

Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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

For articles: ncfsarticles@gmail.com

For reviews: ncfsreviews@gmail.com

www.ncfs-journal.org

Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules. *Lettres à Trebutien 1832-1858*. Ed. Philippe Berthier. Paris: Bartillat, 2013. Pp. 1315. ISBN: 9782841004706

Karen L. Humphreys, Trinity College

This collection of Barbey d'Aurevilly's letters to his editor, publisher, and friend, Guillaume-Stanislas Trebutien offers a rich albeit one-sided correspondence. *Lettres à Trebutien*, edited by Philippe Berthier, is a beautifully rendered testimony to the personal and professional relationship between the two men over twenty-two years. At 1300 pages, this tome does not lend itself to quick perusal. However, because of its epistolary form and Berthier's presentation, it can be referenced chronologically for auto/biographical sources, information on nineteenth-century literary culture and the press industry in general; or, conversely, savored a missive at a time for the fiery, eloquent prose that won Barbey's renown as the *Connétable des lettres*.

Little is known of the brooding yet passionate conservator of the municipal library in Caen; only the pages penned by Barbey have survived, leaving what Berthier dubs a "correspondance mutilée" (9). A reserved, patient man, eight years Barbey's senior, Trebutien meticulously edited Barbey's work. In addition, he was also his copyist, "fact finder," and archivist. An early twentieth-century biography and more recent work by Jean-Luc Pire in 1985 fill in a few gaps, but on the whole, Trebutien is known primarily for his association with Barbey. Before he died in Caen in 1870, he published a version of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in 1828, several works by Barbey including *Du dandysme et de George Brummel* (1845), and Eugénie de Guérin's *Journal* and *Lettres*. The extent to which Trebutien toiled for his fellow *Normand* is clear from the evidence and gratitude expressed in Barbey's letters. Barbey's affectionate and praiseworthy epithets in his letter greetings ("Mon cher Trebutien," "mon glorieux Baron!," "mon Molière," "Mon bien cher et admirable ami"), attest both to a close rapport and to Barbey's verve for letter writing. At the same time, their friendship was not without its strains—notably a four-year feud begun in 1837 and their definitive break in 1858 over the publication of Maurice de Guérin's *Les Reliquiae*. (Barbey, most likely aware of the response it might provoke, suggested Poulet-Malassis for the publisher—"Il publie des choses fétides, pourquoi n'en publierait-il pas une parfumée?" (1249). Written in the margin of this letter dated July 2, 1858 is Trebutien's reaction: "Cette lettre incroyable me tomba des mains, et ceci n'est pas une figure. Je bondis comme un tigre blessé et sentis que mon amitié était atteinte *mortellement*" (1251). In his preface, Berthier stresses Barbey's demands on the erudite bookseller—"en l'élisant pour factotum, confident, alter ego, en lui prêtant vie, Barbey l'a aussi définitivement vampirisé" (8).

Prior to this publication, the letters could be found only on library shelves or in universities, often in dated or multi-volume editions. Features that allow readers to hone in easily on specific details include the arrangement of the correspondence by year, thorough annotations at the end of each letter, a chronology of significant dates in the correspondence, an index of names and literary works mentioned, a brief bibliography and an annex titled, "une fraternelle et durable amitié." The latter is a narrative published in 1927 by Octave Uzanne (told from Barbey's point of view and filtered through Uzanne). These attributes make the collection useful for research and reference purposes as well as investigation of Barbey's character, epistolary style, and critical opinions.

Berthier's incisive preface invites the reader to consider the stylistic idiosyncrasies, rhetorical subtleties, tonal registers, and a host of tensions—tensions created by the frequently conflicting forces of personal ambition, friendship, creative vision, financial need, and public opinion. The genre itself allows a unique freedom of expression for the *destinateur*—and Barbey was keenly aware of the possibilities for spontaneity and variety: "en correspondance, je joue de tous les

instruments et je puis executer un air enchaîné et sévère, après avoir détaché les sons saltimbanques du fifre affolé et du tympanon” (1046). His penchant for outdated phrases, antiquated spellings, and Norman proverbs is matched by enthusiasm for neologisms and oxymora: “Mecredy soir,” “bicoque,” “politicaillerie contemporaine,” “procédés [...] plébassiers de l’imprimerie,” “terrible vertu.” Allusions to Rabelais, Molière, Walter Scott, Beaumarchais, Voltaire, and Ann Radcliffe appear amidst phrases in English, Spanish, Latin, and Italian. Barbey’s controlled yet playful prose is juxtaposed with the spontaneity of no predetermined itinerary.

Poet, dreamer, critic, dandy, melancholic, and *moraliste*, Barbey is all of these and he springs to life in the pages of this correspondence. The value of these letters is multi-fold, as they navigate the reader through the daily life of a critic in the mid-nineteenth century, the subtleties of epistolary writing, the paradoxes of Barbey’s temperament, and the aesthetics of his literary technique. Simply put, Berthier maintains, “c’est aussi en soi et pour soi, du Barbey superlatif, dans son jus le plus succulent” (23).