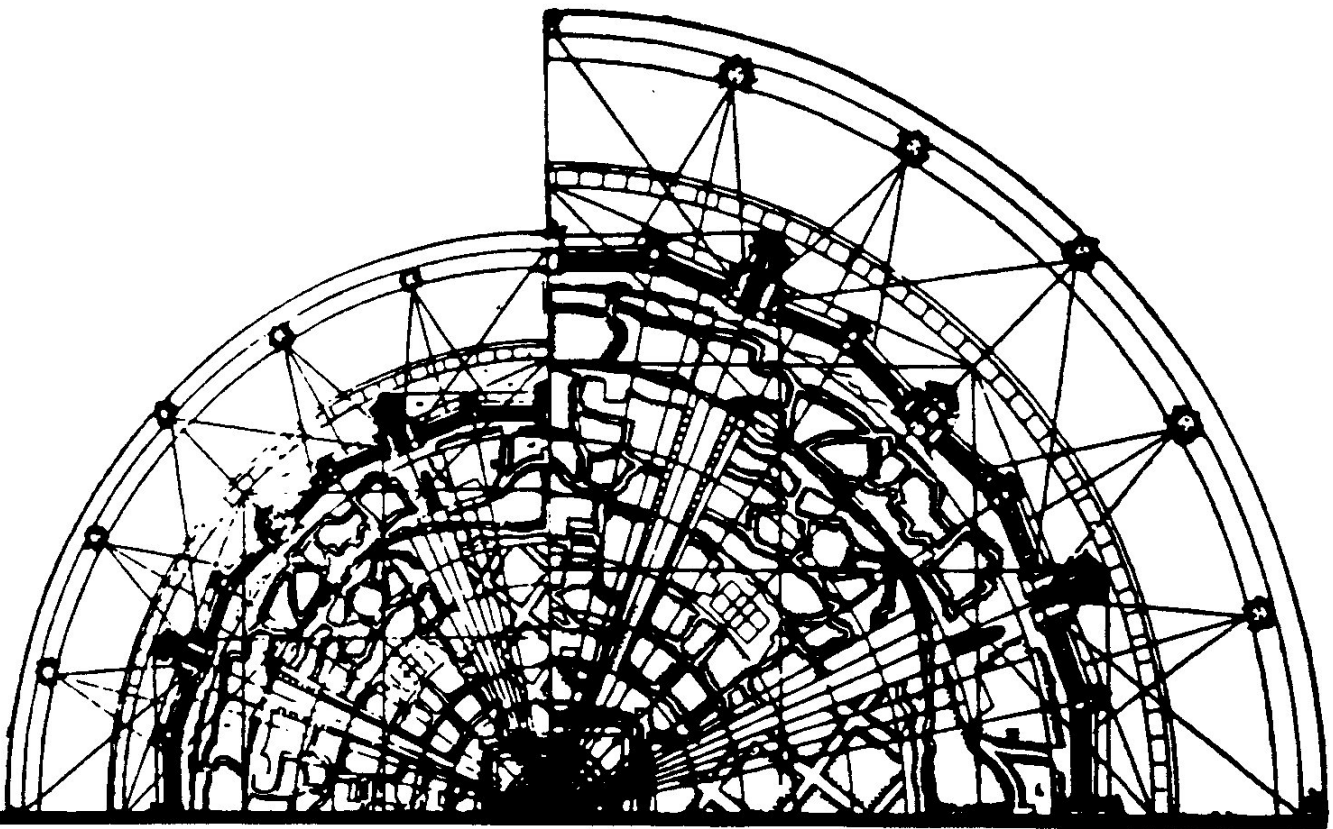


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THREE IRISH TRANSLATIONS OF RIMBAUD'S "BATEAU IVRE"

Three twentieth-century Irish writers have chosen to translate Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre": Samuel Beckett in the 1930s, Derek Mahon in the 1980s and Ciaran Carson in the 1990s.¹ The first question that springs to mind is, why should these three choose a text that has as its subject exile and the weary longing to return? Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" begins with an excited rejection of home:

La tempête a béni mes éveils maritimes.
Plus léger qu'un bouchon j'ai dansé sur les flots
Qu'on appelle rouleurs éternels de victimes,
Dix nuits, sans regretter l'oeil ni ais des falots!

Mahon translates this as:

Storms smiled on my salt sea-morning sleep.
I danced, light as a cork, nine nights or more,
Upon the intractable, man-trundling deep,
Contemptuous of the blinking lights ashore.

