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"Drunken Boat": Samuel Beckett's Translation of Arthur Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre"

Abstract

This paper scrutinizes Samuel Beckett's translation of Arthur Rimbaud's famous poem "Le Bateau ivre." After a short introductory section which outlines how Beckett's translation fortuitously reached the public domain through the endeavors of James Knowlson and Felix Leakey and then raises some of the main issues arising from this encounter between two such celebrated authors, the article proceeds to offer a close analysis of the Beckett text in terms of Rimbaud's original. This involves a stanza-by-stanza consideration of the original and the translation as reproduced by Knowlson and Leakey and a suggested division of the two texts into four sections for the purposes of close examination. The paper attempts to bring out both the accuracy and the fidelity of Beckett's work but equally the majesty and ingenuity of the "translation" that he has produced. While his work reveals many fascinating insights into both the Rimbaudian aesthetic and the Beckettian, ultimately one is struck by the fact that Beckett has produced something that goes far beyond what we originally designate as a "translation." "Drunken Boat" emerges as a poem in its own right as well as a staggeringly successful rendering of a poem that has so often resisted satisfactory translation.

Keywords

Samuel Beckett, translation, Arthur Rimbaud, Le Bateau ivre, public domain, James Knowlson, Felix Leakey, close analysis, stanza-by-stanza, original, accuracy, fidelity, Rimbaudian aesthetic, Beckettian, Drunken Boat

"Drunken Boat": Samuel Beckett's Translation of Arthur
Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre"

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In 1976 James Knowlson and Felix Leakey edited a limited edition of "Drunken Boat,"¹ Samuel Beckett's previously unpublished translation of Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre." Knowlson recounts the fascinating tale of the composition of this translation, Beckett having already undertaken renderings of Montale, Breton and Eluard among others. As Knowlson points out, the early 1930s were a time of financial difficulty for the young Irish writer as he attempted to establish himself in Paris and translating famous works was a useful source of much needed income. Ironically, the completed translation was not published by the review *This Quarter* for which it had been composed but, fortunately, Beckett had passed on a copy of the work to an Irish friend, Nuala Costello. It was from Nuala Costello that Felix Leakey received the translation of "Le Bateau ivre," this discovery being made all the more remarkable by the fact that the text had survived a fire in the owner's house. Indeed, the pages of the Beckett typescript were charred by flames but, happily, this did not prevent the full text of the translation from being reconstituted.

Included in the publication of this translation is a fascinating textual commentary from Felix Leakey which opens up some important lines of enquiry which I should like to pursue as part of this present scrutiny of Beckett's rendering of this famous piece by Rimbaud. Indeed, in view of the splendor and ingenuity of Beckett's work on the poem, the term "translation" scarcely does

justice to what he has achieved. One can only agree with Leakey that Beckett has gone beyond translation here to create a transformation of “Le Bateau ivre” into an English version that can stand as virtually a new poem in its own right (17). Yet Beckett accomplishes this feat while simultaneously rendering the original in a scrupulous, faithful, and revealing way.

Leakey points out that Beckett renders Rimbaud’s twenty-five lines of alternate-rhymed alexandrines with “an unrhymed line of roughly equivalent rhythm” (14) and there are variations between the two texts in terms of internal accents and stresses. Leakey draws our attention to the “idiosyncratic” and “radical” (14-15) enjambment which Beckett deploys and sees this as an important part of the process whereby Beckett has “freed himself from the rigid constraints” (15) which seeking to match the metrical form of the original would have entailed. For Leakey, this helps the translator avoid “alien and artificial modes of diction” and “excruciating archaisms of syntax and vocabulary” (15) and, amusingly, he goes on to cite some of the more stilted and infelicitous lines in other attempted translations of the poem. One very much agrees with Leakey that it is the flexibility of the Beckett approach which has paid such handsome dividends, the translator alternating between quite literal renderings where he deems these to be most effective and radical syntactical rearrangement and transposition in other instances. Allied to his sense of rhythm and euphony, his flair for etymology and neologism and his use of rare and technical terms, this eclectic method produces a text which Leakey aptly summarizes in his closing lines as “an important new contribution to the small stock of truly creative translations, and one which at the same time contrives to be a genuine and admirable poem in its own right” (17).

While it would be impossible within the compass of a paper of restricted length to do justice to all of the beguiling features of “Drunken Boat,” I now propose to vindicate Leakey’s lavish praise by analysing some salient aspects of the translation and to show how it helps one to appreciate rather better certain key aspects of Rimbaud’s poetic expression and practice at this stage in his career while at the same time throwing light on Beckett’s own lin-

guistic audacity and inventiveness. While acknowledging that Rimbaud's text is capable of subdivision in a variety of ways, I have chosen the following sequencing for the purposes of my own analysis of both it and the Beckett rendering—"Setting Sail" (lines 1-20), "The Voyage" (21-56), "Deceleration and Disenchantment" (57-88), "Closure" (89-100). Under these four headings, I now propose to examine how Beckett has transposed Rimbaud's French text into English.²

Setting Sail (lines 1-20)

It will be remembered that "Le Bateau ivre" opens with a moment of liberation as the craft recalls the way in which it was released from constraints and control:

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.³

Immediately this draws attention to the linguistic flair and inventiveness of the early Rimbaud but what does Beckett make of this dazzling introduction? His first decision is to remove the verb "descendais" from the opening line and to replace it with "Downstream" as initial word in a verbless opening line and from there he proceeds to convert the negative articulation "je ne me sentis plus guidé" into "I felt the towline of the boatmen slacken" in a way that prefigures the drama of so many parts of his rendering. Significantly, the adjective "nus" is transformed into the vigorous verbal immediacy of "stripped them" and one simultaneously registers the sibilance of Beckett's "scream" . . . "stripped" . . . "skewered" and "stakes." As Leakey points out, the whole of "Drunken boat" is so musical and rhythmical that "it positively invites reading aloud" (17).

