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H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 143

Seth Whidden, *Authority in Crisis in French Literature, 1850-1880* (Dorchester: Ashgate, 2014). 193 pp. \$39.70 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1472444264

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A book that begins with an obscure play from 1865, moves on to parody and the rejection of strict rules of versification in poetry (mainly in the hands of Rimbaud) and then concludes with an 1851 short story by Jules Verne, might on the surface seem eccentric in its logic. In fact the slightly quixotic approach taken by Seth Whidden in *Authority in Crisis in French Literature, 1850-1880* lends itself to a dynamic generation of associations between different modes of subversion and disruption. Drawing lightly on Theory with a capital T (Lacan) or, more often, Bakhtin (which he spells the French way, Bakhtine), Whidden moves adroitly between precise materialist, socio-historical contextualization and close textual reading. The result is a careful unpicking of textual subversions that also captures the atmosphere of literary exchange and production in clubs, theatres and cafés, set against the backdrop of political unrest and censorship under the Second Empire and after. The generic range of this study, and its remarkable flexibility, are in themselves a form of response to the “crisis of authority”: they implicitly destabilize any residual hierarchy of genres. By eschewing the single-author study on Rimbaud that he could have written, Whidden also takes a step back from the “author” as sole guarantor of literary significance.

Challenges to the authority of “aucturity,” culminating in the well-known mid-twentieth-century declarations of the death of the author, receive a theoretical overview in the introduction. Whidden’s discussion is unusual in situating those debates within a much deeper historical context. Although some views—not least those of Roland Barthes—date challenges to the primacy of the author to the end of the nineteenth century and specifically to Mallarmé, *Authority in Crisis* argues that other nineteenth-century examples broaden this view. The foundation of textual authority had increasingly, since the sixteenth century, been the notion of a stable, solitary author, one sign of which is that the term “écrivain” even overtook “auteur” as a mark of respect. These considerations of literary authorship, meanwhile, have a fraught and fluid relationship with political authority. In the growing field of journalism, for example, laws that obliged newspapers to give the full name of the author of an article were part of *limitations* on free speech. We thus move to a consideration of political authority and of censorship in the Second Empire, followed by the startling, if temporary, complete freedom of speech for the press during the Commune de Paris.

The different chapters go on to focus on case studies that negotiate, directly or indirectly, between these two types of authority—that of the “author” (or author-function) and political authority. The authority of “aucturity” is seen as being challenged in a variety of ways. Some are reflected in the paratexts and arise from the processes of literary production, such as literary collaboration (a frequent phenomenon in the nineteenth century), anonymity, or the use of initials instead of the author’s full name. Others are internal, formal qualities such as parody and the rejection of strict norms of versification. In still other cases the subversion of narrative “aucturity” is a metatextual feature apparent thematically within the works. This destabilization of the author is set alongside the subversion of the political authority of

Napoleon III's Second Empire, whose validity and solidity were most famously attacked in the 1850s by Hugo (*Les Châtiments*) and Marx (in particular the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). Although the exact relationship between these two kinds of "authority in crisis" is never fully spelled out, the analogy is suggestive and thought provoking.

Chapter one begins with challenges to the notion of the individual, solitary author as guarantor of authority, via a close study of the play *Le Supplice d'une femme*, which premiered in 1865 without any authorial attribution. It was in fact the result of a collaboration between the journalist and newspaper impresario Émile de Girardin, and Alexandre Dumas *fils*, who was an experienced dramatist. Following a dispute over how much control Girardin would have over the play in the end, neither author accepted to publicly own authorship. Ironically, *Le Supplice d'une femme* turns around the disputed paternity of a child. Whidden reads this in the light of Lacan's argument in *Écrits II* that the attribution of paternity can only be the effect of a pure signifier or recognition not of a real father but of the "Name-of-the-Father." In order to shore up the Symbolic order, the protagonist of *Le Supplice d'une femme*, Mathilde, would need to situate the "father" as an ideal thanks to bonds of love and respect. By refusing to sign his name, Girardin both distances himself from the illegitimacy of Mathilde's daughter and renders the play itself illegitimate. Looking at echoes between the play's treatment of illegitimacy and its own disputed paternity, Whidden's reading implies a metatextual dimension that is linked to the crisis of "aucturity."

