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LITERARY CORRESPONDENCES: BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE AND MME DE GENLIS

REBECCA FORD

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's extensive correspondence is a fascinating source of information and insight into his life, works, and character. The correspondence, numbering some 2,500 letters, spans 55 years, from 1760 to 1815, and contains letters from over 430 correspondents. But although Bernardin was already a prolific writer in his youth, it is from the publication of his first major success, the *Études de la Nature*, in December 1784, that his correspondence really takes off; 570 letters date from 1784, and some 1350 date from 1785 onwards (the remaining letters in the correspondence are undated). From these numbers alone, it is clear that Bernardin's correspondence and his status as a writer are intimately linked. As he himself noted in a letter to his friend Pierre Michel Hennin two years after the publication of the *Études*,

j'ai dans mes Cartons plus de 180 lettres de personnes de tout sexe et toute condition la plus part inconnues ce qui me jette dans une correspondance à la qu'elle je ne peux suffire. il y en a cependant de trop agreables pour que je les néglige.¹

This short extract tells us much about the extent and breadth of Bernardin's correspondence, but it also hints at the potential difficulties inherent in corresponding. Here Bernardin points to the conflict between the pleasure of receiving letters and the strain of responding to them,

and in addition raises the issue of relationship that the act of corresponding implies. If Bernardin's correspondence brought him both pleasure and, as we shall see, practical support, it also brought with it some difficulties, not only in dealing with the volume of letters but in maintaining relationships with his correspondents. One set of correspondence which amply illustrates the utility, pleasure and difficulties of corresponding is the exchange of letters between Bernardin and Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin, comtesse de Genlis. Beginning very warmly in 1786, the exchange is terminated five years later in a cold and decisively final letter.

In the mid-1780s, when the correspondence between Mme de Genlis and Bernardin began, Mme de Genlis was the tutor, somewhat controversially for the time, of the sons of the duc d'Orléans, and lived with her pupils and her own children in a residence in the grounds of the convent of Bellechasse. Mme de Genlis was by this stage well known as an educator and a writer, with collections of didactic plays and short stories for children published in 1779 and 1784 respectively (*Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes; Les Veillées du château*), and her three-volume epistolary novel *Adèle et Théodore* published in 1782. By contrast, Bernardin was enjoying his first literary success with the *Études de la nature*, published in 1784. And it seems to have been the *Études de la nature* which inspired the beginning of the relationship between Mme de Genlis and Bernardin: she refers to him in her opening letter as 'l'auteur des *Études de la nature*' and writes to invite him to view her herbarium.² The two authors quickly developed a friendship through their correspondence and a number of social visits (although not without a few misunderstandings and disagreements), and by early 1787 Mme de Genlis proposed to 'adopt' Bernardin as a member of her family:

ce que j'appelle mes parens sont les tendres amis que m'a donné la nature, ma mère, mon frère, mes enfans. mais plus ces titres me sont chers, plus il me sera doux de vous regarder comme faisant partie de cette parenté si tendrement aimée. oui mon ami je vous adopte je vous offre une amitié digne de la vôtre, elle est pure, sincère et solide. [February 1787]

However, in the spring of this same year, a rupture between the two occurred and Bernardin's continuing sense of outrage, combined with Mme de Genlis' increasingly defensive and irritated responses, produce a series of letters over the following year which do little else but bat the minutiae of the argument back and forth. After the summer of 1788 there was a break in the correspondence, and the only further letter from Mme de Genlis comes in 1791 when she thanks him for the gift of a copy of the recently published *Chaumière indienne* but states that Bernardin's actions have put an end to their friendship.

Mme de Genlis was, of course, far from being Bernardin's only female correspondent during this period. Besides his sister Catherine de Saint-Pierre (118 letters, 1766–1804; 44 letters during 1780s), Bernardin corresponded regularly with two other women, Mme de La Berlière (38 letters during 1780s) and Mme Le Pesant de Boisguilbert (28 letters during 1780s), and there are a number of similarities between the letters of Mme de Genlis and those of Mme de La Berlière and Mme Le Pesant de Boisguilbert. All three women emphasize the importance of frankness, honesty and informality in their dealings with friends; all express the desire to be of assistance to Bernardin; and the letters of all three women are supplemented with the exchange of gifts. Equally, all women experience difficulties in continuing a correspondence-based friendship, even while privileging the letter form as a means of circumventing the formal conventions limiting honesty and openness in face-to-face social exchanges: not only do the correspondents frequently declare their anxiety that their correspondence imposes on Bernardin's limited and precious time, they also spend considerable time explaining passages in previous letters that Bernardin has taken amiss; and in fact, correspondence becomes at times such a difficult medium through which to communicate that the women in question return to Bernardin's published text, and their own experiences while reading it, as a more 'real' means of communicating with the author they admire.³

What is particular about the Bernardin-Genlis correspondence, of course, is that both participants are published writers. While – as is the case with many of Bernardin’s correspondents – we possess only the letters from Mme de Genlis, and nothing of Bernardin’s side of the correspondence, we can see from the Genlis letters that the correspondence not only deals with the relationship between the two individuals but also includes a certain amount of critical comment on the published works of both figures as well as other authors and on the process of writing and its ethical and moral implications. This correspondence thus has particular interest because it acts as a third space for both writers between the act of writing a text and that of communicating with those who have read it. Through reading these letters, three issues stand out relating to the status of the text and the written word in the wider context of social interaction: firstly, the primacy accorded to reading and seeing in the pursuit of knowledge, and the problems caused by this primacy; secondly, the status of texts as ‘living’ works and the embodiment of an individual’s personality; and thirdly, the problems that arise when words and texts take on a life of their own.

