What a timely pleasure, Ashbery's *Illuminations*. Timely because the 'Rimbaud’s ever-present genius' (Neil Oram) never dates, because of a new and growing awareness of Rimbaud as a London writer and of *Illuminations* as a London masterpiece, and because these mysterious but prophetic prose-poems have their finger on the pulse of our globalised and mediated post-9/11 reality. Ashbery concludes his preface to this finely produced Norton/Carcanet edition: 'If we are absolutely modern – and we are – it's because Rimbaud commanded us to be.' If Baudelaire was the first modern poet, Rimbaud was the first modernist poet. *Illuminations* – probably begun in 1872 – is 50 years ahead of high modernism's annus mirabilis of 1922. (Interestingly, W.G. Blum's essay 'Rimbaud as Magician' appeared in The Dial in 1919, followed by the first surprisingly belated English translations.) Joyce's epic prose-poem *Ulysses* owes as much to *Illuminations* as it does to Homer; his 'Epiphanies' are literary exercises in transcendental shifts of perception, urban prose-poems, by a writer who was on the Rimbaud trail as early as 1902, when he sent a photo-postcard of himself from Paris costumed in Rimbaldian ‘ideal’ overcoat, hat and scarf. This was all anticipated by Verlaine who, in an early London letter, boasted of ‘our increasingly modernistic poetics’.

It's important to note, against the overstated grain, that Rimbaud's formal innovations are pretty minor. (He was himself a pretty minor.) 'It's about time we demolished the alexandrine!' he announced at 16 to a suitably 'epaté' Theodore Banville, but all he could come up with was the prose-poem, which already had major exponents in Gerard de Nerval, Aloysius Bertrand, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Charles Cros – a friend and former room-mate of Rimbaud’s – and Judith Gautier. (The two clunky ‘free verse’ nautical poems ‘Seascape’ and ‘Motion’ are low points in the sequence, which pale in comparison with his two finest nautical poems in verse ‘The Stolen Heart’ and ‘The Drunken Boat’.) It was Rimbaud's way of ordering and/or disordering his content that contained within it the seeds of aesthetic movements such as Symbolism, Decadance, Futurism, Dada, and most of all, Surrealism. He was the human possessor of the giganticism or ‘monstrosity’ that is one of the major themes – as well as techniques – of these poems: 'A step of yours is the conscription of the new men and their marching orders'. ('To a Reason')

Ashbery himself is one of poetry's most gifted and celebrated postmodernisers. Enid Starkie's description of Rimbaud as 'a supreme master of prosody and style' could equally apply to the American, whose talents and status make this a more-important-than-usual event in Rimbaud translation, by now a global industry. The self-published maudit, who didn’t shift a single unit and took early retirement from literature at the age of 20, is a best-seller in eternity. Ashbery in his own career, taking Rimbaud's prose poetics seriously, has succeeded in making modern poetry more prosaic without making it less poetic, and is among the greatest free verse pioneers. His *Illuminations* is a labour of love and lifelong project, a final homage to one of his profoundest influences whom – in
an omnipresent blurb – he has praised for managing 'to cloud' the transparent French language.

Surprisingly for some, this is a faithful translation – with French en face – of Rimbaud's prose, not a version that kisses the original goodbye. There are Americanisations such as 'Drifters' for 'Vagabonds' and modernisations such as 'highway' for 'route' but these are just what the witchdoctor ordered. (You could easily use 'autobahn' in such an internationalist text peppered with the English and German words Rimbaud was learning in London 1872-74 and in Germany in early 1875.) Faithful remakings are possible. The whole argument about poetry being what is 'lost in translation' is applicable to verse, not to the prose-poem. Would anyone claim we can't feel the power of Nietzsche or Kafka in English? The same is true of Rimbaud's A Season in Hell and, to a lesser degree, Illuminations. The magic is translatable, not all but some. 'I am the walker on the great highway through dwarf woods; the murmur of sluices muffles my steps. I gaze for a long time at the melancholy gold laundry of the setting sun.' ('Childhood')

'After the Flood' is a poem that might well speak to a storm-battered America, but is thought to be experientially sourced in the serious flooding of the Thames in January 1873, where Rimbaud had just sailed from Christmas in Charleville with 'la Mother' to rejoin a suicidal Verlaine in Fitzrovia, who was himself transmogrifying London into 'Sodom': 'the fire in the skyline of this city from the Bible'. Rimbaud's poem evokes the ancient books of Gilgamesh, The Book of Invasions, and the Bible as well as anticipating modern ideas of climate-change. Brilliantly, the character 'Eucharis' turns out to be both a mis-named nymph from Bishop Fenéon's Telemachus (1699) and the Anglo-German Saint Walpurga, abbess, author, and miracle-worker who calmed a storm – by praying – whilst sailing to Germany, as depicted by Rubens, in shrines all over Europe, and feted on Walpurgis Night. She, along with Madame xxx is among a bizarre and beautiful ensemble of female figures who make Illuminations very much a 'white goddess' book, even if by an unwitting gay icon. 'The Queen, the Witch who lights her coals in the clay pot, will never want to tell us what she knows, and which we do not know'. Yes, there is birth-trauma, but there is also an eye-witnessing of the flood-hit megalopolis: 'Stalls were erected in the dirty main street, and boats were towed toward the sea'. Though London is sea-less, much of the book's multi-culturalism was gleaned in Rimbaud's inveterate exploring of London's docks. 'After the Flood' is a surrealist poem but its ingredients recur in the following poems so that it's almost like the trailer of a film. Ashbery's 'regained its composure' and 'cheeping' jackals are bold quirks that customise an assured translation, one that has the slowness, the honey-flow of Rimbaud's poetry, as well as – when required – the mercurial speed.

