

BOOKS BY PIERRE MICHON IN ENGLISH

The Origin of the World

Masters and Servants

Small Lives

The Eleven

Winter Mythologies/Abbots

Rimbaud the Son

PIERRE MICHON

TRANSLATED BY JODY GLADDING AND

ELIZABETH DESHAYS

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There is a whole epoch between us and, today, an entire country of snow.

—Mallarmé

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TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

Take it into your head to write a preface to Rimbaud, writes Pierre Michon, and your wings fall off; you start quoting the saints of the almanac. Duly warned, we proceed with caution and will be brief. *Rimbaud le fils* (Rimbaud the Son) was published in France in 1991, seven years after Michon's first book, *Vies minuscules* (Small Lives). *Vies minuscules* won Michon immediate acclaim and was quickly followed by other successes; *Rimbaud le fils* was his fifth published work. Although still relatively unknown to readers in the United States, Michon is widely recognized in Europe as one of France's foremost contemporary writers. He won the Grand Prix du Roman from the Académie Française for his most recent novel, *Les Onze* (The Eleven), and the Prix de la Ville de Paris for his entire opus.

In *Rimbaud le fils*, Michon asks what drives art. What explains a poet's devotion to the word and then our own devotion to that poet after he abandons it? Through Rimbaud, Michon explores his recurring themes: the absent father, the smothering mother, the backwater upbringing, and how they shape that tortured mix of genius and ambition we call an artist. Although Michon begins with Vitalie Cuif, Rimbaud's mother, it is really the paternal line, the father—or fathers—that interests him. *Rimbaud le fils* traces lineage as determined by literature and how Rimbaud becomes literature incarnate, only to reject that patrimony.

Michon is a virtuosic writer whose medium is language, yet his imagination is visual. Rimbaud is revealed to us in images. We see him first sitting for a school photograph. Later we follow him to Étienne Carjat's studio for the shooting of that iconic portrait with the crooked tie. And finally there he is in Harar, posing before the banana fields, a figure no longer identifiable as "poetry in person." These are all photographs but Michon's methods are painterly. His eye for color, his sense of depth, dimension, composition, the way he returns again and again to the image, adding layer upon layer—this renders *Rimbaud le fils* a meticulously painted canvas, or many canvases, from which the poet eternally escapes.

Dense and poetic, Michon's work calls for every translation trick in the book. A Michon sentence is an architectural feat: shift the position of a verb, extract a semicolon, and the whole thing topples. But the delight of bringing Michon into English is multiplied by the daunting nature of the task. And by the sheer mastery of Michon's prose: "What makes men write? Other men, their mothers, the stars, or the old enormous things, God, language? The powers know. The powers of the air are this breath of wind through the leaves. The night turns. The moon rises, there is no one against the haystack. Rimbaud, in the attic among some pages, has turned toward the wall and sleeps like lead." What makes men write? Michon does not answer this question. But few writers have asked it so beautifully.

IT IS SAID THAT VITALIE RIMBAUD, NÉE CUIF

It is said that Vitalie Rimbaud, née Cuif, country girl and bad-natured woman, suffering and bad-natured, gave birth to Arthur Rimbaud. It is not known if she cursed first and suffered after, or if she cursed at having to suffer and persisted in that malediction; or if, joined like the fingers on her hand, curse and suffering overlapped in her mind, switched places, reinforced one another, so that, irritated by their touch, she crushed her life, her son, her living and her dead between her dark fingers. But it is known that the husband of this woman who was the father of this son, although alive, became a phantom in the purgatory of distant garrisons where he was only a name, when the son was six years old. There is some debate over whether that lightweight father, who was a captain, who read Arabic and dabbled in the annotation of grammar books, was justified in abandoning that creature of darkness who wanted to sweep him under her shadow, or if she only became that way because of the darkness into which his departure cast her; we just do not know. It is said that the child, with phantom on one side of his desk and creature of curse and disaster on the other, was the perfect schoolboy and had a strong attraction for the ancient game of verse: perhaps in the old perfunctory tempo of twelve feet he heard the phantom bugle of distant garrisons, and also the paternosters of the creature of disaster who in order to recite her accursed suffering, had found God, just as her son, to the same end, discovered verse; and in that scansion he married the bugle and the paternosters, perfectly. Verse is an old matchmaker. So it seems that he composed it in great quantities from a very tender age, some in Latin, some in French; in these verses, which still exist, no miracle took place: they are from the hand of a gifted provincial child whose anger has not yet found its own consubstantial rhythm, that true rhythm thanks to which it is changed into charity without losing a fraction of its fine edge, anger and charity blended in the same movement released in a single burst and falling back with all their weight, or taking off but remaining there mixed, heavy, disabled, like fireworks that go off in your hand though sparking impeccably, all of which would later assume the name of Arthur Rimbaud. These were the exercises of a schoolboy. In the period when he was covering page after lined page with these practical scales, it is clear that the polite smile was not his forte and that he sulked, as shown in the photos that devout hands here and there have collected, multiplied like loaves, and that have passed unaltered through all the devout hands in the world: with, on his lap, the small round military cap of the Rossat Institute in Charleville, with that ridiculous scrap of clerical lingerie on his arm with which mothers used to deck out their sons for communion, here his small fingers slipped into the edge of a missal that appears cabbage green, there well hidden in the secret hollow of the kepi, but always the direct and wicked gaze, held out before him like a fist, as though greatly detesting or desiring the photographer who in those days covered himself with a black hood in order to fashion a future out of the past, to tamper with time, the child endlessly sulked. And the rest of his life, or our devotion, teaches us that beneath that appearance the true extent of his anger was considerable: not simply against the armband and the kepi but against the armband and the kepi as well. For under those old castoffs, it is said, there was the shade of the Captain and the living creature of refusal and disaster, of refusal in the name of God who castigated his soul in order that he become Rimbaud: not there in person, but their fabled effigies on either side of the desk; and though perhaps hating them both with all his might, and thus hating the verses in which paternosters and bugles married, he truly loved the mission that they required of him. That was why he was sulking. He persisted, and we know what followed.

