

Mass Illuminations: Jennings, Madge, Rimbaud and the ‘Popular’ Prose Poem

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ABSTRACT: The importance of the Mass-Observation social research project to post-war British literature can be traced to the founding involvement of two poets, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge. Their experimentation with the possibility of a prose-based poetry in the mid-Thirties has already been linked to the example of Surrealism. Here, it is argued that they were also strongly influenced by Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1872-74). Madge’s prose poem ‘Bourgeois News’ uses textual collage to create a Rimbaudian vision of the ‘parade sauvage’ of late imperial Britain, which strikingly anticipates the work of more recent British prose poets such as Rod Mengham and Tony Lopez. In conclusion, archival evidence is used to support the hypothesis that Madge composed an anonymous news article, influenced by his reading of Rimbaud, as an illustration of his belief that newspapers contained the potential for a revolutionary new form of ‘popular poetry’.

In a recent review of Peter Riley's *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* (2014), a prose poem concerning the mass protest against land enclosure in the Peak District in 1932, the poet and critic Billy Mills suggested that Riley's eschewal of the 'overly poetic' to document 'the surreal nature of reality' could be illuminated by Charles Madge's 1937 article 'Poetic Description and Mass-Observation'. This early manifesto for the social research project that Madge founded with Tom Harrison and Humphrey Jennings describes the gathering of 'objective statements about human behaviour' as 'a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers'.¹ Since the turn of the century, Mass-Observation has increasingly been recognised as a movement with avant-garde poetic origins as well as democratising ambitions that anticipate the social realism of post-war British writing. Both Nick Hubble and Benjamin Kohlmann have traced the cultural politics and literary practice of Jennings and Madge to the formative influence of English studies at Cambridge, as pioneered by I.A. Richards and William Empson.² In 2001, a special number of the journal *new formations* included essays by two later poets working in the English Faculty at Cambridge, Drew Milne and Rod Mengham, who reconsidered Madge's example in particular. Milne argued that 'Madge's interest in poetry and poetics informs the project of Mass-Observation beyond the conventional terms of what is meant by poetry', while Mengham proposed that Jennings's and Madge's experiments with the prose poem around the time they founded Mass-Observation suggested

a very paradoxical line of development in English culture in which Surrealism is the formative influence upon both the origins of sociology in Britain and on a war-time and post-war new realism concerned with the portrayal of working-class culture.³

In the case of Jennings, the surrealistic technique of the prose poems (called 'Reports') that he published in literary magazines developed simultaneously with his cinematic practice as a documentary maker who made innovative use of jump-cut and voice-over. In Madge's oeuvre, 'Bourgeois News', the central prose poem of his first collection, *The Disappearing Castle* (1937), also evinces a desire to make poetry out of documentary materials – specifically, the news reporting that was his day job at the *Daily Mirror*. For both, the ideal was embodied in the modernist hero-figure of the 'popular' poet: the 'artist-scientist' who would 'satisfy not his own isolated fantasy, but the needs and wishes of the masses' (Madge)⁴

and bring ‘poetry and romance and news’ together.⁵ This ambition can be connected to the interest that Madge and Jennings had in the ‘absolutely modern’ prose poetry of Arthur Rimbaud in *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1872–74), with its heteroglossic ‘intersection of religious, economic, scientific, pagan, political, historical and other modes of discourse’.⁶ To recognise the importance of Rimbaud’s prose poetry to the avant-garde poetic tradition in Britain – so often associated with the post-Symbolist verse of Eliot and Pound – is to trace one way in which, since the 1930s, it has pursued the French poet’s proto-Surrealist dream of a visionary writing in which the controlling consciousness of the author has been subject to a ‘rational *derangement*’.⁷

What Rod Mengham identifies as the more politically conscious and culturally materialist ‘second phase’ of French Surrealism was undoubtedly a major stimulus to Jennings and, to a lesser degree, Madge in the early thirties. But by the time of Mass-Observation’s formulation, both had begun to express their disillusionment with orthodox Surrealism as a force for change. Harrison, Jennings and Madge’s letter to the *New Statesman* in January 1937, which served as the manifesto of the movement, is often noted for the surrealist list of examples that this new ‘science’ of mass psychology would consider (‘Female taboos about eating./ The private lives of midwives.’)⁸ Yet Geoffrey Nowell-Smith reports Madge’s recollection that it was Harrison, the anthropologist, who ‘was responsible for the surreal elements of the manifesto, and [...] Jennings, the only real surrealist in the group, was not in favour of their inclusion’.⁹ In May 1937, a pamphlet laying out the aims of Mass-Observation – written by Madge and Harrison, but intensively debated by a group that included Jennings – played down Surrealism’s influence in favour of Rimbaud, who was cited as a ‘pre-scientific’ precursor of Mass-Observation’s ambition to psychoanalyse the mind of the crowd. Rimbaud’s prophetic vision, it was claimed, had ‘an historical significance far beyond those of the post-Freudian Surrealist writers and painters’.¹⁰ Rimbaud’s determination to see beyond literature as a bourgeois enclosure of feeling spoke to the left-wing politics of the group. But the line quoted from *Illuminations* – ‘J’ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage’ [‘I alone have the key to this wild circus’] – also bristles with the ambivalence inherent in his belief that the poet ‘makes himself a *seer*’ while ultimately ‘los[ing] the intelligence of his visions’.¹¹