When Enid Starkie calls Illuminations the 'most controversial' of Rimbaud's works, she's referring to dates, not bourgeois-baiting. Verlaine, in his 1886 preface, claimed they were written between 1873-75. Could anyone have known better than he, who was there at its inception and culmination? Scholars have fought viciously over this for decades, some claiming they preceded A Season in Hell – Rimbaud's supposed 'farewell to literature' –, others that they followed it, and others that they were written before and after it. The
Verlaine view makes it enticing to think that a sudden flood of London in 1873 could have triggered off the cyclical inspiration. It's helpful in terms of Rimbaud chronology and development to think of Paris as a verse poem, London as a prose-poem. Graham Robb writes in his classic biography: 'Every city has its own grammar and syntax. Rimbaud was learning the sentence structure of London and its suburbs.' Though he had written prose pieces before London, some were confiscated and destroyed by Verlaine's in-laws. Was he reconstructing from memory, or starting again? He must have done some illuminating in late 1872 (after writing his last known formal verse poem – on arrival – in a French artist's visitors' book) in response to the astonishment of London's megalopolitan sprawl, perhaps 'City' or 'Cities [1]' or 'Cities [2]'. But Verlaine is mostly right; they were probably begun in earnest in 1873, only to be interrupted by A Season in Hell's dramatic ‘April-August’ conception and completion. In early 1873 he had almost certainly been working on the remarkable New Testament adaptations called ‘Evangelical Prose,’ perhaps after attending Church of England services and reading an English Bible, to improve his language. Samaria is England 'the parvenu, the egoist, a more rigid observer of its protestant law than Judah of its ancient tablets.’ A Season in Hell was begun on the backs of those Messianic worksheets. Crucially, A Season in Hell is a French poem, begun and finished in Charleville, ‘atrocious stories’ interspersed with the Gallic chants of 1872. He self-published it in late October. The more English and internationalist Illuminations was resumed in late 1873-early 1874 also in Charleville – the maternal bureau where he declined any menial tasks – but working from London drafts and London experiences. In late March 1874, he returned to London with another poet, Germaine Nouveau, one of a group of young writers called the ‘Vivants’, admirers of Rimbaud. Baudelaire’s command had been: ‘trouver le nouveau’ (to find the new); Germaine was that ‘nouveau’, an apparently excitable, sensual, feminine personality who had experienced a religious vocation as a schoolboy. Nouveau – as graphologists have shown – transcribed fair copies of Illuminations to Rimbaud's dictation. Their few months together are shadowy, but must have been productive. Rimbaud’s work-in-progress had an amanuensis. However, that a letter home from Nouveau mentions he still hasn’t ‘met Vermesch’, one of the famous Communards exiled in London, seriously suggests Rimbaud had omitted to tell Nouveau that the ‘Rimbaud/Verlaine scandal’ had spread to London, and that the poet was also persona non grata among the French expats, as he had been in Parisian literary circles. The lure of French London was bogus. If we backtrack to 7 July 1873, a letter of Rimbaud’s to the freshly absconded Verlaine shows how, in a dangerously homophobic society, the two poets were being viewed by their fellow refugees:

You want to come back to London? You don’t know how everyone here would greet you! The look Andrieu and others would give us if they saw me with you! Anyway I'll try to be brave. Tell me what you think honestly. You want to come back to London for me? What day?

And this was before the earth-shaking events of the Brussels shoot-out and Verlaine’s incarceration for attempted murder. Nouveau had befriended the friendless Rimbaud in Paris in late 1873, but in London he must have been expecting to meet interesting people, and not just French. Verlaine, remember, had written that a meeting with Swinburne was imminent and later dispatched a copy of Romances sans paroles to the English poet.
Instead, not only would Nouveau have been snubbed, he would have been viewed as Rimbaud’s latest catamite. Rimbaud was no name-dropper, but he was a trickster. After Nouveau had seen through the deception, or could take no more of Rimbaud’s machinations, or was beginning to be published in too many respectable journals to safely continue his adventure with the pariah genius, he repatriated. Rimbaud moved to the appropriate address of 40 London Street. ‘Explorateurs’ who go there today find only an enigma. Parallel to Howland Street where Rimbaud and Verlaine had moved into Vermesch’s old digs, and with the Telecom Tower’s giant phallus seeming to commemorate the London honeymoon, London Street has changed its name to Maple Street, and the houses are demolished up to and including number 40. Number 42 survives as a magical symbol – there are 42 Illuminations (plus fragments.) In the summer of 1874 he fell ill, was possibly hospitalised, but definitely called his mother to his aid; which shows how isolated he really was. She, her daughter Vitalie, and Rimbaud spent a month at a hotel in 12 Argyle Square, Kings Cross – now The European Hotel – before Rimbaud moved to Reading to take up a teaching job. All in all, he spent 14 months in London, a long time when one considers his meteorically brief literary career. There may be some Reading Illuminations, though Rimbaud more likely threw himself obsessively into his first proper job. Here were the seeds of renunciation. By Christmas he was back in Charleville; the New Year saw him in Stuttgart. There in 1875, not only did a just-out-of-jail Verlaine fail to convert his former lover to Christianity, but was informed that Rimbaud was also renouncing poetry. The astonishment was complete when the 20-year-old handed Verlaine the final immaculate proof of his gift, a sheaf of prose.

Christopher Hampton, author of the play Total Eclipse, contrasts Rimbaud the ‘amateur genius’ with Verlaine the ‘professional writer’, generously hailing the latter as an inspiration to committed, lifelong writers. When Rimbaud handed the manuscript over to Verlaine, he was entrusting it to a professional man of letters, one who had been busy writing and publishing even from his prison cell. Illuminations, therefore, is not an ‘unfinished symphony’. Rather, it was Rimbaud repaying his debt to the patron who had bankrolled their ‘martyrdom’, who had lavished some 30,000 francs on their ‘way of the cross’, but who would in 1886 symbolically recoup the outlay by editing and introducing the first publication of the book. Supposedly, Rimbaud had actually asked Verlaine to pass the poems onto Nouveau. The danse macabre of the manuscript’s passing from hand to hand and country to country has been documented elsewhere, but what is less well known is that Verlaine and Nouveau seem to have met up in London in 1877, where Verlaine reclaimed the poems. I have literally translated a little-known and obscure sonnet by Verlaine, i.e. to Anglophones, which has been compared in style to a Manet canvas, and is taken to be a snapshot of Verlaine’s and Nouveau’s friendship in the capital. It is called ‘To Germaine Nouveau’:

It was in London, the city of the Englishwoman’s reign,
where we met in the flesh for the first time
and in a Kings Cross of railway-lines, steps and voices,
we spotted each other instantly by our handsome looks.
Then thirst, hollowing us out to the depth of a mine-shaft,
had set us racing – freed from the carriages –
to bars as attractive as the old religions
where the lanky ‘misses’ whiter than ermine
pumped ales and bitters into pewter tankards
and the crystal singer was lighter than air
as we drank beyond thirst to our future friendship.
Our toast has kept its promise. So it is that,
A little older since the adventure,
neither our hearts nor our elbows have grown cold.

