

Review Essays

Romanticism and the Poetics of Epistolary Writing

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Romanticism and the Letter, ed. Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe (Switzerland AG: Springer Nature, 2020).

Letter Writing Among the Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop, ed. Johnathan Ellis (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Susan Wolfson, "Epistolary Poetics: Keats's Letters," in *Romanticism Past and Present*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1982), 43-61.

*I*n recent years, literary critics and historians have begun to challenge the traditional assumptions about the superiority of poetry over prose in eighteenth-century studies and studies of Romanticism. To claim for the privileging of poetry over prose, especially letters in the eighteenth century,

does not seem to be historically valid. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the epistolary novel as a distinctive genre. Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* was a great success when it was first published in 1740. The eighteenth century also witnessed the emergence of letters as a formal literary genre. The letters of Lady Wortley Montagu and Lord Chesterfield were greatly admired by readers when they were published in 1763 and 1774 respectively. Thanks to the Penny Post's efficient service, letter writing and letter exchange were crucial to people's everyday lives in eighteenth-century Britain. This is the gist of epistolary literature and culture in the eighteenth century. The importance of letters—the letter form in the novel or the epistolary form in any literary work—has been increasingly recognized in eighteenth-century studies. By contrast, the importance of letters has been underestimated in Romantic-period studies.

To privilege poetry over prose, especially letters, in the Romantic period does not seem to be historically valid, either. The travel letters of Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft were much admired by readers upon their publication in the 1790s, and the use of letters in Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* and Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* apparently appealed to the British reading public in the 1810s. Many poems in the Romantic period were written in the form of epistle verse, and some of the poems were written as part of the content of a letter that was sent to an actual person. The poem and the letter—these two literary forms—were almost inseparable in the writings of Romantic poets. Yet, few books are dedicated to the subject of letters in the Romantic period. Mary Favret's monograph *Romantic Correspondence* (1993) offers a single-genre study of Romantic-period letters to suggest that the "literary importance of letters did not end with the demise of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel" (ii). Jonathan Ellis's edited volume *Letter Writing Among Poets* (2015) offers a cross-period study of letter writing to "challenge the status of letters as secondary to other forms of literary work, like criticism and poetry" (12). The recent publication of Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe's edited volume *Romanticism and the Letter* is a welcome addition to the broader scholarly project of questioning the claim for the primacy of poetry over prose in eighteenth-century studies and studies of Romanticism.

Is it possible to construct a poetics of the letter? And is there a genre of the Romantic letter? These are the broad questions asked by literary critics and historians on the subject of letters in recent decades. As early as 1982, Susan Wolfson had already coined the phrase "epistolary poetics" to describe the literary form of a letter and its significance in the Romantic period, but it was not until a decade later that Mary Favret offered the first book on the genre of the Romantic letter. Her book contemplates briefly the relationship between the epistolary novel and letters. The focus of her book, however, is on personal letters and the fictional letters of women writers, namely, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley. For some critics, the letters of poets are ideal texts for a critical study of the poetics of the letter. For this reason, John Ellis's edited volume concentrates on the letters of poets during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It contains four essays on Romantic poets, one for each of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, and John Keats. Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe's edited volume, *Romanticism and the Letter*, covers a wider range of Romantic poets, essayists, and novelists. Apart from the introductory essay and the first two essays that illustrate the significance of the letter in its historical and cultural contexts, the volume contains thirteen essays on Romantic authors. Among these essays, there are seven on the first-generation Romantics, one for each of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, Jane Austen and Leigh Hunt, and there are six essays on the second-generation Romantics, one each for Lord Byron, Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley, two for John Keats and one for Byron, Shelley, and Keats. That Byron, Shelley and Keats are recurring subjects in several essays may have something to do with the fact that these three poets are famed letter writers. As seen, many of the essays focus on male writers and canonical authors. In this way, the volume distinguishes itself from previous books on the subject of letters, such as Clare Brant's *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (2006), which tend to focus on female writers and non-canonical authors. In spite of its inclusion of other letter writers, the focus

of this volume and much of its insightful critical attention is on Romantic poets.