The second stanza sees Beckett mixing a literal and a highly flexible method. Whereas "the freights of Flemish grain and English cotton" shows his preparedness to accept the original on its own terms on many occasions and not to insist on a radical dislocation at every turn, his "delivered . . . from the trivial racket of

trivial crews” is a rendering that deserves fuller comment. The reverberation of “trivial” is an internal effect which is one of many elements in Beckett’s translation designed to do justice to the swelling rhythms and echoes of the original while at the same time the very selection of the term “trivial” catches the implications of the adjective “insoucieux.” However, it does so, not by a direct translation of the epithet applied to the narrator, but by attaching to the racket of the crews a degree of insignificance which justifies the original adjective. As we shall see, “Drunken Boat” is brimful of such transpositions and this intuitive skill in the translation is what shields Beckett from the perils of an overly literal rendering and opens up for him so many possibilities for music⁴ and rhythm in his own version. In short, he is already on his way at this very early stage to the composition of not only a thrilling translation of Rimbaud’s piece but of a text that deserves scrutiny and appreciation in its own right.⁵

One might take lines 9-20 together as a preliminary sequence in “Le Bateau ivre” which creates a mood and intensity of image and sensation that prepares us for the concatenation of dazzling imagery which is released from the beginning of stanza six in line 21 and continues unabated until the end of stanza fourteen and line 56. One of the many unforgettable single lines in “Drunken boat” is “Blanker than the brain of a child I fled” [l.9], Beckett opting for the alliterative effect in “b” to render Rimbaud’s “plus sourd que les cerveaux d’enfants.” Thus, alliteration has emerged as a powerful ingredient in “Drunken Boat,” even at this early stage, and one can certainly construe this as evidence of the translator’s acute sense of the original’s multiple sonorities, reverberations and rhythms. Rimbaud’s stunning “Je cours!” at the start of line 11 is rendered “I scoured” but is not given such a prominent position in the translation. However, as Leakey emphasises, the many enjambments of “Drunken Boat” will reflect this outstanding feature of “Le Bateau ivre” and line 12 in this same stanza almost immediately does so with the adjective “Exultant” in first position in this last line. In line 13 Beckett seems to anticipate the sequence of stanzas in the original running from line 29 to line 52 which begin with the trigger of the

first person "Je" or "J'ai." Although Rimbaud does not use this "trigger" in his line 13, Beckett's "I started awake to tempestuous hallowings" is a dynamically active translation of "La tempête a béni mes éveils maritimes" and one notes the exchange of the alliterative "nine nights" for the sonorous "dix nuits" in line 16 of the original. "I danced" is repeated to strengthen those internal rhythms and echoes so central to "Drunken boat" and one might argue that Beckett has caught here, not for the only time, a tone in the original. When Rimbaud writes "qu'on appelle rouleurs éternels de victimes" he seems to be endeavouring to capture the cyclical motion and reverberation of the waves and Beckett skillfully incorporates this principle of repetition, recurrence and echo into "Drunken Boat" as a defining feature. Is there perhaps not also an irony directed at the Romantics which Beckett's "sacrificial, for ever and ever" registers and might the Beckettian irony be more telling than the Rimbaudian here? The opening line of stanza five is a direct and highly effective rendering of the equivalent line in Rimbaud, vindicating Leakey's comments on this matter (17) and proving that Beckett is too astute and deft a translator to miss the opportunity of such a simple translation when it is called for. Such intermittent literalness only throws the spectacular locutions deployed elsewhere into greater relief. Yet, even in this stanza as a whole, which seems to be much more literal than many, one admires the selection and location of the verb "Soaked" in line 18, the inversion of lines 19 and 20 and the exchange of the enjambment in "Me lava . . ." [1.20] for the equally effective "and washing me" at the end of line 19 in the translation. Beckett's "Drunken Boat" is a poem/translation that never lapses into the literal and the predictable for any length of time, being as turbulent and effervescent as the famous text with which it engages.

The Voyage (lines 21—56)

We now come to what is the heart of "Le Bateau ivre," the kaleidoscopic evocation of the voyage. Beckett's pivotal "Thenceforward" [1.21] matches Rimbaud's "Dès lors" but we see a telling inversion of previous patterns in this line. Whereas, up to this point,

the translator has tended to use active verbs in places where the original deploys a verbless expression, here Rimbaud's "je me suis baigné" emerges as "fused in the poem . . . of the sea" but is then picked up again in the lovely choice of "coiled" as an active verb in line 22. When one remembers that Beckett was only in his twenties at the time of composing this translation, his command of French is staggering in its sophistication but "Drunken Boat" also beautifully exemplifies the richness of English in verbs of action and motion. While French must make do with a rather prosaic verb and an adverbial supporting phrase, English can choose from verbs such as "scoured," "coiled" and "swaying" and this is a major contributory factor in the beauty and power of Beckett's poem/translation. It is worth quoting this translated stanza in full:

Thenceforward, fused in the poem, milk of stars,
Of the sea, I coiled through deeps of cloudless green,
Where, dimly, they come swaying down,
Rapt and sad, singly, the drowned.