Verlaine and Nouveau clearly bonded. They were both, in a way, two of Rimbaud’s widows. (Verlaine would literally have been a widow, a black one, had his bullet hit Rimbaud elsewhere). They had both enjoyed a poetic confluence with Rimbaud, and both had benefited. Rimbaud, constructively, trashed Verlaine’s drafts of London poems and Verlaine’s best work dates from that period. Nouveau too must have received much. The Surrealists later regarded him as Rimbaud’s equal. But, most importantly, they had both been personal assistants to Rimbaud – Verlaine in late 1872, early 1873 and mid-1873, Nouveau in early-to-mid-1874 – as he worked on Illuminations. You get the impression Rimbaud liked having someone nearby, a midwife if not quite a wife, as he was embarking on imaginative labours.

Some critics divide Illuminations into childhood/fairytale/rural poems and adulthood/modernist/urban poems but that is too simplistic and too undermining of an overall artistic intention and uniformity in what is justly recognised as – from the Ashbery preface – ‘one of the masterpieces of world literature’. The city disappears and reappears all the time, always close at hand. 'Childhood' has rural idylls but it ends in a sepulchral basement flat with a flash-backing adult who is full of newspaper ennui and bitter regrets: 'Monstrous city, endless night!' The note here is highly reminiscent of James 'B.V.' Thomson, author of the tragic The City of Dreadful Night (1874), who was in London at the same time as Rimbaud. Strangely, you feel you’re in 19th century streets with Thomson; his periodicity feels authentic. With Rimbaud you might be in Atlantis, rediscovered in the sky. Could the Frenchman have met the depressed, alcoholic and bohemian Scot? Rimbaud was dying too, as poet. In the companion poem 'Youth', one of the chapters is titled 'Twenty Years Old', a subtly desperate soul-bearing:

The voices of instruction exiled....Physical naïveté bitterly becalmed...—
Adagio — Ah! the endless egoism of adolescence, studious optimism:
how full of flowers the world was that summer! Dying songs and
shapes....— A choir, to calm helplessness and absence! A choir of
glasses, of nocturnal tunes.... It's true our nerves will have soon capsized.

In the most astounding of the 'white goddess' poems – 'Dawn' – we detect an element of the famous lost poem 'La Chasse Spirituelle': 'In the great city she fled among the steeples and domes, and running like a beggar along the marble quays, I chased her.' In other fairytale there are palaces and public squares, hints of Sumerian or Mesopotamian cities. 'Tale' is a recycled, reduced Gilgamesh. A city adulthood is nostalgic for a country childhood; innocence and experience fuse. The poem ‘Youth’ concludes with a manifesto-like flourish: ‘Your memory and your senses will be nothing more than the food of your creative impulse. As for the world, when you go out, what will it have
become? In any case, nothing like the appearances of today.' London dwarfed everything, making Paris seem a like ‘a pretty provincial town’, threatening to erase the past and its abandoned idylls. *Illuminations*, like his beloved Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*, are modern equivalents of Sumerian and Mesopotamian ‘city laments’ – the most ancient poems, preserved on cuneiform tablets – which originally were lyrical responses to the devastation of city-states by floods, fires, wars, plagues etc. but in modern times can be eulogies for all the ills of the modern city, and of its denizens.

The title *Illuminations* derives from illuminated manuscripts, coloured engravings or plates, but also from Kabbalistic texts such as *The Bahir Illumination* in which mind-boggling Biblical exegesis gives way to instructive tales about kings, highly reminiscent of 'Tale' and 'Royalty'. 'The Illuminator' is one of many Kabbalistic names for the Godhead, but also the nickname Germaine Nouveau gave to his London companion. (Mani the dualist, branded a heretic and put to death, was also known as 'The Illuminator'.) Something had changed since Rimbaud wrote the agonised, bourgeois-bashing, splenetically anti-Christian *A Season in Hell*. Though ironies abound in Rimbaud they offset a tremendous sincerity that might otherwise seem too gushing. A new tone pervades, a melancholy of redemption. Christian imagery, metaphor itself, are jettisoned; these are the poems in which he strives to be 'absolutely modern'. Though still politico-religious, the writing is much less incendiary than before, and even more dreamlike, musical, meditative. Surviving an assassination attempt has had a maturing effect on Rimbaud's already legendary precocity. Feeling lucky to be alive, he is more sensitive than ever to seasons, to weathers, to lights and vibrations. He surrenders to these things, paints them onto his grand canvas, always looking for the illumination. One such concludes the timeless Thames vista of 'The Bridges': 'The water is gray and blue, wide as an arm of the sea. — A white ray, falling from the top of the sky, wipes out this bit of theatricality.' Or again, concluding ‘Childhood’: ‘Why would a spectral cellar window turn livid in one corner of the vault?’

Despite the melancholy – and Rimbaud is one of the saddest of poets – he also loved London. In *A Season in Hell*, he pronounced: 'At dawn, armed with a burning patience, we shall enter the splendid cities.' London was the portal. Here was Babel, Heliopolis, Athens, New Jerusalem. For Verlaine, it was ‘Tyre and Carthage rolled into one.’ The Crystal Palace is a lost model for the architecture of the book, the psychohistory and psychogeography of the world in a gigantic glass display. The 'seer' sees the past/present/future cities. London is the site of all the Mystery Schools of antiquity, humanity as a procession with torches and chariots. The 'logical' London he so admired is smoke and mirrors, a menagerie of mythological animals, a temple of Apollo, and a feat of Cubist engineering: '... what are the relative levels of the other districts above or below the acropolis?' His own nickname for the city – Leun'deun – tears the away the Saxon veil to uncover the original 'Lugh Dun' i.e. the Fort of Lugh, a Celtic solar deity. In *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare – four times – calls it 'Lud's Town'. In many ways Rimbaud was trying to out-Shakespeare Shakespeare, conjuring the cosmos with a magic language, in what is now known as the 'World City'. One of the Rimbaud legends that circulated in
his own lifetime is that Victor Hugo had hailed him as ‘a child Shakespeare’. Here, the poems are choc-a-bloc with theatrical motifs, weird mummers, many lives in one:

Wearing improvised costumes in nightmarish taste they act out ballads, tragedies of thieves and demigods of a spirituality hitherto unknown to history or religions. Chinese, Hottentots, Gypsies, nincompoops, hyenas, Molochs, old dementias, sinister demons, they mingle populist, maternal tricks with bestial poses and tenderness. They would perform new plays and "nice girl" songs. Expert jugglers, they transform people and places, and resort to magnetic comedy...