By the end of the 1930s, to be enamoured of Rimbaud had become one of the clichés of the inter-war generation. Introducing his hack-writer hero John Boot in *Scoop* (1938), Evelyn Waugh slyly noted that Boot’s first book, written at eighteen, was a biography of the

adolescent prodigy.¹² In the same year, W.H. Auden composed his sonnet on Rimbaud's life, which depicted him as a thirties poet *avant la lettre*, struggling to throw off lyrical bad faith for a life of action:

Verse was a special illness of the ear;
Integrity was not enough; that seemed
The hell of childhood: he must try again.

Now, galloping through Africa, he dreamed
Of a new self, the son, an engineer,
His truth acceptable to lying men.¹³

To young writers maturing in the wake of high modernism, Rimbaud's rule-breaking insouciance, in life and art, held out the romantic possibility of perpetual revolution. Kathleen Raine, who was later married to Madge, recalls Humphrey Jennings saying in 1932, "You must *be* 1932" [...] following Rimbaud's injunction (often on his lips), "*il faut être absolument moderne.*"¹⁴ Jennings's qualifications as a visionary leader at this time included his active connection to the Surrealist group in France, with whom he exhibited his paintings. His adoption of Rimbaud as a sage was Surrealist orthodoxy, following André Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), in which Breton listed the writers who had prefigured the movement in specific ways: 'Rimbaud is Surrealist in the way he lived, and elsewhere'.¹⁵ Jennings expanded on the idea that Rimbaud had shown modernity the way in an article on 'The Theatre Today' (1935), in which he associated the French poet with the penultimate stage in a 'series' of liberatory steps towards 'something that nobody has seen in England: poetry *in action*'.¹⁶

Madge was also in the habit of citing Rimbaud as the prophet of a revolutionary future. Beneath an undated holograph draft of an unpublished early poem, 'On Apprehending', he wrote the second sentence of 'À une raison' ('To Reason'), from *Illuminations*: 'Un pas de toi, c'est la levée des nouveaux hommes et leur en-marche' ['One step of yours, and the new men rise up and march'].¹⁷ Added in pencil, it appears to have been scribbled as an afterthought to the poem, which concludes in a fair copy version, dated July 1933:

The step on step of incident is where

is the heard voice of blood that calls and calls.

Each echoed minute is its other too
and each round clasp of things face is and head
of body risen from unseen now sand.¹⁸

When the twenty-one-year-old Madge wrote this poem he had recently discovered the writings of both Marx and Auden.¹⁹ The Audenesque inversions of syntax and rhetoric of metonymised abstractions here yield a Marxist image of history proceeding dialectically ('Each echoed minute is its other too') from the quotidian 'step on step of incident' – the phrase most obviously glossed by the Rimbaud quotation – to the ultimate result of man's 'apprehending' of this process: the liberated rising of the collective body ('each round clasp of things face is and head/ of body risen from unseen now sand'). Madge's apocalyptic vision of a 'body' rising from 'sand' evokes the end of another poem from *Illuminations*, the messianic 'Génie'. A rapturous vision of an unnamed 'He' whose hidden yet revealed being embodies humanity's collective purpose, 'Génie's' final sentence ends with a typically Rimbaudian gesture beyond the time and space of the poem: 'May we, this winter night [...] hail and see him and send him away, and under tides and on the summit of snow deserts, follow his eyes, *his breathing* – his body, – his day.'²⁰

Rimbaud's exemplary status to both Madge and Jennings as a visionary who had gone beyond the conventional limits of poetry is suggested by a collaborative text they published in December 1935. 'The Space of Former Heaven' comments on the Abyssinian crisis, following Mussolini's invasion in October 1935, by juxtaposing contemporary reportage with historical 'observations, apparently drawn from the writings of third parties, [that] highlight the consequences of the "civilising" missions of European states in the creation of their Empires'.²¹ Among the voices appropriated by 'The Space of Former Heaven' are Rimbaud in his later incarnation as a trader in Abyssinia, no longer writing poetry, but letters and journals concerned with the material and social realities of colonialism ('Ras Makonnen proved to be a cultured gentleman by any standards [...] presenting me with colonel's silver-plated shield, two beautiful spears, and a riding mule').²²