Far from missing the lanterns on the shore the runaway boat is freed of its cargo and feels lighter than a cork. But at the end of the poem, the same verb

¹ Beckett's text was written in 1932 but not published until 1976 in a limited edition and in a larger edition in 1977: SAMUEL BECKETT, *Drunken Boat, a translation of Arthur Rimbaud's poem Le Bateau ivre*, ed. and introduced by James Knowlson and Felix Leakey (Reading: Whiteknights Press, 1976); SAMUEL BECKETT, "Drunken Boat", *Collected Poems in English and French* (London: Calder, 1977). DEREK MAHON, "from the Drunken Boat", *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991). CIARAN CARSON, "Drunk Boat", *First Language* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1993). Given that the three poets appear to have used different editions of "Le Bateau ivre", I have preferred to stick to one edition when quoting Rimbaud: ARTHUR RIMBAUD, *Oeuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard and André Guyaux, rev. ed. (Paris: Bordas, 1991).

regretter, to miss, is reintroduced: “Je regrette l’Europe aux anciens parapets!” (“I miss Europe with its ancient parapets!”). Rimbaud’s boat comes almost full circle, while not physically returning to Europe, or home, it wishes it could do so.

It is not coincidental that the three Irish writers have chosen to translate a poem about exile. The act of translation is itself a form of voluntary exile which allows the writer to bypass constricting categories predominant in his own culture. One could say that translating is a distancing from one’s own culture, or else that it is a seeking out in another culture, or literary work, of elements which are missing in one’s own. We can classify translations as tending towards the “adequate” pole, that is, we can say that they are source-oriented, and the Beckett translation seems to fit this description. Or we can say that they tend towards the “acceptable” end of the spectrum, in other words that they try to assimilate the original into the target culture, and the Mahon and Carson texts fit this description.² But whether the translation can be described as adequate or acceptable, it is simultaneously aimed at and distanced from the target culture. A study of Beckett, Carson and Mahon’s translations of Rimbaud’s “Bateau ivre” can shed new light on Irish literary history in this century, particularly on the development away from the Yeatsian mode in poetry. And if translating is for the three writers a way of exiling themselves from aspects of their culture which are narrow or problematic, then it can also be said that (for Mahon and Carson at any rate) the importation of Rimbaud’s exuberant text comes as a breath of fresh air.

Focusing on the act of translating itself can provide a new cross-section through a literature where translating is vitally important but often ignored. Conversely, a study of these three translations relates interestingly to issues in translation studies, notably to the question of intertextuality and to the translated text’s capacity to refer to the historical and cultural world of the target language. The question of how the translated text refers to the “universe of discourse” of the target language is seldom examined by students of intertextuality.³ But the question of reference, or the avoidance of reference, has been a pressing one for poets in Northern Ireland over the last three decades.

If one reason for the choice of “Le Bateau ivre” is that its subject is departure and return, another reason is that the original is a highly intertextual poem. Richard Coe, in a review of Beckett’s “Drunken Boat”, remarks that “few poems have fascinated a young generation of future poets as much as ‘Le

² JOSÉ LAMBERT and HENDRIK VAN GORP, “On Describing Translations”, *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, ed. Theo Hermans (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 45.

³ The term “universe of discourse” is used by ANDRÉ LEFEVERE, *Translation/History/Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 35. See EDWIN GENTZLER, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 122, 147, for a discussion of reference in relation to polysystem theory and deconstruction.

Bateau ivre' did in the 1920s and 1930s".⁴ The movement of excited setting out and jaded homecoming is taken over from Baudelaire's poem "Le Voyage". Rimbaud takes a stanza of "Le Voyage" and uses it as a launching pad for his own journey into the unknown. Baudelaire had written:

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.
Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!
Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit!⁵

(For the child, in love with maps and engravings the universe is equal to his vast appetite. Ah! how the world is big in lamplight! In the eyes of memory how small the world is!)

"Le Bateau ivre" itself is a place where references to Jules Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, to Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amérique*, as well as to children's encyclopaedias and travel magazines, meet and criss-cross.⁶ Critics of Rimbaud writing before the late sixties, which was when Julia Kristeva coined the fruitful term "intertextuality", had already commented on the poem's lack of originality and marvelled at the fact that Rimbaud had never seen the sea.⁷ Neither biography nor the idea of creative genius were much help in understanding a poem where what counted was the handling of themes and language.

One of the attractions of "Le Bateau ivre" to a translator is precisely that it is not a perfect unity: in it different texts can be seen to surface and disappear. A critic from the Louvain translation studies group, André Lefevere, sees translated texts as places where different ideas, or different types of poetics, or constraints such as the social and economic, "mingle and clash".⁸ Once we start translating, or reading translations carefully, we realize that few texts are perfectly closed and unified works of art. Different strands pull against each other, or are even left loose and unravelled. In the Irish translations of "Le Bateau ivre", particularly those of Carson and Mahon, it will become apparent that two ways of reading a poem are made to clash. We could choose to read the translations as elegantly wrought replicas of Rimbaud's strategies, transposed into the English language. But we can also see that by

⁴ RICHARD COE, "The Barest Essentials", *TLS* (15 July, 1977), p. 873.