But then the famed 'I is another' shape-shifter signs off: 'I alone know the plan of this savage sideshow.' ('Sideshow') Rimbaud and Verlaine, always fending off ennui, frequently went to the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square, itself named after an exotic elsewhere. ‘Scenes’ is another poem of the theatre, and ‘scenes’ epitomized the Rimbaud/Verlaine relationship as their fellow countrymen in London recalled it. With Rimbaud, the poetry of his work and the theatre of his life are impossibly tangled.

Graham Robb draws attention to Rimbaud as 'tour guide'. This is key. He and Verlaine's walks – 'huge arcs of the city' – meant that by the time his mother and sister arrived in town Rimbaud was able to take them on omniscient treks. In the poetry Rimbaud becomes the shamanic tour guide punctuating his Orphic chants with a language that – again, 50 years before Joyce – parodies the holiday brochure: ‘... and their railways flank, tunnel under and overhang the appointments of this Hotel, chosen from the history of the most elegant and colossal structures of Italy, America and Asia, whose windows and terraces, presently awash with decorative lighting, drinks and lush breezes, are open to the minds of travelers and noblemen...' This really does seem to be about St. Pancras, as Aidan Andrew Dun, author of *Rimbaud Psychogeographer* attests; but ‘Promontory’ can also be read today on the esplanade at Scarborough. The original Dr. Who, a Rimbaud prose-poem is an ink-and-parchment tardis and can take you anywhere in time and/or space. Schopenhauer's idea of genius as 'perception' is true of our 'voyant'. (A currently touring, devised theatre-piece on him is called *The Seer*.) With or without the opium of the docks, the city itself was psychotropic for Rimbaud, acting upon his sensibility, ingested by his clear-sightedness. 'The sight, the sight of him!' from 'Genie' – the French 'sa vue' suggests 'his view' – is his clairvoyance as well as his appearance. But London itself did much of the work, as the early 1870s drawings of Gustav Doré demonstrate, a modern gothic. What Venice had been to past-seeking English creatives, London was to the future-seeking French.

Verlaine has his cameos, in 'Tale' where he could be the 'Prince' to Rimbaud's 'genie' (and Gilgamesh to Rimbaud's Enkidu), perhaps goatishly in ‘Antique’ and – unmistakably – in 'Drifters'. Poor Verlaine. One of the greatest French poets of the 19th century, Rimbaud's mentor/patron/editor/publisher, a legend in his own right, he suffers from an abysmal 'image problem'. The best way of dignifying him is to imagine him as Ginsberg to Rimbaud's Dylan, and then to think of all the great composers who've immortalised his exquisite lyrics. His shabby visage, and shabbier trenchcoat, is included in the Soho Mural on Broadwick Street in the company of such luminaries as Blake, Mozart, Marx,
and Shelley; Rimbaud is unaccountably absent. Verlaine was seen as one of the great European poets for decades, until Rimbaud began his ascent and eclipse. ‘Drifters’ – following on from 'The Foolish Virgin and the Infernal Bridegroom' – is a purgation of their relationship. Rimbaud was one of the most solitary of all figures and should be grateful to Verlaine for providing the emotional raw materials that only an intimate relationship can. The poem begins – in a fine Ashberyan gambit – 'Pathetic brother!' (Mine begins 'Poor bugger!') 'Pathetic' is perfect, better than the literal 'pitiable'. The Verlaine figure 'howling his dream of stupid sorrow' is so Ginsbergian. Here is love and hysteria and farce and poetry. We glimpse the 8 Great College Street house – now set to become a cultural centre in honour of the French poets – but we see that they won't be there for long. Ashbery's 'Drifters' also suggests the psychogeographical modus operandi of 'the drift', which owes so much to Rimbaud's example.

One key to understanding the ‘Rimbe/Verlomphe‘ relationship is their totem animals. After Etienne Carjat – the photographer who butterfly-caught Rimbaud’s famous image for posterity – had been attacked by Rimbaud and had branded him as a ‘little toad’, the nickname stuck. (Of Carjat’s two photos, the less well-known one is of a very toad-like Rimbaud with much thicker, sulkier lips.) Rimbaud in subsequent correspondence with Verlaine refers to himself jokingly as ‘the toad’. In the self-loathing of _A Season_ he criticises himself for being ‘idler than the toad’. (Tristam Corbiere would later write a great sonnet called ‘Le Crapaud’ in which the toad was a ‘skinhead poet’.) Verlaine, on the other hand, was a pig. In one letter he signed off grotesquely with ‘Your old sow’; this was a less grotesque sign-off than his original English ‘I am your old cunt ever opening or opened’. Again in _A Season_, Rimbaud writes: ‘Thus it was that I fell in love with a pig’. The male toad and his long-suffering hog are like revellers in _Comus_ who have been transformed into beasts, for the purpose of non-stop partying. Fabulously, the toad who was always wild has used his magic to free the pig from captivity; but even though the pig loved his new freedoms he missed his old captivities.

Another key to the relationship is that they were both DNA warriors. The French phrase ‘fils du capitaine’ applies to both of them; their fathers were army captains. Captain Verlaine was disgusted by his son’s poetic debauchery and refused to finance it; his mother was his great patron. Verlaine, no wimp, joined the Garde Nationale at the advent of the Third Republic and was an armed Communard. Someone once described him as looking like a ‘Swabian warrior’. Captain Rimbaud abandoned his family early but seems to have bequeathed to his son a brilliance at grammar, a fascination with the Koran, an itch to travel, and strangler’s hands. Both poets can be seen as a two-man crack squadron waging an ideological war on what must have been an incredibly straitjacketed 19th century Europe. As guerilla anarchists and outré-bohemians, they were not only breaking the rules of art but were lifestyle innovators also. Ironically, Rimbaud was always on the run from compulsory military service – another reason to return to London – but later enlisted in the Dutch Colonial Army, before deserting a deathtrap in Java. Verlaine tried to enlist with the Carlist Rebels in Spain, but was turned down. Their legend is not pretty because it is so combative, an ‘assault on culture’. Verlaine was the more brutal, attacking his own wife and child. The nadir was when they turned on themselves, and the failed assassination. Some people talk of how ‘rock-and-roll’ it all was but there were no
sunglasses, limousines, 5-star hotels and sold-out concerts. The Bob Dylans and Patti Smiths of the world live utterly different lives, such as the above/below of bohemia, and the unpopularity of literary poetry. Wherever Rimbaud and Verlaine travelled, like Godot’s two tramps, the effect they had on other people was not one of irrational love but irrational hatred. Sexually (as tests showed) and emotionally (as the letters and poems show), their relationship was very serious indeed, but it should also be perfectly obvious that even in the course of their Anthony-and-Cleopatra sized love affair, as well as before and after it, they were – as painstakingly clarified by the singer-songwriter Tom Robinson – not homosexuals but bisexuals. What better testament is there than Verlaine’s two late books of pornographic verse Femmes and the posthumous Hombres?

