

Crossed Correspondences

Crossed Correspondences:

*Writers as Readers
and Critics of their Peers*

Edited by

Vanessa Guignery

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To fathers and sons:
G rard, Nadir, Cl ment, Florent

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INTRODUCTION

LETTERS BETWEEN WRITERS AS PRIVATE LITERARY CRITICISM

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While some writers adamantly refuse to allow anyone to read, let alone comment upon, their literary production before it is published, others are willing to submit their manuscripts and work-in-progress to their peers, in the hope of receiving critical judgment that might validate their choices, or prompt them to introduce changes. The aim of this collection of essays is to analyse the specificity of correspondences in which writers comment not only on the production of their correspondent, but also on their own artistic approach and their own work while it is still in progress or only just completed but not yet published. Such correspondences contain treasures of literary analysis when the recipient of a piece annotates it, criticizes it, judges it, inciting the sender to justify or defend his/her choices, to reconsider his/her method and to discuss his/her aesthetic principles. In some cases, correspondences include heated discussions between writers who do not share the same artistic conceptions. More frequently, a fruitful dialogue emerges which can help both parties delineate more clearly their trains of thoughts and their respective aesthetic stances, and can accompany works in their gestation. It is indeed sometimes through such private and informal epistolary exchanges that writers have managed to develop their own poetics and aesthetics. Cases of reciprocal fertilisation also exist, when the attentive criticism of a manuscript by a fellow writer has an impact on that reader-writer's own production and on his/her approach to his/her work.¹

¹ This volume has affinities with recent collections of essays that partly draw attention to the critical and genetic dimension of correspondences such as *Lettre et*

Hugh Haughton argues that unless they figure as epistolary poems (Horace) or in epistolary novels (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*), letters "tend to slip between genres" and are simply "treated as supplementary texts, hovering uneasily in the borderland between a 'document' and a 'work'" (57). For Pierre-Marc de Biasi, although letters are a fundamental source of analysis of the published works for literary critics, they are not strictly speaking a genetic document: they bear witness to the process of creation but are not part of it (72). This indeterminate, elusive and "nomadic" (Diaz) status of writers' letters can prove an asset. As noted by Rebecca Earle, "the letter form is a protean, all-inclusive genre, whose very shapelessness is its strength, allowing it to adapt to any expressive requirement" (8).

In the case of writers' exchanges about their literary work, the dialogical dimension turns the individual (and separate) letters into a proper "correspondence" based on a sustained relation in which "the parties involved take turns in being writer/signatory and addressee/reader" (Stanley 209). When authors discuss points of poetics and aesthetics, the epistolary genre becomes an aesthetic laboratory and a place for literary debates, which can result in the formulation of a full-fledged *ars poetica*.² Flaubert's correspondence with Louise Colet during the composition of *Madame Bovary*, at a time when he was correcting her poems in great detail, is the place where he defined his aesthetics in direct opposition to hers.³ For Thomas Travisano (the editor of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop's correspondence), the letters of Ezra Pound provide "an insider's guide to the making of modernism as a literary movement in the words of its chief impresario" (49) while for Hugh Haughton, the letters of Pound, T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore are "above all literary performances, performances which cast light on their *œuvres* in prose and verse but also on the institutions of modernism." (76)

In those literary correspondences whose very specific object is creation itself, writers reveal themselves as first critics, thus suggesting points of

Critique (2003), edited by Pierre-Jean Dufief, but also *Correspondance et poésie* (2011) and *Correspondance et théâtre* (2012), both edited by Jean-Marc Hovasse, as well as *Genèse & Correspondances* (2012), edited by François Leriche and Alain Pagès.

² One may recall that Horace's *Ars poetica* or *Epistle to the Pisos* was originally a letter in verse addressed to the Piso family.

³ Yvan Leclerc has shown that in the case of Flaubert, the correspondence is the only place where the critical discourse can be heard as he never published any review, manifesto, critical essay or preface, apart from his preface to Louis Bouilhet's posthumous *Dernières chansons* (Leclerc 111).

contact between correspondences and literary criticism. Far from the autobiographical or anecdotal dimension to which the epistolary genre often pertains, the critical component of writers' private exchanges can be considered as a very peculiar type of literary criticism between peers: not the criticism of an external exegete after publication, but that of an acquaintance of the author who is him/herself a writer and comments on the work before publication. The critical judgment offered by that writer was not originally meant to be published and is therefore not formulated with that intention—except in the case of self-conscious and market-oriented correspondences which were initiated from the start with the deliberate intention of publication.⁴ In most situations however, comments are relatively relaxed, spontaneous, direct and open, without any taboo or censure (even if feelings of friendship—or even of love—between letter writers can lead some to qualify their criticism). The informality, ease and candour of this special form of criticism are precisely what can sometimes illuminate the work more fully and more clearly than a published essay which has been laboured over for a long time. Referring to Gerard Manley Hopkins's letters, Michael D. Hurley notes: "the genre of letter writing, the typically informal style of his correspondence, allows his literary-critical insights to emerge incidentally, irrelevantly, even irreverently" (149).⁵ This early stage of private literary criticism thus greatly differs from the public reviews or statements that may be published by the same writers on the same works,⁶ but also from formal and artful essays or prefaces by writers on their own production.