⁵ CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76).

⁶ For a review of the literature of the sources of "Le Bateau ivre", see EMILIE NOULET, *Le Premier Voyage de Rimbaud* (Brussels: Académie Royale, 1953), pp. 189-280.

⁷ RIMBAUD, *Oeuvres*, pp. 424-25. See also ERNEST DELAHAYE, *Rimbaud* (Paris: Albert Messein, 1923), pp. 92-93 and ENID STARKIE, *Arthur Rimbaud*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1973), p. 132.

⁸ ANDRÉ LEFEVERE, "Why Waste our Time on Rewrites?", *The Manipulation of Literature*, ed. Hermans, p. 233.

using texts from advertising and biography Carson and Mahon are making some kind of point about different ways of referring to the historical world outside the poem. What is this point? The Beckett translation is a key to the cultural configuration which gives rise to the need to pit the text against the historical world which lies outside. And the translations which come after Beckett's can shed light on what Beckett is doing in his own translation.

There are important differences between the Beckett text and the two others apparent in their presentation as well as in the paratextual comments (i.e. the comments next to, or around the text) which the authors provide.⁹ In this respect the three translators are complying with the translation norms of their time, though the presentation of the text also coincides with strategies they use in the translations themselves. Following the conventions of parallel text publication the Beckett translation gives the Rimbaud text on the left-hand page.¹⁰ But the translation is not intended as a crib for non-speakers of French who wish to check their understanding of the original with the aid of a translation. Nor is it purely in homage to Rimbaud. When we come to look at it in more detail, particularly at the levels of syntax, vocabulary and register, it will become clear that Beckett has his own agenda.

Derek Mahon's paratext is equally revealing: the "from" in the title, "from The Drunken Boat", indicates that his text does not represent a translation of the whole of the original. In addition, the words "after Rimbaud", in small italics and in brackets, indicate that the poem is a version acceptable to the target culture. The Ciaran Carson paratext also gives "after Rimbaud" in small italics. But then Carson adds as a subtitle "Le Bateau ivre" in French as if to remind his readers of the foreignness of his source. What the paratexts show, then, is that the Beckett poem tends towards the adequate pole, and that the other two tend towards the acceptable pole. But if we consider all the poems in relation to the culture to which they are directed then there is more that needs to be said.

I shall now examine each translation in chronological order, beginning with Beckett's "Drunken Boat". The areas where Beckett makes systematic and significant shifts are those of syntax, vocabulary and register.¹¹ To take the syntactic level first, in Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" the syntax is often ambiguous,

⁹ For a definition of the term *paratext*, see GÉRARD GENETTE, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 9. Genette lists, for example, subtitles, prefaces, marginal texts, epigraphs, illustrations, etc.

¹⁰ It is not clear whether the decision to print the parallel version of the Rimbaud text that Beckett used (the 1912 *Mercure de France* edition by Paterne Berrichon) was actually Beckett's decision or that of the 1976 editors of the limited edition. See BECKETT, *Drunken Boat*, ed. Knowlson and Leakey, pp. 12-13. Presumably this way of presenting the text was in accordance with the translator's wishes.

¹¹ ANTON POPOVIC, "The Concept 'Shift of Expression' in Translation Analysis", *The Nature of Translation*, ed. James S. Holmes, Frans de Haan and Anton Popovic (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 78-87.

and the numerous inversions mean that we do not know until we get to the end of the sentence whether a given word is going to be the subject or the object of the sentence. For example in stanza 5 we have,

L'eau verte pénétra ma coque de sapin
Et des taches de vins bleus et des vomissures
Me lava

This can read as: “The green water entered my pine hull and stains of blue wine and vomit” or “The green water entered my hull of pine and of stains of blue wine and of vomit...”. It is only when you get to the verb “me lava” (“washed me”) that you realize that the second reading is the correct one and that “des taches” and “des vomissures” are not potential subjects of the sentence alongside “l'eau verte”. Or again, in stanza 6 we have,

Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème
De la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent,
Dévorant les azurs verts

(And from then on I bathed in the Poem of the Sea, infused with stars and becoming milky, devouring the green azures)

Is it the boat or the “poème de la mer” which is “infusé” and “lactescent”? It is not until we reach “dévorant” that we make the decision that these participial adjectives describe the boat.¹² Ambiguities such as these, together with the frequency of run-on lines, leave the reader feeling tossed about, not unlike the boat of the title.

Beckett keeps the inversions and run-on lines, but instead of creating syntactic ambiguity, he works on the sound of the text, introducing repetition. For instance, in stanzas 1 and 2 we have internal rhymes between “grain” and “strain” and the repetition of “impassive” and “passive”, and of “trivial”:

Downstream on *impassive* rivers suddenly
I felt the towline of the boatmen slacken.
Redskins had taken them in a scream and stripped them and
Skewered them to the glaring stakes for targets.

