

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

A scholarly journal devoted to the study of French literature and related fields

For articles: [ncfsarticles@gmail.com](mailto:ncfsarticles@gmail.com)

For reviews: [ncfsreviews@gmail.com](mailto:ncfsreviews@gmail.com)

[www.ncfs-journal.org](http://www.ncfs-journal.org)

Poyet, Thierry, ed. *Lectures de la correspondance Flaubert-Sand. Des vérités de raison et de sentiment. Écritures de l'intime: correspondances, mémoires, autobiographies*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2013. Pp. 308. ISBN: 9782845165304

*Anne E. McCall, Binghamton University (SUNY)*

In this collection of essays, Thierry Poyet takes on a *bête sacrée* of the epistolary canon: the letters exchanged between two of France's great writers and one of its famous literary odd couples, George Sand and Gustave Flaubert. The sixteen essays that follow Poyet's introductory text renew discussion of a correspondence that developed over thirteen years and whose combination of predictability and inscrutability has attracted the attention of writers and powerhouse critics from Maupassant to Martine Reid. Poyet uses ideology, theory, and the concept of encounters to organize studies of a corpus known for opposing the idealism, optimism, democratic-mindedness, and life-embracing expansiveness of Sand to the realism, pessimism, elitism, and art-focused existence of Flaubert. The essays do review well-worn oppositions that Michel Brix summarizes as her "combativité optimiste" and his "défaitiste bilieux," but they do so while revealing nuances and points of convergence. As a result, readers who may have tired of this classic epistolary "face-off" can reread the letters with fresh eyes and new tools for understanding.

Poyet leads the charge when he reminds readers that the two novelists shared experiences of marginality. As a woman living largely outside of Paris, belonging to an older literary generation, and favoring democracy, Sand faced the question of her relevance; Flaubert's esthetic choices, his palpable scorn for the public, limited productivity, and residency in Normandy put him on the fringes of literary society too. Caroline Caset enriches nuanced understandings when she affirms that the writers differed more in the methods they espoused than the goals they embraced, and she argues this through what she contends was their shared belief in the educational mission of the artist and the potential of children. Bernard Hamon and Gérard Chalaye examine the aversion that both correspondents had for Catholicism, even though it led Sand to see in democracy progress relative to Catholicism, and the de Tocqueville-inspired Flaubert to understand democratic ideals and the Revolution as its unfortunate continuation. Monia Kalle's analysis of inspiration, be it a force or excuse, reveals the differing ways in which the authors situated themselves relative to language, yet she too insists on their shared identification with early Romanticism and courtly lyricism.

As a form of life-writing, letters are not simply a vehicle for intellectual debate; they facilitate, record, and commemorate evolving relationships. Yvan Leclerc brings to the fore the asymmetries that grounded the Sand-Flaubert relationship. Françoise Ghillebaert analyses stylistic doubt in the evolution of the exchanges, while Marianne Charrier-Vozel claims that manners, indulgence, and public criticism transform letters that could have been instruments for dialogic criticism into the novel of a friendship. Poyet cautions more generally against over-interpreting either the vivacity of the friendship or the intellectual bond between writers who neither saw each other often nor wrote frequently, nor used their correspondence to do much more than explain why they could not see each other. Poyet himself contends that the letters, even as they amplify a distinction between literature written for others and literature written about others, are often banal.

Several contributors bring the letters out of isolation into dialogue with other relationships and genres. Françoise Genevray does so by bringing Turguenev into the discussion. This shared correspondent embraced positions that set him between Flaubert and Sand, and sketched paths out of oppositions to which Sand and Flaubert remained committed. Isabelle Hoog Naginski associates the authors' famous "troubadour" epithet for each other with the

structure of the corpus, which she likens to the medieval “jeu-parti.” She also compares the correspondents’ representations of artists to those that exist in their novels and even to Louise Colet’s *Lui*, which includes Flaubert as well as Sand and Musset. Éric Le Calvez traces the influence that Sand had on the genesis of *L’Éducation sentimentale* and through it, demonstrates its limits. Marie-Pierre Rootering concludes similarly from her examination of Flaubert’s interest in Sand’s theatrical productions. Finally, the experience that both writers had with pantomime viewing and writing leads Leisha Ashdown-Lecointre to see in this art form a window onto their theatrical practice and Sand’s theorizations of it. Letters are indeed a theatrical form, so Catherine Masson writes in recounting the development of her production, *George Sand—Gustave Flaubert, échanges épistolaires*. Masson’s sensitive portrayal of life-writing, intellectual debate, and rich ellipses marks a worthy conclusion to a volume that provides multiple leads for future studies.