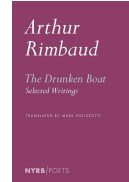


REVIEW

**Review of Mark Polizzotti's translation of *Arthur Rimbaud, The Drunken Boat: Selected Writings***

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New quality translations of a poet like Arthur Rimbaud are always welcome. This is due largely to the fact that even 150 years after he laid down his pen for good, Rimbaud still feels new, still feels fresh. Indeed, it is impossible to even conceive of the youthful rebel aging, his verse remains so timeless. To illustrate this eternal return, in my own attempts to present Rimbaud to undergrads, I have often related the anecdote of Jim Morrison penning a fan letter to literature professor Wallace Fowlie, thanking him for his 1966 translation of Rimbaud's verse, then telling of the latter's essay comparing the two *The Rebel as Poet* (1994). Last time I tried that angle, however, I was bewildered to see students cock their heads sideways and glance at each other in confusion, before one brave soul raised her hand: "Who is Jim Morrison?" Nevertheless, despite glaring lacunae in their music education, they loved Rimbaud – for his attitude, for his irreverence, for the primal scream that is his poetic voice.

The nod of New York Review Books to an accomplished and adept translator like Mark Polizzotti to translate Rimbaud was an inspired choice. Given his books on Bob Dylan, Luis Buñuel and André Breton, Polizzotti is someone who has proven himself to be at great ease gravitating between the popular culture worlds of poetry, music and film – with a clear penchant for young turks and *poètes maudits*. As a translator, he manages to capture the spirit of a maniacal 19<sup>th</sup>-century perfectionist like Gustave Flaubert as effectively as he does the rhythmic modernity of Marguerite Duras or the masterful, terse contemporary prose of Patrick Modiano. With an acknowledgement of building on the shoulders of his predecessors, Polizzotti defines his point of departure for Rimbaud to be an attempt to capture the poet's unique *tone*, "to echo his French voice" (xxiv) and "to create English poems that sound to (his) inner ear like Rimbaud's French" (xxiv). In other words, this is not the Rimbaud of Fowlie; neither is it that of poet John Ashberry, nor of Paul Schmidt – all of which achieve their ends, no less. In *The Drunken Boat: Selected Writings*, Polizzotti transmits all of the punch and the punkish verve of Rimbaud. For, as he puts it, "Rimbaud's poetry is above all a poetics of feeling, or, as he described it, of sensation" (xxiv).

Digging into the edition's parallel text, which is a boon for readers wishing also to orient themselves with the original French, one notices that Polizzotti accomplished what he set out to do. In the opening lines of "Romances," all of the impetuous defiance of Rimbaud is felt when the translation begins, "No one's serious at seventeen. / – Nice evening out, to hell with beers and lemonade, / And rowdy cafés with glaring lights!" (27). This is not linear or verbatim, but it does capture that feeling, that sensation that is so much a part of Rimbaud. Or, in the oft-anthologized "Vowels," the bold choice to conclude the sonnet with "violet beam of Your Eyes!" (69) – when

the original possessive pronoun is the less definite “rayon violet de Ses Yeux!” (68) – Polizzotti demonstrates that feeling foils literatim accuracy. In fact, he explains this choice in his endnotes as a deliberate attempt to preserve the ambiguity of the identity of whose eyes they are: his, hers or God’s (270). Even Rimbaud’s most famous sonnet “Le Dormeur du val” takes a new sensorial form with Polizzotti’s rendering “Sleeper in the Valley,” and the bucolic scene is presented as pristinely as the original, up to the point after the poem’s *chute*, when we discover the tragic true nature of this slumber – the fragmentary final lines read almost like an autopsy medical report: “Right side pierced by two crimson holes” (35).

Further into the translation, the volume’s namesake *The Drunken Boat* conveys all of the swaying, swooning and distress of the original, just as the “automatic” associations and the delirium of *A Season in Hell* that drew the interest of Jim Morrison, the Beats, Henry Miller, etc., are all sensed. For the selected letters that close the volume, the choices include the most important elements of his correspondence: from the hopeful fan letter to Verlaine that changed literary history, to the missives to Georges Izambard and Paul Demeny that trace his progression (if not to say his “illumination”), to his sweet apology to Verlaine from London, followed by his police deposition a week later in Brussels and his subsequent decrying of Verlaine’s return to Christianity, ending with his farewell to literature as he fled to Africa at the beginning of his fame in France. Yet again, Polizzotti’s attention to sentiment in these letters remains entirely true to Rimbaud.

To discuss the material nature of the book, readers will be pleased to note that it is a lightweight and affordable paperback. Not a scholarly critical edition, the 13-page introduction paints an essential portrait of the biography-become-myth of Rimbaud and the endnotes are minimal, offering more context than embarking on any analytical depth or engaging the existing scholarship. NYRB should be praised for their efforts in this series to make available affordable paperback translations of key poets, much like Lawrence Ferlinghetti did (and *City Lights* continues to do) with contemporary world poets.

As a translator of poetry myself, I would welcome a rendering of Rimbaud’s early verse, with all of its Parnassian attention to versification and prosody, that aims to maintain meter and rhyme. Then again, that never was the intention of Polizzotti, whose stated objectives were clear from the outset. Not only does he seize on the sensations of Rimbaud and capture his French voice, he also ties the poet into that long French tradition of the tattered genius, rebel troubadour, à la François Villon or Diderot’s fictional Nephew of the composer Rameau. Adolescents discovering Rimbaud for the first time or seasoned scholars who have read each and every translation will find value and a faithful guide in Polizzotti’s masterful rendering of Rimbaud’s poetic voice.