Then, delivered from my *straining* boatmen,
From the *trivial* racket of *trivial* crews and from
The freights of Flemish *grain* and English cotton,
I made my own course down the *passive* rivers.¹³

¹² For further discussion of syntactic ambiguity in “Le Bateau ivre”, see RIMBAUD, *Oeuvres*, pp. 426-29.

¹³ In this and following quotations, the italics are my own.

In Rimbaud this had read as follows:

Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles
 Je ne me sentis plus guidé par les haleurs:
 Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles
 Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs.
 J'étais insoucieux de tous les équipages,
 Porteur de blés flamands ou de cotons anglais.
 Quand avec mes haleurs ont fini ces tapages
 Les Fleuves m'ont laissé descendre où je voulais.

There is alliteration here but no internal rhyme on whole words, and the only repetition is on the word “haleurs”.

There are many more places where Beckett compensates for Rimbaud’s twisting syntax by introducing repetition and internal rhyme. For instance in stanza 11 we have repetition, this time on the word “feet” (with additional assonance in the word “stampede”) when Beckett’s boat says,

I have followed months long the maddened herds of the surf
 Storming the reefs, mindless of the *feet*,
 The radiant *feet* of the Marys that constrain
 The stampedes of the broken-winded Oceans.

In Rimbaud this had been:

J'ai suivi, des mois pleins, pareilles aux vacheries
 Hystériques, la houle à l'assaut des récifs,
 Sans songer que les pieds lumineux des Maries
 Pussent forcer le mufle aux Océans poussifs!

It could be argued that here the repetition attempts to do justice in English to the extraordinary assonance of “ou” and “u” sounds in Rimbaud. But it is nevertheless the case that Beckett’s repetition of whole words is far more than an effect peculiar to this particular stanza. As a final example of the many repetitions which run throughout his translation, in stanza 19 the boat wishes it could break asunder, and more repetition is used: “May I split from stem to stern and founder, ah founder!”. In Rimbaud this was, “O que ma quille éclate! O que j’aille à la mer!”

In places also, Beckett’s syntax seems deliberately flat-footed. In stanza 12 the phrase “tangle of / The flowers of the eyes of panthers in the skins of men” has no less than four “of”s. This plethora of prepositions is an example of what Beckett himself has called “the syntax of weakness”.¹⁴ His treatment

¹⁴ Quoted and discussed in CHRISTOPHER RICKS, *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 82-83. There are more examples of “of”s in stanzas 7 and 11.

of Rimbaud's syntax keeps phonetic features of the text very much in the foreground, often at the expense of lexical elements.¹⁵ The result is a diminution of the sense of the poem in English, creating oddly echoing sound effects.

One of the marvellous things about Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" is the vocabulary of colour, whether fiery, metallic or painterly.¹⁶ The absence of colour in Rimbaud's last three stanzas is thus all the more striking: the only colour left is that of the "flache noire", the dark puddle or pond where the child plays with a toy boat. Beckett systematically eliminates or tones down these colours, making his "Drunken Boat" altogether more drab than Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre".

This toning-down of colour can be connected with another feature of Beckett's "Drunken Boat", the replacement of elements of wonder in the boat's voyage by elements of horror and illness. "La tempête a béni mes éveils maritimes" (the storm blessed my maritime awakenings, stanza 4) becomes "I started awake"; "délires" (which can be happy in French) become "thuds of fever" (stanza 7). Similarly "frissons" (which can be shivers of excitement) become "peals of ague" (stanza 9). The line, "J'ai heurté, savez-vous? d'incroyables Florides" (in stanza 12) becomes, somewhat excessively, "I have fouled, be it known, unspeakable Floridas". A whole new vocabulary of illness (haemorrhage, fever, weals, peals of ague, disembowelled, bloated) is introduced, suffusing the English version with suffering and horror.

At the same time, the Beckett version changes the register of the "Bateau ivre", making it in places more formal, and archaic. For instance, the word "désormais" (from then on) is translated as "thenceforward"; the word "les flots" (the waves) is translated by "peals of ague". There is another Elizabethan touch when "l'éveil jaune et bleu des phosphores chanteurs" (literally, the yellow and blue awakening of the singing phosphors) is translated by "the yellow-blue *alarum* of phosphors singing". A startling recourse to legalese appears when "sans regretter l'oeil niais des falots" (without missing the stupid eye of the lanterns) is translated by "the crass eye of the lanterns was *expunged*".