⁴ This is the case of the collection of letters between Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (2013), discussed in this volume by Gerd Bayer, but also *Distant Intimacy: A Friendship in the Age of the Internet* (2013), the email correspondence that took place over a year between Frederic Raphael and Joseph Epstein, two writers who had never met. Raphael and Epstein's project, in which they thought might be "some fun, not to mention \$\$\$" (1), was inspired from the correspondence between Michel Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy, which took place from January to July 2008—*Public Enemies* (2008)—and includes a "Glossary of Letters" with brief summaries of the twenty-eight letters (305-309).

⁵ Hopkins's sometimes desultory method of epistolary writing can lead him to give essential information about his poetry between parentheses or in postscripts. See for example the postscript to his letter to Robert Bridges of 8 August 1877 about the difference between a counterpoint and a circumflex (in Thornton and Phillips 277).

⁶ In this volume, Jeremy Elprin shows how John Keats's contestation of his fellow poets Wordsworth and Hazlitt was confined to the realm of the familiar letter and stayed safely away from the public arena.

A few examples taken from various correspondences between writers will be developed below to highlight some of the questions raised by this special type of critical letter-writing and developed in the following chapters of this book. Three main aspects will be approached: the discussion will first focus on the status of the letter-writers in relation to each other to determine whether they can genuinely act and be considered as peers; the examination will then turn to the way in which they make their remarks and criticism, with more or less diplomacy and tact; finally, the type of advice they give will be considered in order to determine whether comments on the work pertain to specific details of formulation, vocabulary or rhythm, or if they allow writers to develop broader discussions about their own aesthetics.

Peers: almost the same, but not quite

Several writers have argued that criticism of literary works should be conducted by peers and between peers, “within the restricted circle of a small elite” (Dufief 6), and not by the general public, by journalists or by academics. The private letter could therefore be seen as the privileged refuge for such a reserved activity (Leclerc 120) within a specific “epistolary community” (Stanley 203). Flaubert famously chose fellow writers—Alfred Le Poittevin, Louis Bouilhet, Ernest Feydeau, Yvan Turgenev, George Sand, the Goncourts—with whom reciprocal literary exchanges could take place, but with each one of them, a different type of balance and relationship was installed. Flaubert called Bouilhet “my literary conscience, my judgment, my compass”, “my advisor, my guide”, “my *midwife*” (Flaubert IV, 70, 76, 153) and the two friends commented on their works in progress in a spirit of fraternal conviviality and reciprocity.⁷ Turgenev was an equal in terms of age, profession and standing with whom Flaubert peacefully shared similar literary assumptions, George Sand an older peer with radically opposed aesthetic principles,⁸ Maxime Du Camp his polar opposite in artistic choices and doctrines,⁹ Jules and Edmond de Goncourt younger brothers who looked up to Flaubert and aspired to be his equals while being aware of his

⁷ All quotations from Flaubert’s correspondence are my translation. Two chapters in this volume (by Sarga Moussa and by Stéphanie Dord-Crouslé) are devoted to the correspondence between Flaubert and Bouilhet.

⁸ For more information on the correspondence between Flaubert and Sand, see Kallel.

⁹ Du Camp made 251 notes on the manuscript of *L’Éducation sentimentale*, of which Flaubert discarded 87 (de Biasi 104-105).

“unyielding alterity” (Dufief 157).¹⁰ Louise Colet was neither an equal nor one with whom Flaubert could share his religion of Art, and yet when he was writing *Madame Bovary*, she was the privileged recipient of letters in which he wrote about his frightful difficulties of composition and expounded his aesthetic principles.

As several contributors to this volume point out, the word “peers” needs to be interrogated as writers in correspondences are rarely equals: to borrow Homi Bhabha’s formula from a very different context, the “recognizable Other” is “almost the same, but not quite” (122). One writer may be older and more experienced than the other, may have published more or have had more success.¹¹ In such cases, the younger writer’s letters are often characterised by a shy, tentative and unassuming tone, excessive considerateness and deference or even self-deprecation. Lynn Keller records for instance that Elizabeth Bishop (born in 1911) would rarely send a piece to Marianne Moore (born in 1887) “without apologizing for its ‘awful faults,’ without labelling it ‘vague,’ ‘trivial,’ ‘tedious,’ or even ‘a little CHEAP.’” (409) The relation between writers (even when they are of the same age) can thus sometimes amount to a relation of master and disciple,¹² literary advisor and protégé, even if at some point, cracks may appear in the figure of the instructor who also needs the reassurance of the apprentice to validate his/her own art.

Sometimes, the superiority-inferiority complex emerges from correspondences between almost exact contemporaries, as is the case of the epistolary exchanges between André Gide (1869-1951), Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925) and Paul Valéry (1871-1945). If Valéry and Gide may have felt superior to their friend Louÿs, the triangular relationship actually complicates the distribution of roles.¹³ As noted by Pascal Mercier, “any

¹⁰ In this volume, Pierre-Jean Dufief examines the correspondence between Edmond de Goncourt (after his brother’s death) and Alphonse and Julia Daudet.

