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

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resulted from a “construction européocentriste” (294), but also that we might find in these texts traces of “une obscénité made in India, produite par des codes moraux et esthétiques qui ne sont pas ceux du voyageur” (295). Perhaps the most important theme that emerges from this volume is that of relativity: the obscene must be understood in relation to a specific set of circumstances, whether textual, cultural, geographical, or performative. It becomes clear as the reader explores this volume that we should think of the obscene in terms of reception rather than production, since the category simply does not exist in the absence of an audience. Because of its astute focus on and deconstruction of these different performative contexts, this volume will be of great interest to scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds.

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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.

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Juliana Starr


This compilation consists of thirteen essays on fin-de-siècle novelist and art critic Joris-Karl Huysmans. It also includes half a dozen illustrations along with a foreword by Solal. Grouped thematically under three main headings, the articles all touch on Huysmans’s conversion or his religious writings. The first section, “Corpus,” contains mostly articles on Huysmans’s trilogy—En route, La cathédrale, and L’oblat, or his hagiography Esquisse biographique sur Don Bosco. While Vircondelet and Jalabert write about the trilogy and its hero Durtal, Guglielmi and Solal both shed light on Huysmans’s 1902 biography of the priest Giovanni Melchior Bosco, who was canonized in 1934. Vircondelet affirms in his opening essay, that Huysmans’s trilogy excels in delivering all the documentation “nécessaire à la connaissance de la vie cloîtrée ou à l’édification des grandes cathédrales” (29) and inaugurates his “vie de converti” (30). Solal, on the other hand, claims that the Esquisse and Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam, which appeared a year earlier, create “une pause hagiographique dans l’itinéraire romanesque de la tétralogie de Durtal” (85) especially between La cathédrale and L’oblat. According to Solal, during this hiatus, Huysmans abandons his “série de roman-confessions” in favor of extraordinary personalities drawn from Christian history (85). The second part of the collection, “Connexions,” finds contextual inspiration and intertextual links between Huysmans’s expressions of catholicity and various religious texts, figures, and places. Duran-Tournier’s engaging study examines how the notes in