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Flaubert en toutes lettres: l'écriture épistolaire dans la correspondance et dans l'oeuvre (book review)

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SCHWEIGER, AMÉLIE. *Flaubert en toutes lettres: l'écriture épistolaire dans la correspondance et dans l'œuvre*. Rouen: PU de Rouen, 2012. ISBN 978-2-87775-571-9. Pp. 144. 15 €.

Scholars of Flaubert's correspondence like Charles Carlut and Hélène Frejlich tend to offer biographical readings, insights into the author's aesthetic ideas viewed through the prism of personality. Like many, they consider his letters precious glimpses into the personal life of the avatar of impersonal art. According to Schweiger, such interpretations are worthwhile but do not sufficiently take into account the textual richness of the epistle, its dynamic and ever-evolving nature, and its complex relations with other types of writing. For if letter-writing speaks volumes about fiction writing the opposite is also true. Schweiger thus sees Flaubert's correspondence as equal to his novelistic works and seeks to explore the intimate and slippery relationship between the two. Above all, she attempts to trace the evolution of his epistolary texts—both those depicted inside his fictional works and those existing outside them—and to show what they can tell us about his overall concept of writing. Chapter 1 examines Flaubert's correspondence to reveal his lack of confidence as a letter writer and his ambivalence toward epistolary art—one he sometimes denigrates as inferior to literature and at other times elevates as superior. Composing missives is seen as a way of honing compositional skills and combating writer's block. By examining several early fictional works like *Mémoires d'un fou* and *Novembre*, chapter 2 shows how epistolary writing helped Flaubert navigate the transition from personal to impersonal literature, a transition that mirrored his journey from romanticism to realism. Chapter 3 studies three early novels whose plot revolves around letter writing: *Un secret de Philippe le Prudent*, *Passion et vertu*, and the first version of *L'éducation sentimentale*, the latter being in part an epistolary novel. Here the missive is seen negatively as incapable of facilitating meaningful communication, thus anticipating later works like *Madame*

Bovary, where so-called love letters are reduced to insipid dribble. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Flaubert's correspondence with his muse Louise Colet transformed his art by providing an invaluable laboratory for new ideas. Chapter 5 reveals how his travels in the Orient helped him develop a new aesthetic in which the writer, like the Baudelairian *flâneur*, adopts an attitude of receptive passivity. Finally, chapter 6 shows how fame and notoriety brought an overwhelming avalanche of fan mail and professional responsibilities that transformed his correspondence into a series of written snapshots. Whether a training ground, outlet, springboard or laboratory, epistolary writing played an essential role in Flaubert's career, facilitating not so much his growth from a letter to a fiction writer but rather his progression from a self-absorbed writer to an outward-looking one able to identify with difference. His modernity lies as much in his blurring of the boundaries between the genres as it does in his adamant refusal of all forms of personal complacency. This well-written and insightful volume is highly recommended to all readers interested in Flaubert and epistolary writing.