Or perhaps he did not hate them at all: hate is not a good matchmaker. Verses are made to be given away, so that in exchange you are given something resembling love; they compose bridal wreaths; and

as disastrous as she was, perhaps because she was so, the creature's vocation more than anyone's was to receive love, and why not give it: like everyone else, she aspired to impossible nuptials, whether knowingly or not. But since she had foundered in paternosters, had devoted herself to the dark, to the dark fingers inside her ripping her joy to shreds, since she had gotten herself up to her neck in the irremediable, the incommensurable, and finally since she, too, sulked, the usual childish gifts, the flowers and little smiles, the Hugoesque sentimentalities, which are, after all, part of reality as well and keep love circulating among creatures without disaster, all that was lost on her. The flowers and little smiles she ripped to shreds, like everything else: because she did not love this son who was her, because she did not love herself, who knows? because all she loved in herself was the bottomless well in which everything foundered; and she was too busy feeling her way along the dark walls of that well groping for the bottom, to notice the small flowers that grew on the coping. More potent offerings were needed. And the son, having always known that the bouquets and simpering smiles, the neat tie, clean trousers, the air of the little gentleman, all filial artifices reminiscent of Victor Hugo were not sufficient, did not work, were rejected, fell into the well, crushed between two dark fingers, her son had found a solution equal to her own, and fashioned for that incommensurable grief incommensurable little gifts—paternosters of his own invention: long passages of rhymed language that she did not understand, but as she pored over them perhaps without being able to read them she saw something disproportionate as her well and unrelenting as her fingers, the mark of a ravaging passion that has forgotten its cause and overshot its effect, of pure, ineffectual love; churchlike things wrapped up in lugubrious finales, smacking of the boot and the dungeon; wooden language out of which he made her a gift box; Latin diatribes on Jugurtha and Hercules, dead captains of the dead language; and in those diatribes no doubt there were flights of doves, June mornings and trumpets, but it all fell onto the page in an opaque idiom of pure December, arranged calligraphically as verses are that is to say, between two margins a sheer, narrow well of ink, to the bottom of which you drop, page after page. And before all that perhaps she exulted, wordlessly; she recognized herself, and in the Charleville dining room the seated child who looked up at her saw her gaping for a moment, as if astonished, respectful, envious, the fingers in her ceasing to crush the dark and the source of curse drying up, growing calm, as if in this wooden language that she could not read she sensed the work of a well digger more powerful than she was, who dug more deeply and more irremediably, who was her master and in some way her savior. It could be that she caressed his head then. Because it was a gift, in a sense. And when at other times the child read aloud before her the final draft of his Virgilian verses honed to their most true for the local competition, as we can imagine he often did, just as the girls at Saint-Cyr did for the king, and she, the country girl, seated like the king, flabbergasted but reticent, disdainful, royal, which is to say merciless, when thus he went before her with his most high paternosters, he, too, royal, impassioned, admirable and ridiculous like the little Bonaparte at Brienne vaguely terrifying like him, we can imagine that they were closer at that time than they would have thought possible; but very far apart, both of them on their thrones and not wanting to come down, in the way of two sovereigns of distant capitals who are in correspondence. So in his early years he spoke his poetry and she listened, I am sure. They gave each other this gift, as others offer bouquets and are then embraced by their mothers, under the smiling gaze of their fathers; and the father was there as well, they could hear the lost bugle in the wooden language. Yes, those two incommensurables face to face in Charleville dining rooms crossed swords with one another, gave each other a kind of love: dictated so by means of language suspended in the air and rhythmical. But while the language conducted its sabbath high above the dining-room light, they themselves, their bodies here below, seated, or standing and reciting leaning against the table, their bodies sulked.

And that too has no doubt been said, because with regard to that childish pout before the photographer, and with regard to Vitalie Rimbaud's pout which is not known because no photographer

captured it once and for all under his black hood, everything has been said. And nearly everything has been said as well with regard to the other one who must not have been very much fun either, the shadow who attended those verbal jousts in the dining room in absentia, the Captain, of whom for now we have no photograph either, and yet sometimes we have no doubt that he posed in Purgatory before a camera, among some noncommissioned officers in distant garrisons, smoothing his imperial beard with two fingers or playing cards or with his hand on his sword—and maybe at the precise moment when he remembered young Arthur. He remembers Arthur in a garret in the Ardennes, in yellowed sepia; it is a hundred years since anyone has seen him, behind him a bugle sounds, we do not hear it. The devout will find this portrait some day, you will muse over it, you will see the hand on the hilt or smoothing the moustache, you will not know what he was thinking. But for the moment you do not know this face.

On the other hand, we know the faces of the child's other relatives because there are photographs of them, and before photographs, painted portraits, from the age when only the hand of the painter tampered with time, using pigments from the earth, not yet the silver chlorides in the box of tricks under the black hood. Because as we know, other ancestors engendered him, remained close to him, not only in photographs, and they were as much at his beck and call as the mother was intractable, and less phantoms on the whole than the father, more flagrant, better vouched for by the thick books with their names on them than the father with his *Bescherelle* grammar book, abandoned in Charleville in the haste of his departure, which was also thick, it is true, but the trace of the father in the margins, learned annotations in spidery scrawl, was infinitesimal; and the grammar book did not bear the name of Rimbaud printed on it, but the name of the *Bescherelle* brothers. Yes, pure of any kinship with the Captain and the Captain's wife, and perhaps also contingent with regard to them as the seven distant planets are with regard to the moon and the sun, the grandfathers appeared magisterially, the beacons as they were called, distant stars in the darkness of schools, Malherbe and Racine, Hugo, Baudelaire and little Banville; who, one arising from the next, had begotten one another in approximately that order, had launched the canonical filiation that heats up the twelve feet two by two, all come from there, all strung along the great twelve-foot rod like brilliant diverse but similar rings, and out of that slight variation being born, being named; who, by that very long umbilical cord stretching back to Virgil, Virgil who had not needed twelve feet because he was the Old Man, the founder, he had all license; who, beyond Virgil, beyond Homer, were rooted perhaps in the heart of the ineffable Name; who, to perpetuate the lineage, all had special license from beyond to beget one another, bypassing women, bypassing the cursing women, and speaking louder than the cursing women, in big mute books; and the latest offspring had this pile of readily available ancestors on his little desk in Charleville. He was not sure that he would be among them; but he already was, because as loyally as he venerated them, he did not only venerate them, he detested them in that same heart; they stood between him and the ineffable Name, they were heavy, they were in the way. We know that he surpassed them in the end, that he vanquished them and was their master; in no time at all, he broke the rod and on it broke himself.

