

Re-reading *la femme poète*: Rimbaud and Louisa Siefert

C'était un soir de juin paisible. Du midi
 Le vent soufflait chargé d'un parfum attiédi,
 Et les deux vieilles tours massives & carrées
 D'un rayon de soleil couchant étaient dorées.
 5 Le ciel d'un bleu d'opale avait des tons charmants;
 Les arbres & les fleurs tressaillaient par moments;
 Partout les foin coupés dormaient sur les prairies.
 On eût dit la nature en proie aux rêveries;
 Nous étions réunis tous au bout du jardin;
 10 Personne ne troublait le silence serein
 Qui, du ciel calme & pur, tombait sur toutes choses
 Et venait rafraîchir les hommes & les roses.
 *Moi, j'étais à l'écart, tenant sur mes genoux
 *Ma petite cousine aux grands yeux si doux:
 15 *C'est une ravissante enfant que Marguerite
 *Avec ses cheveux blonds, sa bouche si petite
 *Et son teint transparent. Amour ou chérubin,¹
 Dont rien n'altère encor le sourire divin!
 Elle avait tant joué qu'elle était un peu lasse,
 20 Et, comme on voit la fleur sous la brise qui passe
 S'incliner, la mignonne avait fermé les yeux,
 En appuyant sur moi son front pur & joyeux.
 Enlacée à mes bras, elle était immobile;
 La lumière baignait son visage tranquille;
 25 Elle ne dormait pas, elle semblait rêver.
 Et je la regardais se perdre & s'élever
 Dans ce cher pays bleu, splendide, & solitaire,
 Où depuis si longtemps, je vis loin de la terre.
 Tout à coup quelqu'un dit en nous montrant ainsi:
 30 "-Vraiment, c'est un tableau tout à fait réussi.
 "Et comme la petite à la grande ressemble!"
 "Nul n'y pensait avant qu'elles fussent ensemble.
 "On dirait, n'est-ce pas? à les regarder bien,
 "Les deux soeurs, ou la mère & l'enfant." L'entretien
 35 Alors se renoua, sérieux ou frivole.
 Autour de moi, chacun, ayant pris la parole,
 Sur ce premier avis voulut donner le sien.
 Mais, je n'écoutais plus, je n'entendais plus rien,
 Non, plus rien que l'haleine égale & reposée
 40 Qui sortait doucement de la lèvre rosée.
 Mon coeur seul parlait haut sans craindre de témoin;
 Un mot avait suffi pour l'emporter bien loin,
 Et je berçais toujours ma petite cousine
 Tandis qu'un long soupir soulevait ma poitrine:
 45 -Les deux soeurs, me disais-je, oh! non, dans sa douceur
 Je la connais bien, moi, l'amitié d'une soeur;
 Je sais ce qu'elle vaut & combien elle est sûre.

Sa tendresse est habile à panser la blessure
 Profonde que l'amour nous fait; son dévouement
 50 Est, jusqu'en ses détails, sympathique et charmant;
 Sa force est patiente & son ardeur fidèle.
 Ma soeur, puissent mes jours s'écouler auprès d'elle!
 Puisse Dieu lui donner ce qu'il m'ôte ici-bas!
 Ma soeur est mon amie & ne changera pas.
 55 *Marguerite est trop jeune. Oh! si c'était ma fille,
 *Si j'avais une enfant tête blonde & gentille,
 *Fragile créature en qui je revivrais,
 *Rose & candide avec de grands yeux indiscrets,²
 Sans cesse demandant des chansons, des caresses
 60 Et de tendres baisers, quelles folles ivresses
 Me causeraient sa voix, son parler hésitant
 Ou le timbre joyeux de son rire éclatant!
 Pour elle, être à mon tour ce qu'est pour moi ma mère,
 Et, comme par un souffle, en cette vie amère,
 65 Sentir les maux guéris & les pleurs essuyés
 Par le bruit de l'enfant qui jouerait à mes pieds;
 Etre le but, la vie & l'âme de cette âme,
 L'instruire de ma foi, l'échauffer de ma flamme
 Et rien demander que sa joie en retour,
 70 Quel rêve, encor plus doux que celui de l'amour!
 *Des larmes sourdent presque au bord de ma paupière
 *Quand je pense à l'enfant qui me rendrait si fière,
 *Et que je n'aurai pas, que je n'aurai jamais;
 *Car l'avenir, cruel en celui que j'aimais,
 75 *De cette enfant aussi veut que je désespère.
 Pourtant elle eut porté le nom de mon grand-père,
 Je l'aurais appelée Olympe comme lui.
 Doux & brillant reflet du rayon qui m'a lui
 Dans les jours d'autrefois, les jours de mon enfance,
 80 Ce nom, porté par elle, à sa fraîche innocence
 Se serait rajeuni de nouveau pour longtemps;
 Echo de la vieillesse & chanson du printemps,
 Fleur nouvelle naissant de la plante brisée,
 Matin tout emperlé des pleurs de la rosée,
 85 Prestige du passé, rêve de l'avenir,
 Vie & mort, jour & nuit, espoir & souvenir!
 Mais pourquoi tant choyer cette folle chimère?
 *Jamais on ne dira de moi: C'est une mère!
 *Et jamais un enfant ne me dira: Maman!
 90 *C'en est fini pour moi du céleste roman
 *Que toute jeune fille à mon âge imagine.
 Du bouquet effeuillé je n'ai plus que l'épine,
 La brise s'est changée en ouragan glacé:
 *Ma vie à dix-huit ans comprend tout un passé.