In lines 23 and 24 Beckett is at pains to capture the crucial gradations of Rimbaud's text—gradations created by the four commas in the corresponding lines of "Le Bateau ivre." Beckett goes one better by including a fifth comma, captures the paradox of the drowned in the prominently positioned "Rapt and sad," and in "singly" finds a means of both creating the perfect pace for the sequence and maintaining Rimbaud's insistence on the isolation of these floating deceased. One more stanza remains before we reach the sequence of six stanzas that are bound together by the fact that they all begin with the vitality and zest suggested onomatopoeically by the "Je" or "J'ai" at the outset. This seventh stanza is one of the most famous in "Le Bateau ivre" and one of the most challenging from the perspective of the translator:

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

For "délires/Et rythmes lents" Beckett suggests to us "slowly tossing/ In thuds of fever," a rendering of such ingenuity and appropriateness that once again, the reader is acutely aware of an alleged "translation" going far beyond what normal expectations of such an exercise might be. Again Beckett takes a verbless sequence and recasts it with the addition of a verb from the rich repertoire of English, illustrating that the English idiom can felicitously bring out qualities in the original poem that the French can intimate—but in different ways. Beckett even matches the earlier hyphenated "tohu-bohus" with his neologism "arch-alcohol of song" to account for the whole of line 27. Here a full line in the original is condensed into a half-line in the Beckett version, thus creating useful space for longer renderings of other elements. Once again, we see a literal approach to "Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour" but this is combined with the energy of line 27 "Pumping over the blues in sudden stains" where we have an instance of Beckett's success with verb selection in "Drunken Boat." More generally, it is fascinating to follow, stanza by stanza, how Beckett takes so many of the 25 units of "Le Bateau ivre" and dismantles them before reassembling them in a different formation. There is a pliability and suppleness in approach here which is central to the success of the entire enterprise.

We now arrive at stanza eight, the first stanza in the sequence of visionary insights identified earlier. Lines 29 and 30 are translated very directly, almost verbatim, and even line 31 "And dawn exalted like a cloud of doves" might initially seem a rather straightforward interpretation. Yet it must be remembered that other renderings of this line have been hopelessly convoluted⁶ and that, by refusing to become entangled in metrical imitations, Beckett has allowed himself to capture the beauty and simplicity of the original here. He also affords us a memorable, and highly Rimbaudian, variation in line 32 where the celebrated "Et j'ai vu quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir" becomes "And my eyes have fixed phantasmagoria." Readers of Rimbaud will know that in *Une Saison en enfer* the poet describes himself as "maître en fantasmagories" and that this term also appears in "Métropolitain" in the *Illuminations*. How appropriate then that Beckett should include it in

English form at this juncture as another “bridge” between original and translation, not forgetting its worth as a valuable addition to the euphony of “Drunken Boat.” Is the implication of the choice of the word “phantasmagoria” that the successful translator of an author must immerse himself in the language of that author’s entire *œuvre* and not simply that section of it that it is proposed to translate?

Wisely maintaining the anaphoric first person in this sequence, Beckett also continues his practice of rearranging the internal architecture of many stanzas and this is well seen in lines 33-36. Whereas Rimbaud’s theatrical reference here is to “acteurs de drames très antiques.” In line 35, Beckett refers to “ancient tragic footlights.” In line 33, line 33 in Rimbaud being rendered by line 34 in Beckett; line 34 by line 35, and only line 36 remaining in the same position in the sequence. This last line is a further illustration of the felicitousness of Beckett’s locutions with “Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de volets” becoming “And peals of ague rattle down its slats.” Again, the verb (“rattle”) stands out here in the English with the selection of “ague” once more suggesting a translator with a vast reservoir of vocabulary at his disposal. Of all the stanzas in “Le Bateau ivre,” number 10 (lines 37-40) is arguably the one that is transposed most directly and literally in “Drunken boat.” However, one is struck by the use of the relatively rare word “alarum” in line 40 and this is indicative of a translation that is ever able to surprise the anglophone reader with the richness of its rare and technical terminology, even at moments where it might appear that Beckett has opted for more obvious equivalents.

A feature of stanza 11 that is worthy of note is the internal echo of “feet” (lines 42 and 43) and the selection of “mindless” for “sans songer que” and “broken-winded” for “poussifs” maintain the high level of English idiom, the naturalness of the translation and the sense of a text that flows as spontaneously as the original. It is worth stressing here that Beckett developed a very ambivalent attitude to language, this becoming particularly evident in many of his dramatic pieces from *En attendant Godot* through to shorter works such as *Pas moi*. Seeing both the miracu-

lous and the absurd in language, he has produced dramas that enact this duality but even at the time of composition of "Drunken Boat" he was no doubt conscious that Rimbaud held a similar conception of the power and limitations of words. Indeed, "Le Bateau ivre" might seem to encapsulate the Rimbaudian search for a new idiom and vision in that it scales unprecedented heights only to conclude with a sense of disappointment. Generally speaking, Beckett seems to attempt to reflect as directly as possible the wonders of Rimbaud's language in this sequence and stays close to the terminology, phrasing and sequencing of the original. Nevertheless, some choices are noteworthy. The use of "fouled" to render "heurté" (l.45), of "unspeakable" for "incroyables" in the same line, the introduction of the verb "sprawl" in line 49 and the creation of the noun "swamp-nets" in line 50, the use of an adjective "doomed" as an equivalent for "vers les gouffres"—these are all intriguing touches in stanzas 12 and 13. One becomes ever more conscious of "Drunken Boat" as a cornucopia of inspired words and locutions as Beckett endeavours to capture what Rimbaud himself would have felt was virtually beyond language.⁷ Most conspicuous of all is the translation of line 51 "Des écroulements d'eaux au milieu des bonaces" into the formula "The calm sea disembowelled in waterslides." Once again, it is a verb that captures the eye here and one cannot help imagining that the term "disembowelled" would have been relished by Rimbaud as an elevation of a visceral lexicon to the poetic level.⁸ Increasingly, as "Drunken Boat" proceeds, one becomes aware of how important Beckett's general familiarity with the Rimbaud canon and conception of the poetic has been in the development of this translation.

Stanza 14, which concludes this sequence of incandescent imagery and vision presented in a kaleidoscopic inventory, is another that we shall quote in its entirety in the original:

Glaciers, soleils d'argent, flots nacreux, cieux de braises,
 Echouages hideux au fond des golfes bruns
 Où les serpents géants dévorés des punaises
 Choient des arbres tordus avec de noirs parfums!