Apart from the range of writers covered in the book, one great merit of *Romanticism and the Letter* is its consistent construction of a poetics of the letter while responding to the challenges posed by a critical study of letters, such as a lack of epistolary theories. The introductory essay gives a concise thematic and theoretical context for understanding the historical and aesthetic richness of the letters of Romantic poets, essayists, and novelists. The editors of the volume put forth the thesis that we should consider the letters as “aesthetic achievements in their own right” (9). The letters in the Romantic period “are literary works, but of a specific kind, one that is always raising questions about what a literary work is and can be” (*ibid.*). These letters “describe human drama, both incidental and overwhelming, and become a vitally significant mode of thought and feeling in the Romantic age” (*ibid.*). There is, however, an obstacle for epistolary critics. As the contributors to the volume show, “it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert a meaningful distinction between an author’s letters and their literary productions” (*ibid.*). What the contributors to the volume reveal, instead, is that there is “a fascinating dynamic between the two” (*ibid.*). Another obstacle for epistolary critics is the lack of a stable framework of epistolary theories against which to test ideas about epistolary poetics. The contributors to the volume address the issue by employing a variety of methodologies, “with some focusing on close reading, some on historical and cultural context, and some still on theory and questions on the subject of letters” (10). As we shall see later, some contributors to the volume work toward developing productive epistolary theories of their own.

The first two essays in the volume foreground the significance of letter-writing in the historical and cultural context by exploring social interactions between letter writers and their correspondents. Mary O’Connell’s essay is an informative study of the correspondence between Romantic writers and publishers. The purpose of her study is to show the ways in which “these writers reacted to the increasing commercialization of literature” (27). Indeed, “the letters of Byron and John Murray are a perfect example of how

the correspondence between a writer and publisher can reveal their competing sense of what a work is and of the literary marketplace" (20). So are the letters of Shelley and Charles Ollier. Stephen Behrendt's essay focuses on women's correspondence in the quarter century following 1800, which has received less critical attention than that of the eighteenth century. His case study of the correspondence between Mary Leadbeater and Melesina Trench draws on the theory of social networking put forth by Charles Kadushin. Behrendt argues that the letters of these two Irish women poets "formed the nexus of a paradigmatic *epistolary* salon that approximated the social dynamic of more familiar eighteenth-century Bluestocking salons" (30, emphasis original). He shrewdly notices that "in 1810 Richard and Maria Edgeworth helped Leadbeater negotiate the publication of her *Cottage Dialogues* with their London publisher Joseph Johnson" (31). The Edgeworth letters are mentioned only in passing, however. Behrendt's otherwise excellent argument about a reincarnation of "Bluestocking salons" in early nineteenth-century Ireland seems less convincing here because of the lack of any detailed analysis of the letters of Maria. Moreover, it would be helpful if Behrendt gave the particular reasons behind his choice of the female authors Leadbeater and Trench since both are less well-known than Maria Edgeworth.

The seven essays that follow center on the letters of the first-generation Romantics. The title of Oliver Clarkson's essay, "The Disappointment of Wordsworth's letters," seems apt for an essay on this poet's letter writing, as it gives a sense of the disappointment that the poet felt in his life. It also deftly describes a sense of disappointment that the readers may have felt if they were intent on discovering the poet in his letters. Wordsworth is not as great a letter writer as one may expect him to be. The themes of disappointment and hope in Clarkson's essay also work well in relation to his materials. Wordsworth's letters are deliberately dull, as he once confessed to Thomas Moore that "he took pains to make his letters 'as bad & dull as possible' to avoid the 'horror' of them being 'preserved'" (Wordsworth's emphasis in his letter to Moore, quoted and paraphrased in Clarkson 45), but there is still a sense of "the enduring energies of hope"

