



Vanessa Guignery, ed. *Crossed Correspondences: Writers as Readers and Critics of their Peers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. 285p. ISBN 9781443886994. GBP £47.99 (hardcover).

This bilingual volume contains essays about a specific kind of correspondence between writers. A wide range of authors working in French and English is represented here – from Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser to Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee – but the essays come together in exploring what the volume’s editor, Vanessa Guignery, describes as “private literary criticism” passed between writers. Guignery writes that the collection concerns itself with “correspondences in which writers comment not only on the production of their correspondent, but also their own artistic approach to their own work while it is still in progress or only just completed but not yet published” (1). In other words, these are all letters showing the ways in which writers help each other write. As Guignery notes, the shifts in the technologies of correspondence from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century do not diminish the significance of epistolary exchanges between writers, they simply change their forms from paper to screen.

In her introduction, Guignery makes the case for these kinds of letters as private, pre-publication criticism characterized by informal, intimate style and serious literary intent. The letters considered here exclude criticism written for publication and they also exclude one-way streets: both correspondents have to take turns criticizing and being criticized. Guignery’s introduction sets the precise parameters of this volume clearly and makes a case,



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too, for this body of works as a genre of correspondence worth studying in itself. The examples run the gamut in terms of degree of collegiality, power dynamics between correspondents, the nature of the criticisms, and duration of relationships. The English writers considered here include: Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser; John Keats and William Wordsworth; Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins; R. L. Stevenson and Marcel Schwob, Graham Greene and various correspondents; Aurobindo Ghose and Dilip Kumar Roy; a group of modernist poets (Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell); Elizabeth Bishop and Mary Swenson; and Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee. The French selection is narrower, consisting of: three essays on Gustave Flaubert and his many correspondents; one on Auguste Vacquerie and Victor Hugo; one on the Goncourts & the Daudets; and one on Jean-Michel Reynard and André du Bouchet.

Examples in the individual chapters are so varied that it is difficult to be precise about common features (stylistic, aesthetic, or otherwise) particular to this genre of correspondence that distinguish it from, for example, professional reviews or reflections by friends of writers who are not writers themselves. Often the features of style or aesthetics discussed among writers seems quite similar to the features that might be outlined in reviews or in informal reader responses. However, the correspondences discussed here are by turns amusing and illuminating, and they are for the most part well handled by the authors of the chapters. Together the essays in this volume show that vibrant conversations between writers about composition and craft can reveal how writers think about themselves and one another. Indeed, these “crossed correspondences” are a perfect example of continued work in book history and print culture that dismisses the idea of the autonomous, solitary author and instead uses archival and historical evidence to show how literary works arise from dialogue and collaboration.

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