Jennings would continue to develop the formal idea of the poetic 'report' in the texts that he published the following year in the avant-garde magazine *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. 'Three Reports' appeared in the 'Surrealist Double Number' of June 1936, and a

further three appeared in the August–September issue. Both included material appropriated from scholarly works and passages more obviously in a Surrealist mode. The second set of reports, for example, begins with a paragraph concerning the life of the seventeenth-century Italian painter Salvator Rosa and ends with a short, imagistic piece about a horse (‘His mouth consists of the two rays of the eternal twins, cool as a sea breeze’).²³ The November issue featured Jennings’s ‘study for a long report’ titled ‘The Boyhood of Byron’, comprising juxtaposed paragraphs of diverse non-fictional material seemingly only connected by its assured explanatory manner. As Rod Mengham suggests, the collaging method of Jennings’s ‘Reports’ resembles his stated practice as a documentary filmmaker: ‘any two shots can be cut together – the soundtrack will connect them’.²⁴ The decentred omniscience achieved by Jennings’ prose segues of reverie and image strongly recalls Rimbaud’s ironic, polyphonic channelling of post-Enlightenment Europe in *Illuminations*. ‘The Boyhood of Byron’, for example, begins with an abridgement of a sentence from Samuel Bailey’s *Essays on the Formation and Publication of Opinions* (1821) followed by a passage from a nineteenth-century translation of the Comte de Buffon’s *Natural History of Man, the Globe, and of Quadrupeds*:

The labours of the antiquary, the verbal critic, the collator of mouldering manuscripts, may be preparing the way for the achievements of some splendid genius, who may combine their minute details into some magnificent system, or evolve from a multitude of particulars some general principle, destined to illuminate the career of future ages.

Observe the horses of South America, that live wild; their gait, their running, their leaping, seem neither constrained nor regular.²⁵

Compare the opening of ‘Sunday’, from the ‘Youth’ sequence of *Illuminations*:

When homework is done, the inevitable descent from heaven and the visitation of memories, and the session of rhythms invading the dwelling, the head and the world of the spirit.

– A horse scampers off along the suburban turf, and the gardens and the wood lots, besieged by the carbonic plague.²⁶

The same issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* ended with Jennings's acerbic review of Herbert Read's *Surrealism* anthology, which registered 'grave doubts [...] about the use of Surrealism in this country' and the conservative assimilation of the movement's liberating aims into the 'rules' of 'aestheticism'. The review's polemic against 'the sleep of selectivity' in English culture concludes: 'to be *already* a "painter", a "writer", an "artist", a "surrealist", what a handicap'.²⁷ The restlessness about generic categories in Jennings's literary activity at this time, and in particular the dividing line between poetry and history, would eventually result in his anthology of the Industrial Revolution, *Pandaemonium* (1985), begun in 1937 and completed after his death by Charles Madge and Mary-Lou Jennings. In his editorial preface, Madge draws on Jennings's notes for an introduction, in which the book's eyewitness accounts of 'the coming of the machine' are referred to as 'images' – a term, Madge observes, which 'in the way he uses it, can cover a wide range of meanings': 'He chose the extracts because, for him, they had an imaginative impact. [...] If at first one does not see the image through his eyes, on a further reading and after the impact of the other images, a stronger sense of it may follow.' In support of this advice to the reader, Madge quotes two statements from Jennings's notes on his compilation of this 'contradictory and inconsistent' material. One has the pithy quality of an epigram: 'The presence of *Imagination* is apprehended by *Imagination*: therefore the reasons for choice are not reasonable'. The other seems to be a note to a potential publisher: 'A certain number of the proposed type of extracts are appended. But clearly a great deal of the effect of the book must lie in the order and arrangement of them.'²⁸

Jennings's conception of the book as something one might study 'as one studies the material and architecture of a poem',²⁹ and his argument (elaborated by Madge) for the historico-poetic 'image' that may emerge without rational explanation from a carefully arranged sequence of passages, strongly echoes T.S. Eliot's theory of the prose poem in the Preface to his English translation of St-John Perse's *Anabase* (1930). Reflecting on his own experience as a reader of the poem in French, Eliot made its difficulties a test of the reader's aptitude for the 'logic of the imagination'. 'The justification of [Perse's] abbreviation of method', Eliot wrote,

is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilisation. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.

Such a selection of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts.

