To cite this article:

Stephen Regan. “At the Green Bar: The Irish French Sonnets of Ciaran Carson.” *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 21, (December 2025): 29-34.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

At the Green Bar: The Irish French Sonnets of Ciaran Carson

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Translators, as well as poets, know all too well that a struggle for articulation, a hunger for eloquence, can be a powerful motivating factor in creative writing, especially in circumstances where the imposed language or official language is associated with a history of oppression. Seamus Heaney memorably complimented James Joyce for having shown Irish writers that "English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon", and that emboldened grasp of the English language has been a striking characteristic of the poetry of Heaney and many of his near contemporaries (Parker 97).

The Irish poet and translator Ciaran Carson was a student of Heaney at Queen's University Belfast in the late 1960s, and he returned to Queen's in 2003 as the first director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry. His childhood education was unusual, in that he grew up in an Irish (Gaelic)-speaking household in Belfast at a time when very few families in Northern Ireland spoke anything other than English at home. The Irish language had been marginalized in the North after the Partition of Ireland in 1921, and it wasn't until the late 1960s that an Irish language revival started to take place. The other unusual linguistic factor in his upbringing, however, was that his father, William Carson, was a leading proponent of Esperanto, which had been devised in 1887 as an international means of communication – a universal second language with European roots. Carson senior was well known for his linguistic skills, hence the invitation he received to attend the Great Joint Congress of the British and Irish Esperanto Associations, which took place in Dublin at Easter in 1969. From an early age, his son was used to hearing Irish, English and Esperanto, and he grew up with his own prodigious capacity for bringing different languages into creative exchange. It no doubt pleased young Carson greatly to discover that James Joyce knew about Esperanto, boldly announcing it in the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses* (1922) and using it playfully in *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

The titles of Carson's early volumes of poetry, including *The Irish for No* (1987) and *First Language* (1993), immediately signal his interest in the interplay and interchange of languages. In these books and others, such as *Belfast Confetti* (1989), he acquired a reputation as a masterful exponent of the long line, a poet who skillfully crossed the musicality of the English lyric with the endlessly digressive narratives and tall tales of the Irish storyteller or *seanachie*. In the late 1990s, a new lyric intensity pervaded Carson's work and found its most creative expression in a prolific series of sonnets. Significantly, it was the twelve-syllable or alexandrine line of the French sonnet that Carson found most appealing. His book *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998) is a striking collection of translations of late-nineteenth-century French symbolist and decadent poetry with unmistakably Irish nuances and allusions. In each case, Carson provides the original French sonnet and accompanies it with his translation, though often the original prompts a provocative reworking rather than a strict linguistic translation.

The opening sonnet of *The Alexandrine Plan* is Carson's version of Rimbaud's "Au-Cabaret Vert", which Rimbaud is thought to have written towards the end of 1870 after visiting Charleroi in Belgium. This is a poem in which he turns away from the world of industry and social administration and finds pleasure in idleness and in the delights of the ordinary.

Au Cabaret-Vert

cinq heures du soir

Depuis huit jours, j'avais déchiré mes bottines
Aux cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi.
- Au Cabaret-Vert : je demandai des tartines
De beurre et du jambon qui fût à moitié froid.

Bienheureux, j'allongeai les jambes sous la table
Verte : je contemplai les sujets très naïfs
De la tapisserie. - Et ce fut adorable,
Quand la fille aux tétons énormes, aux yeux vifs,

- Celle-là, ce n'est pas un baiser qui l'épeure ! -
Rieuse, m'apporta des tartines de beurre,
Du jambon tiède, dans un plat colorié,

Du jambon rose et blanc parfumé d'une gousse
D'ail, - et m'emplit la chope immense, avec sa mousse
Que dorait un rayon de soleil arriéré.

Arthur Rimbaud (12)

Carson seizes opportunistically on the obvious Irish national possibilities in the title of Rimbaud's sonnet, felicitously rendering it as "the green bar" and cheekily turning the narrator from a bohemian French wanderer to a garrulous Irish rover. Here is Carson's version.