Beckett's "iridescent" and "flagrant" are adjectives which bring just the right note of exotic excitement and intoxication in line 53 and he follows this up dramatically with "horror-strewn" for "hideux" in the very next line. There is a delightful horror in his adjective "pullulant" (with lice) in line 55 and the final verbal success comes in line 56 where he emulates Rimbaud's recourse to the archaic verb "choir" with the equally effective "lapse" as the first word in the line. Again, sense has been accurately conveyed while simultaneously Beckett's text matches, and at times might even outstrip, all the linguistic luxuriance and subtlety of Rimbaud's original.

Deceleration and Disenchantment (lines 57-88)

One can identify the first line in stanza 15 as the point where "Le Bateau ivre" begins to lose both momentum and self-belief. This is not an abrupt disengagement on Rimbaud's part but rather a gradual deceleration to the point where the poem's famous finale sees such a marked contraction of horizons and expectations. The conditional tense in "J'aurais voulu" implies something less than total satisfaction but, ambiguously, the poet clings to the splendour and wonder of his journey. Beckett renders lines 57 and 58 quite literally but lines 59 and 60 see him move into a more expansive approach:

Des écumes de fleurs ont béni mes dérades,
Et d'ineffables vents m'ont ailé par instants.

In spumes of flowers I have risen from my anchors
And canticles of wind have blessed my wings.

It would be hard to find a better illustration in this whole exercise of how Beckett is not content merely to convey the general meaning of the original but is rather also bent on capturing its tone and beauty. Even, if as Leakey indicates, Rimbaud intended "bercé" and not "béni" in line 59,⁹ one is still impressed by the spirituality of the rendering, especially as readers of Rimbaud will be so acutely aware of the very real presence of mystical and religious terminology in his work as a whole.¹⁰ Thus, one is con-

vinced by the noun "canticles" and the register of Beckett's couplet seems in no way to misrepresent the ethereal serenity of Rimbaud's lines. The shift of mood mentioned above is underscored by the references in stanza 16 to martyrdom ("martyr"), distress ("sanglot") and defeat ("une femme à genoux"). The glory of the Beckett text at this point, it seems to me, lies not so much in its vocabulary but rather in its rhythmical sensitivity to "Le Bateau ivre." The clause "rocking softly on its sobbing" perfectly registers the deceleration, regret and disillusionment that will colour the text from this point to the end. Significantly, the celebrated likening of the poet-boat to a woman on her knees which occupies the whole of line 64 in "Le Bateau ivre" is condensed into less than that whole line in "Drunken Boat." Of course, this indicates the radical restructuring of Rimbaud's stanza that Beckett has embarked upon. This restructuring involves an inversion of lines 61 and 62 (a technique seen many times in "Drunken Boat"); the creation of the striking enjambment "Of gloom" (l.64), another regular feature; and the introduction of dashes in line 64 to highlight the words "like a woman kneeling." Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, Rimbaud was to turn increasingly to the *tiret* and other features of punctuation in his later prose poetry in *Une Saison en enfer* and the *Illuminations*.¹¹ Once again, then, one senses that Beckett's translation of the poem is not just conditioned by what he has found in "Le Bateau ivre" but just as importantly by a receptivity to the entire corpus of Rimbaud's work.¹²

Stanza 17 is a most interesting one. One is struck by the way in which Beckett converts the nouns "querelles" and "fientes" into "screeching" and "shiteing," this latter verb seeming a particularly appropriate choice given Rimbaud's predilection in his early verse for irreverent terminology and for words relating to excremental functions ("Oraison du soir" 'Accroupissements').¹³ "Flaxen-eyed" for "aux yeux blonds" and "trembling decks" for "ballottant" are also interesting selections but it is the ingenious rendering of "presqu'île" as a "stranded sanctuary" which is most compelling here. The idea of the boat as bird sanctuary is satisfying, not only in its conveying of the sense of the Rimbaud image,

but also in terms of how it registers the increasing sense of self-irony and self-mockery at this stage of the poem. Beckett obviously appreciated the classic contours of so many of Rimbaud's poems, not the least of these being "Le Bateau ivre," where the miracle is followed by the catastrophe¹⁴ and where the Rimbaudian self becomes alienated from its own preoccupations. It will be remembered that lines 23 and 24 were characterized in both original and translation by a proliferation of commas to convey the slow floating down of the dead. Fascinatingly, and this time without direct prompting from "Le Bateau ivre," line 67 repeats this formula and reads "Till down they swayed to sleep, the drowned, spreadeagled." Again, Beckett inverts the couplet here, concluding his 17th stanza with the penultimate line in Rimbaud's quatrain and introducing yet another dramatic verb in "sundering."

Lines 69-84, stanzas 18 to 21, involve a retrospective in which Rimbaud takes a look at his earlier image of the intoxicated traveller and juxtaposes it with his present sense of stagnation, estrangement and disenchantment. This permits Beckett to have recourse to anaphoric openings in these four stanzas ("Now I who . . ." 1.69, "Who . . ." 1.73, "Who . . ." 1.77, "I who . . ." 1.81) in a manner which recalls the earlier sequence beginning with the first person pronoun. And again one is conscious of the appropriateness of this device, given Rimbaud's frequent experimentation with this technique in texts such as "Solde," "Dévotion" and "Enfance" in the *Illuminations*. "Tangled hair" (1.69), "beyond birds" for "dans l'éther sans oiseau" (1.70) and "salved" for "repêché" are the most significant elements in the predominantly literal rendering in stanza 18. "Reeking and free in a fume of purple of spray" (1.73) contains another instance of the widespread deployment of alliteration in "Drunken Boat" while Leakey refers to "the quite anomalous 'rhyme'" in lines 74 and 75 where "flame" rhymes three times with itself.¹⁵ It is hard to imagine Beckett including any gratuitous or careless effects in such a studied and scrupulously compiled translation. Indeed, students of Beckett will need no reminding of his very attentive and fastidious interest in all linguistic matters.¹⁶ Thus, one must conclude that what seems "anomalous" here is in fact a calculated decision with the

intention of augmenting the text's internal reverberations and of meeting the demands of the quatrain form that Beckett has copied from Rimbaud. As earlier, one notes how "for a chosen poet's rapture" captures in line 75 the tongue-in-cheek effect of the original's "confiture exquisite aux bons poètes" but perhaps with a rather more understated ironic tone.

