Enid Starkie’s biographical writing on Rimbaud is exemplary in its empirical focus and this is rightly saluted by Étiemble. Yet the great negater in Rimbaud reception studies should also have noted the similarities between the way in which he revisited and revised his insights on the poet between 1936 and 1950 and the cumulative way in which Starkie worked as she focused first (in 1937) on the lesser-known Abyssinian part of Rimbaud’s life by means of documents in the UK Foreign Office, before publishing a more complete study of the poet-trader in 1938 (and then also revising this completely in 1960).

Despite Starkie’s achievement, foremost of the biographies of the poet is Jean-Luc Steinmetz’s *Arthur Rimbaud, une question de présence*, the Foreword of which is a major (but completely neglected) contribution in French to the theory of biography. With specific reference to Rimbaud, it underscores the ineffable and enigmatic qualities of the poet’s life, his work and something which could be called the ‘work of his life’, his ‘poésie en actes’ which make it unamenable to exhaustive interpretation.¹ The start of the main text of the biography is an intertextual echo of Roquentin’s renunciation of biography in *La Nausée*. There is a sense in which the Foreword sketches a methodology of a future biography, rather than one which has been completely realized in the book to which it is attached.

Before we move on to a more detailed analysis of the biographical writing of Jean-Luc Steinmetz, let us begin by offering a short account of the biographer in the ‘man-and-the-work’ style. Steinmetz is a professor of French literature, a biographer of note (*Mallarmé*, 1998 and *Pétrus Borel*, 2002) and a poet; therefore we should expect similarities between his life-writing and the work of Andrew Motion,
which is informed about the debates regarding biography. This section points to unacknowledged intertexts between Steinmetz’s comments about life-writing in *Arthur Rimbaud* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938), which stages a well-known fictional rejection of biography. Steinmetz finds it useful to give a personal account of how he has abandoned a certain type of biographical writing in advance of writing his biography of Rimbaud. In this way he passes comment on the genre in an informed way.

This speculation about the problems of biographical truth is central to the way in which Steinmetz writes biography. He insists on their importance, making sure that the reader sees them: the extracts quoted below are printed at the opening of the biography, perhaps serving as a preface addressed to those readers who do not generally read prefaces, and who have deliberately skipped the seven-page Foreword.2 This practice is different from that of Andrew Motion, who develops his theoretical material on biography in spaces which are on the margins of his main narrative (Foreword, Afterword and endnotes).

Steinmetz speaks in the first person about his life-writing technique in *Arthur Rimbaud*. Many biographers do this in their prefaces or forewords, but they fall into authoritative discourse as soon as they begin to tell the story of their subject’s life. Steinmetz successfully maintains an equilibrium between a self-reflexive style and an overuse of this autobiographical technique, which can distract the reader from the intended biographical subject. He begins by talking about himself at a moment of transition in the writing of the biography, when he moves from one way of writing to another. In this there is a subtle connection between his own practice and the poet’s renunciation of his art. Steinmetz also discerns continuity in what has been seen as a definitive renunciation: ‘Rimbaud ne croit plus à la littérature. Il délaisse cette “pratique” pour d’autres, plus efficaces, lui permettant d’être “absolument moderne”’ (‘Rimbaud no longer believes in literature. He has given up that “activity” for other, more efficient ones that allow him to be “absolutely modern”’) and ‘il se confie bel et bien à l’éphémère, à l’instant, en abandonnant précisément l’éternité, c’est-à-dire une valeur transcendantale cherchée par l’art’

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2 The end of this overture on the theory of biography is separated from the rest of the text by a centred asterisk.