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Seth Whidden, *Arthur Rimbaud*. London: Reaktion Books, 2018. 204 pp. Notes and bibliography. £11.99 (pb). ISBN 978-1-78023-980-4.

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It is perhaps unusual for a critical study—even a biographical one—to be described as a “page turner;” in the case of Seth Whidden’s recent study of Arthur Rimbaud, however, the epithet seems fitting. Published as part of Reaktion Books’ “Critical Lives” series in 2018, Whidden’s take on the much-studied *enfant terrible* of nineteenth-century French poetry is refreshing and captivating. Bringing his considerable expertise on Rimbaud to bear, Whidden adeptly unites the critical dimension of this particular series with the biographical demands of the “Critical Lives” format. The resulting book is both an illuminating introduction to Rimbaud and his works, and an insightful textual study that has already become an essential addition to reading lists on nineteenth-century French poetry for Modern Languages and comparative literature courses.

In the introduction, Whidden sets out two broad questions that serve as starting points for the study: “What makes Rimbaud’s poetry important, and what makes his story so compelling that it needs to be told?” (p. 12). Throughout the book, Whidden’s detailed yet precise analyses of Rimbaud’s innovative poetics and his intricate yet vivacious delivery of the poet’s story makes for a convincing response to these questions, bringing that compelling narrative to the fore in a complete and sensitive reading of the poet and his oeuvre. The main body of the book is divided into six principal chapters—each with single-word headings: “Walls,” “Fields,” “Capital,” “Cities,” “Wounds,” and “Worlds”—which take us chronologically through the divagations of Rimbaud’s short and effervescent life. The closing chapter, “Afterlives,” meanwhile, takes a look at the influence of Rimbaud and his works on art and popular culture, reinforcing the continued importance of his poetry and his persona as well as the ongoing relevance of his story.

That story begins in Rimbaud’s native Charleville-Mezières, in the Ardennes region of northern France. It is this small town, on the banks of the Meuse river, that serves as the backdrop for Whidden’s lively narration of the poet’s childhood and the lofty aspirations of the prodigious young writer, who sought something more than the “vain strolls through the countryside” and the “controlling grip of his mother” (p. 15). The chapter title, “Walls,” evokes the creatively limiting space of Charleville and the pent-up Wanderlust of the teenaged poet, aptly capturing the dynamic interplay of structure and rebellion which would come to characterize Rimbaud’s life and works. Whidden’s evocation of space is one of the many strengths of this study. From the imaginative possibilities conjured up by the confines of Charleville’s main square, the Place Ducale, to the young poet’s later urge to flee to Paris to pursue creative opportunity, not

forgetting Bruxelles-Midi station, the site of the notorious *fracas* between Verlaine and Rimbaud, spaces are described in rich and animated detail, making the events of Rimbaud's life and writing easy to conjure up in the mind's eye.

The mind's eye, and the different angles on Rimbaud's creative life offered up by travels—both physical and psychological—are central to the development of chapter two, "Fields," that continues the theme of vagabonding. The chapter begins with an illuminating reading of the poem "Ma Bohême (Fantaisie)," which not only presents us with Rimbaud the dreamer and wanderer but also with Rimbaud the formal rebel, whose meandering sonnet overrides conventions of French versification. Whidden describes with verve Rimbaud's various escapades, as he attempted to flee the cultural vacuum of Charleville early in the summer of 1870, sought to publish works with Paul Demeny, director of the *Librairie artistique*, and tried his luck in several journalism roles across northern France. The events of "Fields" are those borne of struggles—personal, moral, political and professional—as the single-minded young Rimbaud sought opportunity in Paris, hampered by lacking funds, his own disdain for authority and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, which overshadowed life in rural France. As the war got underway, we learn of Rimbaud's political engagement, of his staunch opposition to French military action against the Prussians, of the under-age poet's desire to join up to the Garde de Douai and, simultaneously, of his struggle to make a name for himself as a published author. In this section, the notion of space comes, once again, to the fore, in a richly contextualized analysis of one of Rimbaud's most famous poems, "Le Dormeur du Val," which describes the horrific consequences of military action in the Franco-Prussian war and the bloodthirsty transformation of Rimbaud's bucolic homeland.