Eliot's introduction goes on to offer a tentative and limited affirmation of the idea that a writer, by using 'certain exclusively poetic methods, is sometimes able to write poetry in what is called prose'.³⁰ Although avoiding the actual term 'prose poem', Eliot nevertheless modifies his own earlier position in 'The Borderline of Prose' (1917) that 'the only absolute distinction to be drawn is that poetry is written in verse, and prose is written in prose'. In that essay, he mentioned in passing the 'good French prose' of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, observing that these 'short prose pieces', written with 'curious precision' and 'perfect cogency in the choice and juxtaposition of images [...] attain their effect by an instant and simple impression, a unity all the more convincing because of the apparent incongruity of images'.³¹

What Eliot admired, and advocated, in the later French prose of Perse, therefore, was a Rimbaudian poetic 'method' of a paradoxically 'logic[al]' series of juxtaposed images. In his own work, the imaginative consequence of translating *Anabase* would be the two parts of his unfinished *Coriolan* sequence, 'Triumphal March' (1931) and 'Difficulties of a Statesman' (1932). In these poems the politically conservative Eliot concerns himself, like Perse, with the figure of the strong leader aspiring to bring order to a 'barbaric civilisation' – an activity that is directly compared to the poet's art at the end of part 1 of *Anabasis*, which concludes:

There at the sensitive point on my brow where the poem is formed, I inscribe this
chant of all a people, the most rapt god-drunken,
drawing to our dockywards eternal keels³²

For the left-wing Madge and Jennings, though, the idea of a poetry liberated from the restraints of verse form, lyric voice and logical argument had opened up the possibility of democratically transcribing, rather than authorially 'inscrib[ing]', the poetic consciousness of a people. In 'Poetic Description and Mass-Observation', Madge presented three pieces of

prose ‘collected’ by Jennings – an extract from a novel, a *Pandaemonium*-style account of an industrial discovery, and a Mass-Observer’s report – and made his case for the latter as a method that produced

a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers. The immediate effect of MASS-OBSERVATION is to de-value considerably the status of the ‘poet.’ It makes the term ‘poet’ apply, not to his performance, but to his profession, like ‘footballer.’

The article goes on to suggest, with reference to a poem by Thomas Hardy, that although ‘metre and rhyme’ were once used ‘to focus the serious attention of his reader [...] perhaps at the present time this advantage of the poetic form has become a disadvantage’, a formal trapping that inhibits rather than encourages poetic apprehension.³³

Madge’s argument for the writing of Mass-Observation reports as a new mode of quasi-investigative poetic praxis brings to a head themes that he had been pursuing in his critical writing for several years. His essay on ‘Poetry and Politics’, which appeared in May 1933, argued against the idea that there was such a thing as ‘essentially poetic material’, as this would belie ‘the original poetic nature of the mind’: ‘the mind is a poetic instrument and so is poetic despite itself even when it sets out to be scientific, as any text-book proves’.³⁴ Writing on the subject of ‘Surrealism for the English’ in December 1933, he returned to this idea:

Nowadays instead of finding Pindar as logical as Euclid or Aristotle, we would be justified in considering Euclid and Aristotle as poetical as Pindar. The air of conviction which passes and has passed for logical proof, is poetic in origin. (This, being of course, the poet’s way of putting it.)

The implication here is that the intellectual force of all writing, scientific or imaginative, in verse or prose, may be considered ‘poetic’ – an idea that underpins Madge’s argument for the ‘scientific value’ of Surrealism as a mode of artistic practice which English writers should imitate in its ‘dialectical’ spirit rather than its established forms.³⁵ In August 1934 he elaborated on the idea that Surrealism was essentially social criticism by other means: ‘the

dialectical product of conflict with the mass of superstition and social prejudice commonly attached to the name of literature'. Its 'activities', moreover, were 'universal, and would continue if its organised and self-avowed theoreticians were to relapse into silence'.³⁶