¹¹ In our volume, this is the case of Victor Hugo in relation to Auguste Vacquerie (as analysed by Jean-Marc Hovasse), of Charles Dickens towards Wilkie Collins (as shown by Hubert Malfray), of Sri Aurobindo Ghose in relation to Dilip Kumar Roy (as demonstrated by Benedetta Zaccarello), and of André du Bouchet towards Jean-Michel Reynard (as examined by Corinne Blanchaud).

¹² In this volume, Laetitia Sansonetti shows how the sixteenth-century poet Gabriel Harvey acted as the mentor of his contemporary, the budding poet Edmund Spenser. In another chapter, Catherine Thomas-Ripault notes that Ernest Feydeau treated Flaubert, Georges Sand and Sainte-Beuve as “masters” in his letters to them.

¹³ Other famous triangular correspondences include that between Léon Bloy, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam—*Lettres. Correspondances à trois* (1980), edited by Daniel Habrekorn—and that between Marina Tsvétaïeva, Boris

trio is the simple juxtaposition of three duos which are enriched by their combinations” (in Fawcett and Mercier 9).¹⁴ Gide and Louÿs became friends in 1888 while they were at the École Alsacienne, and from then on, kept encouraging each other to write. When Gide, in a letter of September 1889, described in great detail his project for a book about a gifted young man entitled *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Louÿs's advice was: “forget everything. Forget the existence of a *Werther*, a *À Rebours*” (99). Louÿs told his friend to take down notes, think of plans, write sketches, but do no more, as “autobiographical novels are only possible half way through one's life” (101). On the other hand, he encouraged Gide to write poetry, which he considered an excellent exercise for prose—“Make lines! Make lines!” (101)—and sent him one of his own poems, as he would continue to do in the next few years. On 26 May 1890, Pierre Louÿs met Paul Valéry whose “eyes sp[oke] like Gide's” (178), and Valéry sent two sonnets to Louÿs with his very first letter (184-185).¹⁵ An astounded Louÿs wrote to Gide: “Remember the name of Valéry, whom I told you about. I received a letter and poems from him. That one is a real one.” (192) This would soon provoke Gide's jealousy as he wanted to protect his special relationship with Louÿs and was suspicious of this new friend, but when Valéry and Gide finally met in December 1890, Valéry was enraptured (365) and Gide enthralled (and intimidated) by his new companion (366).

Although Gide and Louÿs stopped corresponding in 1895 after a final quarrel,¹⁶ Valéry continued to write to each of them and the duos went on exchanging commentaries on each other's production. During fifty years of a solid friendship and an intense correspondence, Gide and Valéry encouraged each other to write and publish, and shared opinions of their works, Valéry often with an undisguised bluntness. Louÿs and Valéry, for their part, continued to correspond until 1920. On 11 May 1916, Louÿs sent Valéry the corrections to his *Poétique*, telling his friend: “I will not publish that without having you read it” (1082), and justifying his changes in detail (1083-1086). A few days later, Valéry commented on these

Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke during the summer of 1926—*Correspondances à trois* (2003).

¹⁴ All the following quotations are my translation into English of extracts from *André Gide, Pierre Louÿs, Paul Valéry. Correspondances à trois voix. 1888-1920* (2004), edited by Peter Fawcett and Pascal Mercier.

¹⁵ Shortly after Louÿs's death in 1925, Valéry wrote: “The friendship of Pierre Louÿs was a capital episode in my life. It was by sheer chance that I met him and as a result my life was completely changed.” (Lockspeiser 161)

¹⁶ See Luc Dellisse, *Le Tombeau d'une amitié. André Gide et Pierre Louÿs* (2013).

corrections (and would continue to criticise his friend's poems in the future) and then sent Louÿs the first 131 lines of *La Jeune Parque*, complaining that his friend the poet André Lebey (who had had them read to him) "does not quibble" (1087). Over the next few months, Louÿs—who found the poem "one of the most beautiful in our language" (1103)—would pay the utmost attention to the lines sent by Valéry, offering precise comments, using square brackets around the words he liked the least and indicating which lines he admired the most. Valéry praised his friend for "having put his finger [...] on the little golden corpses that stink among the hemistichs" (1107), but also sometimes defended his choices. When Louÿs barely commented on seven hand-written pages of *La Jeune Parque*, Valéry wrote that he was disappointed as he was expecting his friend's observations "IMPATIENTLY", and confessed he could "only rely on you, your ear, your taste, your experience, your difference and your resemblance" (1122). When Valéry sent new lines, awed Louÿs exclaimed: "You have too much genius. You make me ashamed. All this is disgusting. Writing such lines should not be allowed" (1154-55).

While Valéry and Louÿs may have considered each other as peers when they met,¹⁷ Valéry's intellectual ascendance rapidly became indisputable. According to Pascal Mercier, although Louÿs recognised the superiority of both Gide and Valéry, his dashing boldness and spirited dynamism made him assume the "position of discoverer and 'coach'" (19) but also conductor. Gide and Valéry may appear to be on a more equal footing, but Gide felt inferior. In 1863, he wrote to Eugène Rouart: "[Valéry] is more intelligent than us, or at least always seems to be" (19). Despite those various (and visible) degrees of superiority or inferiority, the three writers craved for the comments, opinions and criticisms of the other two, which could validate their work or help assuage doubts.

