

Allar on Bivort, ed. (2015)

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The first contribution to *Rimbaud poéticien* makes a minor but well-conceived addition to the volume's title: a question mark. Dominique Combe's "Rimbaud poéticien?" calls attention to the fact that Arthur Rimbaud, a stunningly prolific poet during the short time that he was writing, wrote precious little *about* poetry. In contrast, Charles Baudelaire, Théodore de Banville, and Stéphane Mallarmé, among many other nineteenth-century French poets, left extensive reflections on the nature of art and poetry in their essays, letters, and metapoetic verse, as well as in the memory of friends and protégés (think of Paul Valéry's important account of Mallarmé reciting *Un coup de dés*). There is no doubt that these figures were *poéticiens*, in the most precise sense of the term, as well as *poètes*. What about Arthur Rimbaud? As Combe points out, the minuscule corpus of texts written explicitly about poetry—the two *Lettres du voyant*, two sections of *Une saison en enfer*, and a few verse poems—hardly theorize a concerted *poetics*. Indeed, in his search for a certain experiential "immediacy" in poetry, Rimbaud can even appear hostile to such theorizing. And yet, what would modernist poetics be without the notions of the *voyant*, *poésie objective*, *l'hallucination des mots*, or the self-alienating assertion, *Je est un autre*? The contributions to *Rimbaud poéticien* reflect, with particular attention to the historical context of Rimbaud's writing, upon this tension between Rimbaud's ambiguous status as a poetic theorist and the undeniable fecundity and influence of the small body of theory that he did produce.

The volume began as a 2013 colloquium of the same title that took place in Geneva, bringing together several eminent Rimbaud scholars, including André Guyaux, Michel Murat, Jean-Luc Steinmetz, and Seth Whidden, with promising younger scholars like Adrien Cavallaro, whose keynote essay concludes the volume. Like most conference proceedings, this book has the advantages and disadvantages that come with participants interpreting the topic of conversation more or less loosely. The primary disadvantage in this particular case is that the richest texts in which to find Rimbaud the *poéticien* are already among the most analyzed texts in Rimbaud studies, if not modern French literature. Thus, when contributions lose focus on the specific question of poetics and metapoetics, they struggle to contribute anything new to the massive body of existing scholarship. However, in Whidden's hands, for example, the question of a Rimbaud *poéticien* serves as a productive invitation to examine the technical poetics of the famous prose-verse amalgam called "Alchimie du verbe"—its metrical, syntactical, prosodic, and typographic "disorder"—in relation to a "sanctification" of chaos in post-Commune France. Other contributions, such as Maria Emanuela Raffi's analysis of one of the two free-verse poems in *Illuminations*, "Départ," broaden the corpus of metapoetic texts and thus challenge the perception that Rimbaud was largely, to use Combe's word, "anti-poéticien."

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the colloquium-to-book format comes with Yoshikazu Nakaji's rereading of two major recent studies on "Alchimie du verbe": one by Steve Murphy and the other by Murat. Nakaji examines Rimbaud's role as a "self-critic" by exploring the relationship between the narrative prose and the verse inserted into "Alchimie." A dominant interpretation holds that the more "mature" prose derides the delirious verse associated with the younger Rimbaud, but Murat and Murphy have both cautioned against assimilating the prose narrator to Rimbaud himself. Nakaji elegantly teases out the important distinction between the readings of Murat and Murphy, who disagree about the level of "porosity" between the verse and the prose. In what then becomes a conversation between Nakaji and Murat, Nakaji makes a well-turned and subtle plea to further loosen the boundary between fiction and biography. Murat responds with a concise, exhilarating illustration of how Rimbaud's critical impulse ultimately expresses itself *as poetry*, which does indeed work as "self-critique" but then necessarily exceeds the critical gesture. Murphy's presence, unfortunately, is sorely missed, both for this particular conversation and for the collection more generally, which would benefit from his close knowledge of Rimbaud's poems and letters within the literary historical context of nineteenth-century France.

Literary history does get extensive treatment, however, in Cavallaro's impressive keynote essay, which explores twentieth-century poetry's adoption of Rimbaldian "formulae" like the oft-quoted phrases about the *voyant* and the *dérèglement de tous les sens*. Cavallaro performs an admirable balancing act between historical rigor and literary theory in order to argue that these formulae, because of their extraordinary syntactic and semantic flexibility, lend themselves to a simultaneous "atomization" and "contamination" through time. The argument's reach could be extended beyond the select lineage of canonical French poets (from Paul Claudel through André Breton, roughly), to account for Rimbaud's momentous effect on concurrent poetic movements in the Francophone world and elsewhere—from Aimé Césaire, in his anticolonial journal *Tropiques*, to the great Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si, nicknamed "Le Rimbaud noir." Nonetheless, this contribution fittingly closes out a volume that draws on many strong resources in contemporary Rimbaud studies to reassess the poet's ambiguous but widely

influential role as a *poéticien*.

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