Louisa Siefert
 Marguerite, 1868

Read in the social and literary context of nineteenth-century French women, the following passage from Rimbaud's well-known *lettre du voyant* projects that *la femme*, once liberated from her domestic bondage, will play a fundamental role in revolutionizing poetry:

Quand sera brisé l'infini servage de la femme, quand elle vivra
pour elle et par elle, l'homme,--jusqu'ici abominable--lui ayant
donné son renvoi, elle sera poète, elle aussi! La femme trouvera
de l'inconnu!
(15 mai 1871)

As a seer poet in Rimbaud's sense of the term, she too will reveal the unknown through poetic writing, for "elle trouvera des choses étranges, insondables, repoussantes, délicieuses" (15 mai 1871). When re-read in modern critical terms, this epistolary call to social and literary arms strikes a feminist chord by challenging women's exclusion from the male-dominated poetic tradition. Rimbaud, much like his contemporary Michelet, ostensibly reveres the creative impulse of women. Indeed Rimbaud's idealization of woman's creativity contrasts sharply with the misogynistic treatment she receives in his poetic texts. Yet his reading of *Marguerite*, from the best-selling French woman poet Louisa Siefert (1845-1877), takes a phallographic turn, restricting *la femme poète* to personal Romantic lyricism, more precisely, to maternal longing. Rimbaud overlooks dialogic voicing and figurations of the unconscious in Siefert. While Siefert may have inspired Rimbaud, he overcomes her influence by concealing her modernity.³

Modern critics have yet to fully recover which women writing poetry in nineteenth-century France may have prompted Rimbaud's projection concerning women's poetic movement. In Michael Danahy's view, "[Rimbaud] had in mind Desbordes-Valmore, whose work he introduced to his lover and fellow poet Verlaine" (130). Several poems and a dedicatory chapter in the definitive version of *Poètes maudits* (1888) indeed support that Verlaine esteemed

Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, without however specifying Rimbaud's view of her writing.⁴ To infer from the *voyant* letter an exclusive allusion to Desbordes-Valmore, as Danahy does, covers over another *femme poète* that Rimbaud likely had in mind, too: Louisa Siefert. Critical commentary upholds an allusion to Siefert in the *voyant* letter that textual evidence in Rimbaud further supports.

Antoine Adam comments regarding the revolutionary role Rimbaud attributes to women poets that "Rimbaud s'inspire de la littérature illuministe" (1007). For "les écrivains de l'illuminisme annonçaient l'affranchissement de la femme et attribuaient à celle-ci un don de prophétie" (1077), and thus likely provided a model for coupling the social and literary liberation of women in the *voyant* letter that frames my discussion. Once society loosened its domestic hold on woman, her visionary capacity would begin to emerge. In the revolutionary social climate of nineteenth-century characterized by an emergent socialism and feminism, Adam observes that "les femmes auteurs et prophètes avaient tout naturellement surgi. Rimbaud admirait Louisa Siefert. Il aurait pu citer également Claire Démar, Flora Tristan, Pauline Roland, Jeanne Deroin. Dans ce mouvement de féminisme idéaliste, George Sand et Daniel Stern n'étaient pas oubliées" (1077).⁵ Among these inspiring nineteenth-century French women writers, Louisa Siefert is the only woman poet named and quoted by Rimbaud. He makes explicit reference to Siefert and quotes a long excerpt of *Marguerite* from her first volume of poetry, *Rayons perdus* (1868), in a letter to Georges Izambard (1870). Yet, considering Rimbaud's stated ideal for the woman *voyant*, *Marguerite* is a provocative choice of texts, since the longing for maternity in this text contradicts the revolutionary impulse of the socially liberated *femme poète* projected in the *voyant* letter.

A letter to Izambard (25 août 1870) expressly states Rimbaud's admiration for Louisa Siefert, and supports the view that he followed closely her literary

production:

Vous aviez l'air de vouloir connaître Louisa Siefert, quand je vous ai prêté ses derniers vers; je viens de me procurer des parties de son premier volume de poésies, les *Rayons perdus*, 4e édition. J'ai là une pièce très émue et fort belle, *Marguerite*.⁶

*Moi, j'étais à l'écart, tenant sur mes genoux
Ma petite cousine aux grands yeux si doux:
C'est une ravissante enfant que Marguerite
Avec ses cheveux blonds, sa bouche si petite
Et son teint transparent...*

*Marguerite est trop jeune. Oh! si c'était ma fille,
Si j'avais une enfant tête blonde & gentille,
Fragile créature en qui je revivrais,
Rose & candide avec de grands yeux indiscrets!
Quand je pense à l'enfant qui me rendrait si fière,
Et que je n'aurai pas, que je n'aurai jamais;
Car l'avenir, cruel en celui que j'aimais,
De cette enfant aussi veut que je désespère...*

*Jamais on ne dira de moi: c'est une mère!
Et jamais un enfant ne me dira: maman!
C'en est fini pour moi du céleste roman
Que toute jeune fille à mon âge imagine...*

Ma vie, à dix-huit ans, compte tout un passé.