There exist other cases of correspondences which are less concerned with issues of status and more based on equal reciprocation and exchange. The letters between B.S. Johnson (1933-1973) and Zulfikar Ghose (born in 1935) are a remarkable example of such a balanced relation between peers. The two men met when they were undergraduates in England and published their first novels and poems around the same time (Johnson's novel *Travelling People* appeared in 1963; Ghose's collection of poetry *The Loss of India* in 1964), and some of their works were reviewed together. They frequently exchanged views on literary matters, read each other's early drafts and commented thoroughly on them, suggesting

¹⁷ Émile Henriot even considers Valéry's first letters to Louÿs "almost those of a disciple" (in Fawcett and Mercier 35).

revisions. Johnson rehearsed many of his experimental ideas in his letters and in some instances, responding to his friend's criticism and doubts, wrote an extended analysis of his work in progress. From their detailed critical comments on their work, the reader can derive a comprehensive understanding of Johnson's critical thinking, whether it concerns his ideas about form, his attention to questions of style, his thoughts on prosody and the metres he uses in his poems, or what 'truth' in literature means to him. Ghose's approach to literature also emerges from his detailed commentary of his friend's work and other writers' production, as well as from his statements on rhythm and images in poetry, the use of syllabic meter, or his advocacy of strict forms within which to achieve freedom. Much of the correspondence is thus an extended literary discussion, which gives important insights into their work "from literary gestation to the discovery and assertion of their distinct voices" (Shamsie 1).

In his autobiography *Confessions of a Native-Alien*, Ghose wrote: "Bryan has been the best critic-companion any writer can wish for" (92), and in reaction to Johnson's irritation with scathing reviews of one of his novels, he told his friend not to pay attention to any critic: "The only praise that pleases me is that of a writer whose work I respect" (in Guignery 400). However, part of the two writers' tacit agreement was that they should not only offer encouragement and admiration but also be "bluntly critical if that was what the work deserved" and help each other write better (Ghose 2010/2011, 22). Therefore, when Ghose disagreed with Johnson's apparent defence of "a poetry without metaphor" in one of his early poems, the latter vehemently reacted:

[...] wasn't the point of showing each other poems that we should try to make each other's writing better? Thus I'm not interested in whether you accept the statement in THE DISHONESTY OF METAPHOR or not: I'm interested in whether the poem can be improved in diction, rhythm, or any other technical thing. (in Guignery 250)

Ghose answered that Johnson's diction and rhythm were fine, but that the poem as a whole was "somewhat banal" and the paradox at the heart of it "all too obvious" (in Guignery 252). Johnson would nevertheless publish the poem in its original version. In addition to Johnson's insistence on making "each other's writing better", the two writers were always prompting each other to experiment with new forms instead of replicating what had already been done. On 4 December 1966, Johnson judged Ghose's second novel, *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, "a retrogression" from the first: "I am very disappointed you have not tried to do something new [...] you have not pushed the novel form any further forward with this

novel” (in Guignery 236). On 9 May 1967, Ghose responded to Johnson’s poems in a similar way:

[...] show me something new, something which is really a development from your past work: your last three poems are neither; they are merely different without being good. Please accept this as helpful criticism, as a way of trying to make the writing of your poetry better. (in Guignery 252)

Such exchanges between Ghose and Johnson are frequent and emblematic of the way the two friends were sincerely doing their best to help each other as peers in the interest of artistic improvement and innovation, alternating between direct criticisms and friendly encouragement.

The choice of words

The examples given above of correspondences between peers, which are either fairly equal (Ghose, Johnson) or less than equal (Valéry, Louÿs, Gide) reveal that the criticisms are expressed more or less tactfully. A famous case of blunt comments from one writer to another is found in the correspondence between Gustave Flaubert and Louise Colet. When they met in June 1846, Flaubert was twenty-four and an unpublished provincial writer; Colet was thirty-five and an established, prize-winning poet and salon-goer. And yet, Flaubert was the one who advised Colet on her work, which he judged with the utmost severity and outspokenness, but also commented with the greatest care. When Colet sent the corrected draft of her poem “La Paysanne” to Flaubert, the hermit of Croisset, who had never written verse but had always paid the closest attention to the poetic creations of his friend Louis Bouilhet, spent six and a half hours writing down his detailed comments and corrections pertaining to vocabulary, grammar, meter, rhythm, sonorities, images and metaphors (Flaubert II, 182-198).¹⁸ In his letter of 28 November 1852, he warned her from the start that he was going to “slate” her and so he did, judging her lines “heavy”, “bad”, “detestable”, “terrible”, “odious”. After sixteen pages of objections, he wrote: “*Everything I have not marked seems to me either good or excellent*” (198). A week later, Flaubert and Bouilhet spent three hours discussing “La Paysanne” and on 9 December, Flaubert sent Colet the manuscript with their “corrections”, or what he would rather call “observations” (200). Ten days later, he declared himself “superlatively annoyed” at her “revolting obstinacy of carelessness” and advised her to

¹⁸ For a precise analysis of Flaubert’s corrections of Colet’s poetry, see Robert.

“*meditate*” before she wrote (210) and to “rewrite almost all lines” (213). On 29 December, he told her “La Paysanne” was “*good*” but sent four pages of further comments (220-224), and continued to suggest changes until January 1854, at which point he started commenting upon her next poem “L’Acropole” (later published as *L’Acropole d’Athènes*), in the same vein.