The growing hostility to dogmatic Surrealist practice in these essays emerges explicitly in a review Madge wrote of David Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* in December 1935. The article opens with what seems to be a mocking collage of politely respectful remarks made by Gascoyne, an avowed Surrealist, about the movement. Madge comments about these that 'words, which lie about quite inertly on the floors of newspaper offices, begin to explode when loaded into the breeches of guns'. Here, they provide ammunition for his view that 'Surrealism is now in its academic period'.³⁷ Madge's remark about the explosive potential of words in newspapers, however, suggests that he did not consider its compositional methods necessarily defunct. 'Bourgeois News', his longest and most ambitious experiment in prose poetry, was published in the next issue of *New Verse* (February 1936), and appears to have been written some time between March and December 1935.³⁸ Although Madge states in his autobiography that it was composed by collaging newspaper reports³⁹ – a recognised Surrealist method ever since André Breton offered a poem 'of headlines and scraps of headlines' in the first Surrealist Manifesto⁴⁰ – the results are to be distinguished from the kind of contemporary Surrealism that proceeded by the shock tactics of chance meetings. The English Surrealist poet and editor Roger Roughton provided an example of this when – possibly in response to Jennings's and Madge's experiments – he assembled passages from the *Evening Standard* of 6 June 1936 to create a text called 'Final Night of the Bath'. This appeared in his own magazine, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, in December 1936, directly opposite Jennings's review of Herbert Read's *Surrealism*. Splicing stories of politics and crime, 'Final Night of the Bath' concludes: 'Now Mr. Baldwin had taken the body back into the Cabinet Room; it contains an exhortation to read "The Daily Worker" and a form for joining the Communist Party'.⁴¹ Roughton's macabre juxtaposition is blunt in its political thrust: the Conservative prime minister Stanley Baldwin is depicted concealing a murdered body and, with it, revolutionary socialism. By contrast, Madge's 'Bourgeois News' maintains a plausibly logical and solemn manner as it plies between incongruous material. Intimating some kind of natural disaster in modern Britain, the landscape of its report is defamiliarised by a perpetual switching of perspective and voice, so that it seems simultaneously to be concerned with a foreign country too, populated by a shifting mass of human and non-human 'natives'.

Rod Mengham has described Madge's technique as 'a certain unity of tone which gives the impression of a scientific attitude', the binding effect of 'the music of a certain kind of speech'.⁴² Such a music of incongruous unity has often been noted as an important formal quality of Rimbaud's prose poetry. Marjorie Perloff, for example, describes the *Illuminations* as a form of visual and verbal *anti-paysage*, in which "'normal" declarative sentences are arranged in what looks like a stable narrative sequence', only to be undermined by the incompatible presence of 'images that refuse to cohere in a coherent referential scheme' ('the reader understands what is being said but not what is being talked about').⁴³ The direct influence of *Illuminations*' disorienting matter-of-factness on 'Bourgeois News' is suggested by Madge's first sentence: 'Floods are frequent because the rivers of Britain have been neglected for a century'. This recalls the opening line of the poem customarily placed at the start of Rimbaud's sequence: 'As soon as the idea of the Flood had subsided' ('After the Flood'). In both Rimbaud and Madge, there is a clear implication that flooding is a catastrophe to be welcomed in the remaking of a morbidly bourgeois civilisation. Madge's next sentence tells how 'Positive movements of transgression carry the sea and its deposits over the lands', and the paragraph proceeds through a panorama of observations on the theme of collective 'building' by man and nature, reminiscent of Rimbaud's description of a world rising up again ('Beavers set about building', 'The Hôtel Splendide was built'). As in Rimbaud, however, the rapid, magical resurrection of civilisation soon reveals itself to be a replica of the old world of luxury established on brutality ('The butchers' blocks rose in the dirty main street').⁴⁴ Madge's first paragraph is abruptly concluded by the news that 'the operator received concussion and a wound on the head from a cast-iron cover blown off a 60A switch-fuse box'. The next paragraph, however, passes with mandarin calmness from this violent industrial accident to a seemingly nonsensical sentence drawn from earth science: 'Geodesists have welcomed escape from the rising and sinking of the crust'.⁴⁵

As Kristin Ross observes in her historicist reading of the poetics of *Illuminations*, 'Rimbaud favors contradictory assertions [such as 'Farewell *here, anywhere*' ('Democracy')] because for an expanding, mobile, and imperialistic bourgeois class, *here is* the same as *anywhere*'.⁴⁶ The disjunctive and contradictory optimism of Madge's opening paragraph sets the pattern for the rest of the poem and its underlying analysis of the failings of capitalism. These were elaborated by an article he wrote for *Left Review* in May 1936: 'The motives of bourgeois society and of bourgeois industrial development suffice to open up new continents [...] But once having started the wheels turning, the motive ceases to be effective, and the

well-known deadlock of capitalism begins.’ The article’s analysis of contemporary England as a deadlocked country, ‘fighting a losing battle against reality’, also points to the irony of the poem’s title: ‘Bourgeois News’ (like ‘prose poem’) is a term fraught with internal contradiction.⁴⁷ Yet its recurrent imagery of mass upheaval and its bewilderingly prolix periods and paragraphs inject an unsettlingly anarchic quality into the text, reminiscent of Ross’s description of certain passages in Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* where ‘sheer semantic acceleration [...] creates in the reader the anxiety that the poem might never end’, giving rise to the feeling that one is being swept along by a textual ‘crowd’.⁴⁸