AND AMONG ALL THOSE AWARDS DAY FIGURES

And among all those Awards Day figures, the seventeenth-century wigs, the beards of 1830, Racine, Hugo, the others, whose busts at that time sat on pianos, behind large bouquets of peonies in the homes of genteel nightcaps who believed themselves to be poets and who were, or perhaps whose small, two-bit lithographs decorated the garrets of young greenhorn poseurs who believed themselves to be poets and who were, among all those bronze and wooden faces appears for us the poet Georges Izambard, famous in his way. Only the muse duped him, so he does not rise among the stars in the procession of the masters of the rod, no one made a bust of him, he is in the abyss where the twelve syllables let him fall. He dedicated his life to them. The rod loves whom it pleases. He too wanted to be Shakespeare, in his youth: but that came to an end when he was twenty-two years old, in the spring of 1870, in that schoolroom by the window through which schoolboys saw chestnut trees in blossom, and where he alone, Izambard, saw Rimbaud on a school bench become Rimbaud. The poet Izambard holds for eternity the Charleville School chair in rhetoric; he is forever twenty-two years old, his long life a dead letter, and as for the collections that he nevertheless composed and later published, in the eyes of time it is as though he had pissed into the wind. But he was that young man in that classroom that is why his photograph is there, not very large, not full-page, at the very beginning of the iconographies, as some vague precursor or minor figure could have appeared if photography had been invented at the time of the ancient referential story, a second, not even John the Baptist, not even Joseph the carpenter, but maybe the head workman in Joseph's shop, the one who taught the Son how to hold a plane and whom the four Gospels do not even mention. And of course in this case the plane was the twelve feet in the French style, with all their old tricks since Malherbe, with all their new tricks too, those of the good Parnassians invoked by Izambard. Consequently, beginning with Izambard, the schoolboy's practice scales abandoned the wooden language of the *oremus* and easily played the hereditary instrument, the one passed down from Villon to Coppée; that is, French; where meaning openly appears: from then on he could have dedicated his diatribes to the queen Carabosse in the same language that Carabosse spoke, and no longer in the matte idiom of December, he could have pitted himself against her in the language of June. But he did not do so; apparently those diatribes were no longer for her: because he was a grown boy now and had let go of his mother's skirts; above all because if he had spoken those verses under the dining-room light, his love would have burst forth without measure in the clarity of the meaning, and he would have fallen on the floor before her, babbling like an infant, his infant tears rendering him speechless from the first hemistich, and perhaps then in the clarity of the meaning she would have passionately picked him up, sat him on her knees, wiped his nose, caressed him and consoled him; perhaps she herself would have been a bit consoled: and poetry does not want such consolations, they render it mute. It is also said that under Izambard's reign, right beneath his eyes the practice scales became a work of art, that is to say an ogre; and if the child did not deign to recite them to the old queen it was because his anger toward her had grown, was hungry, felt its wings and seven-league boots, burned to pit itself against sovereigns of another caliber, to bring them down one after another, mercilessly to dig wells under them to engulf them. And he began with Izambard.

Nevertheless he loved Izambard; but the work, the art, made use of Izambard and did not love him.

No doubt the creature of disaster knew that and could not say it, but not Izambard, who could have said it; not Izambard, fresh from teachers college with his gentle air and his cocky ways, his little pince-nez, the quiver of his lip, his hair slightly but not overly long, that fervent republicanism that

his whole figure bore, that reserve, decent, timid and brave, which is how he remains, behind the silver chlorides with which the great magic captured him at twenty-two years old. Alas, the poet Izambard knew nothing of all that when he began his school year in 1870, crossed the courtyard under the chestnut trees, caught sight of the little group in caps who were waiting for him there outside the classroom, and straightened up cockily then, nose in the air toward the clear sky and fashioning for himself who knows what azure—an azure without malice in any case: because, out of bravery or timidity, he did not want to see the pall that is behind perfect azures, is basic and fundamental to them, and which it is precisely azure's mission to conceal, to paint in glory; without which azure is a pot of blue paint, a lapis-lazuli preciousity; and he loved and practiced poetry no doubt, but in the way of those men passionate about hunting, books on hunting, the lovely stories of autumn with feathers and blood, high-sounding words of venery, of falconry, hunting horns in a corner of the woods resounding like an angel, but who, gun in hand and hare with its expressive ears bolting at their feet, begin to tremble, close their eyes and shoot to the side. And when they return they say that it was a good hunt. Neither did Izambard want to kill anyone and nevertheless believed that it would be a good hunt; and if, entering his classroom after lessons and taking a seat at his request, you had asked him what he considered poetry to be, he no doubt would have responded, blushing, becoming flustered, perhaps removing his pince-nez to wipe the condensation with a teachers college handkerchief, and gazing out the window rather than looking at you, he would have answered in a tone of both audacity and panic that it was a matter of the heart thanks to which language is adorned like a bride, or perhaps since Baudelaire, eyes made up, pockmarked, but glorious and adorned like a fine whore—but surely not a dark peasant woman who digs a hole into which language disproportionately plunges and vibrates. He believed that it *was good*, poetry; that it was entirely on the side of good, the Republic and Awards Day, and not on the side of Sedan and great massacres; that it was one's duty to remove the obstacles spitefully placed before poetry by evil spirits, which lead to deaths and above all to those invitations to crime, the armband and the kepi: and that, with those garish rags stripped away, each of us would democratically become a poet, because it only takes a childlike imagination, the discipline of rhymes and the freedom of freedom. You would have granted him the discipline of rhymes; as for the rest, no doubt you would have had your reservations and kept them to yourself; but if you found yourself impassioned by this young man's impromptu speech, your legs stretched uncomfortably under the small desk and your heart nevertheless exalted by the high blossoms in the leaves almost discernible through the window, if thus you had objected that poetry cannot be wholly on the side of good, since our first parents in the Garden of Eden did not speak, communicated in the way of flowers through bees, winged messengers, and would feel their tongues loosen only after the angel had shown them the door; if you had argued that language comes to humans after the Fall, when matter no longer sings; that poetry, which is the language of language, also falls into the universal well and perhaps twice as quickly, unless in its frenzied duplication it ceaselessly climbs back up using all its strength is almost at the coping, falls back deeper, and so makes use of its free freedom—and if you yourself were indecisive then, searching for words, blurting them out with audacity and panic—then he would have carefully folded the teachers college handkerchief, replaced his pince-nez, and looking you up and down, clearing his throat, would have asked you coldly to which sect you belonged. And you would have blushed in turn, gazed out at the chestnut trees in the evening, and spoken of Sedan.