While Flaubert (together with the inseparable Bouilhet) kept suggesting corrections and deletions, Colet doggedly resisted them so that on 11 March 1854, the uncompromising writer grew impatient with her obstinacy and sent her an angry letter reproaching her for her heedlessness (262-265). The reason why Flaubert’s advice consistently went unheard is that Colet’s romantic, lyrical and highly subjective aesthetics was incompatible with his own poetics. In particular, the latter was based on a principle of impersonality that he was struggling to implement in his own composition of *Madame Bovary* at the time, as described at length in his letters to his mistress, the only place in his literary work where Flaubert could assume the first-person pronoun and make personal statements. As Julian Barnes wrote in an essay about Louise Colet: “there is something almost comic about the ultimate hopelessness of [Flaubert’s] counsel: here was the young devotee of form and priest of the impersonal seeking to redirect a poet who was his polar opposite” (2002, 180).

Significantly, this praxis of corrections and recommendations only worked one way as Flaubert refused to send Colet a single page of *Madame Bovary* before it was finished and therefore she could never reciprocate by offering her own comments on the work in progress. Beforehand, Colet had almost always praised Flaubert’s already completed work, even when she did not particularly like it, and her compliments often met with his disapproval. In 1847, Maxime Du Camp warned her that Flaubert had been “profoundly wounded by the extravagant praise” she had lavished on *Novembre* (Barnes 2002, 189),¹⁹ and when she expressed admiration for the first *Éducation sentimentale*, Flaubert rebuked her for her “excessive enthusiasm” (Flaubert II, 29).

We find none of Flaubert’s abruptness and inflexibility in the correspondence between the Flaubertophile Julian Barnes and his friend, the renowned critic and biographer Hermione Lee. On the contrary, the close friendship that unites them and Lee’s intimate familiarity with Barnes’s work over the years lead each of them to show the greatest

¹⁹ In her Memento of 26 November 1851 however, Colet wrote that she found the work “weak” and “mediocre”, and she sent Flaubert a twelve-page letter about it (Flaubert II, 882), which unfortunately has not survived.

respect in their criticism of the other's production. Barnes's archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas show that Lee commented at length upon the drafts of his novels, short stories and essays, sending long letters, faxes or emails with very careful indications, annotating the typescripts in great detail or sending pages of typed comments.²⁰ Lee's extensive comments are offered generously as she is neither editor, publisher, agent nor reviewer, but is happy to give her opinion as a friend and fellow writer, and sometimes even provides more than annotations. For instance, in addition to her thirteen-page letter about the first draft of Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, she sends photocopies of poems by Matthew Arnold, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost and Heathcote Williams, which she feels could relate to specific passages in the book. She also gives information about intertextual echoes that Barnes might not have been aware of. Regarding the chapter entitled "Upstream!", Lee notes:

(it's the title of a play by Ayckbourn, set on a boat, incidentally. No that's way upstream. But that would be the title of the film, that's the point.); Firmin: incidentally, not that it matters, Firmin is the name of the hero of Lowry's Under the Volcano, so lousy stuff had been done about how it's 'infirm' anagram, etc. In case you don't want the echo. (1.7.1)²¹

Lee's expertise as a literary critic combined with her long standing friendship with Barnes and her informed knowledge of his work enable her to provide meticulous analyses of the drafts (which would have made for illuminating reviews)²² and offer valuable advice about narrative momentum, structure or even choice of words. Having read a later draft of the chapter entitled "The Survivor" from *A History of the World in 10½*

²⁰ Extracts from unpublished letters by Hermione Lee to Julian Barnes are printed below with the kind permission of Hermione Lee, Julian Barnes and the Harry Ransom Center. Extracts from "Papers. 1971-2000" will be referenced with number 1 followed by box and folder numbers. Extracts from "Addition to His Papers. 1996-2006" will be referenced with number 2 followed by box and folder numbers.

²¹ Barnes kept the name Firmin for the Jesuit missionary in the film in which his fictional protagonists perform (Barnes 1989, 203).

²² Although Hermione Lee took part in many public discussions with Julian Barnes, apart from a short review of his first novel *Metroland* in 1980, she never reviewed his books, precisely because of their special relationship. Referring to his second novel *Before She Met Me*, Barnes wrote to Lee: "you are quite right not to review it. Even if you thought [*sic*] it was entirely wonderful (perhaps especially if), you shouldn't." (1.1.4)

Chapters, she writes on 1 August 1988: “I think this does work better”, and adds “a few tiny things” about grammatical tenses: “‘skin was torn off and what’s underneath is blood’—was or is both times?”,²³ as well as formulation: “‘Reacting against this enclosure’—bit stiff?”²⁴ (1.7.1). On 4 April 1992, Lee sends a six-page letter of appreciative comments on *The Porcupine*, based on precise passages, but refers to “tiny points” where she thought the language “sounded too formal”, for example in “High expectations did not lead to tall words” (1.12.4), which Barnes later transformed into a less dense formulation: “The high expectations of the last years refused to declare themselves in tall words.” (Barnes 1992, 42)