In Chapter three, "Capital," Whidden draws links between Rimbaud's physical sense of placelessness, the national upheaval in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, and the poet's own inner turmoil, as he finally leaves the now war-torn provinces for Paris. The chapter describes the events of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune in a relevant and insightful way, offering a useful starting point for those new to nineteenth-century French literary and historical studies, and a helpful contextual backdrop for those more comfortable with the events of this period, which shaped the literary landscape of the early 1870s. We learn how Rimbaud, in Paris, forged links with the Communard Eugène Vermersch and cartoonist André Gill, and of the events leading up to the poet's famous *Lettres du Voyant*, written to Georges Izambard and Paul Demeny in May 1871. Whidden's readings of the *Lettres du Voyant* clearly set out Rimbaud's new poetics, neatly linking this aesthetically important correspondence to the violent uprisings in Paris during the commune. This prepares the terrain for some dexterous close readings, which demonstrate the "social and political awareness of Rimbaud's post-commune poems" (pp. 72-73).

The third chapter, "Capital," is a particularly strong example of Whidden challenging the oversimplified, if seductive, narrative of Rimbaud as a badly-behaved child prodigy. Here, as throughout the study, Whidden vividly shows Rimbaud to be a poet directly in dialogue—and often at odds—with his (senior and more established) contemporaries. On arrival in Paris, we see the supposed teenaged tear-away poet to be honest, astute, self-assured and often searingly critical of those in the circles that he was just beginning to penetrate. In Whidden's narrative, the "shock factor" of Rimbaud's behavior is pleasingly offset by his eagerness to showcase his literary prowess. We are reminded both of Rimbaud's desire to impress contemporaries such as Verlaine, whom Rimbaud considered in his youth to be a "vrai poète," but also of his disdain for Théodore de Banville, who was dismissed as a "vrai con" (p. 77).

While Whidden's account of Rimbaud's life and aesthetic development avoids falling into cliché, he does indulge the reader with some of the kinds of anecdotes that anyone with a passing knowledge of Rimbaud might anticipate. We learn how Rimbaud, whilst enjoying Charles Cros's hospitality when down and out in Paris, used some of his host's poems as toilet paper, and, later, how he sold off Banville's furniture whilst living under his roof and benefitting from the kindness of the poet he had previously dismissed. These slightly sordid anecdotes lead seamlessly into Rimbaud's activities with the *Cercle zutique*. Whidden offers a reading of Verlaine and Rimbaud's "L'Idole, Sonnet du Trou de Cul"—a joint effort, parodying Albert Mérat's sonnet "L'Idole." Exploring how this sonnet challenges the conventions of French versification, Whidden provocatively asks: "What better way to mock any last vestiges of verse poetry's lofty aspirations than by sticking the sonnet where the sun don't shine?" (p. 88). From the ridiculous (if ingenious) we move to the sublime, in the form of "Voyelles," in which the sonnet form is deployed, this time, to explore the synesthetic possibilities of poetic form and language, offering up a new blueprint for poetry. Here, Whidden deftly shows Rimbaud once again playing with the limits of form, renewing the sonnet precisely by destabilizing (if, this time, less crudely) its central tenets.

Chapter four, "Cities," takes us to the height of Rimbaud's rebellion, both poetically and personally, as—through travel from Paris to Brussels and London—his famous relationship with Verlaine intensified, much to the displeasure of Verlaine's wife, Mathilde. We learn how, during this period, Rimbaud and Verlaine's illicit friendship became increasingly volatile, marked by absinthe-soaked Parisian reunions. In this section, Whidden explores the development of Rimbaud's handling of versification, describing how "with the precision of a surgeon...he sets upon cutting up the alexandrine" (p. 96). The analyses in this section are characteristically detailed and engaging, offering an important insight into the formal and aural liberties which characterize Rimbaud's final foray into verse poetry. As Rimbaud's relationship with verse poetry begins to reach its conclusion, his relationship with Verlaine, too, begins to unravel. Whidden describes the events leading up to one of literature's best-known disputes as, fueled by alcohol and romantic tensions, Rimbaud declares his intention to end the pair's tumultuous relationship, upon which Verlaine heads out to purchase a gun. The chapter closes with an account of the infamous altercation between Rimbaud and Verlaine, which ended with Rimbaud being shot by his old friend, who was sentenced to two years in prison in Mons.

From the drama of Rimbaud's personal life, in the fifth chapter, "Wounds," the focus shifts back to a period of intense and focused creativity, as Rimbaud worked on *Une Saison en enfer* whilst in Roche, recuperating from his injuries. Whidden highlights the importance of *Une Saison en enfer* within Rimbaud's poetic oeuvre, noting that this extended prose poem represents a rare completed project for the poet, a story with internal coherence and a process of form-finding that runs in parallel to Rimbaud's mental and physical recovery from his bloody dispute with Verlaine. Showing a particular wariness for overstating the impact of events in Rimbaud's personal life or falling back on clichéd interpretations of the impact of the rift with Verlaine, Whidden offers, instead, important insight into the chronology of the poet's verse and prose writings, exploring resonances between the different sections of *Une Saison en enfer* and other works, including "Voyelles," the *Lettres du Voyant* and his collection of prose and free-verse poems, *Illuminations*, initially published in 1886.