Lines 77 and 78 in the original are partially inverted, "scudded" for "courais" and the expression "Fury of timber" for "Planche folle" giving Beckett's version its own distinct flavor at this point. Beckett's lines 79 and 80 read:

When Sirius flogged into a drift of ashes
The furnace-cratered cobalt of the skies.

Here the inventiveness of "Drunken boat" as more than a mere transcription into English of "Le Bateau ivre" is apparent. Beckett's knowledge of astronomy is well advertised in both his prose writings and his drama¹⁷ and thus "Sirius" is a characteristic selection but it also corresponds nicely to the Rimbaudian predilection for vocabulary culled from specialist lexicons.¹⁸ "Flogged" might be added to the by now extended inventory of vivid verbs of action that intensify the drama of "Drunken Boat" but, by condensing Rimbaud's line 79 into half a line in this way, Beckett borrows a precious extra half-line with which to render the challenging "cieux aux ardents entonnoirs" in line 80 of the original. This "borrowing" technique is everywhere present in "Drunken Boat" and is an essential component in Beckett's rendering, without which it is certain that he would have had to content himself with a much less fluid, rhythmical and flamboyant performance. Arguments about "close" and "loose" translation do not really seem to arise in connection with "Drunken Boat" but that Beckett has been able to come up with "flogged into a drift of ashes" to replace "faisaient crouler à coups de trique" is one measure of the potential of this "translation" to transcend the material with which it is working. The final stanza in this anaphoric sequence is stanza 21 (lines 81-84). As with "nine nights" for "dix nuits" earlier, Beckett here does not reproduce Rimbaud's "cinquante lieues" but opts for the less precise and more poetic "a waste of leagues" (l.81) and

in the following line offers the neologism “turgent” for “épais.” Line 83 brings one of the most beautiful lines in the entire translation where “Fileur éternel des immobilités bleues” becomes “I weaving forever voids of spellbound blue.” Again, Beckett actualizes the line by introducing the verb “weaving” and it is interesting to see how he renders “immobilités” by a conjunction of the noun “voids” and the adjective “spellbound.” Interesting, too, is the choice of “remember” for “regrette” in line 84 as the poet-boat registers his desire to return to familiar *points de repère*. Stanza 22, however, briefly regenerates the visionary impetus of earlier lines and the verb in “launched me aloft” in lines 85/86 may be added to our inventory of such terms.

Closure (89-100)

These concluding stanzas represent a poignant scaling down of the drama and majesty of the voyage. If one thinks ahead to the *Illuminations*, one can point to poems such as “Conte” and “Aube” where we find a similar pattern of intense energy being expended, a climactic moment being reached and then the appending of a finale that would seem to denote exhaustion, disappointment and defeat. In “Drunken Boat” line 89 exchanges a noun for a verb and then a verb for an adjective so that “Mais, vrai, j’ai trop pleuré. Les aubes sont navrantes,” becomes “But no more tears. Dawns have broken my heart,” and this despair prefigures the characteristically Rimbaldian death-wish in the last line of stanza 23 “May I split from stern to stern and founder, ah founder!” Again, close reference to the *Illuminations* will show that texts such as “Nocturne vulgaire” and “Angoisse” evoke the spectacular immolation of the self in elemental ferment. Concerning line 91, one enjoys the choice of “bloated” for “gonflé” but even more intriguing is the translation of “enivrantes” as “stagnant.” In a poem whose title would seem to extol the virtues of intoxication in a very Baudelairean way,¹⁹ Beckett is still correct in interpreting “enivrantes” at this stage as a negative and ironic commentary on the voyage. The penultimate stanza is another illustration of Beckett reverting to more literal mode, a device used regularly in the course of “Drunken Boat.” This literalness might seem par-

ticularly appropriate at this stage of the poem where Rimbaud has disengaged from the heady frenzy of the visionary odyssey. What is being noted here is a sober (in various senses of the word) winding down and a return to the modest proportions of the child playing with his boat in the puddle. Despite Rimbaud's predilection for the child and his world and the associations of joy, spontaneity and drama that these usually entail for him, here it is a sense of orphanhood and abandonment that is most striking. Beckett wisely contents himself with replicating the desolation, solitude and melancholy serenity of Rimbaud's quatrain.

As with Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," the closing stanza of "Le Bateau ivre" is extremely well known. Moreover, there is a general acknowledgement that Rimbaud is a master of finales and in the *Illuminations* these finales variously challenge, perplex, threaten and surprise the reader.²⁰ Let us quote the stanza in its entirety and then consider how Beckett copes with it:

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!