Hermione Lee not only expresses her admiration for the work, using such adjectives as “brilliant”, “wonderful”, “impressive”, “enchanting”, “beautiful”, “marvellous” or “extraordinary”, and underlining important laudatory words in her letters for emphasis, but she also proves extremely tactful and moderate when making suggestions which are usually presented as “tiny things” and “minor comments”. Reacting to the draft of the short story “Dragons” in a letter of 10 January 1990, she uses such sentences as “I was a bit uncertain”, “I would have liked a tiny bit more, maybe only one sentence [...]”, “Well you do that I suppose on p.6, para 2, but I wanted it in a bit more detail”. She even graciously refers her cautious remarks back to herself, offering Barnes the possibility of ignoring her comments if he so wishes: “that’s probably just my appetite for more detail”; “perhaps I’m just being a slow reader” (1.2.1), “this is because I am a lit. intello” (1.4.5). Sometimes, Lee assumes the roles of both reader/critic and writer, or prosecutor and defender—like Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, who alternates between the voice of an invented prosecutor of Flaubert and that of his defender in “The Case Against” (Barnes 1984, 128-136). After a paragraph of questions about the time scheme in *Talking it Over*, which she finds too ambiguous, Lee concludes: “No, I think that’s right as it is, it should be ambivalent” (1.14.5). Even though she comes to the conclusion that nothing should be changed, her reflections about the treatment of time are valuable in that they draw attention to specific narratological choices.

²³ The first typescript draft read “The skin is stripped off and what’s underneath is blood” (1.6.8). The published version is “The skin was torn off and underneath was blood” (Barnes 1989, 84).

²⁴ In the published version, “She thought her mind could be reacting against this enclosure, and giving her hints” (1.7.1) was replaced with “She thought her mind could be protesting, asking to be let out.” (Barnes 1989, 99).

Although the reader rarely has access to Julian Barnes's answers,²⁵ we know he takes Lee's remarks into careful consideration, as revealed by a comparison between the first drafts and the published versions of the books, but also because he sometimes asks for more information about a specific word she used. In a fax of 2 January 1998 including comments about the novel *England, England*, Lee explains: "No, difficult wasn't a euphemism for dull, but for ambiguous." (1.4.5) One of the rare letters from Barnes in the archives is a copy of his letter to Lee responding to her comments about *Before She Met Me*. While he declares himself "glad you found it as funny as you did, and glad about the bits you liked", he is intent on justifying his choices and sometimes disagreeing with Lee's interpretations in a longer section of the letter introduced by: "Now for your Buts, and my reButs" (1.1.4). His refutations²⁶ and detailed explanations offer an interesting insight into the book, although Lee's interpretations are not invalidated by the statement of Barnes's intentions.

From detailed criticism to *ars poetica*

Whether writers offer their criticisms bluntly or cautiously, as equals or not quite equals, it is also interesting to examine the type of comments that are made. Referring to Flaubert's correspondence, Yvan Leclerc distinguishes three types of literary comments within letters: specific criticisms on the work which has been sent to the writer for evaluation, general aesthetic principles, and reflexions on one's own production and its genesis (113). The three categories often blur as corrections made to a piece of work can lead to the expression of a poetics. The degree of attentiveness to comments and genuine dialogue also varies from one

²⁵ In the case of *Arthur & George* (published in 2005) and later works, email correspondence sometimes allows the reader to read Barnes's side of the exchange, his most frequent question being "does this work for you?". In July 2004, he sent Lee one-eighth of his new (as yet untitled) novel with precise narratological questions—"Did the split narrative work for you?"; "Did you notice/have any trouble with the past/present tense split?"; "did it bother you that the narratives, though interwoven, are not contemporaneous in time?" (2.2.5)—which Lee diligently answered.

²⁶ Examples of such refutations are: "I didn't write her as funny at all", "I didn't intend there to be a 'switch', any more than I inteded [*sic*] the ending to be a 'surprise'"; "No, it's not in any way a parable, covertly feminist or not"; "Hmmm. McEwanish – I don't think so"; "My use of MacLean's brain-theory is much more speculative; it's certainly not introduced as 'an answer'"; "I don't intend the three-tier-brain theory as an 'explanation' of how Graham behaves" (1.1.4).

correspondence to the next. Françoise Leriche and Alain Pagès point out that some writers elicit the active participation of their peers (through corrections and detailed criticisms which will modify the draft) while others use their letters as pretexts for monologues to expound on their theoretical and aesthetic ideas, “narcissistic displays with no repercussion on the genetic process” (8).²⁷ In the second case, the very notion of the correspondence as an exchange falls apart to be replaced by a self-absorbed letter to oneself.

A comparison between the first drafts of a text and its published version is essential to establish which comments by another writer in epistolary writing have been taken into account and which have been discarded.²⁸ Between 1937 and 1940, Elizabeth Bishop sent most of her manuscripts to Marianne Moore for commentary, and the older writer was determined to “scrutinize every detail” in them (in Costello 398), giving the most thorough advice on stylistic and technical matters. Moore’s criticism includes the following recommendations:

[...] omitting a few words and phrases or, in stories, longer passages [...] querying particular phrases, identifying some combination of sounds that seems to her ear discordant, noting an interruption of rhythmic continuity, suggesting some slight variation in pacing [...]. (Keller 417)