Either way, Rimbaud was too intelligently pessimistic to be redeemed by love. ‘I would never throw love out the window’ he says in ‘Phrases’, but he did anyway. As he veils himself, the Rimbaud voice, the Rimbaud grammar are devastatingly all-seeing and honest. No wonder he was so solitary. How difficult to be his friend when he can see right through you. 'I see what comes afterward! My wisdom is as spurned as chaos...' he says in the hilarious 'Lives', speaking in the voice of a trio of past lives or alter egos that yet always remain the tantalizing confessions of an enigma. The following sounds like an ironically concise CV: 'I try to be touched by the memory of a childhood spent begging, of apprenticeship or my arrival in wooden shoes, of polemics, of five or six widowings, and several wedding parties where my obstinate head prevented me from rising to the fever pitch of my pals.' Verlaine is surely in there too – with the Vilains Bonshommes and the Parnassians – accounting for Rimbaud's widows, as well as his even more notorious mother, known pseudonymously as 'Widow Rimbaud' following her husband's desertion. One of Rimbaud's many tricks is to convince the reader he's adopted a persona, and then write about himself anyway. Like Oliver Hardy, he is always exasperated by the slapstick of his own situation. 'Somewhere in the world a distraught woman in a melodrama sighs over unlikely desertions.' (Is this his mother, Verlaine, or perhaps himself at St. Katherine’s Dock after Verlaine’s ship had set sail for Belgium in the ill-fated July of 1873?) Occasionally he falls back into the medieval confessionalism – his genius sublimates the Catholic confessional and uses it for firewood – of A Season in Hell. One of Ashbery's finest translations is the second part of 'Youth', subtitled 'Sonnet'. (It’s not the first blank sonnet. One hundred years earlier, the teenage Blake wrote four blank sonnets to the seasons.) Here, Rimbaud's trick is to substitute 'you' for 'I'.

Man of average build, wasn’t the flesh
a fruit hung in the orchard;—O
childlike days!—the body a treasure to be squandered;—O
loving, the danger or the strength of Pysche? Earth
had slopes fertile in princes and artists,
and lineage and race drove you
to crimes and mourning: the world your fortune and
your peril. But now, that labour accomplished,—you, your
calculations,
—you, your impatience—are nothing but your dance
and your voice, not fixed and in no way forced, yet reason
enough for a double happening of invention and success,
in fraternal and discreet humanity through the pictureless universe;—strength and rectitude reflect the dance and the voice only now appreciated.

Who more than Rimbaud embodies the other Schopenhauerian notion of genius i.e. that it 'always sees the universal in the particular'? 'Sonnet' is Rimbaud as Adam, as Everyman, in a mindscape of abstractions. Had Rimbaud contributed to the medieval Realism vs. Nominalism debate about whether concepts such as ‘whiteness’ or ‘humanity’ were realities or merely names, he’d have done so as a Realist. ‘Invention’ and ‘success’ and ‘humanity’ and ‘peril’ are clearly such realities for Rimbaud, he finds it difficult to move among the minutiae of a more day-to-day existence. In ‘Psyche’ he namechecks the goddess who was the tragic lover of love himself, Cupid, as told in that most influential of ancient novels *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, a book Rimbaud knew inside-out. This is a verse translation that succeeds in relaying a Rimbalidan technique and emotion – 'the dance and the voice' – to an English reader. In 14 fast-flowing, time-lapse photography lines, the strangely italicised *Man* becomes myth.

However, by the time he was writing these poems, a new relationship had replaced his intense bond with Verlaine. This was not Nouveau, who was a fellow-poet and acolyte. (Unfortunately, he ended his days as a church-door beggar in Aix, his version of events seemingly lost.) One of the puzzles of *Illuminations* is to whom the many love poems are addressed. Biographers – Robb excluded – have often posited a mystery girlfriend in London, whom Verlaine had mentioned. Women abound in the slopes of his paragraphs. In the English-titled 'Bottom', the poet who co-authored with Verlaine the classically scatological 'Sonnet to an Arsehole', seems to be having more camp fun; but he is really a rude mechanical, a shape-shifting peasant, whose liaison with the fairy queen ('madame') was all-too-transitory. 'In the morning,—a bellicose dawn in June,—I ran to the fields, a donkey, trumpeting and brandishing my grievance...’ A clue is surely to be found in the fact that one of the poems is entitled 'H' — which stands for a character called Hortense — and that two of the other major female characters are called Helen and Henrika. Jeremy Harding and James Sturrock suggest that 'H' is a code word for the 'Habit' of masturbation, but this is infantilisation. Or is it? Wallace Fowlie and various French critics have looked at the ‘atrocious gestures’ and ‘solitude’ and ‘erotic mechanism’ and ‘childhood’ and detected ‘onanism’. His aforementioned final verse poem satirized the Imperial Prince who himself was in ‘the Habit’. I beg to differ. H is neither habit nor homosexuality, but a real woman. My own take on *Illuminations* is that among its dimensions is a series of poems addressed to a female lover with whom he had a brief relationship, — possibly a young Frenchwoman from the community of idealist refugees, possibly a married woman or a widow — but a relationship which failed due to poverty.

From 'H': 'Her door is open to human misery. There, the morality of present-day beings is disincorporated into her passion or her action.—O terrible shudder of novice lovers, on the bloody ground and under the illuminating hydrogen! find Hortense.'