Beckett's urge to archaize English can be linked to his use of Gallic stylistic features. For example, the making plural of abstract nouns has been a feature of French literary style since the seventeenth century, and so we have in Rimbaud's text words like "rousseurs" and "langueurs". Beckett translates

¹⁵ For more instances of repetition, see stanzas 4 and 19.

¹⁶ Blues and yellows predominate: l'eau verte, des taches de vins bleus, la mer lactescent, azurs verts, flottaison blême, bleuités, les rousseurs amères, de longs figements violets, la nuit verte aux neiges éblouies, l'éveil jaune et bleu, des arcs-en-ciel, de glauques troupeaux, soleils d'argent, flots nacreux, cieus de braises, des golfes bruns, poissons d'or, fleurs d'ombre aux ventouses jaunes, oiseaux aux yeux blonds, brumes violettes, le ciel rougeoyant, hippocampes noirs, cieus ultramarins, des immobilités bleues, oiseaux d'or, la flache noire.

these literally, giving the strange English words, “rednesses” and “languors”. The effect of these and other Gallicisms is to make the English text sound oddly foreign. To quote more fully, the stanza where the word “rousseurs” occurs reads as:

Où, teignant tout à coup les bleuités, délires
 Et rythmes lents sous les rutilements du jour,
 Plus fortes que l'alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres
 Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour!

This becomes in Beckett's version:

Where, under the sky's haemorrhage, slowly tossing
 In thuds of fever, arch-alcohol of song,
 Pumping over the blues in sudden stains,
 The bitter rednesses of love ferment.

In this respect we can contrast Beckett with another modernist translator, Ezra Pound. Pound set out in his translations to capture the rhythm, diction and movement of words in the original and to re-energize twentieth-century English.¹⁷ Beckett's translation of Rimbaud, with its repetitions, its archaisms and Gallicisms, seems to be doing something else: it injects the English language with foreign substance in order to immobilize it.

We could regard Beckett's “Drunken Boat” as belonging to the first stage of his voluntary exile in France and the French language. It is probably true to say that his early translations from French into English represent a distancing from a literary culture perceived as too insular and ethnocentric. Yeats, in what Denis Donoghue describes as his equestrian mode, had created a dominant model of Irish poem – one where selective readings of history were elevated to the status of a powerful personal origin myth.¹⁸ Beckett was not interested in this kind of writing and turned his back on Yeats: in 1934, praising experimental poets like Coffey and Devlin and McGreevy, and attacking Yeats's legacy, he wrote, “contemporary Irish poets may be divided into antiquarians and others, the former in the majority, the latter kindly noticed by Mr. W.B. Yeats as ‘the fish that lie gasping on the shore’”.¹⁹

We could say that in translating Rimbaud the way he did, Beckett was exiling himself from English. But when he later went on to translate his own texts from French as well as from English it began to be apparent that he was

¹⁷ GENTZLER, p. 20.

¹⁸ DENIS DONOGHUE, *We Irish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 14.

¹⁹ ANDREW BELIS [pseud for SAMUEL BECKETT], “Recent Irish Poetry”, *Bookman* (August 1934), p. 235.

doing something more.²⁰ Until recently critics of Beckett's self-translation have continued to think in terms of national literatures and have got lost in often tiresome assertions that a given English version was "better" than a given French version, or the opposite. Lately Steven Connor and Brian T. Fitch have moved the debate forward, focusing respectively on tautology and on the status of the English and French texts.²¹ In his translation of Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" Beckett is already beginning deliberately to impoverish the English language, to make it fail, and to alienate it from itself. What we have in the later self-translations is an exile from language.

Although the Carson and Mahon versions of Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" are very different from Beckett's, for them Beckett, by translating from Rimbaud, opens up another path from that laid down by Yeats. The equestrian Yeats, as described by Denis Donoghue, was to make a reappearance when the Troubles began in Northern Ireland in 1969. Since then the Northern writer has been expected both to refer to the political situation in the province and also to write on behalf of a particular community, whether Protestant or Catholic. Referring to contemporary, or historical, events becomes a vexed question for poets like Seamus Heaney or Derek Mahon. Indeed, many of their poems are constructed around the topic of referring or refusing to refer, or the topic of belonging or not belonging. Donoghue discusses how the figure of Yeats has resurfaced in literary criticism since 1969 to inform the debate about whether myth should be forged from history, or *vice versa*.²² Taking Donoghue's point further, I would suggest that the writers themselves have become tired of myth and history as the sole terms of debate. They are seeking new ways of referring. Translating, by its very obliquity, allows them to do this and even gives them the freedom to consider the act of referring itself.

Thus far we have seen how translating can revivify a literary culture in danger of going stale from fixed and exclusive terms of debate. But our three texts can also shed light on two neglected aspects of the translated text. The first aspect is the extent to which a translated text is an independent text in its own right. The second aspect is the extent to which the translated text is a literary creation which stands out against the society of which it is a part.