Although it would not have been Sedan that crossed your lips; you are in that classroom three to six months before Sedan, before Sedan becomes that closed fist in history, when it is still only a garrison in the Ardennes; you would have spoken of Solferino or Sebastopol, some massacre or another, only emphasize that evil is out there, not in Malherbe but in Louis-Napoleon, not in language but in the aberration of action, flagrant and indisputable when the Carabosse of combat, the goddess of crows, is dancing on dead armies; and to agree heartily with Izambard that the Carabosses are in the armband

and the kepi, but not in poetry, which is all good fairy. And Izambard, reassured—not about poetry but on your account—would have accompanied you to the door, said his polite teachers college good-byes, made a Latin joke; and you would have taken leave of him with a Latin joke and much inward respect; because Izambard was one of those men thanks to whom the world can endure, for whom evil is elsewhere, close at hand but outside, omnipresent but remediable, one of that old species of men who fight for the good that they believe they feel inside themselves: and since at twenty-two he thought that Carabosse—I mean Vitalie Cuif this time—was exactly the opposite of poetry, that she was an obstacle in its way, that she was guilty of too much prose and of corrupting the free poetry of her son, he helped Arthur to rid himself of her; and for the future of *la poésie française*, if that old nightingale still exists, he did well—but not in the way he believed he did well: because as often happens, the mother, dismissed from the affections of the son, repudiated, mocked, excluded from the world and disavowed, the mother disappeared from among the visible creatures and took refuge completely within the son, gathered her old skirts in both hands and leapt wholly into the son, into the dark, never-opened inner closet where, we are told, we are unconscious of our actions and we act; there she rejoined the Captain, who had been there for some time with his sword and his shako; but she made more noise than the Captain. And such things often happen; but it happens less often that the son is Arthur Rimbaud, whose notable actions were only beautiful verses; and it was with the dark fingers that I mentioned, but this time tampering with the son, gripping the son, locked into the son, that the most beautiful verses were spun out two by two: yes, we can imagine that the age-old alexandrine was prodigiously exalted, then irrevocably destroyed in about 1872 by a sad woman who scratched, flailed and raved in a child.

Perhaps after all Izambard had an inkling of that, though it was beyond him. Perhaps when, a year later, Rimbaud mocked and disposed of him in his turn, sold off the good master's books and put him in the closet, he discerned that poetry *was bad*; that the old witch whom he believed he was doing in was, in the end, the one who made poetry and would do him in; he could not not perceive all that, anymore than he could admit that he had perceived it: and that is undoubtedly why, knowing but not wanting to know, the poet Izambard forever pissed into the wind. And that is not our concern. We can leave that classroom; put on your top hat, there are boys watching you: they raise their little shakos when you pass them in the shade of the chestnut trees, they take you for the inspector, perhaps one of them is scowling, sticks up his nose conspicuously and keeps his kepi firmly on. Nothing is more beautiful than those May chestnut trees above him. Remaining at his doorway, the rhetoric classroom already dark behind him, Izambard regards the evening shadow and you, leaving, within it, you become that shadow. He is talking to himself in Latin. You did not turn around; what you are seeking is not within Izambard's domain.

NEITHER WAS IT WITHIN BANVILLE'S DOMAIN

Neither was it within Banville's domain.

He too appears in this story, not long after Izambard, because we know that the adolescent sent him verses, care of the publisher Lemerre, into which he had put his whole heart; and the first, no doubt, that he considered presentable to an established poet. The triumphs of Awards Day were no longer enough for him; they had served their purpose; they had nurtured in that angry heart a brutal ambition at the same time as was born there that uncertain faculty, pose or task or revelation from On High, or bit of all three, that was called *genius* in those times, that almost supernatural attribute that never appears itself, overhead or in the living visible body, as halo, vigor, beauty, or youth, but that nevertheless appears in minute effects and which is confirmed in the perfection of bits of coded language more or less lengthy written in black and white. We know that these bits are generally infinitesimal. We who read them never know if they are perfect or if it was whispered to us in childhood that they were perfect, and we in turn whisper it to others, ad infinitum; and the one who writes them does not know any more than we do, if anything less, he knows it only at the moment when he joins the rods, when fitting together flawlessly like mortise and tenon they briefly exult, closing with the triumphant sound of jaws, and it is over; and when it is over once again he trembles, that is him, the poet, in those jaws, the rod has deserted him there and he no longer knows how to write, even if he, like Field Marshal Hugo, had laid out rod upon rod until he died, even if he himself were the jubilant jaws of the shark and *verse in person*. Thus he trembles at his desk like a rat; but when he goes out he wants some kind of halo to appear over his head, and he wants to be told so: for he cannot see it himself. And to return to Rimbaud's genius, to that most precise and furious ambition in the heart of the Ardennes in the scrap of a sulky man who was also and at the same time pure love—because all that is mixed together, byzantine and multiple as the old theology—to return to the one who is like the emblem for that conflict, that byzantine knot, we do not know if ambition precedes or foments genius, engenders it by strength of toil, or if, on the contrary, by pure miracle unfurling its wings, genius only afterward becomes aware of the shadow they cast and the men who rush into this mirage, and from then on, he who is the plaything of that phantom attribute and projects that shadow becomes infatuated with it, wants ever more of it, damns himself.