After citing these verses selected from Siefert's text reproduced in its entirety at the outset of my essay, Rimbaud simply comments "--C'est aussi beau que les plaintes d'Antigone [*anumphé*] dans Sophocle." Rimbaud borrows this identification of the female poetic voice in *Marguerite* with Antigone from Charles Asselineau's preface to the second and subsequent two editions of Siefert's *Rayons perdus*.⁷ By using the Greek term transliterated here as *anumphé*, which means unwedded, Rimbaud emphasizes what likely encouraged Asselineau's comparison. Both female subjects are unmarried and childless. Further still, Siefert's female subject, like Antigone, ostensibly epitomizes courage, purity, and moral resolve.

One could certainly argue that what wrenches Antigone's heart is not

primarily the projection of unfulfilled maternity, as in Siefert, but rather a sense of deep moral indignation. Rimbaud's use of this comparison nonetheless raises questions concerning his view of *la femme poète*. Are we to understand from the identification of Siefert's female speaking subject with Antigone's lamentation spurred by intense, personal grief that Rimbaud admires in Siefert the subjectivity which he vehemently repudiated in earlier male Romantics such as Musset? Or can we infer from this admiration of Siefert at odds with Rimbaud's rejection of subjective idealism a misreading of *la femme poète*?

Rimbaud's comments that textually frame the verses selected from *Marguerite* read Siefert in the shadow of the male-dominated Romantic poetic tradition. Both his prefatory description of Siefert's text as *très émue et fort belle* and afterword comparing the artistic beauty of *Marguerite* to Antigone's lamentations underscore the personal, emotional charge of this text ascribed to a female subject speaking in the first-person. The term *plaintes* ("paroles et cris par lesquels on exhale la peine"; Littré 4: 1145) evokes racking mental anguish, and recalls the role that personal suffering plays in the inspiration of Romantic poetry, for example, in Lamartine and in Musset. Reading Siefert in the shadow of these male Romantics is problematic from the perspective of Rimbaud's revisionist stance toward his predecessors which I have already discussed.⁸ Moreover, such Romantic subjectivity does not readily support our connecting Siefert with the later nineteenth-century poetic revolution advanced by Rimbaud.

Further still, the topic of maternity in *Marguerite* narrowly associates Siefert with nineteenth-century French women's writing typically excluded from the canon. Charles Asselineau, in prefatory remarks to *Rayons perdus*, readily distinguishes Siefert's poetry from writing about motherhood which does not move the literary public's heart (1869, iii). Not only does Rimbaud's choice of

texts strike us as inconsistent with Asselineau's reading of Siefert, but also as against the feminist grain of the *voyant* letter. On the one hand, Rimbaud recovers Siefert and presents her creative writing to the literary public; he identifies her by name, directly quotes her text, and draws affirming notice to her voice. On the other hand, his selection of *Marguerite* skews the inspiration of her poetry in a manner that limits her voice to the private domestic sphere, and, by extension, woman's role to her reproductive duty.

Rimbaud's ambivalence toward Siefert as a creative woman, which has a likely source in Michelet, invites us to reread this *femme poète* in terms of the purportedly conflicting capacities of reproduction versus production that position woman in either a solely domestic role or in creative activity circulated in the public sphere. My re-reading of Rimbaud's Siefert will reveal the male poet's unwitting blindness to the woman poet's creative impulse operative in *Marguerite* and in other texts circulated to the literary public. *Marguerite* conceives through writing woman's productive role, and shows us that a woman too quests for the unknown by imagining what she has yet to see. Like Rimbaud's *voyant*, then, Siefert makes known through writing the creative impulse of the unconscious Other, albeit in a voice that specifically brings to light the female imaginary.⁹

We find, along with the personal voice that Rimbaud highlights in *Marguerite*, strong evidence of the discourse of an other through which the creative woman discovers the unknown within herself. In the first eight verses of the text, an impersonal third-person speaker paints with evocative imagery a natural scene that sets the stage for reverie, i.e., for the interplay of the real and the imagined. Speaking in general psychological terms, reverie involves a loosening of conscious attention without total surrender of consciousness that enables the dialogue of conscious and unconscious mental activity.¹⁰ The creative

role played by reverie, evoked throughout *Marguerite* (*quel rêve* v. 70, *rêve de l'avenir* v. 85, *que toute jeune fille à mon âge imagine* v. 91), suggests the split subjectivity explicit in Rimbaud. Formulated in modern critical terms, Rimbaud's much-quoted *je est un autre* reconfigures the Romantic speaking subject as a personal and an impersonal discursive construction, at once self and the unconscious Other, i.e., the Symbolic order of language. *Marguerite* hints at this modern notion of a subject divided in and through discourse which we shall see demonstrated in Siefert's other texts where a doubling of the subject, as in dreams, brings about poetic insight into the as yet unknown.