To take the first point: in a pioneering essay on poetry translation, James Holmes argues that if the original poem refers to a world outside the text then the translation of that poem could be called a "metapoem" because it "deals not with 'the world' but with the linguistic formulations made by others; it is a

²⁰ For a discussion of Beckett's exile from English as leading to an awareness of the arbitrariness of all language, see ANN BEER, "'Watt', Knott and Beckett's bilingualism", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 10 (1985), pp. 37-76.

²¹ STEVEN CONNOR, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) and BRIAN T. FITCH, *Beckett and Babel: an Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* (University of Toronto Press, 1988).

²² DONOGHUE, p. 9.

comment on a comment”.²³ This would mean that translations were always second-degree literature, incapable of referring to a world outside themselves and doomed only to refer back to the original.

The second point concerns the problem of referring in a different way. If we understand the term “intertextuality” in its broadest Kristevan sense, not only viewing the text in its relationship with society, but also considering society itself as a cluster of texts, then the whole of existence is in danger of being reduced to the textual. Kristeva concurs with Bakhtin by quoting him: “Bakhtine situe le texte dans l’histoire et dans la société, envisagées elles-mêmes comme textes que l’écrivain lit et dans lesquels il s’insère en les récrivant” (Bakhtin situates the text in history and in society, themselves envisaged as texts that the writer reads and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them).²⁴ To regard society as a collection of texts would be to ignore the problem of reference to a historical world and to glide over the points where texts refer to events, places and lives. We have seen that it is precisely because of their history and society that writers in Ireland are compelled to engage with the problem of reference. Far from being “metapoems” the Mahon and Carson translations play with the very act of referring. In the case of Mahon, it will become apparent that reference to the world outside the poem is deliberately balanced against the poem’s own sense. And in Carson’s translation, the rather unexpected references have a destabilizing effect and represent a refusal to anchor meaning in a given history or community.

We can say that there are three types of intertextuality at work here. First translation, as a rewriting of the original “Bateau ivre”, offers all three writers a necessary distance from a claustrophobic domestic literary culture. Secondly, in the Mahon and Carson translations, the question of reference is raised through the introduction of texts which refer to events, like biography and journalism. And finally, insofar as the three translations now constitute a translation tradition, they mark changes in the history of Irish poetry in English in this century.

Mahon’s achievement in his poem “from The Drunken Boat” is to balance the urge to escape into a future or other life against the backward homeward look. He cuts down considerably on the tripartite structure of Rimbaud’s poem, leaving out the longest middle section which has the boat as *voyant* or seer, and keeping from this middle section only one stanza which he moves into the conclusion. Thus all of the stanzas where the boat has its visions are omitted, each of which begins in the same way by “J’ai vu”, “J’ai rêvé”, “J’ai suivi”, “J’ai heurté”, “J’ai vu” (translated, for example, by Beckett as “I have seen”, “I have dreamt”, “I have followed”, “I have fouled”, “I have

²³ JAMES S. HOLMES, “Forms of Verse Translation and the Translation of Verse Form”, *The Nature of Translation*, p. 91.

²⁴ JULIA KRISTEVA, *Sèméiôtikè* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 144.

seen”). By shortening the Rimbaud poem, Mahon also reduces the passages where the boat reflects on itself. These are the stanzas towards the end of the middle section where the word “moi” is repeated over and over again: “Or moi, bateau perdu sous les cheveux des anses [...] Moi dont les Monitors et les voiliers des Hanses / N’auraient pas repêché la carcasse ivre d’eau [...] Moi qui trouais le ciel rougeoyant comme un mur [...] Moi qui tremblais”. Carson’s translation, for example, by repeating the words “me” and “my”, does capture the boat’s awareness of itself as an object: “Now see me, snarled-up in the reefs of bladder-wrack [...] where Royal Navy men would slag my sea-drunk corpse [...] Me, I shivered”. But neither the visionary nor the self-reflective parts of the voyage are important to Mahon. What counts for him are the opening and closing sections and the equilibrium between the two movements of departure and homecoming.

When Mahon’s boat returns home, references to historical events are omitted and biography of Rimbaud comes to the fore. Mahon deletes Rimbaud’s last stanza in which critics have detected references to 1871 and the prison-ships, or “pontons” where some of those who took part in the Commune were incarcerated²⁵:

Je ne puis plus, baigné de vos langueurs, ô lames,
Enlever leur sillage aux porteurs de cotons,
Ni traverser l’orgueil des drapeaux et des flammes,
Ni nager sous les yeux horribles des pontons.

Interestingly, the Carson translation, emerging from Northern Ireland in the early 1990’s, transposes this into another type of political reference, to the Royal Navy:

There, I am no more. O waves, you’ve bathed and cradled
me
and shaped
Me. I’ll gaze no more at Blue Ensigns, nor merchantmen, nor
the drawn blinds of prison-ships.