No, we do not know if it is pure or impure. We do not know if at the beginning there is the Word on the stack of ribboned books that, with little ceremonies, a subprefect in full uniform on a raised platform delivers into your hands. But, born of the Word, which since the beginning whispers where will and has no residence, not Charleville, Patmos, or Guernsey, or born very locally of awards in excellence acclaimed in a local school auditorium in July with potted plants and flags, there is *genius* since the word is in the language; since we use this abuse of language; and no doubt it does not exist, but the poets of that time wanted to be rewarded with that which did not exist: the older ones wanted to be reassured continually by honorary chairs under the dome of the Academy, by crowds taking off their hats to them, and when through misfortune they were without an audience in Guernsey, they summoned out of the air Shakespeare, Mozart, Virgil, who in fatherly fashion rushed over the sea to reassure them, with all the little hands of the sea clapping—and in heavy weather the big hands: and the Old Man on his gray island leaning over his *séance* table was at the opening night of *Hernani* with the red waistcoat, exiled he heard the audience of *Hernani*. And the young ones waited for the old ones out of courtesy and reciprocity, perhaps belief mitigated by augury between them, a great fear of augury suspended between men and gods, who are both fearsome, the young ones waited for the

recognized poets, that is, the ones whose names had at least once in some context brushed up against the word *genius*, for those poets to grant them a small ray from that invisible halo that they were reputed to have over their heads; and which is transmitted as if by cuttings, from the oldest to the youngest, but that the young can never quite steal, not even Rimbaud or Saint John, the old must proffer it: and it was of Banville that Rimbaud asked that immense small favor.

We no longer hear of Banville, he too pissed into the wind; and he did not even enjoy the combined benefits of mystery and failure, of the loss of being, that Izambard's shade enjoyed. If we go by the anthology pieces (since no one bothers to read the complete versions anymore, except perhaps some old auto-didact, a Léautaud from Douai or Confolens who, leaving the library, curses the Walkmen and the motorbikes, or more optimistically, a very young country girl who climbed up to the attic in June, when school is closed and the heart wide open to the infinite freedom of objectless loves, and in the attic she found among old dresses *Les Cariatides* by Théodore de Banville, an old book of poems that she reads alone under the linden tree until dark), if we can go by those pieces, always the same ones, which must indeed be the best of them but which seem so poor, Banville was not a brilliant poet—at least he no longer seems so to us—and yet in his lifetime he seemed so: someone is mistaken in this matter, Baudelaire or you, me or Sainte-Beuve, Rimbaud or the descendants of Rimbaud, who knows? men of letters are futile. We have not read his verses, except for those eternal trifles from selected pieces with their Bacchuses that in the corner of the woods our grandmothers might take for slightly tipsy grandsons, and their violet-eyed erect young Athenian girls, pretty in their way, but with so little ass under their tunics. We have not read him. But we know, because we have read about him, that he too was prodigiously precocious, from his infancy possessed great ambition and pure love, the seven-league boots, came from Moulins as Bonaparte from Ajaccio and Rimbaud from Charleville with a strong will to be done with old-fashioned poetry, and proudly launched those *Cariatides* in Paris, which, says Baudelaire, no one would believe a young fellow of eighteen to have written. Yes, we know that Baudelaire held him in high esteem and was his friend, that he set him apart as he did Chateaubriand and Flaubert, above the modern riffraff as he put it, which perhaps distinguishes him, unless it was polite augury; we know that for a long time he slept with the fat Marie Daubrun, whom Baudelaire so desired; that they had a falling out over her and that much later the munificent Banville, a decent man, sent a petition to the minister so that the poor human wreck of Brussels could draw a pension, have his clothes brushed, his old man's food brought to his imbecile mouth by an almost friendly hand, perhaps glimpse a skirt, chant his *crénom* without a thought for tomorrow. And that distinguishes him. Furthermore, from Gide's slander we know that the affability of his criticism was such that, reading it, one would think one was eating jam; from Doctor Mondor we know that he highly prized and revived the little forms fallen into female hands: the rondeau, double rondeau, lay, virelay, villanelle, chant royal; from Mallarmé that he *was not somebody special, but the very sound of the lyre*; and that this somebody who was in the end nobody, as a good bourgeois, as a good poet, loved to walk in the Luxembourg Gardens *dear to the passerby*, and from there under the leaves certainly eyed the dome of the Pantheon close by, believing, not believing, that he had laid enough rods two by two to be laid himself in return one day there below in the shade of the vault that is to the great dead what the June leaves are to the passersby; and of course that is also why, because of that finally modest ambition, he was not Rimbaud; but that is not the only reason. We also know about his voice, from Antonin Proust, who heard it, from the time when it rang forth into the day: it was musical, lilting, a bit high and fluty, like Mallarmé's; in that high-perched voice he liked to proclaim *I am a lyric poet and make my living from it*—and we can well imagine all of that together, the fluty voice, the bland affirmation, half sincere, half silly, and beneath it all a bit of specious ferocity, the Louis-Philippardian stroll to the Luxembourg, gaze drawn toward the dome: Banville is a type that we have all encountered a hundred times. Finally, from Verlaine we have the precious knowledge that he

strikingly resembled Watteau's Gilles, so that he could have been taken for him had this Gilles happened to be strolling in Paris—that he thus resembled Charles Carreau, parish priest of Nogent-sur-Marne and Watteau's model, and there was no danger of mistaking them for one another because since 1721, the model no longer set foot in the Luxembourg or anywhere else, and was under the marly earth of the Marne. Banville had the Gilles's reddened nose and his dazed look of a boy about cry, perhaps his very old soul; and the silver chlorides, obediently reproducing as is their custom, photo after photo perfectly identical in the way of amoebas, in my case perfectly reproduced on [page 39](#) of the Rimbaud iconography that lies open before me, the silver chlorides are in agreement with Verlaine on this point.

Watteau's Gilles wrote neoclassical nonsense; at least that is what is said of him today. But if in those times you had been a poet, a young poet, not quite Rimbaud of course but almost, if you too were tired of old-fashioned poetics, you would have turned the corner of boulevard Saint-Germain, heart pounding, into rue de Buci, where Banville lived; with his letter of encouragement in your pocket, which you had received in Douai or Confolens, affable as jam. You would have seen your hand tremble as it pushed open the carriage entrance of 10, rue de Buci; and in the depths of the cool, dark inner courtyard, filled with the sounds of the city though they seemed distant, like phantoms, you would have hesitated for a long time. You hesitate; you look up into the air, the mute windows of a *great poet*, and above the windows the month of June; because it is June, the four feet of that blue throne resting on the roofs. And at the same time as June, it is the evidence of poetic inanity that hits you; that is sitting on you, under which you are gasping for breath: because of course compared to June your pieces regarding June are pitiful; and without even considering June, which is very high and rebellious like Meaning, just considering language, the little corrupted code, the meager but inexhaustible hand with which meaning is made, not even meaning, the game of meaning, which has the air of a meaning, even compared to that, your poems hardly measure up; and your verses are far from true, powerless to translate what you are, the suffering void that you are, into pure prayer without waste. Into the language of June. No, nothing triumphs disproportionately in the poem, not June, not language, not you. So you flee, you are already at the gare d'Austerlitz, the evening trains are so beautiful when one is rid of the burden of having to speak about them.

