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Robert St. Clair, *Poetry, Politics, and the Body in Rimbaud: Lyrical Material*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. viii + 271 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. £60.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9780198826583.

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Robert St. Clair's title, *Poetry, Politics, and the Body in Rimbaud*, promises such a full program that his subtitle, *Lyrical Material*, nearly slips by unnoticed. It is important, however. This subtitle is meant to draw our attention to that portion of the poet's *œuvre* to be addressed in this study. As with most poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century, those writing in the wake of Baudelaire, that distinction is often between verse and prose poetry. In the instance of Arthur Rimbaud, this distinction also points to the two major phases of this short, meteoric career: the period of 1870-1871 when the near entirety of the poetry in verse was composed, and that of the prose poems written from late 1872 to early 1874. St. Clair focuses on the first of these periods, a deceptively brief but momentous two-year span in the life of the fifteen-year-old, in the history of France and in the history of lyric poetry. This period would see the liberating *fugues* from home culminating in the September 1871 escape to Paris and to the literary companionship that he longed for. For the French nation, this was the time of the catastrophic Franco-Prussian War, bringing the collapse of the Second Empire and the ensuing workers' insurrection of the Paris Commune. Finally, the moment saw this uniquely gifted young man bring to lyric poetry a rare technical prowess and a perhaps even rarer degree of self-understanding. Bodies, of course, were not new to poetry, having been staples since at least the sixteenth century and the new humanism of the Pléiade. How bodies were put to use would, of course, vary according to the prevailing systems of meaning at any given historical period.

As St. Clair reminds us, bodies abound in Rimbaud, from the old prostitute arising from her bath to the child being deloused by the silvery fingernails of two grown sisters. He masterfully shows that the body in Rimbaud's work is a strong and polyvalent signifier. For the present analysis, he points to five distinct types of body that the poet enlists in order to express the ways in which he, Rimbaud--understood as a particular poetic consciousness--is in contact with the world, both the natural one and that of the social and political contexts in which he lived. For each type, St. Clair focuses on a single poem that serves as illustration and as a springboard allowing him to expand the work's critical purview and so largely extend its potential for meaning.

The first of these bodies is the poet's own. The poem "Sensation" projects the sensory experience and ensuing bliss of wandering afar through nature, through dewy fields along country paths on summer evenings. St. Clair places this poem in the aesthetic context of ecocriticism, with the

body serving as the intermediary between consciousness and the natural world. For him, issues pertaining to subjectivity and to the status of the lyrical subject become paramount, and he draws on other poems and on a wide array of critical thinkers to help contextualize their importance, Adorno, Benjamin, Hegel, and Marx, with whom St. Clair shows the greatest affinity, as, he claims, does Rimbaud. For St. Clair, Rimbaud never really wrote alone. His literary models were always with him, as sources of parody and pastiche and as fellow travelers who looked to similar thematic sources. In the case of "Sensation," those companions were Banville and Hugo—an unlikely pair, perhaps, but St. Clair argues convincingly for their presence at various points in the poem's elaboration.

The second body type is the impoverished, undernourished one, displayed with both pathos and humor in "Les Effarés." A group of famished boys perch on all fours at the street-level vent of a bakery to warm themselves against the night snow and fog. As they watch the baker, they lean toward the light, heat, and odor of baking bread coming from the large oven. They strain so much as they lean that they split their britches, leaving their undergarments to flap in the wind.

Professor St. Clair is quick to remind us that poverty is a common trope in nineteenth-century literature, in narrative especially, but also in verse, beginning toward mid-century, as poets began the shift toward urban settings and societal subject matter. In his extended discussion of how poverty was understood in the nineteenth century, and especially on the eve of the Commune, St. Clair turns to literary critics and social philosophers to argue that poetry is indeed "a social-historical form grappling with the meaning of history and community" (p. 75).

To be sure, the poetic treatment of poverty and the poor was not uniform, though in a surprising number of instances one finds revealed "the bedrock of indifference and incomprehension at the base of poetic sympathy for the poor," as examples from Mallarmé, Baudelaire, and Hugo show (pp. 95-98). The encounter between the poetic persona and the impoverished figure who is the pretext for the poem often pivot around a marked irony that can suggest a middleclass sense of entitlement. In "Les Effarés," the encounter is between the boys' eager gaze and the baker whose strong arms and quiet singing suggest the admirable physical and moral qualities in the working class. His labor also brings a utopic whiff of what a certain future might be. (A caveat regarding the discourse of this chapter: while the impressive abundance of documentation allows the author to cast a very wide net, the analytic paragraphs in the many footnotes that accompany most citations, and that themselves frequently contain yet further references, may distract the reader from appreciating the principal flow of ideas and so might have been incorporated into the body of the text.)

As further development of his analysis of a utopian workers' community in Rimbaud's poetry of 1870-1871, St. Clair presents the social history of the cabaret and café as privileged spots for working class leisure and political discussion, which provide the context for discussion of the relaxed and familiar bodies in "Au cabaret-vert, cinq heures du soir." The bodies are those of the *serveuse*, whose easy conversation and ample bosom exude warm welcome, and of the poet, who enters a cabaret after eight days of travel on foot, and stretches his legs easily under the table where he has taken a seat, looking forward to *tartines au jambon-beurre* and a glass of beer. The poet may have been on the road alone, but the convivial atmosphere of the cabaret provides a needed respite and sense of community. St. Clair is masterful in his presentation of this poem and, never shy when afforded the opportunity for levity and wordplay, provides the poem a perfectly apt English subtitle: "Happy Hour."