(47) in the tone and rhythms of his letters. As Clarkson asserts, Wordsworth's letters are, indeed, separate from his literary production. Susan Wolfson's essay sheds light on William and Dorothy Wordsworth's epistolary practices. She notes that "the literary form of a letter—call it epistolary poetics—shimmers behind William Wordsworth's shaping of his autobiography" (61), which was originally drafted as a poem addressed to S.T. Coleridge. She then compares *The Prelude* with the actual letters that he wrote to his sister Dorothy. Her reading of the Simplon passage and the Mont Blanc passage in *The Prelude* shows that Wordsworth's literary production is much better than his actual letters: "*The Prelude*—quasi-letter-to-Coleridge as it is framed—is a different genre, a deliberately crafted, elevated narrative" (65). The purpose of her essay, however, is to compare *The Prelude* with Dorothy's *Alfoxden Journal*, which "she kept as a common-place book, a sort of proto-letter, for her brother's perusal" (67). Following Jonathan Wordsworth's lead, Wolfson argues forcefully that the poet is indebted to his sister for his power of poetic creativity. Her reading of the Snowden episode in *The Prelude* affirms that "the imaginative power so claimed was actually a textual power not of his origination, but Dorothy's, a ghost writer" (67). Finally, Wolfson's reading of the mountain-climbing episodes in Dorothy's letter journal asserts that there are moments when Dorothy's picturesque description actually "verges on prose-poetry, paced in iambic rhythms" (70).

For those who wish to discover the poet or the professional writer in the correspondence of the first-generation Romantics, the letters of Coleridge, Southey, and Lamb are ideal choices. Gregory Leadbetter's essay on Coleridge's letters illustrates the performative nature of epistolary writing. Coleridge is now most celebrated for his epistle verses such as "Dejection: An Ode," which was written as a "Letter to Sarah Hutchinson." As Leadbetter demonstrates, Coleridge's poem shows how "his 'shaping Spirit of Imagination' [Coleridge's phrase] is given both thematic and performative prominence" (89). Coleridge is also obsessed with "the shaping activity of his mind" (90) in his letters, the shared interest of which thus "implicate[s] the poet in the correspondent" (91). Linda Pratt's essay

offers a major corrective to the familiar image of Southey as the "entire man of letters" (Byron's phrase, 99) in two ways. First, Pratt's essay unearths some of Southey's unfinished proposed writings that emerge from his correspondence; and second, her essay explores the significance of his unfinished works in the wider contexts of print culture and the fragmentary nature of Romanticism. Pratt's essay is timely as she draws on "the new edition of Southey's *Collected Letters* to explore this unfamiliar conjunction of Southey and incompleteness and its implications for understanding both of his writings and of the culture within which he worked" (100). Her essay promotes a greater understanding of Southey's correspondence with publishers and editors throughout his entire literary career. For instance, his letters reveal his fraught relationship with John Murray and William Gifford, the respective proprietor and editor of the *Quarterly Review*, showing that "His correspondence is, [...] evidence that Southey was part of a wider culture of print that was shaped by commercial, political and social pressures" (110). As Pratt puts it, "letter writing and letter exchange play key roles in creating, sustaining and eventually fragmenting a network" (111).

By contrast with the above, Timothy Webb's essay on Lamb's correspondence illustrates the therapeutic and creative qualities of letter writing. Lamb's correspondence with Wordsworth and Coleridge is a good example here. In it, he confesses to Coleridge that he loved to write to him for it makes him think himself "not totally disconnected with the better part of mankind" (123). Letter-exchange and poetic friendship were clearly important to Lamb. In a letter of 30 January 1801, Lamb wrote about his response to the *Lyrical Ballads* and confessed to Wordsworth that his reason to turn down a "kind" invitation to visit Cumberland was related to his attraction to the "lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, wagons, play houses, all the bustle and wickedness about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, drunken scenes, rattles." As Webb points out, the passage is well-known precisely because it is tied to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Webb agrees with Felicity James that "for all its inherent vitality, Lamb's 'poem in prose' is also contrarian or confrontational, since it deliberately expresses a

challenge to the poetics embodied in the *Lyrical Ballads* and in its ‘preface’” (131). This allows Webb to argue further that “by expressing his emotion in a ‘poem in prose’ Lamb also begins to set the agenda for a new kind of writing which will not, in the first place, resort to poetic forms” (131).