Collaborations were more unusual in poetry, which was dominated by the Romantic tradition of the individual lyric subject. Turning towards poetic collaboration in the second part of the same chapter, Whidden gives a lively evocation of the proliferation of public spaces for literary exchange under the Second Empire, which coexisted with severe censorship. One gets a sense of the provocative, cynical chatter of the Café Riche and the Divan Le Peltier. This account of the formations and reformations of literary groups leads into his discussion of Verlaine and members of the "Vilains bonshommes" group, immediate precursor of the 1871 Zutistes. Their use of parody subverts the authority of versification, the Alexandrine and the classical tradition, in particular Racine. Whidden invokes Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, anti-authoritarian effect of laughter, bringing them to bear on the late nineteenth century in productive ways. A vivid account of the origins and early history of the word "zut" itself leads into a discussion of how the Zutistes said "zut!" to the conventions of versification. Looking at the *Cercle zutiste* and its precursors such as Eugène Vermersch, Whidden sets their flouting of rules of versification alongside challenges to the defining role of the single author. The Zutistes and co. made great use of pastiche, and "parostiche" (a mixture of citation and pastiche), as well as pseudonyms, anonymous or unaccredited publications, and spurious humorous accreditations (for example to Montaigne) as part of their subversion of conventional literary authority. Here the links to political subversion are striking, and "zutisme" is an alternative to the "mutisme" imposed by censorship.

From café culture, via the *Cercle Zutiste*, we are led firmly to Whidden's main subject, which is very definitely Rimbaud. Indeed, this volume could easily have become a monograph focused entirely on Rimbaud, who was also the partial subject of his 2007 book, *Leaving Parnassus: The Lyric Subject in Verlaine and Rimbaud* (Brill). As mentioned, however, the more dynamic approach adopted by Whidden is in itself suggestive of the destabilization of the single authoritative subject. A monograph would also have meant losing the unexpected and productive resonances set up by the volte-faces Whidden takes in the current book. Thus the long and troubled history of the Vendôme column, with its series of destructions and reinstatements from Louis XIV onwards, brings Whidden to the moment of the Commune and Rimbaud's response to the political effervescence of 1871, which is contemporary with his *Lettres du Voyant*. Rimbaud's revolutionary step of unmooring the subject from the ego, breaking with what Whidden calls the "aut(h)o(r)biographical" lyric subject (p. 80), is both poetic and political. Authority—and aucturity—are both undermined by the *Album zutique's* use of parody and of double signatures, with the target of the parody in full along with the initials of the parody's author (though Rimbaud alone among the Zutistes does sign his own name). Whidden's argument that collaboration is a subversion of the authority of the individual lyric "Je" culminates in Rimbaud and Verlaine's co-

writing “Idole: Sonnet du Trou du Cul,” itself a parody of a Parnassian poet, where the “Je” disappears in favor of the transgressive hole. Rimbaud’s post-Commune “disorder” and “delirium” disrupt both versification and the lyric subject irreversibly. Perhaps less convincing is the suggestion of links—based on analogy and wordplay—between the hands of Communards caught marked with gunpowder (in Rimbaud’s “Mains de Jeanne-Marie”) and Whidden’s central theme of multi-handed composition or collaboration (p. 107).

The final chapter turns perhaps counter-intuitively to Jules Verne, and his pushing at the boundaries of literature and rational knowledge in a way that challenges their authority. The focus is one of Verne’s early stories, “Un voyage en ballon,” first published in 1851 and then slightly revised and reprinted in 1874. The latter date provides a pretext for using this as the final part of the book, but in fact the turn back to a thematic treatment of “authority in crisis” provides a neat twist with which to finish. The protagonist and narrator of the story is a scientist-explorer who is about to set off alone on a balloon ride, when a stranger jumps in and joins him at the moment of lift-off. The story stages a series of challenges to the authority of the rationalist scientist protagonist: it is nearly impossible to master the balloon itself fully; the stranger usurps his control; and the authority of science is subverted by something like anarchy. Verne’s story brings us back neatly to Whidden’s ongoing parallels between subversions of aucturity and other forms of authority, since the uninvited travel companion—who turns out to be a mad caricature artist—displays a playful attitude to names and naming, and the tussle over control of the balloon becomes a struggle for control of the narration.

These shifts between genres—theatre, poetry, prose fiction, political satire—belie the remarkably careful attention brought to bear on generic constraints and close textual readings. Whidden also make skillful use of historical contextualization in support of the parallels between subversions of textual and political authority. He examines the destabilization of the single lyric subject most often by collaboration, but also anonymous publication, parody and the undermining of inherited conventions. In what is otherwise an accomplished volume, it is regrettable that he has been let down by his publisher at times: the volume would have benefited from some careful copy-editing to avoid typographical errors and some stray mistranslations (“se défend ... d’avoir outragé les mœurs” is, for example, translated as “defends himself ... for having outraged morals” rather than “denies that he offended morality” [p. 38]; “détrempés” becomes “dried-up” rather than “drenched” [p. 140]). These are however technical points that do not detract from *Authority in Crisis’s* significant contribution to the contextualization of literary subversion against the political background of the Second Empire and its aftermath.

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