"Steeped in the languors of the swell" is the beautiful introduction to Beckett's final quatrain, this being followed up by the verb "absorb" for "enlever" in line 97. As a final flourish, his concluding couplet is "Nor breast the arrogant oriflammes and banners/ Nor swim beneath the leer of the pontoons." As a rendering of "les yeux horribles," the noun "leer" is particularly felicitous and, of course, it must be remembered in considering this final stanza that it is all a reflection of narrative disenchantment as the poet abandons his voyage and looks back upon it with bitter irony. Once again the pedestrian nature of the French verb "traverser" strikes one in comparison to the English verb "breast" opted for by Beckett and the noun "oriflammes" (the sacred red banners of old French kings) strikes a mediaeval note that might make one think of the vocabulary found in many texts in Rimbaud's *Derniers vers*.²¹

In standing back from “Drunken Boat” as a whole, after a protracted stanza by stanza analysis, one is struck by a number of features. Firstly, one recalls Leakey’s contention that the piece demands reading aloud. From the heavy sibilance of the opening stanza to the alliteration in “f” and “b” in stanzas 2 and 3, from the internal reverberation of “danced” in stanza 4 to the rhyme in “pine” and “wine” in lines 18 and 20 of stanza 5, the opening of “Drunken Boat” is a strongly musicalized text which appeals constantly and in many different ways to the ear. Secondly, the text is full of accelerations and decelerations, subtle shifts in pace and tempo, great climactic flourishes and crescendos and sequences in a more muted and subdued key. One is reminded of the famous declaration made by Rimbaud in *Une Saison en enfer* where he conceives of his own imaginative processes as a vast operatic performance, “Je devins un opéra fabuleux.”²² Beckett would most certainly have been aware of the priority accorded to music and opera in Rimbaud’s work and his translation of “Le Bateau ivre” reflects this awareness. Thus we have the cadenced and restrained effects in stanza 6, to describe the floating down of the drowned, juxtaposed with the majestic energy and resonance of the very next stanza which celebrates the “arch-alcohol of song.” A third feature of “Drunken Boat” that merits comment is the number of unforgettable “one-liners” that occur. Again, a wide reading of Rimbaud, and especially of his prose poetry, quickly reveals that he had a predilection for the single-line comment and the numerous one-line finales in the *Illuminations* (“Conte,” “Aube,” “Parade”) are evidence of this.²³ In “Drunken Boat” we find the following glorious “one-liners” from the pen of Beckett:

I started awake to tempestuous hallowings (1.13)
And my eyes have fixed phantasmagoria (1.32)
And canticles of wind have blessed my wings (1.60)
I weaving for ever voids of spellbound blue (1.83)
And every moon is torment, every sun bitterness. (1.90)

Fourthly, one is struck by the richness of Beckett’s lexicon. “Arch-alcohol,” “phantasmagoria,” “alarum,” “swamp-nets,” “disembowelled,” “waterslides,” “iridescent,” “pullulant,” “lapse,” “polyps,” “vendris,” “sloops,” “sailed,” “not,” “turgent,” “oriflammes”—these

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and many other such elements show how he has mixed the highly modern term with the mediaeval, the learned word with the vulgar in such a way as to reflect the countless tones and registers of the original. Equally salient in terms of the vocabulary used in "Drunken Boat" are the many proper nouns culled from history, mythology, etc.—"Marys," "Floridas," "Leviathan," "Monitors," "Hanseatic," "Sirius," "Behemoths." These are all in the original and Beckett has faithfully reproduced them in his rendering. There can be little doubt that Rimbaud would have approved of "Drunken Boat"—insofar as he ever gave his approval to any artistic endeavor. No poet was less likely to be seduced by his own poetic accomplishments and indeed his easy disenchantment with such "accomplishments" is apparent in the structure of "Le Bateau ivre" itself with its development from initial enthusiasm, passion and vitality to the eventual loss of momentum, the sense of disillusionment and the quintessentially Rimbaudian irony trained on himself and his work. Nevertheless, one cannot help thinking of that passage early in "Délires II" ("Alchimie du verbe") in *Une Saison en enfer* where he writes of his attempt to "inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens." He at once follows up this reference to his attempts to create a new poetic language by saying "Je réservais la traduction." This is a typical refusal to share his secrets but, at least in the case of "Le Bateau ivre"/"Drunken Boat," one can thank Samuel Beckett for offering a possible "translation" of a slice of this new language.²⁴

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, "Drunken Boat": A Translation of Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Le Bateau ivre" edited with an introduction by James Knowlson and Felix Leakey, Whiteknights Press, Reading, 1976. The version of "Le Bateau ivre" used by Beckett is that of the 1912 *Mercure de France* edition by Paterne Berrichon—*Œuvres de Arthur Rimbaud: Vers et proses* (1929 reprint).

2. It is worth noting at this point that one of the most remarkable features of Beckett's subsequent career was to be the fact that he wrote both in English and French with equal felicity. Even more conspicu-

ous is the fact that so many of his famous works for fiction and drama exist in two versions, French and English—versions that can scarcely be called “translations” the one of the other but rather as works in their own right. Beckett himself was acutely aware of the challenge of transposing a work from English to French or vice versa and one might refer the interested reader to Brian T. Fitch’s excellent study *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation of the Status of the Bilingual Work*.

3. All references to “Le Bateau ivre” are from the Paternie Berrichon version. All other references to Rimbaud’s texts are from *Rimbaud, Œuvres*, Edition de Suzanne Bernard et André Guyaux, abbreviated B/G.

4. Of course, Beckett’s interest in music has been well advertised. So many of his plays contain significant musical elements with the use of the work of Schubert and Beethoven, for example. There seems little doubt that he conceived of music as a superior form of expression to words and this links him both to the general Symbolist elevation of music and to Rimbaud’s world in particular where music is central to visionary experience (“Conte,” “Génie”). A recent Radio 3 program on Beckett and music, *Ill Seen Ill Sung*, was broadcast on 5th September 1999 and throws much light on this crucial area in Beckett studies.

5. Again one thinks of Beckett’s twin versions of his own works—*Company* and *Compagnie*, *Embers* and *Cendres*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Mal vu mal dit*. It is not too fanciful to suggest that his early translations of Rimbaud, Apollinaire and others prefigure the arguably more demanding task of “translating” himself.

