

WRITING RIMBAUD VARIATIONS

A few years ago I completed versions of Lorca's *Sonnets of Dark Love*, following my dissatisfaction with published translations and my curiosity about testing whether my voice could harmonize with another sonneteer. I've loved experimenting with sonnets for nearly twenty years, and translating a famous sonneteer seemed to be an exciting way of developing my interest in that form.

Are these translations or versions? I feel more comfortable calling them versions, following the interesting distinctions made by Don Paterson between the two enterprises.

My intention was to work collaboratively with Rimbaud, with his voice and his images: to experiment with ventriloquism, me being the dummy and Rimbaud the speaker. I also worked collaboratively with my husband and literal translator, teasing out the rhythms and meanings, returning again and again to the original French, but always with the intention of creating a fresh English poem that's faithful to Rimbaud's spirit. Working collaboratively with an expert in French was an exciting development from writing poetry in isolation, the traditional way.

For several months I worked on a group of seven Rimbaud sonnets, many of which might have a ghostly subheading of *Ah! The joys of youth*. It's a young man speaking these lines: his energy; his poverty; his love of the body (his own and others'); his boastfulness and ambition; his urge to shock; his delight in walking, eating, drinking, flirting, poetry and pissing.

While I stayed faithful to the originals' stanza divisions, I decided from the outset (as with my Lorca versions) that I would write unrhymed sonnets, even if half-rhymes sometimes arose naturally during composition. It seemed to me that my primary loyalty must be to Rimbaud's images and metaphors. I didn't want to be diverted by the requirement to force a rhyme, which might take me onto paths Rimbaud never trod. Saying that, I admit to taking liberties with the originals at times, in the interests of keeping energy in my English versions. If they don't keep a contemporary reader on their toes I feel I won't have done Rimbaud justice.

Along with avoiding a rhyme-scheme, I'll confess my biggest deviations as examples: introducing beer in the first stanza of *Au Cabaret-Vert* (whereas Rimbaud's order is alcohol-free); introducing a gull and girl on the green tablecloth (whereas Rimbaud generalizes *les sujets tres naiifs*.) In *Ma Boheme* the original's Fantasy, Muse, Tom Thumb and Great Bear have vanished. Blackberries appear in my second stanza, but were prompted by the implications of Rimbaud's *j'egrenais*, since I felt driven to follow the logic of that verb to its source.

No more excuses. Are they translations, versions or a quirky hybrid? If they're sonnets which catch some of Rimbaud's exuberance and startling imagery, I hope he'll forgive my liberties. Given Rimbaud's love of rule-breaking, I kid myself that he would.