In a letter of 1 May 1938, Moore also famously berated Bishop for her evasion of profundity and her dangerous “tentativeness and interiorizing” (in Costello 391). Mostly, Moore recommends discipline and an endless attention to the smallest details, and Bishop sometimes modifies her drafts accordingly. For her famous poem “The Fish”, following Moore’s advice, Bishop replaced the adjective “lousy” with “infested”, and “gunwales” with “gunnels”, and discarded capital letters at the beginning of lines. As a consequence, she wrote to Moore in a letter of 19 February 1940 that she felt “very ADVANCED” (Giroux 88). In other instances however, Bishop humbly justified her decision to keep a particular word, and in the case of the poem “Roosters”, which Moore took the liberty to rewrite in a letter of

²⁷ Writers can also use the vehicle of a letter to share with one or several of their peers a brief summary of the novel they are currently writing. This is what Robert Louis Stevenson did in a letter to Henry James when he was writing *The Master of Ballantrae*, as shown by Jean-Pierre Naugrette in this volume.

²⁸ As shown by François Gallix in this volume, Graham Greene corresponded with R.K. Narayan and with Mervyn Peake, and as one of the directors of Eyre and Spottiswoode, made alterations and corrections to their manuscripts, which the two writers accepted.

16 October 1940 (changing the stanza construction, removing some rhymes, condensing lines, eliminating several stanzas and modifying the title), Bishop responded tersely and from then on, stopped sending unpublished work to Moore (Keller 422-23).

As Bishop gained self-confidence, intellectual self-reliance and aesthetic independence, she, in her turn, became a commentator on other writers' work in her correspondence, especially that of Robert Lowell. Bishop and Lowell wrote letters to each other for thirty years (from 1947 to 1977) in which they encouraged, complimented and emulated each other, but also sometimes gently competed with each other.²⁹ According to Paul Muldoon, their correspondence, though full of outward praise, is "more often than not guarded rather than unbuttoned" (216): "despite their outward bombast, these letters have their inward tendency to quietly bombard" (225). When commenting on Lowell's poems, Bishop (who felt uneasy about some of them but was intent on protecting their friendship) cautiously insisted on accuracy of words and a sharp attention to detail. As early as 3 December 1947, after receiving an early draft of Lowell's poem "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid", Bishop made a few queries about the choice of specific words which she judged "gratuitous" or which "bother[ed]" or "puzzle[d]" her.³⁰ Such meticulous readings which led to modifications in final versions might be more common for poets as their pieces are easier to send than a complete novel or even part of it, and maybe more suitable to be commented upon in detail.³¹

Sometimes, comments upon another writer's work go beyond suggestions of alterations of a specific word and enable the formulation of aesthetic principles, as shown by the correspondence between Gerard

²⁹ On 22 April 1960, Bishop (who had drafted a sonnet called "The Drunkard") wrote to Lowell (whose poem on the same topic was entitled "The Drinker"): "Oh—I think your drunkenness poem is going to be superb! Yours is definitely better. It started me off on mine again. Mine is more personal and yet a bit more abstract, I think. Please send me your finished one and I hope eventually to send you mine." (in Travisano and Hamilton 315) The last poem in Lowell's *Life Studies*, "Skunk Hour", is dedicated to Bishop and a homage to (and part imitation of) Bishop's "The Armadillo", dedicated to Lowell.

³⁰ Following her interrogations, Lowell would change "mass" to "morning service" and delete "Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" from his poem (Giroux 151-152).

³¹ One may also refer to exchanges between Gérard de Nerval and Théophile Gautier, W.B. Yeats and Dorothy Wellesley or Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings, to name just a few. The correspondences between the experimental poets William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky, Pound and Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, are discussed in this volume by Lacy Rumsey.

Manley Hopkins and the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges (later editor of Hopkins's poems). Hopkins not only meticulously and uncompromisingly commented on the poems Bridges sent him, insisting on accuracy and propriety in the choice of words and paying utmost attention to metre and rhythm; he also offered extended explanations of his own production, which profitably complement what he wrote in more formal published texts. For instance, as noted by Michael D. Hurley, "when it comes to defining and characterising his innovative metrical practice, the letters clarify and correct the simplified account he offers in his best-known exposition of sprung rhythm, the *Author's Preface*." (149)

These clarifications result in particular from Hopkins's frustration at Bridges's annoying misunderstandings of his technique and dismissal of some of his poetry. When, on 8 August 1877, Hopkins sent Bridges "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*", his first poem in sprung rhythm (which had been rejected by the Jesuit journal *The Month* two years earlier), Bridges was declared to offer no "serviceable criticisms", writing instead that he would not "for any money" read the poem again.³² Bridges considered its rhythm too informal, reproaching Hopkins for his "licences", and judged the whole poem obscure, calling the result "presumptuous [*sic*] [...] jugglery" (in Thornton and Phillips 282). To justify the strictness of his verse, Hopkins gave precise examples of his metrical count,³³ explained why there were no outriding feet in his poem and defended his use of sprung rhythm as "the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms" (in Thornton and Phillips 282). Bridges's coolness towards Hopkins's poetry, far from discouraging the latter, prompted him to explain his method in great detail and confirmed his faith in his own system.³⁴

A further stage in artists' constructive exchanges is reached when a writer's personal letters become a major source of inspiration for the

³² On 21 August 1877, Hopkins wrote to Bridges: "your criticism is of no use, being only a protest memorialising me against my whole policy and proceedings." (in Thornton and Phillips 282)

³³ For example: "I never allow e.g. I or my (that is diphthongs, for I = a + I and my = ma + i) in the short or weak syllables of those feet, excepting before vowels, semi-vowels, or l, and rarely then, or when the measure becomes (what is the word?) molossic" (in Thornton and Phillips 280-281).