The essays that follow explore the variations of the epistolary style of Jane Austen and Leigh Hunt. Joe Bray’s essay examines Austen’s epistolary style through the use of the letter form in her well-known novels, namely, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. Bray is right to argue that “the letter is for Austen a powerful means of illustrating fictional consciousness, and the key to generating sophisticated stylistic techniques” (134). A good example is the correspondence between Fanny Price and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*. While there are occasions in which the use of a letter would reveal the character of its writer in Austen’s novel, Mary’s letters remain obscure and confusing to Fanny, who finds it difficult to interpret Mary’s feelings for Edmund. Thus, Bray suggests that the “letter in Austen’s fiction can be a complex, challenging form, which on many occasions occludes and obscures the characters of its writer, rather than revealing it transparently” (140). Back in the world of non-fiction, Daniel Westwood’s essay examines “the various ways in which Hunt’s letters attempt to conjure into being a sense of proximity, connection, or consensus that might reconcile, or at least mitigate, divisions ranging from physical separation to ideological discord” (148). Westwood’s argument is based on his observation that “Hunt’s letters to the Shelleys bear a strong affinity to the ‘aesthetic of intimacy’ that Jane Stabler identifies in Hunt’s poetry” (149). That said, Westwood is also attentive to Hunt’s use in his correspondence of “silence as a communicative strategy” to “avoid deepening the cracks that appear in his relationship to the Shelleys” in 1819 (when he suppressed Shelley’s poems “The Mask of Anarchy” and “Peter Bell the Third” from publication in *The Examiner*).

For those who wish to discover the poet or the “man of feeling” in the correspondence of the second-generation Romantics, the letters of Byron, Shelley and Keats are ideal choices. Jane Stabler’s essay on Byron’s letters illustrates the performative nature of letter writing. She focuses on “Byron’s

letters to a small group of male friends in 1809-11 to suggest ways in which we might begin to define a poetic of Byron's early letters before he became the poet of 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage'" (166). For instance, before he sets sail for Lisbon in 1809, the young Byron writes letters about the preparations for his voyage, bidding farewell to three older male friends. Stabler shrewdly notices that to "each friend, Byron dispatches a subtly different assemblage of the 'qualia' of experience, producing three performances of expansive masculinity" (169). It is clear that "well before *Childe Harold*, he had mastered the art of creating and divulging an artfully constructed version of his consciousness" (169). The merit of Stabler's essay is that it offers the first detailed study of the varying ways in which Byron's epistolary style evolves over time in his early years. Madeleine Callaghan's essay explores the dynamic connections between poetry and letters in the writings of Byron, Shelley, and Keats through a close reading of "Don Juan," "Laon and Cythna," and the "Fall of Hyperion." For instance, Keats's poem the "Fall of Hyperion" is reminiscent of his letter to J.H. Reynolds of 3 May 1818 in which he "calmly discusses Milton and Wordsworth, but the 'Fall of Hyperion' [is different because here he] explores the painful pleasure of the young poet's relationship with his predecessors" (190). The letter and the poem seen together thus embody "the tension of judging poetic influence as the poet becomes a unique artist" (191). As Callaghan puts it, poetry "becomes a means of re-conceiving of [*sic.*] the concerns, insights and preoccupations of letters where neither genre takes precedence, but they remain, instead, in oblique dialogue" (198). Michael O'Neill's essay argues that the diversity of Shelley's epistolary style is revealed by the "transformative potential of language" in his letters from Italy (216). He shows that the models for Shelley's epistolary writings are various, including epistolary fiction as well as his own poetry and prose. On the one hand, Shelley's letters modulate tone and perspective and reflect his own description in "A Defense of Poetry" of Plato as a poet in his prose. Like Plato in his philosophical dialogues, Shelley in his letters "forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style" (199-200). On the other hand, there is a striking

affinity between the emotional intensity of Shelley's letters and that of the epistolary novel. In short, Shelley's letters characteristically "display a continual swiftness of mind that prompts thought and awakens feeling" (217).