Narrative shifts in *Marguerite* call to mind the dialogic subject developed in Rimbaud's prose poetry (Paliyenko 1994). The shift from the impersonal third-person speaker that sets the poetic stage in *Marguerite*, along with intermittent dialogues in the body of the text, cast the narrative voice in *Marguerite* in dialogic terms. The excerpt chosen by Rimbaud does not demonstrate this dialogism in Siefert which would have supported the modernity of her poetic writing. Rimbaud focuses instead on a traditional first-person Romantic voice in *Marguerite* identified with the poet. This covering over the dialogic aspect of Siefert's writing, an aspect of her modernity, may be simply a question of limited space in Rimbaud's missive to Izambard. Or is it possible that Rimbaud does not yet recognize in Siefert the split subjectivity that he will articulate just nine months later to Izambard and Demeny (*lettres du voyant*, mai 1871)? Further still, in the revisionist light of his own struggle for originality, Rimbaud's selective reading of Siefert may project an unwitting admission of his anxiety of being influenced, i.e., inspired, by a woman. Whether a personal or a general gender bias, the Siefert that Rimbaud chooses to circulate in his letter to Izambard draws skewed notice to her writing in the shadow of traditional male-dominated Romantic lyricism.

A first-person voice plays the primary narrative role in *Marguerite*, where we observe a shift from *nous* in verse 9, to *moi/je* in verse 13, which begins the excerpt given by Rimbaud: *Moi, j'étais à l'écart, tenant sur mes genoux/Ma petite cousine aux grands yeux bleus si doux*. Intervening verses 16-54, not quoted by Rimbaud, prepare the onset of the subject's reverie and poetic conception of a desired child in subsequent verses 55-58, and 71-75, quoted in Rimbaud's letter to Izambard. The sleepy gaze of Marguerite traces the site of imagined bliss where the speaker projects herself: *Et je la regardais se perdre et s'élever/Dans ce cher pays bleu, splendide & solitaire,/Où depuis si longtemps, je vis loin de la terre* (v. 26-28). Others observing the narrating subject with the child (*Et comme la petite à la grande ressemble/Nul n'y pensait avant qu'elles fussent ensemble./On dirait, n'est-ce pas à les regarder bien,/Les deux soeurs, ou la mère et l'enfant* v. 34) remark a resemblance between them which further inspires the speaker to imagine a daughter that she will never know: *Si j'avais une enfant, tête blonde & gentille,/Fragile créature en qui je revivrai....*

The verses of *Marguerite* (55-58, 71-75, 88-91, and 94) reproduced by Rimbaud in his letter to Izambard move quickly from fantasy to reality. Put simply, the imagined child is but a dream: *Quand je pense à l'enfant qui me rendrait si fière,/Et que je n'aurai pas, que je n'aurai jamais;/... C'en est fini pour moi du céleste roman/Que toute jeune fille à mon âge imagine....* We recall that Rimbaud finds this poem, where a textually inscribed female speaker laments that she will not fulfill her maternal role, "very emotional" and esthetically "beautiful."

In sharp contrast to the feminist perspective in Rimbaud alluded to in my introductory remarks, this *femme poète's* speaking from the heart in the quoted lines above does not present the voice of a liberated woman described in the seer letter. The female speaking subject in *Marguerite* laments her inability to perform her social duty, that is, to be a mother. Remaining childfree is precisely what

would in part free woman from the socially imposed *infini servage* to which Rimbaud alludes in his view of the emergent *femme poète*. Thus, this lamentation ostensibly contradicts the social liberation that for Rimbaud would open up a literary space for women in the poetic scene. And yet, at the same time, *Marguerite* conceives a female poetic subject that discloses through writing a woman's creative capacity.

Modern feminists may take Siefert to task for purportedly limiting her creative vision in *Marguerite* to a projected maternal role. For a nineteenth-century woman to publicly circulate her personal feelings previously marginalized in the domestic sphere was nonetheless revolutionary. As Asselineau comments in his prefatory comments to Siefert's *Rayons perdus*, "communément les femmes qui écrivent en vers ont pour premier soin de se déguiser, de se transformer. Elles jouent la poésie ... en 'travesti,' se croyant apparemment plus à l'aise sous un costume qui n'est pas le leur" (ii). In nineteenth-century France, declares Asselineau, poetry was "un art d'hommes." As for women publishing verse, "cela ne se fait pas, cela est mal vu" (ii). Asselineau observes, along with the social proscription barring women from a writing career, that the nineteenth-century French poetic scene excluded most women poets who superficially treated through their writing topics such as religion, nature, family, and domestic harmony. Whereas most women would thus not risk exposing their personal selves to public scrutiny, not only does Siefert, like Desbordes-Valmore, speak "en son propre nom," but for Asselineau she lays bare "les sentiments & les passions de son sexe" (iii).