The Green Bar

I'd ripped my boots to pieces on the pebbly roads
Since Monday was a week. I walked into Kingstown.
Found myself in the old Green Bar. I ordered loads
Of cool ham, bread and butter. It was nearly sundown.

Pleased as Punch, I stretched my legs beneath the shamrock
Table. I admired the tacky '50s décor.
Then this vacant waitress in a tit-enhancing frock
Came on and wiggled up to me, her eyes galore

With hints of smooch kisses and her gorgeous platter
Of green gherkins, slabs of ham and bread and butter,
Rosy, garlic-scented ham; and then she filled my beer mug

With a bright smile, and turned herself into a ray
Of sunshine, like an unexpected Lady Day.
I guzzled it all into me. *Glug. Glug. Glug. Glug*.

Ciaran Carson (13)

The advantages of the Alexandrine form are immediately apparent in the luxuriously long rambling opening line playing off its plosive consonants against a variety of vowel sounds. Like the original, Carson's sonnet intersperses run-on lines with shorter syntactical units, catching the rhythms of actual speech. Rimbaud's "Charlerois" is conveniently translated as Kingstown, which could be the name of one of several townlands called Kingstown in Ireland, but it is much more likely that Carson is using the old name of the Dublin port, Dunlaoighre, conveniently resituating the sonnet in the Dublin environs. Again, with a brazen Irish attitude, "la table / Verte" is ostentatiously rendered as "the shamrock / Table". In other respects, Carson dutifully acknowledges the technical resources and procedures of the Rimbaud sonnet, including the quatrain-tercet sub-divisions, line breaks and syntax, and even the deployment of rhymes. The discipline of the sonnet form permits some liberties of expression, including the nicely colloquial "Pleased as Punch" for "Bien heureux" and the blatantly anachronistic "tacky '50s décor" for "les sujets très naïfs".

The ironic re-employment of a familiar anglicised French word to assist with his translation is typical of Carson's ingenuity in these sonnets. His relaxed colloquialisms prove very serviceable. The versatile phrase "Came on", strategically placed at the opening of a line, suggests coming on duty or starting a shift, but also acting in a sexually provocative way, and it also retains the performative connotations of cabaret (that is, coming on stage). What Carson is also cleverly doing in "The Green Bar" is to cross the French sonnet with the Irish *aisling*, a dream or vision poem in which the speaker encounters a woman who foretells the freedom of Ireland. Having entered the Green Bar at sundown, the narrator finds himself blessed with the sunshine of "an unexpected Lady Day", and consumes it with an appreciative pleasure. Lady Day was the name traditionally given to the Feast of the Annunciation, but as Carson knows it was also the nickname of the American jazz singer Billie Holiday, who was of mixed African and Irish descent. Carson closes his version of Rimbaud's sonnet with his own distinctive signature: a phonetic, onomatopoeic rendering of the verb to drink.

Although Rimbaud has an immediate appeal for Carson, his versions of poems by Mallarmé and Baudelaire are similarly striking in their bold appropriation of diction and imagery, and in their readiness to find Irish cultural equivalents for French habits and customs. In his translations of Mallarmé, Carson catches the yearning isolation and inwardness of the originals, as well as their foregrounding of vivid symbols that often have to do with the art of writing or with the longing for spiritual release and transcendence. Among these symbolist motifs are the bell and the swan. The bell, for instance, appears in Mallarme's poem "Le Sonneur", rendered by Carson as "The Sonneteer". Here, he depicts the writer as a "lonely campanologist" turning out "muted, brittle tinkles" on the bell of poetry and anticipating a suicidal death on the end of his own rope. Carson brilliantly captures the confessional candour and the morbid self-defeat of nineteenth-century decadent and symbolist poetry, powerfully rendering the shared identity of poet and bell ringer: "I am that man. Alas! Most nights I dangle on / An anxious tangled cable" (57). He also deftly plays with the symbol of the swan, familiar not just in the poems of Mallarmé and Baudelaire but in the poems of the great Irish poet, W. B. Yeats. The sonnet by Mallarmé beginning "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd hui" is neatly retitled "At the Sign of the Swan". Once again, Carson makes clear the relationship between poetic identity and symbol by deftly rhyming "line" with "sign" and by playing on the phonetic similarity of "sign" and "Cygne": "Beautiful ghost, condemned by his own brilliant line, / Engraved within a pond of icy crystallite, / He maintains the useless exile of a Swan, or sign" (51).