From 'Fairy': 'For Helen's childhood, furs and shadows quivered—and the bosom of the poor,
and the legends of the sky.
   And her eyes and her dance superior even to the precious glitter, the cold influences, the pleasure of the unique setting and hour.'

From 'Workers': 'O that mild February morning. The untimely South came to enliven our ridiculous paupers' memories, our young poverty.
   Henrika had on a brown and white checked cotton skirt, which must have been worn during the last century...'

They read like refrains. Here is a way of making a cycle of prose-poems more lyrical: the theme as chorus. As with the child beggar who chased the female dawn, the 'H' woman and the miseries of poverty are always mentioned together. ‘Find Hortense’ suggests a riddle. Question: why after the disaster with Verlaine did Rimbaud want to come back to an ill-disposed London? Was it to ‘find Hortense’? The ‘novice lovers’ and the ‘bloody ground’ speak of more than masturbation. Hortensio from The Taming of the Shrew ends up happily married to a widow. (In Milan, Rimbaud lived with a widow for three weeks.) One other serious possibility is that he formed a relationship with a prostitute, the only type of woman he would have had easy access to in Victorian England. Wallace Fowlie is adamant this is the onanistic Rimbaud, but does admit ‘the poem would seem to describe the life of a prostitute’. Poets in the European tradition do not tend to write prolonged, impassioned love cycles to their own wrists. The ‘H’ poems are all beautiful, the heart of the book. 'Workers' is a masterpiece that reflects not only a consciousness deepened by his encounters with Karl Marx in communard Soho but a personal/political heartbreak. Though the ‘Sud’ suggests a northern French landscape, another detail anchors it in the London real. The poem beginning with ‘O that mild February morning’ later recounts: 'In a puddle left in a rather steep path by last month's flood she showed me some tiny fish.' This seems to be the flood of January 1873 again. (Rimbaud himself became a 'worker' in 1874, when he and Nouveau worked in a cardboard factory in Holborn. Even with such a job Rimbaud would still have been numbered among the poor). ‘Workers’ is about a young couple who are married or engaged but clearly this relationship, in what Benjamin would call ‘the era of high capitalism’, is doomed. The ‘ma femme’ is the narrator’s but perhaps also Rimbaud’s: ‘No we will not spend the summer in this miserly country where we’ll never be anything but orphans engaged to eachother. I don’t want this rugged arm to keep dragging a beloved image behind us.’ Here, Ashbery’s ‘behind us’ makes the ‘beloved image’ more mysterious than usual, perhaps a child the couple aren’t going to have.

Other females are serenaded. Who is the upper-case 'She' addressed in the rawest of poems, 'Anguish'?

Is it possible that She will have me pardoned for my continually squelched ambitions,—that an affluent end is compensation enough for ages of poverty, — that a day's success can lull us to sleep, forgetting the shame of our fatal ineptitude... That accidents of scientific magic and movements of social brotherhood are to be cherished as the progressive restitution of our first freedom?...
Some critics see his mother here, but note the detail of ‘lull us to sleep’. (Rimbaud never slept with the ‘Mouth of Darkness’, except in the graveyard at Charleville, where she buried him and joined him later.) Again it’s a wife-like figure and again there is both poverty and idealism. ‘Our first freedom’ is Edenic, not Oedipal. Ashbery’s ‘squelched’ is the kind of word he gleefully uses in his own poems, thus extending poetry’s vocabulary.

On a lighter note, from ‘Devotions’: ‘To Lulu,—a demon—who has retained a taste for chapels of the time of the Girlfriends and of her incomplete education. Pray for men! To Madame xxx.’ Note the upper case ‘Girlfriends’ and the reappearance of Madame xxx. The voice seems to be that of a priest addressing prayers to all and sundry, but slips back to Rimbaud: ‘To the adolescent that I was.’ Again, poverty is cited: ‘To the spirit of the poor.’ The poem ‘Phrases’ concludes with more mystery women and more poverty and destitution: ‘My friend, beggar girl, monstrous child! how little it all matters to you, these unhappy women and these machinations, and my embarrassment. Fasten yourself to us with your impossible voice, your voice! sole flatterer of this vile despair.’

The omnipresent female figure, a multiplicity in unity, seems almost to be a metropolitan equivalent of St. Francis’ ‘Lady Poverty’. Though Rimbaud had announced ‘I detest poverty!’ in A Season, lambasting London as ‘the harbour of misery, the colossal city whose skyline is stained with fire and mud’, here he is Flaubert-like immersed in what he most hates and writing up the sordid details. By fusing social comment with tragic love, more pathos is generated. Has there ever been such a sublime meditation on the taboo subject of poverty, or one so aesthetically advanced? As a revolutionary, a communard, a millenarian, Rimbaud belonged to an ancient tradition of European dissent whose adherents were supposed to go to the major cities and live among the poor e.g. the Beghards, the Amaurians, the Free Spirits, and London’s very own Ranters. ‘Let’s resume studying amid the clamour of the devouring task that is once more forming and rising up among the masses.’ Interested in more than just Troubadour forms, Rimbaud is one of Norman Cohn’s ‘mystical anarchists’, a charismatic challenge to the status quo, scourging the hypocrisy of European bourgeois Christendom. ‘Ancient revolts swarm at the core of the Celestial Empire…’ However, that the poems also document an unhappy love affair mean that Illuminations should also be counted among such poem cycles as Dante’s or Petrarch’s or Shakespeare’s or Sidney’s. When Verlaine’s preface says the poems are about ‘hazy adorable loves’, he doesn’t mean himself.

There are a few gay flashes within this ferment. 'There are a few young men,— what would they think of Cherubino?—endowed with frightening voices and some dangerous resources. They are sent off to be buggered in cities, swathed in disgusting luxury'. Ashbery's 'to be buggered' is another bold quirk. Let's compare it with other translations. The French is 'prendre du dos' - literally 'to take from the back'. Wyatt Mason's is 'to get it from behind' (2002); Paul Schmidt's is 'to take it from behind' (1967); and Wallace Fowlie's is the very gentrified 'for trade' (1966). The poem ‘Antique’ portrays a hermaphrodite faun with his/her ‘double sex’ on show; and in ‘Common Nocturne’ there is a mention of ‘Sodoms’; but these rare instances are swept away by a heterosexual tide – ‘The sea of the vigil, like Amélie’s breasts’– which when it’s not doting on ‘H’ and
other mystery females – ‘I throw myself on the bed, and, turning toward the dark, I see you, my daughters! my queens!’ – then magnifies into a full-blown pagan goddess-worship. The English-titled ‘Being Beauteous’ is magnificent and visionary:

Against snow, a tall Beautiful Being… The actual colours of life darken, dance, and emerge around the Vision as it takes shape. And shudders arise and rumble, and the frenetic taste of these effects weighted down with the mortal whistling and raucous music that the world, far behind us, hurls at our mother of beauty, —she backs off, she stands up. Oh! our bones are clad with a new loving body.