Rather than admiring in Siefert precisely what he repudiated in Musset, notably *excessive* sentimentality, it is more likely that what draws Rimbaud to Siefert is a desire to penetrate the mystery of the female imaginary.¹¹ The female poetic subject in *Marguerite* speaks from the heart, all the while giving

voice to her imagination (*Mon coeur seul parlait haut sans craindre de témoin;/Un mot avait suffi pour l'emporter bien loin....* v. 41). Furthermore, what unwittingly seduces Rimbaud is a similar conception of the creative process in his female counterpart, at once personal and impersonal, conscious and unconscious. The impulse of the creative Other within the self plays an important role in both Siefert's *Rayons perdus* (1868) and poetic texts published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1869, which Rimbaud likely read.

Although Rimbaud himself sent texts to Banville which were not accepted for publication in *Le Parnasse*, most of his contemporaries named in the *lettre du voyant* (15 mai 1871) were published in this journal.¹² Siefert's inclusion in *Le Parnasse contemporain* testifies to both the critical notice she received from her male counterparts and to her evolving voice and participation in the more "revolutionary" discourse that Rimbaud discerned in Banville and company. The *voyant* letter reads these *seconds romantiques* as *très voyants*,, all the while setting forth Rimbaud's poetic project aimed at overcoming these predecessors. Rimbaud's *voyance*, which I have analyzed elsewhere in the modern terms of the creative impulse that dialogizes the speaking subject, emerges in Siefert where *la femme devient poète*.

Just as an Other voice dialogizes the first-person lyric female speaker in *Marguerite*, so too the speaking subject splits from the creative impulse in other texts collected in *Rayons perdus*. References to reverie, dreams, and the unknown often announce this *dédoublement*. For example, in *Souvenirs d'enfance* free associations transform recollected readings into *visions sublimes* and *songes* that escape the conscious control of the speaking subject:

*Sans que j'en susse rien cependant, au milieu
de ce bizarre amas de songes & d'histoires
La lumière, pour moi, se faisait peu à peu.
Les grandes vérités rayonnantes ou noires
Les mondes inconnus, le passé submergé,*

*Remplacèrent ainsi les contes illusoires.
Le menton dans la main et le regard plongé
Dans les rangs infinis de confuses images,
Que de jours j'ai perdu sans en avoir congé!*

A later verse of *Souvenirs d'enfance* underscores the autonomy of the creative impulse that leads the subject to discover the unknown within her self:

*Soudain, comme l'oiseau lassé d'un long voyage
Qu'emportent ça & là les vents impétueux,
Ma pensée abordait une nouvelle plage.*

Similarly, in *Les Remembrances*, the speaking subject submits her narrative authority to the Other voice within the self: *J'écoute les récits que me fait ma mémoire/Sur ce temps enchanté*. This line in Siefert suggests the autonomy of creativity that Rimbaud later describes in the *voyant* letter: "J'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée. Je la regarde. Je l'écoute" (15 mai 1871).

Reflexions on the creative process in *Jalousie* give rise to a similar doubling of the artist-as-willful-creator and an autonomous creative principle:

*Oh! ce sonnet me pèse à l'égal d'un remord!
Que je m'occupe ou non, que je veille ou je rêve,
Ce souvenir ne peut me laisser paix ni trêve,
Car pour moi chaque vers est un serpent qui mord....
Arrière donc, vipère à la langue empestée,
Amertume égoïste & vile, pour jamais
Retourne au gouffre noir qui t'avait enfantée!*

This *dédoublement* that splits the "I" from the Other within the self is also apparent in *Vivere memento*, where the speaking subject submits to a state of unconsciousness from which novel visions emerge:

*La vie est si souvent morne & décolorée ...
Et que l'âme, fuyant les épreuves amères,
S'envole & vient saisir à travers les chimères
L'idéal interdit.
On trouve ainsi l'oubli des autres, de soi-même,
On n'est plus de la terre, on plane, on rêve, on aime ...
Si jamais âme humaine a goûté ce vertige,
Et, semblable à la fleur arrachée à sa tige
Que soulève le vent,
Si jamais un esprit a délaissé la terre,
Ce fut moi, dans les jours où j'aimais à me taire*

Pour m'en aller rêvant.

Texts published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1869 illustrate the shift in Siefert's language from a highly personal mode to an impersonal one that we observed in *Rayons perdus*. Repeated reference to dreams again evokes the autonomy of the Other voice within the self, calling to mind Rimbaud's aim to write objective poetry, where the artist's subjectivity is no longer the central source of creative expression. By loosening his or her conscious control of creativity, a creative artist opens up poetic writing to undirected expression, i.e., unconscious mental activity.