6. See note 2.

7. One recalls the “Lettre du voyant” where Rimbaud speaks of finding a new language and criticizes extensively the unsatisfactory idiom of the Romantics. There is a straining after a new lexicon here, one that might defy conventional decoding and thus represent that “indicable” referred to in “Conte” in the *Illuminations*.

8. There are so many examples, especially in the early verse, of Rimbaud relishing the use of terms that refer to bodily functions in an effort to cock a snook at the Parnassian notion of what constitutes “poetic” language. One thinks of the “peau moite” of Tartufe in ‘Le Châtiment de Tartufe’(B/G, 50); of the ulcerated anus of the “goddess” in “Vénus

Anadyomène" (B/G, 61); and of the "fumiers chauds" in "Les Reparties de Nina" (B/G, 67).

9. Knowlson and Leakey, p.13 where Leakey points out that Beckett has taken account of the erroneous "béni" in a most felicitous way but would have undoubtedly dealt just as capably with the correct verb "bercé" had it been presented to him.

10. One only has to think of Rimbaud's self-presentation as "le saint, en prière sur la terrasse" in "Enfance IV" (B/G, 257) in the *Illuminations* to appreciate the importance of spiritual activity in his poetry.

11. See G.M.Macklin, "Perspectives on the role of punctuation in Rimbaud's *Illuminations*," *Journal of European Studies*, vol.20, 1990, 59-72 for an analysis of the contribution of a reinvigorated punctuation to the Rimbaldian prose poem.

12. Of course, the extent to which the reader of "Drunken Boat" is familiar with the Rimbaud corpus will determine how sensitive he is to the pulses, subtleties and reverberations contained in Beckett's poem. Equally, a strong knowledge of Beckett's fiction and drama can only enhance one's understanding and appreciation of how he has handled Rimbaud's text.

13. Further examples of Rimbaud's predilection for earthy, visceral language come at the end of "Oraison du soir" ("Je pissurai . . .")—B/G, 87; and in "Accroupissements" where brother Milotus has to use the chamber pot ("Quelque chose comme un oiseau remue un peu/ A son ventre serein comme un monceau de tripe!")—B/G, 93.

14. Rimbaud's poems frequently move from an initial visionary experience to some kind of calamity. This is very noticeable in the *Illuminations*—"Conte," "Aube," "Nocturne vulgaire." See P.Broome "From Vision to Catastrophe in Rimbaud's *Illuminations*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol.15, no.4, October 1979, 361-79.

15. See note 3.

16. Beckett is renowned for his linguistic fastidiousness and the precise instructions offered in his plays, as well as his exacting demands as a stage director, suggest a scrupulous attention to detail which has undoubtedly informed his work on "Le Bateau ivre."

17. There are frequent references in Beckett's work to astronomy as, for example, in the radio play *Cendres* where Henry's story about

Bolton and Holloway alludes to “Véga dans la Lyre vert vif.” (*Cendres*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1959, 42)

18. For illustration of Rimbaud’s interest in specialized lexicons one need only consider the amazing floral and botanical terminology in “Ce qu’on dit au poète à propos de fleurs” (B/G, 115-20) and the anatomical vocabulary in “Les Assis” (B/G, 83-84).

19. In *Le Spleen de Paris* Baudelaire enjoins his reader “Il faut être toujours ivre” (in “Enivrez-vous” from Baudelaire *Œuvres complètes* I, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1975, 337).

20. Rimbaud’s skill in the presentation of finales is central to the artistic success of the *Illuminations*—see G.M. Macklin “A Study of Beginnings and Finales in Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*,” *Neophilologus*, 68, 1984, 22-36.

21. The mediaeval tonality of the *Derniers vers* is everywhere apparent from “La Rivière de cassis” to “O saisons, ô châteaux” to “Age d’or.”

22. From “Délires II” in *Une Saison en enfer*—B/G 233.

23. See G.M. Macklin “Finding the Formula: Perspectives on the One-Liner in Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*.” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol.32, no.4, October 1996, 329-42.

24. I am profoundly grateful to Professor John Pilling for permission to use what has been my main source in the preparation of this article—*Samuel Beckett “Drunken Boat”: A Translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem ‘Le Bateau ivre,’* edited with an introduction by James Knowlson and Felix Leakey, Whiteknights Press, Reading, 1976. I am also greatly indebted to M. Jérôme Lindon, Beckett’s literary executor, who allowed me to reproduce “Drunken Boat” in its entirety.

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Le Bateau ivre

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.

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-bohus plus triomphants.

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 niais des falots.

Plus douce qu'aux enfants la chair des pommes sures,
L'eau verte pénétra ma coque de sapin
Et des taches de vins bleus et des vomissures
Me lava, dispersant gouvernail et grappin.

Et, dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le poème
De la mer infusé d'astres et lactescent,
Dévorant les azurs verts où, flottaison blême
Et ravie, un noyé pensif, parfois, descend;

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

Je sais les cieux crevant en éclairs, et les trombes
Et les ressacs et les courants; je sais le soir,
L'aube exaltée ainsi qu'un peuple de colombes,
Et j'ai vu quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir.

J'ai vu le soleil bas taché d'horreurs mystiques
Illuminant de longs figements violets,
Pareils à des acteurs de drames très antiques,
Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de volets.

J'ai rêvé la nuit verte aux neiges éblouies,
Baisers montant aux yeux des mers avec lenteur,

La circulation des sèves inouïes

Et l'éveil jaune et bleu des phosphores chanteurs.

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

J'ai heurté, savez-vous? d'incroyables Florides
 Mêlant aux fleurs des yeux de panthères aux peaux
 D'hommes, des arcs-en-ciel tendus comme des brides
 Sous l'horizon des mers, à de glauques troupeaux.

J'ai vu fermenter les marais, énormes nasses
 Où pourrit dans les joncs tout un Léviathan,
 Des écroulements d'eaux au milieu des bonaces
 Et les lointains vers les gouffres cataractant!