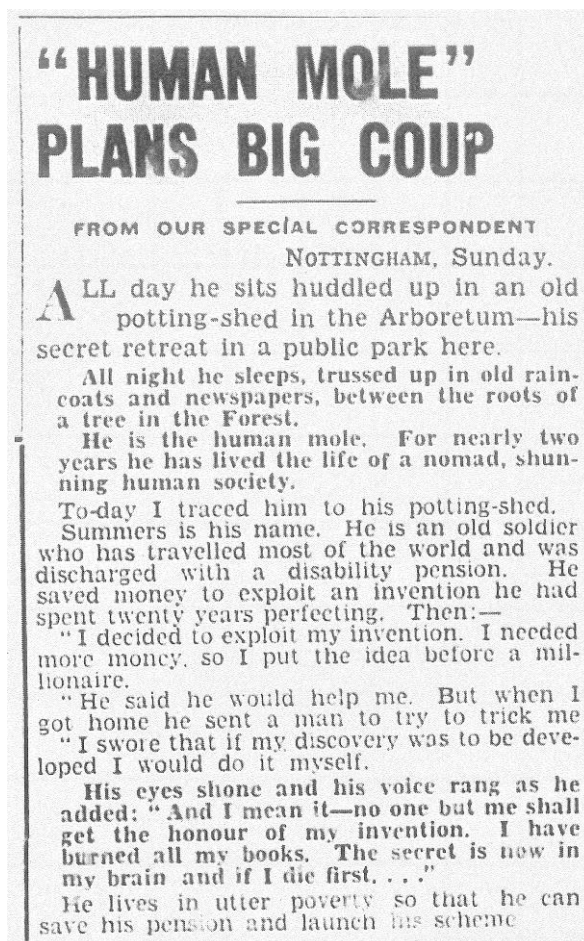
The result, as Rod Mengham describes it, is a text where ‘autocratic and democratic perspectives are still being held in tension’ – a tension that resonates through politically-conscious British poetry long beyond the thirties.⁴⁹ It may be heard in Mengham’s own recent prose poems, such as ‘Batavia’ from *Diving Tower* (2006), with its deadpan alternation between the voices of prophetic wisdom and post-imperial history (‘It was a time to sow and a time for the radio signals to break up’).⁵⁰ A similar music of mass culture has been cultivated by Mengham’s contemporary, Tony Lopez, whose book-length sequence *Only More So* (2011) splices prose from a wide range of sources, in a way that closely recalls Madge’s *détournement* of capitalist narratives in ‘Bourgeois News’:

For most workers, training is a chance to get away from the desk and eat biscuits. The North Atlantic warmed substantially during the 1990s, although that trend seems now to have halted. A driver fell asleep at the wheel of his car, which tumbled onto the track in front of a 125 express train.⁵¹

Madge’s own conclusion about his experiment appears to have been negative, insofar as he did not publish any other prose poems using newspapers as a source material, and none at all after the shorter vignettes of ‘Government House’ and ‘Landscapes’ in 1936. In 1939, reflecting on the idea of ‘popular poetry’, he expressed disillusionment with the idea that ‘the crime reports in the *New of the World*’ and a modernist work like Eliot’s verse drama *Sweeney Agonistes* might be made to appeal to the same audience.⁵² Yet there is a curious coda.

In June 1937, shortly after leaving his job at the *Daily Mirror*, Madge wrote an essay analysing the newspaper as a medium that shapes ‘social consciousness’ by weaving fact and fiction in a ‘twisted skein’ and creating ‘a dream world’. He argued nevertheless that the news

might also be ‘an influence subversive of itself’, due to its love of the ‘good human story’, which led to the inclusion of working-class reality in bourgeois-controlled publications. Newspapers, he thought, also had the potential to produce ‘popular poetry’ which expressed the wishes of the ‘literate mass’. As an example, Madge quoted the ‘Human Mole’ story from the *Daily Mirror*, 26 October 1936.



‘In this story’, Madge comments,

the style and content are not only poetic, but have certain affinities with poetic tradition. It is given peculiar force by the introduction of certain elements of unmistakable reality – the potting-shed ‘in the heart of Nottingham’, the newspapers in which the Mole wraps himself at night, and his thick-soled boots. Connecting the real world with this world of poetic fantasy is the Reporter, the anonymous and impersonal ‘I’ who tells the story.