But perhaps in that courtyard you do not flee: in June above a sparrow passes; you murmur for yourself alone one of those verses that are called perfect because they note the impossibility of recording all at once June, one's own distress, and the whole of language, but which stand their ground in that impossibility, and standing, play the trumpet; this is Baudelaire; one or the other, the sparrow or Baudelaire, whispers to you that the imposture, poetic inanity, is also a kind of courage. You forgive yourself. And you also forgive Banville, who is only a man, for having definitively opted for language for want of June, for having buried himself within it, and there within having become *the very sound of the lyre*, that is to say, nobody. The lyre is no cause for fear, only men are: you climb the stairs with all the strength of your young legs, and you ring Théodore de Banville's doorbell.

(And of course there I could see you both, on either side of the large bouquet, peonies or hydrangeas, there on the poet's desk: the floured one, who is at the same time the ineffable sound, and you. You would not have said that you have come for the little cutting, the one that is transmitted from the oldest to the youngest, the little cutting of genius, that is to say, permission to eat at the poetic trough or to spit in it, the entrance pass to the domes, Guernsey or Harar, it is up to you; and he would not have said that he was on the point of giving it to you: because that is done without saying so, while speaking of something else. You speak of those things, I hear you; and Banville's perched voice perches higher as he extols the form, the truth that inheres in syntax more than in our desires, in rhyme more than in our hearts—the thousand inanities of the hedonism of literature, the *Enlightenment* pose, the pose of the mind—and you, half hidden behind that large bouquet of peonies

I could see you turn red as the flowers, gritting your teeth, keeping to yourself and chewing over the fable of Meaning, of salvation through language, of God who wants to appear in it and who cannot because of Banville and his kind—the thousand inanities of the idealism of literature, the *red waistcoat* pose, the pose of the heart; or, on the contrary, to please Banville, to conform to what he expects of your eighteen years, there you are getting up on your high horse, letting loose on him a whole tirade, you take the pose of the heart one step farther; and there is so much of youth in your insolence that you feel the Confolens suit ripping across your shoulders from the pressure of wings; and the munificent Banville pretends to see those wings. He smiles. He tells you that you remind him of Boyer or Baudelaire when they were twenty; and at those words you know that over the bouquet of peonies he has just invisibly offered you the little cutting, and without even getting up you have taken it, it is in your pocket.

What calm within you then, what power, what a glorious future: but you are not Arthur Rimbaud.)

THAT POET, WHO NO LONGER CASTS A SHADOW

That poet, who no longer casts a shadow, thus received two letters from the very young Rimbaud, who casts upon us as great a shadow as Dante's little bonnet casts upon the Italian language and Virgil's laurels cast upon Dante—because men of letters are futile, timid, devout. Reading them, Banville sensed his Julien Sorel of the Ardennes at fifty leagues; and in that he was not mistaken: letters are little traps for others, just one other, whom one wants to put in one's pocket; and Rimbaud excelled in this discipline of bird-catching. Verses are greater traps for more ineffable prey. And in the verses that went with those letters, that were the basis and justification for them, Banville surely heard something altogether different, different from Rastignac or Sorel, because for all that Banville was, that is to say nightingale and nightcap, the uninterrupted attention required by the Dome yonder he knew how to make two verses hold together, and, which is something else again, how, in the pincer of two verses, to hold a little of the world; he had done that all his life. Under the gifted, clever, Hugoesque young versifier, under the flagrant rhymes, Banville heard the other, darker rhyme, unknown to the rhymer, that could not care less about the one in whom it sings, or squeaks; which is born of the very ancient way each of us knots together June, language, and ourselves—and in some that makes music: a thin stave of three or four notes, but tyrannical, tyrannically reiterated and combined, the variety of its combinations making great poets, as they are called; and that stave, that song, that tyranny muddles the rhymer's plans and decides from start to finish for him: perhaps that is what decides that you wake up as Julien Sorel, that midway through your life you compose a small thing as unassailable and laughable as Dante's bonnet (meanwhile that small thing is published, you call it *Les Fleurs du mal*, it is only a tiny milestone in the conquest of Paris), that all afternoon you spend waiting in vain for that small thing to make you king, and, without knowing how it happened, that you mutter a single terrifying *crénom* one evening in a cheap joint in Brussels; and when finally you go to bed you still believe that you are Julien Sorel, but at the end of the line; until you are a corpse you believe it, even though you have written *Les Fleurs du mal*. And at least once Banville had encountered in flesh and blood that aberrant ambition that makes great poets, from it he had even stolen the fat Marie Daubrun, for it he had petitioned the minister for a pauper's pension; and he knew how to recognize it. Thus he recognized it in Rimbaud's verses. That is what we want to believe, since we are devout; but sometimes we have doubts; and when we have doubts we tell ourselves that its music is not so obvious, that perhaps by dint of paternosters we are the ones who put it there, not God; not all the muses assembled at Charleville, not *genius*; that a century of devotion to these staves is solely responsible for the notes. No matter, that is how things stand: perhaps it is only a little ditty, but it resounds fantastically in us like the great organ swells of a *Te Deum*.