Glaciers, soleils d'argent, flots nacreux, cieus de braises,
 Echouages hideux au fond des golfes bruns
 Où les serpents géants dévorés des punaises
 Choient des arbres tordus avec de noirs parfums!

J'aurais voulu montrer aux enfants ces dorades
 Du flot bleu, ces poissons d'or, ces poissons chantants.
 Des écumes de fleurs ont béni mes dérades,
 Et d'ineffables vents m'ont ailé par instants.

Parfois, martyr lassé des pôles et des zones,
 La mer, dont le sanglot faisait mon roulis doux,
 Montait vers moi ses fleurs d'ombre aux ventouses jaunes
 Et je restais ainsi qu'une femme à genoux.

Presqu'île ballottant sur mes bords les querelles
 Et les fientes d'oiseaux clabaudeurs aux yeux blonds,
 Et je voguais lorsqu'à travers mes liens frêles
 Des noyés descendaient dormir à reculons...

Or, moi, bateau perdu sous les cheveux des anses,
 Jeté par l'ouragan dans l'éther sans oiseau,
 Moi dont les Monitors et les voiliers des Hanses
 N'auraient pas repêché la carcasse ivre d'eau,

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,

Qui courais taché de lunules électriques,
 Planche folle, escorté des hippocampes noirs,
 Quand les Juilllets faisaient crouler à coups de triques
 Les cieus ultramarins aux ardents entonnoirs,

Moi qui tremblais, sentant geindre à cinquante lieues

Le rut des Béhémots et des Maelstroms épais,
Fileur éternel des immobilités bleues,
Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets.

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

Mais, vrai, j'ai trop pleuré. Les aubes sont navrantes,
Toute lune est atroce et tout soleil amer.
L'acre amour m'a gonflé de torpeurs enivrantes.
Oh! que ma quille éclate! Oh! que j'aille à la mer!

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

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!

Drunken Boat

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.

Blanker than the brain of a child I fled
Through winter, I scoured the furious jolts of the tides,
In an uproar and a chaos of Peninsulas,
Exultant, from their moorings in triumph torn.

I started awake to tempestuous hallowings.
Nine nights I danced like a cork on the billows, I danced
On the breakers, sacrificial, for ever and ever,
And the crass eye of the lanterns was expunged.

More firmly bland than to children apples' firm pulp,
Soaked the green water through my hull of pine,
Scattering helm and grappling and washing me
Of the stains, the vomitings and blue wine.

Thenceforward, fused in the poem, milk of stars,
Of the sea, I coiled through deeps of cloudless green,
Where, dimly, they come swaying down,
Rapt and sad, singly, the drowned;

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.

I know the heavens split with lightnings and the currents
Of the sea and its surgings and its spoutings; I know evening,
And dawn exalted like a cloud of doves.
And my eyes have fixed phantasmagoria.

I have seen, as shed by ancient tragic footlights,
Out from the horror of the low sun's mystic stains,
Long weals of violet creep across the sea
And peals of ague rattle down its slats.

I have dreamt the green night's drifts of dazzled snow,
The slow climb of kisses to the eyes of the seas,
The circulation of unheard of saps,
And the yellow-blue alarum of phosphors singing.

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.

I have fouled, be it known, unspeakable Florides, tangle of
The flowers of the eyes of panthers in the skins of
Men and the taut rainbows curbing,
Beyond the brows of the seas, the glaucous herds.

I have see Leviathan sprawl rotting in the reeds
Of the great seething swamp-nets;
The calm sea disembowelled in waterslides
And the cataracting of the doomed horizons.

Iridescent waters, glaciers, suns of silver, flagrant skies,
And dark creeks' secret ledges, horror-strewn,
Where giant reptiles, pullulant with lice,
Lapse with dark perfumes from the writhing trees.

I would have shown to children those dorados
Of the blue wave, those golden fish, those singing fish;
In spumes of flowers I have risen from my anchors
And canticles of wind have blessed my wings.

Then toward me, rocking softly on its sobbing,
Weary of the torment of the poles and zones,
The sea would lift its yellow polyps on flowers
Of gloom and hold me—like a woman kneeling—

A stranded sanctuary for screeching birds,
Flaxen-eyed, shiteing on my trembling decks,
Till down they swayed to sleep, the drowned, spreadeagled,
And, sundering the fine tendrils, floated me.

Now I who was wrecked in the inlets' tangled hair
And flung beyond birds aloft by the hurricane,
Whose carcass drunk with water Monitors
And Hanseatic sloops could not have salvaged;

Who, reeking and free in a fume of purple spray,
Have pierced the skies that would flame as a wall would flame
For a chosen poet's rapture, and stream and flame
With solar lichen and with azure snot;

Who scudded, with my escort of black sea-horses,
Fury of timber, scarred with electric moons,
When Sirius flogged into a drift of ashes
The furnace-cratered cobalt of the skies;

I who heard in trembling across a waste of leagues
The turgent stroms and Behemoths moan their rut,
I weaving for ever voids of spellbound blue,
Now remember Europe and her ancient ramparts.

I saw archipelagoes of stars and islands launched me
Aloft on the deep delirium of their skies:
Are these the fathomless nights of your sleep and exile,
Million of golden birds, oh Vigour to be?

But no more tears. Dawns have broken my heart,
And every moon is torment, every sun bitterness;
I am bloated with the stagnant fumes of acrid loving -
May I split from stem to stern and founder, ah founder!

I want none of Europe's waters unless it be
The cold black puddle where a child, full of sadness,
Squatting, looses a boat as frail
As a moth into the fragrant evening.

Steeped in the languors of the swell, I may
Absorb no more the wake of the cotton-freighters,
Nor breast the arrogant oriflammes and banners,
Nor swim beneath the leer of the pontoons.