For example, a grouping of Siefert's three untitled sonnets begins,

*Rêves, anxiétés, soupirs, sanglots, murmures,
Vœux toujours renaissants & toujours contenus,
Instinct des cœurs naïfs, espoir de têtes mûres,
O désirs infinis, qui ne vous a connus!*

The creative impulse embodied as dreams and desire leads the woman poet to discover through writing *l'inconnu*. The second sonnet largely ascribed to a third-person speaker with first-person intrusions evokes metaphorically, with the allusion to indeterminate desire, the inner psychological life from which the creative impulse arises:

*Chimère ou souvenir, temps futur, temps passé,
C'est comme un idéal qu'on n'a pas embrassé,
Et c'est la grande soif: celle de l'Impossible!*

The third sonnet, which alternates between a third and a first-person speaker, insists on the autonomous activity of the psyche in these terms: *Toute âme est le champ clos d'une bataille noire*. Siefert's text *A ce qui n'est plus* so alludes to the voice of the Other that supersedes the artist's narrative authority.

In *A ce qui n'est plus*, poetic writing becomes the trace of *images que le temps doit avoir effacées / Mots que mon cœur jalouse & ne peut contenir, / Pourquoi revenez-vous creuser mon souvenir?* What the speaking subject repressed returns

to the surface of her expression, albeit altered. Her writing re-members past scenes in poetic form: *Mon espoir est un rêve & mon rêve un secret,/Mes vers en sont l'écho, mais non la voix vibrante*. Again, we follow the suggestion in Siefert of the role played by the Other, i.e., by unconscious impulses, in creativity. At once personal and impersonal, poetic writing lays bare through *des retours imprévus, séduisants, caressants* the royal road to the unknown Other with the self:

*Le cœur a des retours vers les choses anciennes,
Des retours imprévus, séduisants, caressants,
Le poète s'éveille à de si doux accents
Et s'abandonne à ces langueurs qui sont les siennes.*

The doubling or splitting that dialogizes poetic voice in Siefert begins to clarify how she counters early Romantic lyricism that assumes a coherent, speaking subject usually identified with the creative artist. It is precisely this aspect of Siefert's discourse, rather than the traditional lyrical expression of *Marguerite* selected by Rimbaud, that corresponds more closely to the revolution in poetry in which Rimbaud's *femme poète* would participate. While having likely read all of Siefert's available works, Rimbaud includes instead only her traditional expression. What informs Rimbaud's reading of Siefert is an essentially ambivalent view of *la femme poète* that has an important source in Michelet's *La femme* where woman is at once the object of man's happiness and an emergent subject speaking in her own words.

Michelet, in introductory comments, frames *La Femme* as a sequel to *L'Amour*, and reaffirms the phallocratic assumption that "le but de la femme ici-bas, sa vocation évidente, c'est l'amour.... Je soutiens que, comme femme, elle ne fait son salut qu'en faisant le bonheur de l'homme. Elle doit aimer et enfanter, c'est là son devoir sacré" (120). The same passage, however, qualifies the maternal role attributed to woman in terms that strike us as implicitly feminist. Broadening woman's biologically and socially imposed reproductive role to

recognize woman's creativity, Michelet opens up the literal, physical sense of procreation to a figurative, psychical sense of creation: "Mais entendons-nous sur ce mot. Si elle n'est pas épouse et mère, elle sera éducatrice, donc n'en sera pas moins mère et elle enfantera de l'esprit" (120).¹³ Rimbaud's call to poetic arms for women such as Siefert implies precisely such a shift in woman's role, where the creative impulse which supplants her procreative lack conceives the unknown.

Throughout *La Femme*, Michelet turns from phallocratic views to feminist ideals that alternately position woman as object and subject. On the one hand, woman is an object always subjugated to authority; she submits first to her parents and then to her husband, since "destinée à un autre ... elle vivra pour les autres" (118). On the other hand, woman is a subject who surpasses man by virtue of her capacity to imagine:

Elle atteint dans le menu des choses qui nous échappent. D'autre part, en certains moments, elle voit par-dessus nos têtes, perçoit l'avenir, l'invisible, pénètre à travers les corps dans le monde des esprits. (328)

Michelet, in the statement directly above, affirms woman's capacity to envision, thus to be a seer, a poet in Rimbaud's sense of the term. Yet, given her place in nineteenth-century French society, in Michelet's view the inspired woman rarely realizes her vision, since "... la faculté pratique qu'elle a pour les petites choses, et la faculté sybylline qui parfois la mène aux grandes ont rarement un milieu fort, calme, harmonique, où elles puissent se rencontrer, se féconder" (328). In other words, the nineteenth-century French woman's domestic role inextricably linked with her reproductive role stifles her creativity. Michelet, striking another equivocal feminist note, underscores that "on ne peut dire (comme Proudhon) que la femme *n'est que réceptive*. Elle est *productive* aussi par son influence sur l'homme, et dans la sphère de l'idée et dans le réel. Mais son idée n'arrive guère à la forte réalité. C'est pourquoi elle crée peu" (329).