Devoutly we want to believe that Banville heard the *Te Deum*; that perhaps he heard in the schoolboy's verse a very distant echo of the leap that Carabosse made into the inner closet; her marriage with the Captain renewed there; the perfect nuptials of bugle and paternosters; the ridiculous little domestic drama magnified into a high mass, set forth in clear language, but draped, unrecognizable. Or if you prefer quainter images, borrowed from the catechism of that time, which Banville read, and not from those family histories which are our own meager catechism, the obscure rhyme that he heard was the one that strikes charity and anger against one another, infinite rancor and mercy, holds them in each hand, each of them distinct, intact, irreconcilable, sworn enemies, and releases one against the other like fighting cocks, unleashes them, recaptures them, and punctuates that explosion with a great confrontation of drums. And if your personal devotion offers you other metaphors (which you take for thought and which are thought), you call the two terms of this little

tom-tom by different names: you say that it is revolt and pure love, or nothingness and salvation, or the endless fall and within the fall the inexhaustible presence of what is no longer called God; you say that it is in mourning God and in pretending God is restored; and if you do not like God you say that it is the free joy of being alive and the darker joy of being slave to death, whatever: what matters is having the great cymbals well in hand, knowing how to make them clash and that they make that noise one hears in Rimbaud. And lending an ear to that music, Banville, who was not dishonest, who had long ago lost that inner rhyme but knew how to recognize it in others, Banville picked up a pen thoughtfully and prepared to reply; in silk skullcap at his poet's desk, with the peonies and no doubt some Doric knick-knack close at hand that served as paperweight, pensively stirring the tea with rum that Verlaine tells us one drank at his house, reflecting, weighing the pros and the cons, this man who resembled the Gilles replied. He paid the young man from the Ardennes the courtesy of augury, and sent by post the little cutting in letters that are no longer in our possession.

Perhaps I am wasting my time with Banville. I am wasting my time with this poor old man who yesterday came from Moulins with all the poetry of the earth in his heart and who is being destroyed in Paris by schemes, success, power and the approach of death; Banville, whose only function is to be interim leading poet—because Hugo on his island is unavailable, bent over he listens to the beat of Shakespeare's foot in the four feet of his table—that is to say, to deliver the little cutting to the greenhorns of Douai or Charleville; Banville who is nothing, hardly the shadow that returning down rue de Rome lifts his head toward the pigeons on the dome. Nevertheless, I still want to repeat how precious it is to me that this poor man resembles, to the point of being mistaken for, Watteau's Gilles.

Thus it is the Gilles who opens the dance of Rimbaud's readers. It is precious to me that he was the first (the first in Paris of course, Charleville does not count in these matters) who, bent over that poet's desk where he is catching up on correspondences, reads the verses of the white blackbird from Charleville; and that he replies; that he adds words to those words; that thus he is also the first to make comments, in terms we do not know, for the benefit of the author of those verses he has read closely—and for a hundred years his shadow is yoked to that letter, like those dolts in stories whom mischievous fate tethers to an iniquitous and monotonous task, he has not moved from that desk, he is replying to Rimbaud. Interminably he returns to the letter. His conviction has waned, but the fairy wants him to continue: a dark fairy who is inside that small mixture of work and life we call Rimbaud and who transforms those who approach him into Banville, into Pierrot. Because it may be that all the books now written on Rimbaud, the one I am writing and those that will be written tomorrow, were written, are written, and will be written by Théodore de Banville—not exactly by Banville, not all of them, but all without exception by Watteau's Gilles. Some are very much the work of a man we can call Banville, as Banville in person: by the countless Banvilles, that is to say, by a nearly perfect, well-meaning man of poetry, upright, timid but well-meaning, a poseur but sincere, hotheaded, a bit of a nightingale, a bit old-fashioned even if he is very young, and tousled or neatly combed according to inclination, the tousled ones stand for anger and nothingness, the neatly combed for salvation and charity, but they always lack the other cymbal; or there are two cymbals, but not at the same time; and if they were tousled when they were young, there they are in old age in the Luxembourg Gardens airing their white manes beneath the foliage, they, too, are eyeing the dome of the Pantheon, or less visible paradises, the gold of Time, the magnetic field of the beyond, the secret necropolis of the Enlightenment which is like a Saint-Denis built of philosophers' stone where one will be gently laid between Sade and Lautréamont, the great captains, the men of anger who have no more anger—and in the Luxembourg, drawing up a chair to sit near the statues of queens and the girls who pass, they stop suddenly, they are searching for where all their anger has gone, then they smile, set off again, they tell themselves they still love Rimbaud, that all is not lost. André Breton under the trees says his devotions and takes a seat near the queens. Or again, if it is December and too cold in the

Luxembourg, they walk down boulevard Saint-Michel in the north wind, cross the bridge, enter Notre Dame, which is an excellent windbreak, and there, in the dark of December, under the dark vaults, behind a pillar, they suddenly see the enormous roaring column of fire; and of course at that fire for sixty years they light a work beyond meaning, ridiculous, prodigious, through which stride great fiery captains who speak directly to God and whom God calls by their ridiculous, prodigious names, *Thomas Pollock Nageoire, Monsieur de Coûfontaine et Dormant*—but when they take it into their heads to write a preface to Rimbaud and their great wings have fallen off, there they are, nightingales they mistake the pedal of charity for that of anger and quote the saints of the almanac. They become Banville again. Even Breton and Claudel become Banville again and reply to Rimbaud wearing a silk skullcap over their white mane at their poet's desk.

All these books written on Rimbaud, that one book, in truth, as they are so much alike, interchangeable, however ludicrously at odds, like the successive interpretations of the *Filioque* in the Middle Ages, all these books come from the hand of the Gilles. The Gilles is better informed than Banville; he has been informed by a century of work; he knows more about the life of Rimbaud than Rimbaud ever knew, as has been rightly pointed out; he is more modern than Banville, with more modern resolution; floured and modern; he, too, is standing in a kind of garden, since that is where Watteau placed him: yes, he is standing in the Luxembourg, like Banville, like Mallarmé, like Breton with his magnificent mane under the leaves, like young Claudel at the moment when he pushes open the gate to rush down Saint-Michel and shut himself up in the windbreak of Notre Dame. Standing at the edge of that garden, where behind his back under the statues of queens there is laughter and game that he does not hear, some lovely afternoon where he is not, Italian pines, girls, the Gilles watches passing in the void the work and life of another, which he calls Arthur Rimbaud. He invents it: it is the magic that he is not. He watches that magic sparkle; he sees signs there, the promise of the Resurrection of the body or the gold of Time, depending; he watches the comet; he watches nothingness and salvation, revolt and love, the lowly body and the letter, which go at one another, embrace, dance, come apart, come together again, pass and collapse considerably. In his dark room at midday he makes that inexhaustible bobbin spin; that dance; that fall; and it leaves him dumbstruck, he who is nailed there with his arms hanging, his Caliban feet. Laugh if you like: but truly audacious, the most stupid of the Gilleses perhaps, is the one who dares to throw the first stone.