Madge does not admit to having written this ‘poetic fantasy’ himself, but there must be a strong suspicion that he did. The suspicion grows more substantial when one notices that one of the poetic details singled out for praise from the article as quoted (‘his boots are always thick-soled and shining’) did not in fact appear in the story as printed, suggesting that the essay is quoting from pre-editorial copy.⁵³

If so, it seems likely that Madge wrote the ‘Human Mole’ story shortly after drafting an unpublished essay in which he attempted to formulate his ideas about the ‘popular poetry’ of newspapers. The draft, which survives in a notebook, can be precisely dated by the fact that it cites ‘the *Daily Express* today (October 6th 1936)’ in order to remark on the chance appearance of two headlines containing the word ‘convicts’. The idea that ‘the popular phenomenon of the “coincidence”’ should be read for the ‘clues’ it yields about ‘the ultra-repressed condition of our society’ would return in Madge’s first letter to the *New Statesman* on the founding of Mass-Observation in January 1937.⁵⁴ In the draft essay of 6 October 1936, he speculates that the ‘poetic value’ of the word ‘convict’ lies in the reader’s subconscious identification with the figure of the imprisoned other through the ‘paradoxical freedom’ suggested by the image of each headline (‘Convicts Sunbathe and Play Bowls’, ‘Convict Risks Sharks to Save Insects’). This speculation is then immediately followed – without comment and in French – by a passage from the ‘Mauvais sang’ section of Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*:

While still a child, I admired the obdurate convict on whom the prison gates
always close. I visited the inns and furnished rooms he hallowed with his stay.
With his mind I saw the blue sky and the work of the flowering fields. I sniffed
his doom in cities.⁵⁵

Here is the other Rimbaud admired by the young poets of the Thirties: not the revolutionary seer, but the sensitive bourgeois child fascinated by the urban underclass. Rimbaud’s unannounced entry into the essay indicates, if nothing else, Madge’s intimate familiarity with his poetry at this time. But it also suggests his presence, later that month, in the ‘news’ story of the ‘Human Mole’. Benjamin Kohlmann observes that, in the Marxist context of Madge’s essay, the brief report can readily be interpreted as an ‘allegory of socialist injustice’.⁵⁶ Madge’s own account also encourages us to find in it a mythical archetype who has ‘certain affinities with the poetic tradition’. The Human Mole’s fugitive existence in Sherwood Forest

echoes the popular legend of Robin Hood; his history as a discharged soldier recalls the impoverished wanderers of Wordsworth's poetry; and his prized boot-soles take us to the conclusion of Whitman's *Song of Myself*.⁵⁷ His decision, meanwhile, to turn his back on the injustices of his society in order to seek his fortune by his wits, having 'burned all [his] books', not only evokes the 'obdurate convict' of *Une Saison en Enfer* but the legendary ex-poet Rimbaud himself.

NOTES

- ¹ Billy Mills, 'The Ascent of Kinder Scout: A Review', 2 November 2014; <https://ellipticalmovements.wordpress.com/2014/11/02/the-ascent-of-kinder-scout-by-peter-riley-a-review/> (accessed 6 November 2014).
- ² See Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (London: Palgrave, 2005), ch.2, 38–78, and 'The Intermodern Assumption of the Future: William Empson, Charles Madge and Mass-Observation', in *Intermodernism*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 171–88; Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch.4, 127–160.
- ³ See *Mass-Observation as Poetics and Science*, ed. Laura Marcus (*new formations*, 44 (Autumn 2001)): Drew Milne, 'Charles Madge: Political Perception and the Persistence of Poetry', 68, and Rod Mengham, 'Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge', 27.
- ⁴ Charles Madge, 'Magic and Materialism', *Left Review*, 3:1 (1937), 33.
- ⁵ 'The Modern Poet and the Public' (1938), in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 260.
- ⁶ Jonathan Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 33.
- ⁷ Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, rev. edn, trans. Wallace Fowlie and Seth Whidden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 377. All translations of Rimbaud are taken from this edition.
- ⁸ *New Statesman*, 30 January 1937, 155.
- ⁹ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer', in *All Our Yesterdays: Ninety Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 324.
- ¹⁰ Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, with a foreword by Professor Julian Huxley (London: Frederick Muller, 1937), 26.

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- ¹¹ Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 316, 377. As Roger Little notes, this sentence ‘can be variously and perhaps simultaneously interpreted as a proud claim by the poet, as a note of regret at his solitude, and consequently as a challenge or a plea for understanding by the reader’ (*Rimbaud: Illuminations* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1983), 25).
- ¹² Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1964), 13.
- ¹³ *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 238.
- ¹⁴ Kathleen Raine, *The Land Unknown* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), 50. The quotation is from ‘Adieu’, the concluding section of *Une saison en enfer*. Raine also cites Rimbaud’s saying, in the ‘Lettres du voyant’, ‘Je est un autre’ [‘I is someone else’] as ‘another of the phrases of that time’ (p.73).
- ¹⁵ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, 27.
- ¹⁶ ‘The Theatre Today’ (1935), in Jackson (ed.), *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 202–18 (p.213).
- ¹⁷ MS and TS of poems not included in *The Disappearing Castle* (1932–5), Charles Madge Papers, Box 16:2.
- ¹⁸ ‘On Apprehending’, in ‘Poems 1933–34’, Charles Madge Papers, Box 10, notebook (started 9 December 1934).
- ¹⁹ Charles Madge, ‘Autobiography’ (1987), unpublished manuscript, Charles Madge Papers, Box 2:1, 35–40.
- ²⁰ Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 353–5.
- ²¹ Philip C. Logan, *Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Reassessment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 36.
- ²² ‘The Space of Former Heaven’, *Life and Letters*, 13:2 (1935), 54–6.
- ²³ Humphrey Jennings, ‘Reports’, in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, 4:5, August–September 1936, 94–5.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Mengham, ‘Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge’33. David Mellor notes that Jennings began to produce these experimental texts in the same year (1934) that he started work as a documentary maker for the GPO Film Unit (‘Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings’, in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings (London: British Film Institute, 1982), 66).
- ²⁵ ‘The Boyhood of Byron’, in Jackson (ed.), *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 292.
- ²⁶ Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 355.
- ²⁷ Humphrey Jennings, review of Herbert Read, *Surrealism*, in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, 8 (1936), 167–8.