Carson's versions of sonnets by Baudelaire are infused with catchy allusions to popular culture, including pop music and film. The title "La Cloche fêlée" is oddly translated as "The Dongless Bell" rather than the usual "broken bell" or "flawed bell" that Roy Campbell and other translators provide. In place of the conventional translation of the speaker's confession,

"My soul is flawed", Carson gives us an Elvis Presley inspired line: "I'm all shook up" (83). Baudelaire's sonnet "Parfum Exotique" is also oddly translated as "Blue Grass", which conveys the marijuana-induced melancholy of Baudelaire's poem and simultaneously evokes the plangent rhythms of American country music. In his translation of Rimbaud's sonnet "Ma Bohème", Carson once again draws on modern American popular culture, rendering the title not as "My Bohemian Life" but as "On the Road", recalling the title of Jack Kerouac's celebrated 1957 novel of the Beat Generation. Here is the original:

Ma Bohème

(Fantaisie)

Je m'en allais, les poings dans mes poches crevées;
Mon paletot aussi devenait idéal;
J'allais sous le ciel, Muse, et j'étais ton féal;
Oh! là là! que d'amours splendides j'ai rêvées !

Mon unique culotte avait un large trou.
– Petit Poucet rêveur, j'égrenais dans ma course
Des rimes. Mon auberge était à la Grande-Ourse;
– Mes étoiles au ciel avaient un doux frou-frou.

Et je les écoutais, assis au bord des routes,
Ces bons soirs de septembre où je sentais des gouttes
De rosée à mon front, comme un vin de vigueur;

Où, rimant au milieu des ombres fantastiques,
Comme des lyres, je tirais les élastiques
De mes souliers blessés, un pied près de mon cœur !

Arthur Rimbaud (22)

Carson dispenses with Rimbaud's subtitle, but nevertheless captures the French poet's distinctive blend of bohemian wandering and imaginative freewheeling in his Beat-inspired version of the sonnet:

On the Road

Thumbs hitched into my holey pockets, off I hiked
In my has-been-through-the-wars ex-Army greatcoat;
Under your blue skies, O muse, you took me on your bike;
I loved the way in which we spun in perfect rote.

My trousers had a hole as big as any arse,
And I became a dwarf who scatters rhymes along
The Milky Way. In the Great Bear, I sang my song,
As huge stars shivered in the rustling universe.

And I listened to their dew of blue September
Evenings fall on me, like Long Ago remembered

In the first sip of a cool green bubble-beaded wine;

I strummed the black elastic of my tattered boot
Held to my heart like youthful violin or lute,
A veritable pop-star of the awful rhyme.

Ciaran Carson (23)

Carson dutifully observes the alliterative opening of Rimbaud's sonnet, substituting the plosives with the strongly aspirated "hitched" and "holey" and "hiked". Very economically, he catches the distinctive blend in Rimbaud's poem of a joyous impoverishment and a freedom from societal norms that allows the artist his imaginative fantasy. There is a subtle alignment in both poems between tattered clothes and poetic talent, as if the torn garments somehow guarantee the authenticity of the poet as bohemian wanderer. The motif of clothes is especially pronounced in the closing image of the tattered boot strummed like a "youthful violin or lute", giving us a sonorous rhyming couplet. Rimbaud's ideal coat is updated in Carson's sonnet and becomes 'my has-been-through-the wars ex-Army greatcoat'. Carson clearly enjoys this heavy piling on of modifiers, combined with humorous wordplay. The coat is a "has-been coat" in the sense of having seen better days, but it also has literally been through the wars. It's a great coat, as well as a greatcoat. There is an evident delight in the line "My trousers had a hole as big as any arse", not just because it contains both "arse" and "hole", but because it manages to retain Rimbaud's "trou" in "trousers" while also hinting at the "cul" or "arse" in "culotte". "Arse" and "universe" come together in an enterprising rhyme.

