

## Witt on Whidden (2018)

Whidden, Seth. *Arthur Rimbaud*. Reaktion Books, "Critical Lives," 2018, pp. 204, ISBN 978-178023-980-4

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Seth Whidden's new book offers an eminently engaging overview of Rimbaud's major works read in the context of his life. While not a traditional biography in the vein of Jean-Luc Steinmetz's *Arthur Rimbaud: une question de présence* (1991), or the thoroughly researched biographies by Graham Robb (2000) and Jean-Jacques Lefrère (2001), this slender volume nonetheless accomplishes a significant feat: it combines considerations on the art, life, and afterlives of Rimbaud in a study that deftly draws from these biographers' findings as well as from a wealth of recent research on the immanent connections in the poet's writing among poetry, history, politics, and sexuality.

The account proceeds chronologically, beginning with Rimbaud's childhood in Charleville, and trailblazing career as a poet in the early 1870s, before moving on to chart the next eighteen years of peregrinations across Northern Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and East Africa, where he traded coffee and arms, until serious illness led to his repatriation and subsequent death in Marseille in 1891. The book, however, is organized around a series of spatial metaphors. Each chapter opens up a new space. Such a structure makes clear not only the literal broadening of the poet's horizons as he traveled east, but also the possibility of conceiving of Rimbaud's life as a succession of new situations, each partaking simultaneously of a geographical location, a historical moment, a mode of existence, and a writing practice.

Chapter one—"Walls"—thus evokes the confinement Rimbaud experienced as a child growing up in a small provincial town, under the grip of a controlling mother, and the forms of intellectual escape that he found at school, where he excelled, and in composing his own verse poetry. Astute close readings of important poems from 1870, notably "Les Étrennes des Orphelins," Rimbaud's first published verses in French, and "Sensation," the first poem he sent to Théodore de Banville, foreground some of the major themes in the early work (abandonment, wonder, escape), and demonstrate the subtle ways in which the young poet already pushed back against the rules governing French poetry. Chapter two—"Fields"—further explores the themes of straying and vagabondage—in both life and writing—by way of a beautiful reading of the sonnet "Ma Bohême (Fantaisie)." Whidden's account moves seamlessly between Rimbaud's letters, which document the poet's restlessness, escapades, and new encounters, and a helpful presentation of the historical context—the Franco-Prussian war. His discussion of Rimbaud's Republican fervor culminates in a thought-provoking analysis of "Le Dormeur du val" as a mobilization of the sensory power of lyric poetry against war.

Chapter three—"Capital"—takes us to Paris under the Prussian occupation, followed by the rise of the Commune in the spring of 1871. Whidden suggests that while Rimbaud was not physically in Paris at the time of the uprising, his two "Lettres du Voyant" of May 1871, with their call for the advent of a new "poésie objective," fully partake of the same revolutionary spirit. The dense, polysemic language of poems like "Le Cœur supplicié," which evokes the rape of the poetic subject by soldiers, or "Le Bateau ivre," a daring allegorical transposition of the poetic project laid out in the letters, typify Rimbaud's new anti-lyricism. Along the way, we learn about the drunken debaucheries of Rimbaud and Verlaine, the shattering of the latter's family, Rimbaud's defiance of the Parisian literary elite, Étienne Carjat's iconic photographic portrait of the young poet, the parodic writing practices of the Zutistes, and the politics behind Henri Fantin-Latour's famous group portrait, *Le Coin de Table*.

In chapter four—"Cities"—Rimbaud leaves Paris, and with it the practice of verse poetry. His new compositions, prose poems and free verse depicting jagged, industrial cityscapes, bear the trace of his extended stays in Brussels and London in the company of Verlaine. Daring experimentations with language and the status of the poetic subject attest to the intensity of the writing period spanning 1872 and 1873, which would see the inception of both *Illuminations* and *Une saison en enfer*. After the tumultuous love affair with Verlaine ends in July 1873, the young poet retreats to the family farm in Roche. Chapter five—"Wounds"—centers on the work completed that very summer, *Une saison en enfer*. Whidden's nuanced reading of its constitutive sections highlights the cathartic rather than the autobiographical value of a book which, in his view, was written in response to the destruction of both the poet's personal and creative lives. Rimbaud's repudiation of his past works in *Une saison en enfer* is not seen as a farewell to poetry, but rather as a first step towards a renewed exploration of the alchemy of poetic language, also discernible in the prose poems of *Illuminations*. While commenting on the numerous intertextual connections between these last two works, Whidden settles a long-disputed question in the chronology of Rimbaud's writing by demonstrating that the composition of *Illuminations* both precedes and follows the publication of *Une saison en enfer*.

Chapter six—“Worlds”—reconstitutes a whirlwind of traveling from Scandinavia to Abyssinia by way of Java, the Cape of Good Hope, Ireland, and Cyprus, Rimbaud having become a man of all trades: a mercenary, a sailor, a quarry master, builder, and merchant. At this point, the book features several photographs taken by Rimbaud while in Africa, including a self-portrait (the volume contains over forty illustrations encompassing facsimiles of poems, letters, sketches, and several photographs of friends, family, and places). Whidden’s account of the latter part of Rimbaud’s life emphasizes its continuity with the former: he remained a prodigious linguist, a tireless trekker, and a philomath whose constant thirst for knowledge eventually took a scientific turn. Rimbaud also continued to read and write extensively, although manuals, geographical surveys, and scientific observations came to replace poetry. By the time the Parisian literary elite recognized his poetic genius in the mid-1880s, Rimbaud was simply, and perhaps undramatically, elsewhere. The final chapter—“Afterlives”—grapples with some of the questions that Rimbaud elicits: Who was he? What do his poems mean? Why give up poetry at the age of twenty-one? Whidden argues that the elusiveness of Rimbaud’s own answers to these questions makes room for every generation—from the Symbolists to the student protestors of May 68—to come up with its own answers. Admired, forged, censored, ideologically appropriated, mythicized, or heralded as a symbol of rebellion, Rimbaud’s complex afterlives attest to the inextricability of the person and the work.

This book is a must-read for students first encountering Rimbaud. Whidden puts everything in place to facilitate the appreciation of even his most difficult poems, including excellent English translations, without ever claiming to provide an interpretative key. A well-researched and up-to-date study, it is also bound to spark fresh insights in readers already familiar with Rimbaud’s writing. This book is no exercise in academic turf-marking; as Whidden notes in his closing words, “there will always be enough Rimbaud for all of us” (190). Rather, it is an invitation to take stock of the boundlessness of Rimbaud’s poetic project, and to stay in step with it, resolutely.

**Volume:** 48.1–2

**Year:**

- 2019