Robert Graves’ ideas find a corroboration in Rimbaud, Gallic-style, from a poetry culture which had already envisaged the white goddess as ‘La Beauté’ or ‘Beauty’. Again, from ‘Dawn’: ‘...at its silver summit, I recognized the goddess.’ Or from the stunning ‘Barbarian’: ‘... and the voice of woman reaching to the depths of the arctic volcanoes and caverns.’ In one of his earliest poems ‘Sun and Flesh’ he exhorts: ‘Oh Venus! Oh Goddess!’

Rimbaud had always written obsessively about females, young, old, beautiful, ugly: Nina, Venus Anadyomene, Ophelia, Jeanne-Marie, et al. Of course, this does not imply goddess-worship. However an 1871 quatrain goes beyond Rimbaud’s Greco-Roman textbook paganism into something else. This poem has not yet been properly hailed as extraordinary:

THE STAR CRIED ROSE

The star cried rose into the core of your ears.
Infinity rolled white between your neck and thighs.
The sea pearled red onto your crimson breast,
And Man has bled black at your sovereign sides.

More than a quatrain, it is a four-pillared temple. The first pillar is made of the great essences ‘star/infinity/sea/Man’; the second pillar is made of the actions ‘cried/rolled/pearled/bled’; the third pillar is made of the colours ‘rose/white/red/black’; and the fourth pillar is made of the female body parts ‘ears/neck and thighs/breast/sides’. The four pillars might roughly correspond to the four realms of Kabbala ‘Emanation/Creation/Action/Formation’. The poem is the essence of the courtly tradition in which ‘Love’ itself was ‘the Court’. He kept that faith. Later, even the new all-mod-cons Rimbaud would see a superabundance of goddesses in the English polis.

Rimbaud's only known utterances from London are the desperate letters to Verlaine, and Illuminations. Worksheets of poems are lost; only fair copies survive. We know that A Season was reduced and reduced. Doubtless the same is true of Illuminations. Critics laud it as a classic and yet cast doubt on its provenance and integrity by saying that the poems were written in different times and places, in different moods and phases, implying a rag-bag of disparate and contradictory elements. Enid Starkie sees Rimbaud as having renounced the magical debauchery of ‘Morning of Drunkenness’ and ‘Genie’ for the prosaic sobriety of: ‘I am an ephemeral and not at all dissatisfied citizen of a metropolis
thought to be modern because every known taste has been avoided in the furnishings and exteriors of its houses as well as in the plan of the city.’ However, a supreme artist such as Rimbaud, a jongleur par excellence, can juggle a few balls in a single work of art. *Illuminations* was his only project; though he abandoned the gift, he completed the project. Besides, Rimbaud did not sober up till he was out of Europe and even in Abyssinia he liked chewing khat. I’m with the critic Bouillane de Lacoste who asserts that these poems were mostly written in 1874, in London; and I’m with André Breton who draws attention to the great mystery and significance of the year 1874 in Rimbaud’s life.

The aforementioned trio of poems, ‘City’, ‘Cites [1]’ and ‘Cities [2]’ are master blueprints of urban poetry. A phrase, ‘the plan of the city’, installs psychogeographical poets as the new town planners. ‘City’ revels in its own prosaicness, with liberal dollops of sarcasm to taste. Wonder is also apparent, and a harsh sympathy for the ‘millions of people who feel no need to know one another’ and for the ‘new specters rolling through the thick and eternal fumes of coal fires’. We see Ginsberg also, and his ‘cottage in the Western night’. Again the poem’s climax, in a complex clause, returns us to what Robert Graves calls ‘the theme’: ‘Death without tears, our active daughter and servant, and a despairing Love, and a pretty crime whimpering in the street’. ‘Cities [1]’ and ‘[2]’ mix classicism and futurism so brilliantly, you would think modernism was invented then and there. His reading at the British Museum is projected onto the quotidian city and citizens, transforming both. The ‘goddess’ is manifest, this time in triplicate:

On footbridges spanning the abyss and on the roofs of inns, the sky’s passion decks the masts with bunting. The collapse of apotheoses reaches the fields on the heights where seraphic centauresses gambol among avalanches. Above the level of the highest peaks a sea whipped up by the eternal birth of Venus, laden with choral fleets and the humming of precious pearly and conches,—the sea sometimes darkens with mortal flashes of light. On the slopes, crops of flowers as large as our weapons and our goblets are braying. Processions of Mabs in russet and opaline dresses climb the ravines. Farther up, with their hooves in the waterfall and the brambles, stags suckle at Diana’s breasts. Suburban Bacchantes sob and the moon burns and howls. Venus enters the caves of blacksmiths and hermits. Clusters of belfries sing out the ideas of the peoples.

