Rodolphe Töpffer’s Correspondence

David Kunzle


With this eighth and final volume, a massive enterprise draws to a close. Several years ago I reviewed in this Journal the first two volumes of the correspondence of Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846), author-illustrator of numerous illustrated books and increasingly recognized as the virtual inventor of the modern comic strip. The final volume, just released, ending on the 1,433rd letter to and from Töpffer after 3,892 pages in total, appears a year after the death of the editor Jacques Droin, who was 89 years old. He had had the satisfaction of seeing through to the end his fifteen-year labour on the Correspondance. Until his retirement allowed him to dedicate himself full-time to it, he had been a magistrate, a career culminating in his presidency of the Supreme Court of Appeal in Geneva. For twenty years, from its founding in 1974, Droin was President of the Société d’Etudes Töpffériennes. He was always generous in giving access in advance to letters on his computer awaiting inclusion in the corpus. He, with his assistants, has set a new bar in scholarly annotation, here of the myriad people and events who show up in the private correspondence of a man so prolific that one is tempted to see him as an epistolary obsessive. The names and events annotated on occasion take up more space than the letter concerned, and testify to tireless consultation of archives all over Europe. The attention to detail of the scrupulous editorial lawyer-detective Droin is little less than dazzling.

Let us however plead for yet another volume, such as we expect for any major epistolary figure in our culture: a cumulative index, here combining all those assembled, volume by volume, by Droin’s wife Monique, ideally with a short biography where appropriate of each of those friends such as David Munier (1798–1879) and Auguste de la Rive (1801–72) and with whom Töpffer maintained the most intensive exchanges.

Munier and de la Rive were themselves luminaries of Genevan culture, dominant in the government and the Académie (university) and it is to them that their colleague Töpffer directs some of his most picturesque and passionate streams, or rivers and cataracts, of thinking in long letters, some evidently written for the sheer pleasure of writing (and receiving). They are evidence of great affection, and constitute a constant kind of fireside chat among friends and neighbours who met each other both for business and socially. They also enabled Töpffer to vent the publicly or socially taboo, in scandalously and hilariously hostile portraits of contemporaries. For Töpffer, the master of narrative caricature, was also adept at what can only be called grotesque verbal caricature, which was at and over the edge of decency. This was in lieu of the public graphic caricature of recognizable individuals, unwise or impossible in Geneva, as Töpffer’s painter father discovered.

Töpffer was quickly known as the serious, if often humorous and quirky writer of essays, moralistic novels, and chronicles of his hikes in the Alps with the boys of his school as well as the creator and inventor of caricatural picture stories or graphic novels as he called the new genre. A literary polymath, he was soon internationally famous, translated and reviewed. The letters show how much and how widely he was appreciated, and in the case of the comic picture stories, how conscious the author was of breaking new ground and finding a new, overlapping audience with his ‘romans en estampes’. These, in their absolute novelty of format, were treated by the proud father as a precious and special kind of child who needed careful guiding into the world; ordinary commercial outlets used by his fiction and prose work, were often distasteful, whereas plausurable effort, epistolary and other, was

put into cajoling friends into helping distribute the self-published little comic albums. These proved to be, moreover, much more profitable than all his other writings put together. At the same time, there was a risk that such ‘folies’ as he called them might harm his reputation as a teacher; and they did, on occasion, offend stuffy colleagues. It was not this, however, but his prolonged dedication to conservative political polemics towards the end of his life that damaged his school.

An extraordinary, intense and drawn-out episode in his correspondence (vol. vi) is constituted by his negotiations with his second cousin Jacques-Julien Dubocchet (1798—1868), publisher of the first French illustrated news magazine, L’Illustration, over his piece de résistance, Histoire de Monsieur Cryptogame (1845), which brought him a readership tenfold that of his self-published albums. The author paid obsessive attention to the quality of the redrawing of his designs, necessarily onto woodblocks by another hand in Paris. He was lucky to have this done by his most dedicated Parisian disciple, Cham, who was independently inventive and already established as a fully professional caricaturist in many formats, including the Töpfferian.

It is a great fortune that this large body of letters has survived, and that so much of it was kept by the recipients and Töpffer’s descendants over an all-too-brief lifetime. The majority of surviving letters are preserved in the Public Library in Geneva. A notable loss is Töpffer’s responses to the French minor littérateur Xavier de Maistre (1763—1852), who, in Geneva, was unable to meet his correspondent personally, due to old age, de Maistre developed a kind of epistolary love-affair with the younger ‘provincial’ whom he discovered and brought to the attention of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804—69). This influential French critic (following some casual, much earlier, praise from Goethe) had given the Swiss the decisive imprimatur, the launch pad of his reputation in France. The attentions of de Maistre were extended over many years and to the most heart-felt confidences over his friend’s ill health, which seemed to worry him more than his own.

