poems into verse: but the more I worked the more it became apparent that many passages in Rimbaud’s musical prose could be read as verse, with a prosody of their own, scanned, rhymed, alliterated. One could see incipient sonnets embedded therein; and it happened that several of my versions came out as fourteen lines. So I began to think of the project as a restoration, or renovation, rather than a complete makeover. In any event these versions are not conventional translations. The constraints of rhyme and metre led me to cut, interpolate, and interpret. There are instances where I have added to or taken away from the original. I have sometimes twisted Rimbaud’s words. And Rimbaud’s words, of course, twisted mine. Examining his French, I had also to examine my English, learning other aspects of it, sometimes relearning it, for one can never fully know a language, which is always bigger than any of us. As Walter Benjamin has it in ‘The Task of the Translator’ (one of a number of essays collected under the English title *Illuminations*), ‘[The translator] must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.’ One’s ‘own’ language begins to seem another.

So in translation one necessarily becomes Another. First-person, third-person, noun and verb, become confused: *Je est un autre*, ‘I is another’, as Rimbaud has it. I began by wanting to obey the constraints of the twelve syllables of the alexandrine, but that proved impossible: the line, under the pressure of Rimbaud’s sometimes elaborate and often elliptical syntax, began to lengthen or contract in places, and thus became even more hybrid than what I had envisaged. I was not too put out by this failure to abide by my own rule: the prose poems seemed to want that variation of pace and rhythm; written in different voices, different keys as it were, they vary considerably in their linguistic strategies. The strain of the verse form grafted on to Rimbaud’s prose led to hybrid: translation as mutation. Having said all that, I have ‘translated’ as closely to my understanding of the original as I could, when I could. The result of my deliberations follows. Or rather, it has gone before, since this Author’s Note, like all such introductions, has been written after the event.

ACT ONE

As I Roved Out (Aube)

I embraced the summer dawn. All was still before
the palaces, their waters dead forevermore.

Shade after shadow lingered on the woodland road.
I woke quick, live, warm clouds of breath as on I strode.

Gemstones eyed my passing. Wings arose without sound.
My first adventure happened on a path I found

already littered with pale glints, wherein a flower
spoke her name to me. I blinked. It was no known hour.

I laughed to see the Wasserfall dishevelling itself
in shocks among the pines; climbing shelf by rocky shelf,

I recognized the goddess at the silvered peak.
Voilà! Veil after veil I lifted from her, not to speak

of how my arms were fluttering as I did so.
I did it in the lane. And boldly did I go

across the plain where I betrayed her to the cock.
She fled to the city under the steeple clock,

and beggar-like I tailed her on the marble quays.
Far up the road, beneath a grove of laurel trees,

I wound her in those recollected veils, and realized,
just a little, something of her massive shape and size.

Then dawn and child, finding themselves in the wood,
sank deep down into it. On waking it was noon.

After Me . . . (Après le Déluge)

Once the notion of 'The Flood' had dwindled away
a hare halted in sweet hay where the harebells sway

and said its prayer to the rainbow through a spider's web.
And oh! the precious stones were hiding, or had ebbed,

what flowers there were already pivoting to look.
A dirty main street: stalls being set up, boats hauled crook

by hook towards the sea, delineated wave on wave
as in an old engraving. Blood flowed in the nave

of Bluebeard's Castle, from dark slaughterhouses flowed,
every window blanched by God's Seal. Blood and milk flowed.

Beavers busied themselves building. Tall tasses steamed
in coffee houses. In the mansion, rain still streamed

down the windows, children dressed in mourning black
gazed at engaging images. A door clacked;

and in the village square a child whirled his arms about,
understood by weathervane, steeple-cock and rainspout.

Madame Blank established a piano in the Alps.
A thousand First Communion Masses packed the apse.

Caravans embarked. L'Hôtel Splendide was built
on icy chaos, polar night and snowy milt.

Ever afterward, the Moon heard jackals cackling
in the Wastes of Thyme, and eclogues of clogs clacking

in the orchard. Then in the fluorescing violet
forest, the fair nymph Eucharis revealed that it

was spring. Pond, overflow! Foam, overwhelm the bridge,
and slather through the woods! Lightning and thunder, rage!

Black draperies and church organs, rise and roll through rain,
and summon up the former Deluge once again!

For since it has evaporated — oh, the precious stones
being buried, and the flowers fully blown! —

it's such a bore! And the Queen, the Witch, the Sorceress
who fans her embers in an earthen crock, will ne'er confess,

nor tell that which she's always known,
which is that which we'll never know.