

James Lawler. *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self*.

Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 1992. 245 p.

Many great critics, poets and thinkers have, of course, pored over the tantalising, provocative and exquisite concisions of Arthur Rimbaud's ever-youthful poetic *oeuvre*. Verlaine and Mallarmé, Breton and Claudel, Reverdy and Char, Adam, Noulet, Hackett, Chadwick, Frohock, Etiemble, Houston, Cohn, Brunel, Guyaux, Todorov, Steiner, Steinmetz, Bonnefoy, and so on... And Steve Murphy, with his two recent books and his important activity, with that of others, centred around *Parade sauvage*, has shown that much original thought may still be generated in the face of an opus of astonishing resilience and richness. To my mind, however, no critic comes closer than does James Lawler, in his *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self*, to respecting at once the integrity, inner complexity and coherence of a given poem, and the multidimensional character of the poet's vast, becoming and seething *total* project, as ontological, spiritual, ethical, psychological, as it is strictly poetic, textually specific, mediated by form, structure and sound.

Twelve exemplary readings order Lawler's book, each founded in scrupulous scholarship and proper critical debate (usually via notes), and developed as systematic explicative analyses of the utmost sensitivity, thick with perception and nuance, textual concentration and global alertness, and quite delightfully free of methodological or ideological heaviness. Even «Le Bateau ivre» is freshly exposed and the balance of its power spread, away from its end-poetics of failure, disappointment and withdrawal, to re-embrace its enthusiasms and revealed marvels and reestablish its logic as antagonistic, tensional, becoming, transgressively responsible. It is wonderful, too, to have close, intimate, balanced, but, if I may say so, intersubjectively lived readings of somewhat neglected poems such as «Mémoire,» «Michel et Christine,» «Vies,» and «Veillées.» Reassuring, too, that no poetic mode dear to Rimbaud is side-stepped, as we go from, for example, «Voyelles» to «Enfance,» «Angoisse,» and «Dévotion.»

James Lawler's book can be read by beginning students of modern French poetry, by more advanced aficionados, by accomplished scholars and specialists. All will find in *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self* an exemplary grade and pertinence of expression, a probing, open mind that tirelessly redirects attention to the teeming subtleties of the original text, whilst showing just what fine judgement can be

exercised in situating the specific within the global. Rimbaud is revealed, finally, as that vastly plural, infinitely fragmented and infinitely coherent, knot of experiential urgency and possibility, that he indeed is. James Lawler's critical gestures, in revealing the complex, moving mosaic of this living theatre, are, characteristically, discreet, though determining. Like no other critic's gestures, they return us, inspired, enriched, eager, to every source of our wonderment.

Michael Bishop
Université Dalhousie