Mahon’s translation prefers to omit the historical and to end with two biographical stanzas, the penultimate looking into the future. In Rimbaud’s “Bateau ivre” this stanza (number 22 out of 25) comes at the end of the visionary middle section, but Mahon puts it to a different purpose by moving it into his conclusion (it becomes number 11 out of 12):

Delirious capes! Strewn archipelagoes!
Do you nurse there in your galactic foam

²⁵ RIMBAUD, *Oeuvres*, p. 430, note 45.

The glistening bodies of obscure flamingoes
Tranced in a prescience of the life to come?

J'ai vu des archipels sidéraux! et des îles
Dont les cieux délirants sont ouverts au vogueur:
– Est-ce en ces nuits sans fonds que tu dors et t'exiles,
Million d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Vigueur? –

If Mahon's penultimate stanza looks into the future, then his last one looks into the past:

Meuse of the cloud-canals, I would ask of you
Only the pond where, on a quiet evening,
An only child launches a toy canoe
As frail and pitiful as a moth in spring.

Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache
Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé
Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses, lâche
Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.

Mahon's last two stanzas balance each other perfectly: the type of bird in Rimbaud's "million d'oiseaux d'or" is not specified. So Mahon's addition of the "glistening bodies of obscure flamingoes" could be read as a biographical glance forward to Rimbaud's time in Africa.²⁶ Perhaps the explicit reference to the Meuse in Mahon's final stanza is an attempt to get over the translation problem posed by the word "flache". Rimbaud had used this regionalism to link the return to Europe with the world of childhood. But Mahon's naming of the Meuse connects the homeward look with biographical ways of reading Rimbaud, and indeed of reading Mahon himself.²⁷

Elsewhere, in his other poems which are not translations, Mahon pits autobiography against distaste for the over-ordered world of home in Northern Ireland. The additions he makes to the Rimbaud text (the "only" child, the "pitiful" toy boat, and the "cloud-canals") could have come from his poem "Courtyards in Delft". There too, biography, or I should say autobiography, held at a distance throughout the poem, is suddenly admitted at the end. The speaker accepts that he once dwelt in, and was formed by, the world of Delft, which he compares to Northern Ireland and South Africa.

I lived there as a boy and know the coal
Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon

²⁶ ENID STARKIE's *Arthur Rimbaud* contains detailed chapters on the poet's time in Abyssinia.

²⁷ For one of the first references to a particular part of the Meuse in connection with "Le Bateau ivre", see DELAHAYE, p. 94.

Lambency informing the deal table,
 The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.
 I must be lying low in a room there,
 A strange child with a taste for verse,
 While my hard-nosed companions dream of war
 On parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse

Like “Courtyards in Delft”, Mahon’s “from the Drunken Boat” holds in check two opposing forces: on the one hand there is the impulse to refer to the autobiographical world, on the other there is the urge to create an autonomous work of art and possible future lives.

Mahon’s poems have sometimes been regarded as the product of a Northern Irish Protestant poet, in particular by Edna Longley and Gerald Dawe in their collection of essays, *Across the Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland*.²⁸ It was perhaps necessary in 1985 to draw attention to the Protestant voice in modern Irish literature. But to claim lines of filiation from Beckett to MacNeice and Mahon was to run the risk of replicating for Protestants the sort of exclusive particularism of which Irish Catholic nationalism was being accused. In any case, readings of Mahon as representative of a “Protestant imagination” are reductive because they are undone by the poems themselves. In poems like “from the Drunken Boat” and “Courtyards in Delft” biographical references (to home, people and origins) are made to tug against the sense of the poem itself. Mahon alters and builds on the structure of Rimbaud’s “Bateau ivre” in order to achieve this stasis and balance.

If Mahon makes the outward and homeward movements neutralize each other, then Carson changes the home and away of Rimbaud’s poem to create instability. The characteristic movement of his boat is a “bobbling” itself an unstable word half “bobbing”, half “wobbling”.

Through the tug and zip of tides, more brain-deaf than
 an embryo, I bobbed;
 Peninsulas, unmoored and islanded, were envious of my
 Babel-babble.

Dans les clapotements furieux des marées
 Moi l’autre hiver plus sourd que les cerveaux d’enfants,
 Je courus! Et les Péninsules démarrées
 N’ont pas subi tohu-bohu plus triomphants

Carson’s text is like an embryo – it produces itself. Rimbaud had jokingly used language typical of the Parnassian poets in one of his stanzas (stanza 19).

²⁸ GERALD DAWE and EDNA LONGLEY, *Across a Roaring Hill: the Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985), pp. i-xiii.