To his wife Kitty, Rodolphe wrote constantly, even daily. The final volume, the least relevant to his declining rate of work, is filled with the trivia of life at the Vichy spa, and the sad evidence of the uselessness and painfulness of the treatments which probably made his health generally worse. The patient tried bravely to muffle his complaints for fear causing too much worry to his wife, but for all their chaitiness, the letters make for difficult reading. They are a dossier of medical ignorance, incompetence and false optimism at the famous spa, in exploitation of their illustrious patient who devoted a despairing energy to shoring up his will to write. To keep writing letters was to keep alive, better therapy than all that spa water, and the means of escaping from his periodic ‘noirs’ or depressions. His ruptured spleen was a real shock; lifelong it had been his weak eyelash that worried him, but now he was, alas, too weak and ill to make any kind of drawing — perhaps, as Dubocchet suggested, a new picture story about, say, the ridiculous spa doctors. He had given up his teaching duties, in his school and the university, what was left to him but to write?

Poor eyesight had prevented him from becoming a painter like his father, causing him to embrace a successful career as head of Geneva’s most prized boarding school, and as a university professor. But his bad eyes had a decisively positive effect: as he tells us, they encouraged him to develop an improvised, sketchy style, to allow his pen as it were self-impelled to race over the paper. It became the basis of a new aesthetic physiology, especially that of the doodled human face — and a boon to the amateur.

Bad eyesight, doodles, school and picture stories coalesce, for it was in the schoolroom at prep time, we are told, that Töpffer first amused himself; then family and friends, by rough sketching the first drafts of his picture stories. They distracted him in the classroom and consoled him for missing dinner invitations. He complains at finding himself ‘archiquinépétulé’ after seven hours of ‘indecemment deadly lessons’. This is just one example among countless others of the verbal inventions, creative neologisms, fantastic combinations and bizarre distortions of words and parts of words, which he scatters to the wind of his letters: word caricatures if you will, enough to fill his own lexicon. To his youngest child Esther, he wrote sweet nonsense.

The Correspondence should be the basis of the new biography that we need, the first since those by Auguste Blondel (Paris, 1886) and Pierre Maxime Relave (Paris, 1886), necessarily limited in scope, published some 150 years ago. The letters in all their richness, and much recent scholarship, must draw a more complete, human Töpffer from the shadows.

One aspect of the man which invites closer investigation is his sexuality. He was reputed to be the epitome of proper Genevan Calvinism in his art and life, and the perfect family man. His German translator Heinrich Zschokke was provoked to add some kisses, at least, to the courtship of timid young men in the Töpffer novels. But there survive (survived?) ‘saccharous’ letters which escaped Auguste Blondel’s recommendation to destroy them. The torrent of letters to his future wife Kitty (vol. ii), excessive, over-bearing as they seem, hint at some (sexual?) secret not to be divulged openly even in private between them. Are they a practice run for some future novel complete with strange amorous twists? But Töpffer’s marital relations, his self-declared ‘twenty years of happiness’ and his subsequent regular correspondence with his give no hint of the unusual, not to say improper. He was always the devoted husband and father of their four children.

Some glimpses into the correspondence reveal a repressed sensuality and erotic temptation. His letters served to unburden himself of the admission, for instance within the safety of close friendship, of erotic feelings towards the friend’s daughter, soon a ‘young lady’ [just turned four-
The Power of Prints: The Legacy of Ivins and Hyatt Mayor

Antony Griffiths


Innumerable catalogues of print exhibitions have put the collector and donor centre stage: it is a rare one that places the curator in the limelight. Most print collections in Europe and America, however, must be seen as the creation of their curators over long periods of time. The field is too diverse and ever-changing for any one person to hope to reach any sort of finality. This is eminently true of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Department of Prints was only founded in 1916 and William Ivins (1881–1961) and Hyatt Mayor (1901–80) between them built the collection over half a century. The Power of Prints: The Legacy of William M. Ivins and A. Hyatt Mayor celebrates their remarkable achievements, with two essays on the men themselves, and a larger catalogue section for the exhibition that is arranged by technique of printmaking.

This is not the institutional history that one might expect. It is difficult to work out what precisely the two men acquired, as little is given in the way of figures. We cannot understand the relationship with the library, from which many prints seem to have been transferred, and there is no indication of the size of the resources, such as the Dick Fund, that they could draw on, what authority they had to spend funds and how far they had to attract gifts. In an essay on Mayor, Lincoln Kirstein stated that Mayor quadrupled what he had inherited from Ivins. If this is true, and given that Mayor was department head for only twenty years (1946–66) to Ivins's 30 (1916 until 1946), this was a remarkable achievement. The two men can seem to blur into a single two-headed figure. But in fact they were utterly different characters and the strength of the catalogue is to bring this out.

Ivins was far and away the more impressive thinker, and Peter Parshall gives a superb account of his approach and intellectual development. He was always asking what prints told us about humanity, and his answers to this often led him far from the prints themselves. This makes him the most original of all writers on prints, though often the most perverse. His intellectual constructs were rarely checked against common sense, and his Prints and Visual Communications (London, 1953) is the strangest book that I have ever read for its mixture of insight and absurdity.

As a curator Ivins was the colleague from hell, and all curators must be grateful that they never had to work with him. His constant questioning and rethinking led him to despise those he felt to be sub-standard, and he became known as 'Ivins the Terrible' or 'Poison Ivy'. To his own