

Porter on Lewis (2017)

Lewis, Philippa. *Intimacy and Distance: Conflicting Cultures in Nineteenth-Century France*. Legenda Series, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017, pp. xii + 187, ISBN 978-1-78188-513-0

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Philippa Lewis's fresh, thoughtful overview of the virtual relationships between French authors and readers between 1830 and 1870 focuses on selected works by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Eugène Fromentin, Maurice de Guérin, and C.-A. Sainte-Beuve. She speculates that political turbulence and the declining influence of the Catholic Church weakened the established social order. In reaction, some authors turned inward, vesting their authorial identities more deeply in private relationships, seeing themselves less as leaders than as confidantes. She invokes the criticism of Sainte-Beuve as a prime example of sharing a private, intimate self with the reader, regardless of the ostensible subject of the writing, thus foreshadowing today's social media.

Chapter two, "The Embarrassments of Intimacy," recalls Napoleon I's brutal suppression of women's rights, which reverberated throughout the remainder of the century (divorce, for example, remained illegal from 1816 to 1884). Thenceforth, expressions of male sensitivity, vulnerability, and self-disclosure in literature became suspect. Lewis focuses on Baudelaire and Fromentin, asking whether they were truly confessional or purely performative. The poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Lewis insightfully observes, function differently depending on whether they are read separately or as part of the collection. Lewis selects an obscure but essential text, Baudelaire's review of Charles Asselineau's short-story collection, *La Double Vie* (1859) to show how Baudelaire complicates reader-author relations by labeling ostensible authorial sensitivity and intimacy with the reader as "feminine" (48).

Chapter three, "Intimacy and Irony in the *Journal Intime*," begins with a paradox: "Literary intimacy [in this genre] emphasizes the pre-textual and non-fictional reality of its practitioners and protagonists, but is nonetheless supported and maintained through the means of fiction" (66). Here further development would have been desirable. (What would be the differences between the *journal intime* and autobiography?) Lewis's discussion of Eugénie de Guérin's spiritual diary, first directed toward her brother Maurice (deceased in 1859) and then toward their mutual friend Barbey d'Aurevilly, illustrates how the implied readers of an ostensibly intimate text can shift from real to fictional persons, or combine elements from both. Even as a strictly private document, with an intended audience of two, Eugénie's work contained a counter-current of resistance to her own project: she worried that its focus on self might be spiritually sinful and intellectually narrow. Lewis concludes effectively by explaining that the first-person voice in Baudelaire's collection of prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*, tricks the reader into identifying momentarily with immoral attitudes. She illustrates her claim with a virtuoso analysis of "À une heure du matin," pointing to "the particular affective charge produced when intimacy and irony meet" (82), as they do, for example, in the last verse of "Au lecteur": "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère!" This rich chapter repays rereading.

Lewis chooses guides to etiquette—standardizations of social convention—as a backdrop for her chapter four on "Intercultural Encounters, or Intimacy at a Difference." As travelers, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Fromentin fail to achieve lasting intimacy. Flaubert, however, successfully uses the specious intimacy among travelers to gather material, whereas Baudelaire uses his disgust at the immodesty among Belgians to fuel a passionate but sterile denunciation of their country. Even the language of friendship can disguise power relationships and re-engage with "the spatial metaphors that lie behind the everyday language of everyday relations" (94). In this connection, the extreme Orientalism of Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* would ideally have been included.

Chapter five on "Experiencing Art: Baudelaire's Intimate Criticism," focuses on Baudelaire as a connoisseur whose art criticism flows from imaginary journeys among foreign cultures as he visits museums. Lewis quickly modulates by contrasting Baudelaire's delight in intimist paintings (a nostalgic infantile return to the nest) with his cosmopolitanism, an esthetic corrective to the internationalist commercial and imperialist expansion of the latter half of the Euro-American nineteenth century. Simultaneously, she incisively credits Baudelaire with an exceptional capacity for appreciating the detail in contemporary painting, exemplified particularly by the English artists, "ces amis de l'imagination" (123) absent from the Salon of 1859. He understands that details must be isolated to be evocative, and that the limited aims of the merchant or patriot obscure the unexpected insights gained by the *flâneur* or cosmopolitan traveler (126–35).

Chapter six on "Literary Criticism and the Rhetoric of Friendship" focuses on the evolution of Sainte-Beuve's ideals of literary communities: the more he felt himself isolated as a writer, the more he developed a community-based conception of

literature, which had a therapeutic function for him. But this focus on Sainte-Beuve seems narrow and artificial in the face of the vibrant cultural history of direct interpersonal contacts in the French and international salons, academic institutions, and literary movements, from the Renaissance through the *Encyclopédie* to Madame de Staël and Marcel Proust.

Lewis concludes that Baudelaire's criticism deploys irony as an antidote to intimacy. She advocates moving away from "a hermeneutics of suspicion" to emphasizing, instead, the affirmative effects of reading in a trusting author-reader partnership. She effectively synthesizes the deconstructive *distinguo* move of deconstruction—dissecting specious identities—with a discreet historical consciousness that alternatively discloses new ranges of possibilities and then contracts into a synthesis. Brief, thoughtful footnotes extend Lewis's discussions in many directions, revealing her exemplary deep background. One anticipates her future writings with pleasure.

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