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Tim Mitchell, *Albert Mérat, Rimbaud's Seer* (Celesta, 2023), 526 pp. ISBN 9781915787231

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In the history of French poetry, the last third of the nineteenth century offers an intricate network of names, movements, figures, and publications. The names of Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud stand out, of course; some more experienced readers will remember lesser-known Symbolists such as Albert Samain, but most names fade into a blur, and the whole period seems rather like Henri Fantin-Latour's painting, *Un coin de table* (1872), where only two figures would be known to the public of good will. Yet to contemporaries, one face in particular was missing from Fantin-Latour's painting: that of Albert Mérat.

Mérat is hardly known to the modern reader of fin-de-siècle poetry. In *Rimbaud's Seer*, Tim Mitchell sets out the ambitious project of presenting Mérat in the wider picture of the late nineteenth century. The reader is led to discover Mérat's poetic work and his singular character within the complex framework of relations that united or disunited the Parnassians, the Symbolists, the Zutistes, the Decadents, or the Hydropathes, names and labels that varied as much as the people who bore or created them.

When Rimbaud came to Paris in 1870, Mérat was recognized as one of the finest poets of his time. Rimbaud and Verlaine admired him; yet after a fight with Rimbaud, Mérat refused to appear on Fantin-Latour's *Un coin de table* in their company. Posterity recognized Rimbaud as the revolutionary poet whose career, short as it was, influenced both the poetry and the popular culture of the following century. Mérat was a more institutional poet. Mérat was a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and received many awards and distinctions. Like Rimbaud, he stepped away from poetry, he came back to it much later, in the changed landscape of the Belle Époque; but he never was assimilated to the *poètes maudits* of his generation.

From Mérat's childhood, Mitchell shows the reader the world through the eyes of the poet he calls 'Rimbaud's seer'. Mitchell admirably intertwines his narration of Mérat's life with fragments of letters and scholarly works but also of poetry, so much so that the biography itself seems at times like a poem. The historical accuracy with which Mitchell builds his book takes the reader from the dusty printing rooms of artistic Paris to the loud cafés-concerts where the floor is shaken by a furious can-can. Mérat is, after all, the 'Poet of Paris', a seer of ideal beauty who was also the lover of *chahut* dancer Nini-Patte-en-l'air. Mitchell's biography of Mérat is as full of contrasts as the period it describes. The reader is carried back and forth between the 'Paris interlope' of Montmartre's dodgy cafés and the heights of poetic theory, not only in the company of Mérat but with the many characters of the time, famous or forgotten.

The world, through Mérat's eyes, is a shimmering field of appearances, sometimes pinned down by a nimble pen, sometimes seen just long enough before they disappeared to give an everlasting yearning. Like Gérard de Nerval, Mérat skillfully crafts his poetry into a world of longing and regret; like Baudelaire, he grasps the reality of the world so as to express its eeriness. In many aspects of his poetry, Mérat unites Nerval's idealism (both poets wrote a collection entitled *Les Chimères*) and Baudelaire's modernity. The urban landscape is as propitious to poetic reverie as the immensity of the sea; and the mystery of longing love never errs far from the intoxication of earthly beauty. Mérat appears as a junction figure between the generation of Nerval and Baudelaire and that of Catulle Mendès and Stéphane Mallarmé.

Who was Albert Mérat? This biography sketches him, through the descriptions of his contemporaries, as an almost mythical figure, an incursion of medieval grandeur in the commonplace, satirical Paris torn by the violence of the Sedan defeat and the Commune. Emile Blémont said that the blond, tall, clear-eyed Mérat 'had the haughty looks of a feudal baron' – whereas he described Léon Valade, in contrast, as good-natured, brown-haired and medium-sized (p. 11). Verlaine often dubbed him 'Albert le grand', a description not just of his height but also

of his bearing which, combined with the *franchise* [frankness] which Verlaine also notes, gave Mérat a presence that was to draw admiration from some, but animosity from others.