The ambivalence between the creative role and the reproductive one played by woman in Michelet configures the wavering status of *la femme poète* in nineteenth-century France. Rather than freely circulating in the public sphere, woman's poetic vision remains largely confined in her domestic space, all the while developing in the silent margins of her mind. Aging, however, blurs for Michelet tightly conceived public and private boundaries, and reconceives woman as a subject freer to speak on her own terms:

la parole de la femme c'est le dictame universel, la vertu pacificatrice, qui partout adoucit, guérit. Mais ce don divin n'est libre chez elle que quand elle n'est plus esclave, la muette de la pudeur, quand le progrès des années l'émancipe, lui délie la langue, lui donne toute son action. (381)

Woman's social emancipation liberates her body and her mind, unbinding her maternal tongue hitherto restricted to a domestic voice. Thus, she speaks more freely, and by extension, more creatively. Reading more closely, however, we understand that Michelet advocates for women's emancipation in phallographic terms. For the *vertu pacificatrice* of women's speech serves the patriarchal social order by mediating differences between men, while nurturing the family at the heart of the social body.

A subsequent passage in *La Femme* turns more directly to a feminist view of aging women, a view espoused more broadly for all women in Rimbaud's *voyant* letter:

La femme prend une liberté qu'elle n'eut point à un autre âge. Les convenances la tenaient captive. Elle devait se priver de telles communications. Les démarches de charité même lui étaient souvent difficiles, harsardeuses. Le monde injuste en eût médité. Plus âgée, elle est affranchie, jouit de tous les privilèges d'une liberté honnête. Il en résulte qu'elle a tout son essor d'esprit, pense et parle d'une manière bien autrement indépendante et originale. Alors, elle devient elle-même. (383)

Liberated from her unjust social bondage linked with a reproductive role, Michelet's aging woman discovers within herself her productive capacity.

In the excerpt from the seer letter which introduced my discussion, Rimbaud so couples social liberation and creative production to conceive the productive space from which the female poet emerges: "Quand sera brisé l'infini servage de la femme, quand elle vivra pour elle et par elle ... elle sera poète, elle aussi. Elle trouvera de l'inconnu!" Poeticizing women will indeed lead us to their discovery of the unknown as we read them on their own terms.

Rimbaud's projection concerning women provides an important starting point for situating their voice in poetic history. Yet male poets reading their female counterparts risk marginalizing them, even if unwittingly. Although Rimbaud ostensibly aims for Izambard to discover Siefert as a *poète*, both the text *Marguerite* and Rimbaud's reading of it cover over her original voice. Taking into account her male counterpart's misreading, Siefert rightly asks, "un homme comprendra-t-il jamais ce qu'il peut coûter ainsi de peines, de temps, de paroles, de calculs à une femme? Lui, qui est son seul maître après tout, dès qu'il le veut, appréciera-t-il les difficultés toujours renaissantes qu'elle trouve à reprendre un peu de liberté? (1881, 151).

Rimbaud's misreading of his female counterpart in the shadow of the male-dominated Romantic tradition does limit our discovery of a best-selling nineteenth-century French woman poet.¹⁴ His query "ses mondes d'idées différeront-ils des nôtres?" (15 mai 1871) nevertheless inspires us to consider *la femme poète* on her own terms. To recover what is specific to Louisa Siefert's voice, let us continue to re-read her poetic writing in the social and literary space from which it emerged and in the light of our modern insight into the poetics of gender and the impulse to create. For *la femme poète* speaks in a different voice that Rimbaud does not let us hear.

¹ I am grateful to Kerill O'Neill for insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

¹The verses of *Marguerite* cited by Rimbaud in his letter to Izambard are marked with an asterisk in Siefert's text reproduced at the outset of this essay. Rimbaud truncates verse seventeen, quoting only the first half, "et son teint transparent."

²Rimbaud ends verse 58 with an exclamation mark.

³Edward Kaplan observes a similar ambivalence in Michelet's theory of creative thought. Although the feminine faculty of intuition is essential to the conception and expression of inventive thought, Kaplan argues that Michelet nonetheless subordinates female to male in his theory of "the two sexes of the mind" (122-125).

⁴In his essay on Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Verlaine states that Rimbaud had him read her, without commenting on Rimbaud's view of this woman poet. Verlaine underscores his own profound admiration of Desbordes-Valmore's poetry, and concludes "nous proclamons à haute et intelligible voix que Marceline Desbordes-Valmore est tout bonnement,--avec George Sand, si différente, dure, non dans des indulgences charmantes, de haut ... bon sens, de fière et pour ainsi dire de mâle allure, --la seule femme de génie et de talent de ce siècle et de tous les siècles, en compagnie de Sapho peut-être, et de sainte Thérèse" (62). It is noteworthy to remark Verlaine's doubletalk; he views Desbordes-Valmore as a woman poet of genius and talent who takes pride in her expression, like a man. Cf. Verlaine's sonnet entitled *Marceline Desbordes-Valmore* which begins, *La plus noble d'esprit, la plus grande de coeur,/Partant la plus charmante et la plus douloureuse/Des femmes, c'est encor le poète vainqueur/Du rythme souple et sûr et la rime heureuse* (1932, 108). Siefert asks whether a male poet can truly understand a woman poet, i.e., read her without having recourse to masculine parameters (see reference to *Souvenirs rassemblés par sa mère* in the concluding paragraphs of my essay).