Here and elsewhere, Carson both attempts close proximity to the source text and enjoys the occasional striking departure from it. It is almost as if he feels that loose translations and creative slippages have to be earned. So, for instance, the address to the muse in line 3 is strategically positioned at mid-point, as in the original, but then Carson takes the liberty of imagining the two of them (poet and muse) on a bike. It is not just that he needs a rhyme or near rhyme for "hiked". It is also that the bike is a familiar emblem in Irish writing, closely connected with itinerant characters, all the way from Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* to Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy* and his play, *Endgame*. The image of poet and muse "in perfect rote" is beautifully done, hinting at rotation, turn taking, and route or direction all at once. This is another example of Carson "Irishing" these French sonnets (if such a term might be allowed).

Like Rimbaud, Carson imagines the poet scattering rhymes across the constellations, and he turns the Great Bear into a pub, nicely recalling the Green Bar of the earlier sonnet. Notice that it's "In the Great Bear", not under the Great Bear, that he sings his song. The colour imagery is peculiar to Carson, and it's familiar elsewhere in his work. The reference to "blue September" looks back to "blue skies" in the opening quatrain, but it also brings to mind the blues music heard in Kerouac's novel and hints more generally at autumnal melancholy. In addition, it also allows a resonant internal rhyme between "dew" and "blue". Rimbaud's invigorating wine becomes in Carson's poem a beautifully sensuous and Keatsian "cool green bubble-beaded wine". Of course, he gleefully seizes any opportunity to get the colour green into these poems.

There is very little critical writing on Carson's translations, but one of the most enlightening essays on the topic is by Adam Watt (co-editor with Brian Nelson of the Oxford Worlds Classics edition of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*). Watt says of Carson's evocation of "Long Ago remembered / In the first sip of a cool green bubble-beaded wine" that this is a "quasi-Proustian recollection of time past" which creates in Carson's poem a "more muted, perhaps even slightly wistful tone" than we find in the Rimbaud sonnet (234). Watt

goes on to compare Carson's translation with a Scottish translation by Patrick McGuinness comically titled "My Glasgowhemia".

It is worth noting that the rhymes in the first two quatrains (that is, the octave) of Rimbaud's sonnet have envelope rhymes, whereas in Carson's sonnet they have alternating rhymes. Rimbaud gives us *abba*, Carson gives us *abab*. This reinforces a very good point made by Adam Watt, which is that, for all its apparent demotic casualness and seeming improvisation, Carson's sonnet is actually highly wrought and technically adroit. Carson ends his sonnet not with the astounding image of the roving poet's foot close to his heart, but with the self-denigrating picture of the poet as "A veritable pop-star of the awful rhyme". The word "rhyme" purposefully rhymes awfully with "wine" in a clever moment of feigned incompetence.

In conclusion, it is instructive to compare Ciaran Carson's translations of French poets with those of the American poet, Robert Lowell, who chose the title *Imitations* (1961) for his versions of European poetry, including work by Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Lowell was criticised at the time for having given too much of an autobiographical emphasis to the poems, thereby abandoning objectivity and fidelity to the original texts. Carson does something rather different. At times, he produces translations that are ostentatiously Irish and overtly of their time – hence the anachronistic references to twentieth-century popular culture – but he always does so in a way that seems earned and justified, or in a style that is suddenly ignited by a word or image in the original. His proficiency in handling the sonnet form, including the alexandrine line, allows him some adventurousness, but he never travels too far. Instead, his creative manoeuvres have a dynamic effect, sending us back to the sonnets of nineteenth-century French decadent and symbolist poets with renewed insight and rekindled admiration.

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