Mérat, first sketched in broad, almost legendary, traits, appears more and more as a man of flesh and feeling. Behind what some saw as a distant haughtiness was a burning generosity with which he welcomed Rimbaud to Paris and orchestrated a fundraising campaign among his circle of poet friends to support the rowdy seventeen-year-old fugitive from Charleroi during his time in Paris. Yet Mérat, as Mitchell paints him, saw the best and the worse in Rimbaud: despite his charity, he had little patience for Rimbaud's teenage antics (which included stabbing Verlaine as part of an experiment) and, more importantly, perceived both his poetic genius and his debt towards the poets of the day – himself included. Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', celebrated as early as its first public reading, is indeed reminiscent of Mérat's earlier poem entitled 'Le Courant'.

The last chapters of the biography, covering the early 1900s until Mérat's death in 1909, leave the reader with the bitter impression of a declining world. The poets of Mérat's generation have aged. He attends the funeral of the poet François Coppée, which seems to mark the burial of the Parnassian era. Two other friends of Mérat, Charles Frémine and Maurice Rollinat, die too, one after a painful disease, and the other by suicide. The heritage of Baudelaire takes a different turn at the hands of the Symbolists who, although influenced by Mérat's sense of sound and rhythm and his passion for fleeting images, claim Mallarmé and Rimbaud as their masters. Mitchell accurately identifies the change that Baudelaire, Rimbaud, then Mallarmé imposed on French poetry and why Mérat could neither lead nor follow that new direction in the stream of poetic creation. The idea of correspondences, of subtle connections between the perceptions of one sense and those of another, is highly suspicious to someone who, like Mérat, had a long history of mental illness in his family. Not that Mérat would deny the poetic power of such a process; but synaesthesia, far from being a mere artistic effect, loomed on him like a menace of madness. As Mitchell writes, 'For Mérat, the thought of consciously seeking a "derangement of the senses" was terrifying. It was the way to madness and had the potential to destroy him "unsure whether it is

the lark that shines or the cornflower that sings'" (p. 101). Either the *dérangement des sens* was a mere artistic tactic, or it marked the collapse of sanity and reason.

The last year of Mérat's life bears the burden of grief and insanity; but the very way he ended his days seemed to usher him into a Parnassian eternity: his head shrouded in fabric, two holes at his temple, his face keeping the marble-like serenity admired by his contemporaries.

Mitchell's book raises a crucial question of literary history: What makes poetic genius? Mitchell's keen historic and poetic research shows that poetic creation owes a lot to encounters, friendships, and even feuds. Words echo one another, sometimes as a willing homage, sometimes as a biting parody, like Verlaine and Rimbaud's 'Sonnet du trou du cul' [Sonnet on the Asshole], offering a final touch to Mérat's collection of blasons, *L'Idole*. But Mitchell also presents the power of Mérat's words to linger in the reader's memory and to become part of the vocabulary of an entire generation. In the teaming flow of fin-de-siècle creation, Mérat's name might be forgotten, but his influence is unquestionable.

Mitchell's *Rimbaud's Seer*, however, enriched by numerous illustrations and varied with a collection of Mitchell's own translation of more than a hundred of Mérat's poems from his early to his latest works, could not be reduced to a simple biography. This might be both the strength and the weakness of the book. While the book could be appreciated by both specialists and non-specialists of French cultural and literary history, it would delight historians while remaining below the expectations of French literature specialists. One would have enjoyed seeing Mitchell's book enter into deeper conversation with the rare elements of French academic articles dealing with Mérat, such as Yves Reboul's 'Mérat le Voyant' (in *Rimbaud poéticien*, Classiques Garnier, 2015), or 'Rimbaud et Albert Mérat' by C. A. Hacket (in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1992).

Mitchell presents his translation of a broad selection of Mérat's poems. The translations are remarkable; but as the titles of the original poems are presented in a separate section, the layout makes it rather difficult to read Mitchell's translations and the originals simultaneously without a fair amount of juggling. The chapters have numbers but no titles or dates. In the body of the

biography, the quotations are given in English within the text; and if at times Mitchell provides a glimpse of the original French, Mérat and his peers' language remains inaccessible without additional research by the reader. Although this does not remove anything from the intellectual quality of *Rimbaud's Seer*, it might make the book too detailed for a general audience and not accurate enough to academics for lack of access to the French sources. Despite these shortcomings, the book remains a much-needed piece in the fin-de-siècle jigsaw puzzle, and the way it brings together history and poetics, and grants anglophone readers access to Mérat's life and work, will be of value to many.