Here, Rimbaud the isolated poet is one of those hermits and blacksmiths, welcoming his Venus’s visitation, seemingly foreseeing the Diana Memorial Fountain, and also paying homage – as Shelley had done – to the Celtic Mab. Again the poem culminates in a lamenting question: ‘What kind arms, what fortunate hour will give me back that region from whence issue my sleep and my slightest movements?’ ‘Cities [2]’ offers the haunting admission: ‘At several points on the copper footbridges, the platforms, the stairways that wind around covered markets and pillars, I thought that I could judge the depth of the city! It’s the wonder of it that I was unable to seize…’ The ‘Acropolis’ makes us imagine the poet as a would-be philosopher of the city, but failing in his own mind to find the philosopher’s stone. Those of us who love the book would say that for such a thoroughgoing poet-alchemist as Rimbaud, London itself – as sublimated to Leun’deun – was the philosopher’s stone.
Another masterpiece, ‘Metropolitan’ uses the modernism of the early London Underground as a take-off point for more celebration/commiseration of the human condition, and his own personal loss. (How apt that the later Paris system should adopt the poem’s name ‘Métropolitain’.) It’s a masterclass in prose poetry, in Ashbery’s English as in the French. Five fast-flowing, cosmically intoxicated, highly painterly post-Impressionist paragraphs – classic litanies or versicles – are all terminated with an abrupt single noun: ‘The city’ or ‘The Battle’ or ‘The country’ or ‘The Sky’ and finally ‘your Strength’. It works superbly not only as a poetic rhythm, but because it mimics the acceleration and sudden halts of the train itself pulling into stops and taking off again. The Metropolitan Line was half-underground, half-overground at this time, running between Paddington and Farringdon, but the view from Rimbaud’s window is a Turner-esque apocalypse, under which the human shadows move. ‘From the indigo strait to the seas of Ossian, on the pink and orange sand bathed by the wine-coloured sky, crystal boulevards rise up and intersect, immediately populated by poor families who shop for groceries at the fruit stands.’ Again the poet is conducting his own ‘Survey of London’ but again the final paragraph sees him returning to his upper-case female muse in a multi-colored but bittersweet refrain: ‘The morning when, with Her, you thrashed about amid shards of snow, your lips green, ice, black banners and blue rays, and the purple perfumes of the polar sun.—your strength.’ It’s always been too casually assumed that these poems are about anything you want them to be about; but they’re not. They are mostly urban love poems.

Ashbery’s Illuminations are Londonless – except perhaps in the phrase ‘Nothing posh, the city!’ from ‘Metropolitan’, a deviation from the literal ‘Nothing rich, the city!’ – but poems which found their universality in Victorian London speak to all people, of all cities. Despite trying and failing to join the American navy, Rimbaud never got to America, but ‘Brooklyn’ is namechecked. The single phrase ‘Behold the time of the Assassins!’ – in its evocation of Hassan-i-Sabbah’s hit-squads – must surely resonate in New York as it does in London, both targets of Jihad. Phrases such as ‘I dream of a War of righteousness or force, whose logic will be quite unexpected’ and ‘at the service of the most monstrous industrial or military exploitation’ illuminate today as they will illuminate tomorrow. His grand theme of poverty is more relevant than ever in the credit-crunched West and certain lines touch on this miraculously: ‘For example, on whatever evening the naïve tourist finds himself retired from our economic horrors, the hand of a virtuoso animates the harpsichord of the fields…’ Or: ‘The same bourgeois magic on every port where the mail-boat deposits us!’ Or what about: ‘It’s this age that has sunk!’ Another 21st century moment is found in ‘Cities [2]’: ‘The paradise of storms caves in. Savages endlessly dance out the festival of night. And, for an hour, I came down into the liveliness of a boulevard in Baghdad where gangs were chanting the joy of the new work, under a stiff breeze, moving along unable to avoid the fabulous phantoms of the mountains where we were supposed to meet again’. Some translations read ‘new labour’ which is chilling for all the wrong reasons: Blair’s invasion of Iraq on the back of a dodgy dossier. And has the would-be engineer also predicted New Labour’s other immortal triumph, the Millennium Dome? ‘This dome is an armature of artistically
wrought steel approximately fifteen thousand feet in diameter.’ Rimbaud’s *aheadness* always wins, even if the exclamation mark is unfashionable.

Translation is democratic. Even a bad translation will have a good poem, or paragraph, or sentence, or phrase or word. Even a great one will have flaws. Many Rimbaud-inspired poets have a go. In London, Robert Yates does super-literal translations in which the English word chosen is that which most closely resembles the French word; Sean Bonney does ferociously lateral re-wiring. Rimbaud’s tone is so extraordinary that only he can produce it. Translators cannot; they must recreate the meaning, the music. Rimbaud’s grammar is masterly; in translation it can seem stilted, too formal. In prose-poems, especially, repetitions must be deft. What’s great about this one is that not only is Ashbery a genuine Francophile and seasoned translator, he is also John Ashbery. Who else would translate ‘soirée’ as ‘soirée’? Is it an English or American translation? Some of his *Illuminations* are the best ever, in what is consistently the finest single faithful translation of the book I know. Perhaps the one that leaps out is the aforementioned ‘Sonnet’, but then the whole of ‘Youth’ is excellent and so many others are superb, that it’s a question of the individual reader finding his/her own favourites. A double talent is evident. Clayton Eshleman talks of how a poet-translator should reproduce the exact meaning of the original but also emulate the performance value. The opening line of ‘Bottom’ is a good instance of this: ‘Since reality was too prickly for my lavish personality…’ Brilliant. A major problem for poets is that of realism and how to move beyond it, but without ignoring reality. *Illuminations* has always pointed the way, and Ashbery – also a mover beyond realism – has gifted both novice and expert. Nor does he supernannuate his fellow-Americans Fowlie, Schmidt and Mason, who though lesser poets, still took the trouble of doing the whole oeuvre.

As for ‘Genie’ which Ashbery hails as ‘one of the best poems ever written’, it’s about everything. The goddesses have vanished, though. This beautifully sounded fugue, with its empowered ‘He’, could be read as a profoundly homosexual poem, and is surely the inspiration for Ashbery’s own amazing ‘He’. Sometimes I’ve thought it a celebration of Verlaine, the father and provider Rimbaud never knew, a very different portrait to the usual walrus-moustached ‘assassin manqué’. But as so often it’s really about himself. Though Christ-like, it’s not Christ; though Godlike, it’s not God. Perhaps this poem which customarily ends *Illuminations* is about genius, the gift that Rimbaud chose to renounce because – as he could see for himself – all it seemed to offer its standard-bearers was damnation. Czelaw Milosz writes of how Communist societies were amazed at the way Capitalist societies took no interest in artistic geniuses grafting away in their garrets. ‘Genie’ is an I.O.U. for and a signpost to the great works of literature Rimbaud did not go on to create. If protest poetry fails, then silence might be a more powerful protest, and one still ongoing. It is also the poem of a failed angel, someone who realized he was – according to the theological definition of genie – ‘a spirit lower than an angel, that can take human and animal shape, and having a supernatural power over humans.’

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This is an extended version of ‘RIMBAUD / ILLUMINATIONS / ASHBERY’, from the published print copy in *The Wolf* 25 and taken from ‘*Black Goddess White Goddess*: Four Psychogeographical Book Reviews’.