Libre, fumant, monté de brumes violettes,
 Moi qui trouais le ciel rougeoyant comme un mur
 Qui porte, confiture exquise aux bons poètes,
 Des lichens de soleil et des morves d'azur,

Carson expands this into many references to language and literature and these draw attention to the fact that the text itself is a product of literary culture. Its “rambling” is a reference both to its verbiage and its travelling and in the end it shuts itself down by saying, “There, I am no more”.

Carson, like Mahon, juggles with the question of reference but in a freer more playful way. The striking thing about his typography, for example, is that he gives capitals to many nouns, as if to say “I am referring to a particular or a special one of these”. So with the use of capitals in stanzas 7 and 8 ordinary nouns become contaminated by advertising slogans and Rimbaud’s lines are considerably altered. In “Le Bateau ivre” we had the lines:

Plus fortes que l'alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres
 Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour!

These become:

No lyric
 Alcohol, no Harp, can combat it, this slowly-pulsing, twilit
 panegyric.

The claim here is that the poem itself, the panegyric, is far better than a well-known brand of lager, but the interference from advertising is made to swamp the poem almost completely. This interference is even stronger in the next line with its reference to Coca Cola advertisements: “I’ve seen the Real Thing; others only get its aura” (in “Le Bateau ivre” this is, “Et j’ai vu quelquefois ce que l’homme a cru voir”).

Similarly, fragments of newspaper text: the “mad-cow waves of the Antipodes”, the “manatees, which panther-men had reined with rainbows and with Special Powers”, set up powerful sub-currents of meaning, nearly destabilizing the text. It is clear Carson is using reference to the world outside the poem in a different way from Mahon. Mahon’s references are centripetal, to home, childhood and origins. Carson’s are to non-literary fields of discourse which bombard the poet and which are like unravelling threads in his text. When Carson’s boat (or poet) says that it is not like the Nautilus, or that Royal Navy men would “slag” its “sea-drunk corpse”, it is defining what it is not: not scientific, not military or political, not commercial.

Carson's boat in fact resembles an Irish poet. This is clear from the geography of the poem which is very different from that of Rimbaud, Beckett and Mahon. Instead of missing Europe, Carson's boat describes itself as a

Spider spinning in the emerald, I've drifted off the ancient
parapets of Europe!

In Rimbaud this reads:

Fileur éternel des immobilités bleues
Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets!

(Eternal spinner of the blue immobilities / I miss Europe with its ancient parapets!)

The weaving, or spinning, of the text has taken place in the emerald, somewhere offshore of Europe. At the end of his poem Rimbaud had used the dialect word "flache" to bring the boat back to home and to childhood. In a very different way Carson uses the dialect word "stotious" to sum up the boat's drunken wanderings away from home:

Let the keel split now, let me go down! For I am bloated, and
the boat is stotious.

This reads in Rimbaud: "O que ma quille éclate! O que j'aille à la mer!" (Oh let my keel burst! Oh let me go to the sea!)

Although Carson's poem (like Beckett's) keeps the narrative structure of "Le Bateau ivre", the dynamics of home and away are very different. If the boat is a sort of emerald isle, then the voyage is not from home, but in home, in a mobile area of poetic creation. The boat is rather like Carson the translator, who can stay in Ireland and yet, by translating from another literature, wander from it.

To conclude, it is clear that in Ireland now, translation from other European languages, which was once the preserve of experimental poets writing in the 1930s, has moved centre stage. Beckett's "Drunken Boat", which seems to be in homage to the French text but which is actually immobilizing the English language, through syntactic, phonetic and other means, is making it not national, not English, or Irish. Once asked if he was English, Beckett is said to have replied, "au contraire". This answer, and Beckett's translation of "Le Bateau ivre", free up a cultural configuration which insists in labelling people, and writers, in terms of their origins.

From the paratexts (or the tiny introductory pieces of text around the translations) it is clear that the Mahon poem adapts the original to the target culture and that Carson's poem adapts Rimbaud for an Irish audience while pointing to the foreignness of the source. Mahon and Carson continue on from

Beckett, though they do so in a different direction, by playing with the question of reference to the world outside the poem. Mahon holds essentialist readings and writings at one remove, by balancing elements from Rimbaud's biography against the centrifugal wanderings of the boat. This is why the great change that he makes to the narrative structure (his omission of nearly all of the central part of the Rimbaud poem) is so important. In Carson's altogether freer rewriting of Rimbaud, other languages, besides the poetic, raise the question of the place of literature in society. From Mahon's translation to Carson's it is possible to chart a development in relation to the question of how poets refer to history and origins. Beckett's "Drunken Boat" opened up a channel for the poets who followed him, and shows that, far from being "industrious intermediaries", translators can profoundly reshape literary history²⁹.

²⁹ THEO HERMANS, Introduction, *The Manipulation of Literature*, p. 9.