

Seth Whidden. *Authority in Crisis in French Literature, 1850–1880*. Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. viii, 200p. ISBN 9781472444264. £60 (hardback).

French literary history has long had a problem with authority. What is the core of the French canon? Who is the greatest French author? The most influential? The most revered? Unlike many national literatures, French literature provides no clear answers to these questions. Whereas England finds Shakespeare at the centre of its national theatre, France sees Racine, Molière and Corneille. The Italians claim Dante as a national poet, but France has diverse poets of similar stature in its own history (e.g. Ronsard, Labé, Hugo, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, etc.) Exploring this unease with literary authority, Seth Whidden’s new book provides many convincing arguments about why authority is so fraught in French literary history. Following Roland Barthes, Whidden finds in the late nineteenth century “the first attempt to undermine the prestige and authority that modern society traditionally bestows upon an author” (3). While Barthes considers Mallarmé to be the first writer who was preoccupied with lessening literary authority, Whidden makes the case for a similar weakening of authority in the previous generation. His analysis focuses on the works of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Verne and the rest of the Cercle des poètes Zutiques, among other authors of the Second Empire (1850–1870) and the Commune (1871). For Whidden, the crisis in authorial authority (which he terms “aucturity”) was achieved primarily through poetic innovation, but it also occurred in prose (notably in the narrative techniques of Jules Verne).

The 1870s was a time of great political upheaval, most notably the Commune of 1871, which takes a central place in Whidden’s study. This period encompasses the end of the classical Parnassus and the brief formation of the Zutistes. For Whidden, the crisis of literary authority is part of broader literary and social movements, the breakdown of the Second Empire and also the beginnings of café culture, which Whidden traces back to the end of the July Monarchy. His central historical question is: “At what point did poets like Rimbaud, Verlaine, and their friends imagine themselves to be a cenacle, out of the ashes of the Commune and the groups that led up to it?” (39). The answer leads backwards from the Cercle Zutique through the Café Riche and the Divan Le Peletier, much earlier than many accounts of the rise of poetic circles in café culture (39–41).

The Zutistes are an interesting choice for a case study. Unlike the members of the more classical – and longer-lived – Parnassian Movement, Rimbaud and the Cercle Zutique

attacked both literary and political authority: “Rimbaud continued his attack against paradigms of authority as he proceeded to dismantle the authority of French verse, in a meticulous manner that could only be carried out by the most knowledgeable” (18). Whidden’s readings of texts – from the well-known to the obscure – are historically and formally sophisticated. He moves deftly from observations of how individual works fit into an author’s oeuvre to broader social concerns. The first chapter considers how the culture of collaboration affected literary authority, taking the Café Riche society, the “Vilains Bonhommes,” and other poetic circles associated with Symbolism as its central case study (39). Whidden’s portrait of Baudelaire as a creature of the cafés, influenced by and influencing the style of the Café Riche, is particularly notable and well argued (38). Later chapters explore poetic parody, multiplicity in Rimbaud, and narrative authority in Verne. Whidden sees the crisis in literary authority as related to the intense political crises of 1870–1, at least initially, but to his great credit he does not posit any simple, one-to-one parallels between political and aesthetic crises. Rather, “the notion of what it means to be an author is fluid and evolving, responding to changes in the equally fluid and evolving cultural, historical, and national context” (2). True, the Zutistes were, for the most part, against both political and literary authority, in keeping with the anarchic atmosphere of the Commune, and this absence of “aucturity,” in Whidden’s telling, leads into the aesthetic experimentation of Mallarmé. But a corresponding literary iconoclasm is by no means the only response to political anarchy.

In the aftermath of the Commune, literary authority emerged as stronger than ever. Whidden’s conclusion echoes André Gide’s quip that France’s greatest writer is “Hugo, alas.” That is, despite Hugo’s sentimentality and bombastic style, he is the best representative and arbiter of literary authority in France. Hugo’s rhetorical denunciation of political authority through literature ultimately triumphed in France, despite many alternatives. In Whidden’s words: “After the Second Empire and the Paris Commune, aucturity will reserve for itself, and itself alone, the spaces in which these issues can be played out,” for “only an author can propose and destabilize authority with any success” (171).

This book is highly recommended for graduate students and researchers in French literature and culture. It is a fine study of the period with implications for modern literature in general. Specialists of the period will appreciate the fine-grained readings of a wide range of texts. Researchers in other periods will appreciate the deft movement from politics to poetry and



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back, as well as the discussion of authority as it relates to authorship, which has implications far beyond French poetics.

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