Chapter six, "Worlds," describes more travels, this time a curtailed trip to Italy, beset by ill-health and further trips to Germany, the Nordic countries and on to Russia. Whidden describes

with vivacity Rimbaud's various escapades, several of which led him back to France, and often to Charleville, the provincial town from which he tried so hard to escape. The presentation of Rimbaud's trek through Switzerland in the winter of 1878 is particularly striking. Whidden's perspicacious narration of the scene reveals yet another facet to Rimbaud's persona, highlighting the determination of the young writer, whose bids to escape had been blighted by numerous setbacks, from bouts of illness that saw him repatriated, to arrests, feuds and financial ruin. Although, in earlier chapters, Rimbaud appears to revel in defiance, in the later chapters, Whidden sensitively tells of a practical and hardworking side to the poet, as he travels through the Mediterranean, overseeing a construction site in Cyprus. From here, we learn of Rimbaud's stay in Aden (in modern-day Yemen) where he was employed to oversee the weighing and packaging of coffee beans. From there, Rimbaud headed to Harar, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) via Somalia and Djibouti. Whidden describes the success of lesser-known parts of Rimbaud's oeuvre, during his time in Africa, such as his "Notice sur l'Ogadine," an essay on the geographical peculiarities of this arid region of Somalia, published in the Bulletin of the Société de géographie in 1884. He argues that this non-literary aspect of Rimbaud's oeuvre, and his desire to document the world around him, shows the poet's continued status as a "voyant"—a seer—seeking to build up a full and objective picture of the world in all its various guises, whether through visionary poetry or scientific observation.

The insistence on the visual in Rimbaud's work is an important and recurrent theme in Whidden's critical biography of the poet, and is foregrounded at this point in the study. Whidden describes how the visual dimension of the poet's travel writing, from his time in Africa, echoes the combination of drawing and writing in the *Album zutique* and in Rimbaud's earlier ideas for a collection of illustrated prose poetry, entitled "Photographie des temps passés." The notion of prose poetry as a type of literary "snapshot" perhaps implies Rimbaud's status as an heir to Baudelaire, echoing the older poet's attempts to capture passing time in poetry. As Whidden highlights, however, Rimbaud's particular understanding of poetry as giving permanence to visual imagery was coupled with a fascination with the sciences and an interest in the now burgeoning practice of photography, whose "progrès mal appliqués," Baudelaire had deemed responsible for "l'appauvrissement du génie artistique français, déjà si rare." [1] Whidden notes that "[t]he Commune was...when Rimbaud still believed in poetic language and its ability to reveal an *other* world by 'voyance', in the privileged role of 'poet-seer'" (p. 155). In light of this emphasis on seeing and on images, it is particularly pleasing to see plenty of visual material in this book, including photographs, drawings, reproductions of letters and other ephemera; these artefacts, neatly incorporated into the narrative of the study, make Whidden's telling of Rimbaud's story particularly vivid.

The final chapter of this "Critical Lives" biography, entitled "Afterlives" forms a sort of coda to the book, shifting away from Rimbaud's own creative practice to consider some of the many artistic and cultural revivifications of the poet and his works; as Whidden asserts, "since his death, every generation has claimed Rimbaud" (p. 177). He describes how the French poet Paul Claudel found his lost religious faith through reading Rimbaud, establishing "myth of the Christian Rimbaud" (p. 182); we remember, too, how the Surrealists drew, in particular, on the more sordid aspects of Rimbaud's oeuvre, with André Breton elevating him to the status of a "god of puberty" (p.183). Through engagement by diverse literary figures from W.H. Auden to Jack Kerouac and from René Char to Henry Miller, "Rimbaud's life and work drew so much attention that it became an automatic emblem for poetic rebellion" (p. 183).

In the closing pages, Whidden looks beyond the world of the literary to music and the visual arts, considering how Rimbaud inspired the 1940 song cycle *Les Illuminations* by the English classical composer Benjamin Britten and influenced the iconic American rock singer Jim Morrison, frontman of the band The Doors. The ongoing dialogue with Rimbaud in varied artistic, social and political contexts—from the revolutions of May 1968 to David Wojnarowicz’s photography series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York 1978-79*, to representations of the poet’s face in Parisian graffiti and even tattoo art—affirms Whidden’s claim that Rimbaud is “hardly a writer to be stashed away in dusty lecture halls” (p. 186). This “Critical Lives” biography brings Rimbaud out of the lecture halls in a most compelling way, encouraging us to re-evaluate our understanding of the poet, his life and his works.

NOTE

[1] Charles Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 617.

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