“Le Forgeron” is, for St. Clair, a prime example of how poetry can implicate itself in the political struggles of its time. A little over 200 *alexandrins en rimes plates*, it is reminiscent of poems by Hugo that take on historical subjects. Two different but related dates are given as points of reference for the two manuscript versions of the poem. One is July 10, 1792, when the Parisian populace swarmed into the Tuileries gardens. The other is August 10 of the same year, when the revolutionary government formed the *Commune insurrectionnelle* and the royal authority of Louis XVI was suspended. St. Clair shows, in his excellent reading of these complementary versions, how those revolutionary actions describe a body in formation, as the chaotic populous, *la foule*, became the purposeful, collective entity of *le peuple*; and *des gueux* became “Ouvriers...pour les grands temps nouveaux” (p. 202).

In discussing Rimbaud in 1870-1871, the verse poet, it is impossible to avoid mention of Verlaine, whose influence, both personal and poetic, was immense. Meeting the admirably talented poet of the *Poèmes saturniens* and *Fêtes galantes* was among the principal attractions that brought the young poet to Paris in September 1871, and the two wasted little time in creating, as is well known, considerable turmoil in Verlaine’s domestic life. Rimbaud and Verlaine, who were reading each other continuously, openly collaborated on at least one poem, signed by both: “Le sonnet du trou du cul,” included in what would be called *L’album zutique*. Like other verse in that collection, it is parodic and scabrous, and so introduces the homoerotic body in Professor St. Clair’s line-up.

Entry into the subject is via the painting by Fantin-Latour, “Coin de table,” the iconic group portrait of the two poets seated side by side in the company of six other of the Vilains-Bonshommes, the circle of young poets whom Rimbaud frequented during his first months in Paris. One of the several criticisms leveled by the conservative press against the painting when it was first shown in 1872 was that the assembled group consisted of known Commune sympathizers. The one member of the group who is conspicuously absent was Albert Mérat, who would have been seated directly across the table from Verlaine and Rimbaud but who refused to come to the sitting because of insulting treatment received from the two aforementioned. In the painting, his absence is conspicuously represented by an enormous floral arrangement.

That contextualization brings St. Clair to the poem. Its parody is explicit and targets *L’Idole*, a verse collection by Albert Mérat, denominating the charms of the female body, part by part, each praised in its own sonnet. While there is nothing specifically male in the body part invoked by “Le sonnet du trou du cul,” one is led to infer as much from the avowed double authorship by two men who were known lovers. Another possible ambiguity concerns the part played by each author in the poem’s composition. In his subsequent 1903 republication of the poem, significantly revised, Verlaine did take credit for the quatrains, attributing the tercets to Rimbaud. St. Clair points out that there are stylistic elements of both poets in both of the poem’s major parts, however. So, although it cannot be determined who wrote what, it can be maintained that both were largely engaged in the composition. This picture is further troubled by the presence of Mérat whose work is also there as the parodied party, along with several other poets. The homoerotic body, therefore, is important to Saint Clair’s analysis because its nature is duplex, pointing to the duality of authorship, of the poem’s central image, and of the lived experience to which it alludes. It is collaborative at every level, transgressive of established practice and, consequently, in the time of the Paris Commune, indicative of ideal community.

When Robert St. Clair tells us that his “book is the product of many years of reading” and of discussing Rimbaud’s poetry with all and sundry (p. vii), we cannot possibly doubt him. Like the bibliography, the acknowledged list of all those to whom he is indebted is long, and one has the distinct impression that St. Clair’s thanks to his many interlocutors are absolutely sincere. That impression is reinforced in his numerous footnotes where he cites an impressive array of books and articles on Rimbaud as well as on theoretical and historical issues, a scholarly corpus whose authors comprise a further cohort of interlocutors. In these notes, Robert St. Clair is unfailingly generous and clearly has enlisted the support of critics whom he considers not only as *compagnons de route*, but as constituting a sort of scholarly *compagnonnage*. The objective here is to build our knowledge and appreciation of Rimbaud’s poetry. It is a collective endeavor and, as such, subtends one of his book’s principal observations, that Rimbaud (at least the poet of 1870–1871) was as deeply sympathetic to the Commune as he was drawn to the purposeful comfort of community and collective effort.

The downside to this generous approach is that there are too few critics with whom St. Clair actively disagrees, against whom he might push so as better to define what is original to his own scholarship. Following in the wake of Steve Murphy, who began to refocus Rimbaud scholarship in the early 1990s through his close readings and keen attentiveness to poetics, the intertext, and to social and historical detail, a number of scholars, Professor St. Clair among them, have adopted similar approaches.[1] I am not a specialist of Rimbaud studies and so cannot state confidently what Robert St. Clair brings to the table that is new. Broadly speaking, what is distinctive in his approach is the manner in which he exploits the resources of his extensive bibliography in the service of each poem under discussion. I can say with certainty that he has written a serious study that draws meaningful conclusions about the subtle ways in which social and historical presence, often passing undetected in lyric poetry, may indeed be legible. They are conclusions from which any reader of nineteenth-century poetry can profit. I certainly have.

## NOTES

[1] See Steve Murphy, *Rimbaud et la ménagerie impériale* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1991), Steve Murphy, *Stratégies de Rimbaud* (Paris: Champion, 2004), and Steve Murphy, *Rimbaud et la Commune: Microlectures et perspectives* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010).

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