The final essays in the volume center on the letters of John Keats and Mary Shelley; these essays invite us to rethink, once again, the significance of the letter as a literary form in the Romantic period. Andrew Bennett's essay on Keats's letters develops the theory of epistolary intimacy to illuminate the performative nature of letter writing and the ways in which we may conceive of the letter as a literary production. The personal letter is a private document, but in what ways can the personal letter be thought of as a literary work? The binary division between the private "document" and the literary "work" has always made it difficult for epistolary theorists to pin down the aesthetic values of the personal letter as a literary production. However, Bennett forcefully argues that Keats's letters "markedly evolve an intimacy that challenges and disrupts the border between the individuality of the personal letter as 'document' and its potential generality as a literary 'work'" (224). In this way, the personal letter is conceived as "a performance of the kind of individualized, direct, unmediated contract between one person and another that we call 'intimacy'" (221). Bennett draws connections between the personal letter and the literary work at the theoretical level, showing that the contract of sender and receiver in the acts of letter writing and letter exchange bears a strong affinity to the contract of author and reader in literary theory. By contrast, Anthony Howe's essay passionately argues that Keats's poems and letters both suggest "an author-based poetics" for it is "the poet's cast of mind and thus the poem's point of origin that interests him" (241). For instance, Keats's sonnet "Why did I laugh?" is included in an 1819 journal letter to George and Georgiana Keats. Howe's argument is based on his observation that "Keats retains questions of values and their determination, at the level of the poet rather than releasing them to the published poem." For Howe, "Keats thus disempowers the reader as ultimate arbiter by asserting the limitation of the poem as a conduit for its originating consciousness. Hence the surrounding letter, by

giving a fuller sense of that consciousness, potentially takes on a validating role with Keats's implied poetics" (241).

Angela Wright's essay on Mary Shelley's letters and fiction continues the broad theme of an author-based poetics of epistolary writing in a similar vein. The focus of her essay, however, is on the therapeutic and creative qualities of epistolary practice. Mary Shelley's letters are often confessional and her letters on the tragic death of Percy Shelley are good examples. "Like Robert Walton's letters to his sister Margaret Walton Seville [in the novel *Frankenstein*], many of [Mary Shelley's] letters are contemplative rehearsals of regret that are addressed more to herself than to her correspondent" (264). That Mary Shelley strongly identifies herself with the character Lionel Verney in the novel *The Last Man*, due to the early death of her husband, is clear in her journal of 14 May 1824: "The Last Man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me" (265). Wright thus argues convincingly that Mary Shelley's letters and fiction "work in close symbiosis, illustrating everywhere how they inform and converse with each other, from *Frankenstein* (1818) through to the grief-laden *The Last Man* (1826) and beyond" (254).

Overall, the volume participates in the ongoing scholarly project of constructing the poetics of epistolary writing, or more broadly, the poetics of prose writing, in eighteenth-century studies and studies of Romanticism. On the one hand, the book challenges the binary divisions of poetry/prose, poetry/letters and public/private with some satisfying results. It allows us to rethink what it meant to be a letter writer in the period when letters were valued as "a vitally significant mode of thought and feeling in the Romantic age." It also allows us to rethink what it meant to be a writer in the period when letters were valued as a chief means through which writers practiced the art of writing and "mastered the art of creating and divulging an artfully constructed version of [the writer's] consciousness." On the other hand, the book shifts the focus from female letter writers to male letter writers with uneven results. It would be helpful if the volume gave a balanced account of gender in the genre of letter writing. Moreover, a specialist reader may

hope for greater breadth than the volume provides: William Blake is oddly absent in the essays on the letters of Romantic poets, and there are, surprisingly, no essays on Romantic English women poets, notably, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith. Surely, also, one regrets the absence of William Godwin and the lack of analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* in the volume's otherwise comprehensive treatment of the letters of the Romantics. Nevertheless, the greatest accomplishment of the volume *Romanticism and the Letter* is that it positions us to confront the theoretical difficulties of reading letters as literary works in their own right. One hopes that the book will inspire similar single-genre treatments of letters in eighteenth-century studies and Romantic-period studies.

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