

Thomas on De Viveiros and El Kettani, editors (2018)

De Viveiros, Geneviève, and Soundouss El Kettani, editors. *“Au courant de la plume”: Zola et l’épistolaire*. PU du Québec, 2018, pp. 174, ISBN 978-2-7605-4874-9

Andrea S. Thomas, Loyola University Maryland

In the nearly fifty years that have passed since the ten-volume *Émile Zola, Correspondance* was published, not one book has been devoted to Zola’s epistolary work. This volume, as Geneviève de Viveiros and Soundouss El Kettani write in their introduction, aims to fill that void. Like the *Correspondance*, this is also a Franco-Canadian collaboration and, from the start, it reads as a team effort. Each of the four parts explores Zola’s intentions in his private letters as they pertain to the act of writing, the function of the visual, Zola’s temperament, and his relationships. Each chapter demonstrates convincingly the performative role Zola plays in his private letters, perhaps knowing they would one day interest the public.

First, De Viveiros examines self-referentiality in Zola’s letters. Though he continually pleads for more communication from close friends, Zola exhibits an ambivalence about his own writing, lending a self-deprecating tone to his letters, particularly in his early career. As he becomes more successful, however, letter writing becomes a chore, taking time away from his novels. De Viveiros shows that the interrupted nature of epistolary exchange correlates with Zola’s fears of not being able to express himself. His epistolary voice, she writes, operates in a gray zone between written and spoken expression, and thus becomes an ideal form to defend his causes.

Maintaining this notion of resistance and performance in Zola’s private letters, Arnaud Verret investigates the ways Zola justifies his published works to defend himself and undo critics’ image of him as a monster. His main objective, Verret argues, is to gain allies to defend him and to emphasize the work over the author. Ironically, however, the more he tries, the less dissociable from his works Zola becomes. Even though they are not intended in this way, Verret shows, Zola’s private letters take on the potential for a public unveiling, and thus adopt a certain rhetorical posturing, albeit sincere.

The second part focuses on the visual in Zola’s correspondence. Alain Pagès considers the evolution of Zola’s signature throughout his career to show how it marks his authority and distinction. Compared to the variable length of Zola’s letters, his signature is invariable, starting in 1870. Pagès discusses all the unique aspects of Zola’s appreciation for his name: the Z and A bookends, the mirror-like imagery of his given name and surname, such completeness as to insist on his children taking his full name as their surname, as well as using his full name on his most intimate of letters. In all, Pagès concludes, Zola’s signature serves as an imprimatur, authorizing his message in the present and for posterity.

Jean-Sébastien Macke explores the parallels between Zola’s letters and his passion for photography. Zola discovered photography in 1888, the same year he began an affair with Jeanne Rozerot. Like letters, photography connects Zola to his correspondents when in exile or abroad: it provides the physical presence of Jeanne when they are separated, whereas the shared practice of photography brings him closer to his wife, Alexandrine. Through his letters, Macke shows how Zola’s novels and photography inform one another. His fascination with trains, light, action, the countryside, *vraisemblance*, and genealogy, for example, echo what Zola attempts with Naturalism. Macke reiterates the therapeutic effect that photography, like letters, have on Zola: both serve as a medium for an autobiography written in the present tense.

Part three examines Zola’s self-doubt. Jeremy Worth sees in Zola’s letters a constant preoccupation with morbidity, the fragility of life, happiness, and success represented in many of his novels. This melancholy, Worth writes, takes the form of a glacial wind that started with the loss of his father at a young age and continued throughout his life and work. Fecundity, in both literature and life, become Zola’s weapon against mortality. In a neat parallel with the preceding chapter, we see that Zola’s obsession with light comes from a place of darkness, both figurative and literal in the sense of the darkroom.

Returning to the image of a frozen wind, Sébastien Roldan turns to Zola’s correspondence with young followers, whom Zola labeled “des Werther retournés,” to see how he handles a trend of pessimism coursing through his circles. Though often attributed to Schopenhauer’s and Goethe’s influence on young writers, Zola himself was blamed by writers such as Édouard Rod for preaching vitality and faith but fictionalizing the opposite. Roldan shows how *La Joie de vivre*’s neurotic hero Lazare Chanteau was interpreted as a caricature of Zola’s depressed young followers. While this chapter is unlike the others in its focus on Zola’s novels, it still provides enlightening commentary on Zola’s public persona as seen through his private letters.

In the final part, Sophie Guermès analyzes Zola’s epistolary voice to show a range of tone, rhythm, and register that do not

translate to the more distant voice adopted in his novels. In his early years, a joyful tone is tempered by melancholy, whereas in his later years an authoritative tone takes precedence. Guermès compares Zola's tone of deference when writing to his masters, Flaubert and Edmond de Goncourt, with a more paternal tone when writing to his followers. Zola, she shows, treats the letter as a dialogue, a continuation of a conversation, and therefore polyphonic and diverse.

El Kettani closes the volume with an examination of Zola's love letters as a cycle. In his love letters, a generative and oppositional dynamic emerges, creating a symmetry to his private world that mirrors his fictional one. With his wife and his lover, El Kettani proposes, Zola adopts two opposing postures. With Alexandrine, he is a guilty husband and first love; with Jeanne, he is an absent husband, father, and lover. Jeanne is for living, whereas Alexandrine is for writing. El Kattani is especially adept at explaining the significance of what Zola excludes from his love letters. Zola knows that the value of his name could not benefit Jeanne and therefore abstained from signing it in letters to her, a notion which is taken up forcefully in Pagès's chapter, as well.

This example illustrates that the strength of this volume is its cohesion, as each chapter seems to respond to the others, resulting in an enjoyable interwoven effect. It should appeal to all Zola scholars, but especially those interested in the convergence of Zola's public and private identities.

Volume: 48.1–2

Year:

- 2019