³⁴ Hopkins would also explain his principles of sprung rhythm and counterpoint in letters to Richard Watson Dixon (a Roman Catholic priest and poet himself) in October 1878 and March 1879 (in Thornton and Phillips 317-318 and 344-345).

recipient.³⁵ Several critics have shown that the sources of poems by Bishop (“The Bight”, “Cape Breton”) and by Lowell (“Water”, the four sonnets “For Elizabeth Bishop”) are to be found in their letters, and Thomas Travisano remarks that “the conversationally performative quality of the letters gradually began to find its way into a similarly casual performative quality in their poems” (in Travisano and Hamilton xviii). Another well-known example of creative transfer concerns Neal Cassady’s letters to Jack Kerouac. In July 1949, after a period of six months during which the two friends did not communicate, Cassady spent three weeks writing a long letter to Kerouac and bringing him up-to-date about the latest events in his life. Kerouac was so enthralled by Cassady’s spontaneous, impulsive and effusive prose in a stream-of-consciousness mode that he extracted extensive parts of the letter to include them verbatim in *On the Road* (1957), in which Cassady serves as the model for Dean Moriarty (in Moore 118-127). In December 1950, Cassady typed an eighteen-page letter in which he recalled his life in Denver after his release from the Colorado State Reformatory in 1945. Dave Moore, the editor of the correspondence, remarks:

Known as the “Joan Anderson” letter, it had a free-flowing conversational approach that was much praised by Kerouac, who later claimed that it directly inspired the style he adopted in his April 1951 scroll typescript of *On the Road*. (244)

The letter may even have provided Kerouac with the title of his future book. Indeed, referring to his intention to take in the sights of Santa Fe and then enjoy a lengthy meal in a restaurant, Cassady wrote: “I figured this program to get me ‘On The Road’ and in position still in good time before dawn” (in Moore 283). The irony of this epistolary exchange lies in the fact that Kerouac feverishly wrote the scroll version of *On the Road* in just three weeks in April 1951 while Cassady kept struggling with his own writing and never published a book in his lifetime.³⁶ In a letter to his friend and sometime lover Allen Ginsberg who, in “Howl”, called Cassady the “secret hero of these poems” (14), Cassady offered to “come to the core of [his] writing faults, flaws in reasoning, windness or too tight style, grammar troubles, triteness etc” in order to explain his “inability to get on with the book” (in Moore 290). The detailed examples he gives about his

³⁵ This is the case of letters by Elizabeth Bishop, which inspired a poem to her friend May Swenson, as analysed in this volume by Myriam Bellehigue.

³⁶ Cassady’s unfinished autobiographical novel, *The First Third*, a picaresque account of his childhood, was published three years after his death.

“slowness in selecting words”, his tendency to “crowd too much in” so that words “force the sentence into a ridiculous bulge” throw light on his exuberant style: “A compromise must be reached and the slow decision on each one is what puts me in the hole of so muchoftenfardeeply. See what I mean. Those four words just popped and I had to choose.” (in Moore 290-291) In this particular case, the letters themselves became the most creative work of their writer and inspired a specific style and mode of writing to some of his contemporaries.

This volume examines a selection of correspondences by French, British and American writers from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. Modes of communication have greatly evolved over this period, which makes one wonder whether the special type of literary exchanges analysed by our contributors can still exist in the age of emails, texts, Facebook, Twitter, Skype and other new means of near-synchronous communication. According to Frank and Anita Kermode in *The Oxford Book of Letters* (1995), “[t]he great age of letter-writing was roughly 1700-1918” as the development of telephones after the Second World War was accompanied by a shrinking of the postal service (Kermode xxiii). For Pierre-Marc de Biasi, the very genre of a writer’s correspondence on paper has become marginal and exceptional, even “*vintage*” (71). The “sense of time taken and space overcome” which defined the letter has indeed been erased by modern technology which is governed by speed and instantaneousness (Leighton 204).³⁷ Although the decline of writers’ correspondences is indisputable, traditional letter-writing has still allowed a few late twentieth-century authors to comment on each other’s work prior to publication.³⁸ In the new millennium, email exchanges, which encourage literary fluency and immediacy, may also attain the depth and complexity of letters, and therefore allow for a similar type of criticism between writers. While sustained literary exchanges between writers can undoubtedly continue in cyberspace, the real challenge lies in the

³⁷ It should be noted however that by the end of the eighteenth century, letter delivery in Britain was efficient and fast: “there were from six to twelve deliveries per day in the larger cities, so that letters could be exchanged within hours.” (in Thornton and Phillips xlv-xlv). According to Esther Milne, “the frequency of delivery provided by the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British postal system is comparable to the rhythms of email.” (197)

³⁸ This is the case of André du Bouchet and Jean-Michel Reynard whose letters from 1977 to 2001 reveal an extremely stimulating intellectual exchange, as analysed in this volume by Corinne Blanchaud.