The Gilleses have seen *the considerable passerby*; they believe they have seen him pass; invented his passing; there where he passed they see a great furrow that cuts the field of poetry in two, rejecting the old-fashioned on one side, full of beautiful works of course, but old-fashioned, and on the other, the proud ravaged acre of the modern where perhaps nothing grows, but modern; he passed; and when he passed there they were leaning over their poets' desks and silently they speak to us of him, the horrible plowman, the white blackbird. They watch the comet; they note its winding paths; it has twelve feet and sometimes no feet at all or a thousand feet, that much they have found; they are looking for the place, the formula, and the key; they believe that it is coded; they combine those numbers; they are nearly there; they are going *to see*: and suddenly, if a sharper laugh rises behind their backs, if silk murmurs beneath the Italian pines, if a woman's voice as if from very far off calls to them in the great silence, they look up from their notebooks and wonder if the comet really did pass, if their mathematics mean anything, if poetry exists *in person*, or if it is the Harlequin who has rolled them in flour. Alas, Rimbaud has a talent for throwing flour in the eyes of those who approach him: and as I say this, my arms hanging, I begin to cough; if I beat my breeches, flour comes out of them. But sometimes I imagine, and all the Gilleses surely imagine with me, in the brief moments when we forgive ourselves, when we can bear ourselves, when for example the evening wind passes in those Italian pines that Watteau has painted behind us, when our colds are abating, when looking down

at ourselves we no longer see flour but a kind of smock of light, then yes, in those moments we imagine that before us stands a tall boy who also had big heavy hands, working hands, like those of a *laundress*, says Mallarmé, a boy who to dust off his own flour beat his flanks to death with rhymes, the renunciation of rhymes, refusals, slave labor; who, to appear free, not of this world, not from Charleville, not born of the poor woman née Cuif, shut us into the modern slave galley—I imagine that this very weary boy is before us, standing there in his great clumsy shoes, he looks at us and lets his big hands hang. He is before us, the same size or almost, on his two feet; he comes from afar; then he no longer knows that he has created what we call a work; he has no more anger; greatly astonished he regards in our hanging hands the endless, futile Rimbaudian gloss. A thousand times he reads his name, then the word *genius*, then the old word *archangel*, then the words: *absolutely modern*, then illegible numbers, then again his name. He lifts his eyes to ours; and we remain there face to face, unmoving, dumbstruck, old-fashioned, the Italian pines behind us suspended in a breath of air, he is about to speak, we are about to speak, we are going to pose our question, we are going to reply, we are there—the pines rustle in a sudden wind, Rimbaud once again has leapt into his dance, there we are alone, pen in hand.

We are annotating the Vulgate.

AGAIN WE TAKE UP THE VULGATE

Again we take up the Vulgate.

It is said that in the fight in which he struggled every inch of the way with Carabosse, since the inner closet may not have been completely sealed, Arthur Rimbaud sometimes ran off to lose her in the Ardennes countryside; that his long strides carried him into villages as formidable and dreary as cannon fire, handkerchiefs stuffed into the mouth, Warcq, Voncq, Warnécourt, Pussemange, Le Theux; that he was hungry for those places, for those handkerchiefs, for those cannons, and that the verses he strewed along the way said so; that he was hungry with ambition and tricked his hunger with little rhythmical pebbles, ogre and Tom Thumb, as his legend would have it. It is said that a longer escape, a dream, at the end of summer took him to Belgium, toward Charleroi by small paths with blackberries no doubt, mills among the trees, factories rising at the end of an oat field, and we will never know exactly where he passed or where his young mind seized upon some quatrain now better known in this world than Charleroi, where he was left holding the laces of his big shoes under the Big Dipper, but we know that, returning, he stopped in Douai, at the home of Izambard's aunts, three gentle Fates at the far end of a large garden, fussy old seamstresses, and that those days in the large garden at the end of summer were the loveliest days of his life, perhaps the only lovely ones. It is also said that in that garden he made the poem every child knows, in which he calls his stars like one whistles for one's dogs, in which he caresses the Big Dipper and lies down beside it; and that summer's end was all rhythm, usually twelve feet, and Rimbaud, suspended on the rod in the northern sky but at the same time with his two feet under the table in the green inn, got all that onto the rod at one time, the pretty girl serving the ham, the arbor where he eats it, and the North Star rising overhead. And it is pure happiness. It is the very simple appearance of truth, which resembles God or a little dead girl, behind a bank of flowers in September. It is said that two escapes especially, without stars this time, far from gardens, far from truth, took him to Paris. And no one was waiting for him.

There is dispute over whether he took part in the insurrection of the Commune; if he had the pleasure and the terror of holding at rifle point a sworn enemy, evil in person, that is also to say, a poor devil from the depths of the country to whom Monsieur Thiers in Versailles had entrusted plum and rifle, and if, with the deafening beat of the two antithetical cymbals in his heart, he shot; or if he was the little drummer boy perched on the barricade; and if below the barricade he ate soup with the poor, the obscene, the gentle idiots, if he smoked tobacco with them; we would like to believe so, but it does not really seem as though we can, that story is in *Les Misérables*, by the Old Man, not in the life of Arthur Rimbaud. Member of the Commune or not, he returned to Charleville with the red spittle of battle like grapeshot in his heart. It is said that from Charleville in May, on May 15, he wrote to Paul Demeny, poet from Douai, author of *Les Glaneuses*, whom the silver nitrates had also fixed once and for all and transmit to us for reasons that have nothing to do with *Les Glaneuses*, and the photo on [page 54](#), beyond Izambard, beyond Banville, we see the poet's goatee, the little pince-nez, the blown-back hair, the proud profile gazing squarely away toward the blue line of posthumous glories: we know that he sent to that famous addressee—whose fame was cheaply won for having once received ten or twenty pages—the so-called Seer letter; this is an avatar of the old justification of the poet, idealist, voluntarist, missionary, magician—the bravado, the *pro domo* smokescreen; it wears the new clothes of democratic Orphism because it is meant to please, to please the poets of Douai and elsewhere; and it is much more than that, because it is written by a young man who is trying hard to believe in it with his whole heart. But, bravado or stroke of genius, we read and reread that letter, ben

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