⁵For an insightful treatment of the relation of romanticism, feminism, and socialism, see Moses and Rabine.

⁶Pierre Brunel observes regarding the edition of *Rayons perdus* to which Rimbaud refers that "toutefois la quatrième édition n'a été publiée qu'en 1873, et Rimbaud se trompe sur ce point. Il se réfère soit à la deuxième édition, de février 1869, soit à la troisième édition, du printemps 1869" (202). Along with this clarification, Brunel affirms that, while one cannot ascertain precisely which edition Rimbaud read, it is certain that Rimbaud read both Asselineau's preface and *Marguerite* (202).

⁷Asselineau compares the personal lamentation of Siefert's female subject with Antigone: "Il est tel vers, tel passage dans les *Rayons perdus* qui nous a rappelé la plainte d'Antigone allant au supplice: 'Je n'aurai point connu l'amour et l'hymen, & je n'aurai point élevé d'enfant!' (*Préface aux Rayons perdus* iv). The subject of Siefert's *Marguerite* laments, *Des larmes sourdent presque au bord de ma paupière/Quand je songe à l'enfant qui me rendrait si fière,/Et que je n'aurai pas, que je*

n'aurai jamais. Jean-Luc Steinmetz similarly observes, "Antigone anumphé: Antigone 'non mariée.' Rimbaud s'adressant à son professeur fait du zèle. Il se bornait, en fait, à reprendre certains termes de l'avertissement des *Rayons perdus* où l'on comparait quelques vers de L. Siefert à 'la plainte d'Antigone allant au supplice'" (282).

⁸Wendy N. Greenberg correctly emphasizes, among the obstacles that women poets had to overcome, the antifeminist attitudes of influential men of letters such as Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aureyville. Greenberg carefully discusses the important role played by various mentors in helping women poets such as Eliza Mercoeur, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Louise Ackermann, and Louisa Siefert to publish and to receive positive public notice. Yet the narrow attention that Greenberg draws to texts which support the idea that female poets often imitated their mentors does little to promote nineteenth-century French women's poetic movement. For example, Greenberg insists upon Siefert's imitation of Hugo with the reading of one text from Siefert's *Rayons perdus* (460). Certainly aspiring male poets also worked with and against predecessors' texts, unwittingly rewriting strong precursors all the while developing their own voices.

⁹See Jan Montefiore who correctly submits that "the notion of specifically female language and identity is utopian, like that of a female tradition of poetry written without any reference to any masculine discourse," while advancing that it is women's engagement with the male dominated poetic tradition allows us to trace the specificity of their writing (179).

¹⁰For an excellent discussion of reverie or daydreaming as it may pertain to the creative artist, see Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (SE 9: 143-153).

¹¹Asselineau's observation concerning the interest in the female imaginary that a woman poet's expression inspires suggests an analogy with the scientific, i.e., medical, exploration of the mystery of the female body, notably *la terra incognita*: "N'est-il pas vrai que plus le poète est 'personnel' & plus il intéresse? Le coeur de l'homme sera toujours pour l'homme le sujet préféré, & quand ce coeur est le coeur d'une femme, l'intérêt, par l'attrait du mystère, s'augmente d'une curiosité qui l'avive & d'une pitié qui l'attendrit" (Préface de la seconde édition des *Rayons perdus* v).

¹²See Rimbaud's letter to Banville, 24 mai 1870.

¹³Illustrating an identification of literary creation with procreation, Siefert, in *A ma grand'mère*, refers to *Rayons perdus* as "Mon fils premier né, mon enfant" (1881, 246).

¹⁴Siefert's first collection of poetry achieved best-seller status. In prefatory comments to the second edition and subsequent two editions of Siefert's *Rayons perdus*, Asselineau remarks that "un volume de poésies dont toute l'édition s'épuise en quelques semaines, & qu'on est obligé de réimprimer, c'est un

événement assez rare en librairie pour qu'on le remarque et & que l'on cherche à s'en rendre compte" (i). Siefert's mother underscores this success: "Cependant au travers de tous ces déchirements, de toutes ces angoisses de famille, les *Rayons perdus* avaient paru (décembre 1868), et ils avaient reçu de la presse et du public un accueil qui avait confondu les calculs de l'éditeur et les incurables défiances de M. Asselineau" (1881, 94). Ludovic Spizio so describes Siefert's reception, "inconnue la veille, Mlle Siefert devint célèbre du jour au lendemain" (570).