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- ²⁸ Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium: 1660–1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (London: André Deutsch, 1985), xvii–xviii.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.
- ³⁰ T.S. Eliot, Preface, in St-John Perse, *Anabasis*, trans. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 8–9.
- ³¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Borderline of Prose’, *New Statesman*, 19 May 1917, 157–9.
- ³² Perse, trans. Eliot, *Anabasis*, 23.
- ³³ ‘Poetic Description and Mass-Observation’, *New Verse*, 24 (1937), 1–6.
- ³⁴ ‘Poetry and Politics’, *New Verse*, 3 (1933), 1–4.
- ³⁵ ‘Surrealism for the English’, *New Verse*, 6 (1933), 14–18.
- ³⁶ ‘The Meaning of Surrealism’, *New Verse*, 10 (1934), 13–15.
- ³⁷ Review of David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, *New Verse*, 18 (1935), 20–21.
- ³⁸ When Madge reprinted ‘Bourgeois News’ in a later selected volume, *Of Love, Time and Places* (London: Anvil, 1994), it was dated ‘Spring 1936’. However, when it appeared undated in *The Disappearing Castle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937) it was placed between a poem dated March 1935 and one dated January 1936. A note at the start of the earlier book states that ‘all the poems are arranged in chronological order’ (p.7).
- ³⁹ Madge, ‘Autobiography’, 62–73.
- ⁴⁰ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 41.
- ⁴¹ *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, 8 (1936), 166. The text is signed ‘R.E.H.R.’.
- ⁴² Mengham, ‘Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge’, 33.
- ⁴³ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 45, 58–9.
- ⁴⁴ Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 309. Fowlie and Whidden draw out the darker meaning of ‘étals’ here.
- ⁴⁵ *Disappearing Castle*, 41.
- ⁴⁶ Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 130.
- ⁴⁷ ‘America’s Lead’, *Left Review* 2:8 (1936), 404–6.
- ⁴⁸ Ross, *Emergence of Social Space*, 132–3.
- ⁴⁹ Mengham, ‘Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge’, 33. For a suggestive account of Rimbaud’s prose poems as the performance of ‘the intense dialogical struggle among [...] dominant discourses’ in which formal units of prose come to seem interchangeable, like ‘assembly-line parts of mass production’, and the effect of the whole is to create ‘a genre of radical negation, an expression of resistance to the pseudo-fulfilment of “bourgeois magic”’, see Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects*, 125–54.

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- ⁵⁰ Rod Mengham, *Diving Tower* ([Cambridge]; Equipage, 2006), n.p.
- ⁵¹ Tony Lopez, *Only More So* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2012), 13.
- ⁵² ‘Some Reflections on Popular Poetry’, *New Writing*, Christmas 1939 (London: Hogarth Press), 73.
- ⁵³ ‘The Press and Social Consciousness’, *Left Review*, 3:5 (1937), 279–86.
- ⁵⁴ ‘Anthropology at Home’, *New Statesman*, 2 January 1937, 12.
- ⁵⁵ Charles Madge Papers, undated notebook, Box 10; Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 269–71.
- ⁵⁶ Kohlmann, *Committed Styles*, 147. Clive Scott, in *Translating Rimbaud’s ‘Illuminations’* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), proposes an affinity between the *faits divers* newspaper item as ‘an eccentricity in the intricate weave of quotidian eventfulness’ (p.199) and the ‘insolent gratuitousness’ of the Rimbaldian prose poem (p.307).
- ⁵⁷ ‘If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles’ (*Song of Myself*, LII). Madge quoted this line in an essay comparing Whitman to Gerard Manley Hopkins in April 1935 (‘What Is All This Juice? – Hopkins and Victorian Conceptions of Nature’, *New Verse*, 14 (1935), 17–21).