Before looking at the aforementioned issues, it is first worth noting that Bernardin’s correspondence with Mme de Genlis brought him a certain amount of practical aid. Bernardin frequently used his social and correspondence networks to advance his career, boost his finances and improve his living conditions: Bernardin’s correspondents in the 1780s alone variously acted as informal agents negotiating with booksellers and subscribers, involved themselves in scientific experiments, worked to secure him financial assistance from the government and intervened in the unfortunate case of his mentally-ill brother Dutailly imprisoned in the Bastille on charges of treason.⁴ Bernardin’s correspondence with Mme de Genlis is no exception in this regard. From the beginning of their acquaintance she insists that he allows her to help him in whatever way she can:

je n'exigerai qu'une chose c'est que dans toutes Les occasions importantes ou minutieuses où vous croirés quil me Sera possible de vous être utile, vous me Le disiés bonnement, et naturellem^t Sans aucune crainte de m'importuner. (11 October 1786)

Indeed, for Mme de Genlis this trust and mutual support, 'une confiance sans bornes' is what makes for true friendship, as she makes clear by quoting a poem by Antoine Houdar de La Mothe :

je veux que délicate elle se fasse un crime
de ne me pas ouvrir le fond de votre coeur
elle a comme l'amour sa dernière faveur;
c'est son secret le plus intime. (October 1786)⁵

In the course of their correspondance Mme de Genlis worked to obtain a pension for Bernardin from the duc d'Orléans and get his street paved (a concern in which Bernardin involved a number of his correspondents) and acted as benefactrice for a certain Constance whom Bernardin recommended to her as a charitable cause. She was also, as a successful published writer, well-placed to offer him practical advice on the production of his works. She read some of his manuscripts,⁶ and having encountered difficulties with the printing of her latest work, *La Religion considérée comme l'unique base du bonheur et de la véritable philosophie*, by the new polytype method she offered to speak to her replacement printer for the new edition, Couret de Villeneuve, with a view to engaging him to print the third edition of Bernardin's *Études* :

L'imprimeur avec lequel je me suis arrangée me paroît plein d'activité et d'intelligence, si vous voulés je lui parlerai de votre ouvrage qui m'intéresse je vous assure autant que les miens, et je tâcherai de vous faire de bonnes conditions. voyés cher cousin, donnés moi les moyens de vous servir et de vous être utile, vous ne sauriés me procurer un plus sensible plaisir. [April 1787]

However, if ‘une confiance sans bornes’ was for Mme de Genlis the mark of true friendship, as the friendship turned sour her involvement in Bernardin’s affairs quickly became a source of irritation rather than of pleasure:

vous auriés pu vous épargner la peine d’entrer dans d’aussi grands détails relativem^t à votre imprimeur ce n’est pas moi qui vous avoit engagé à en changer, c’est vous monsieur dans une lettre que j’ai sous les yeux qui vous estes plaint de ses procédés, et qui m’avés prié de parler au mien, j’ai fait votre commission uniquem^t p^r vous obliger, et je trouve assurément fort simple que vous avés changé de dessein, d’autant mieux que j’avois eu l’honneur de vous prévenir que m^r couret ne pouroit pas dans ce moment se charger d’un nouvel ouvrage. (13 April 1787)

Reading and Mis-Reading

By the mid-1780s, both Bernardin and Mme de Genlis had found recognition as writers, and the key appeal of Bernardin’s work, acknowledged by many contemporary readers, was his ability to ‘read’ the book of Nature, paint its beauties and discover its harmonies.⁷ Yet while the eighteenth century, as Michel Foucault argues, was a time in which the acts of seeing and describing were paramount,⁸ this primacy of vision was double-edged, as it heightened the danger of mis-reading; and such concerns are evident throughout the Bernardin-Genlis correspondence. Mme de Genlis’s first letter to Bernardin centres on an invitation to view her herbarium, and the letter is thus littered with visual references. ‘Il est artificiel, et en relief, et n’est point sculpté, mais il présente une imitation si parfaite, qu’il a trompé des yeux très exercés’, declares Mme de Genlis of the cabinet (18 September 1786).

The first thing to note here is the importance of vision in the pursuit of knowledge. Despite its artificiality, the herbarium is far from being just a frivolously eye-catching display with little of value to ‘real’ science: the other guests invited to view it include André Thouin, *jardinier en chef* of the Jardin du Roi, Jean Descemet, physician and botanist, and Laurent de Jussieu, nephew of the more famous Jussieu brothers and a botanist in his own right. And of course, Bernardin is invited as ‘l’auteur des *Études de la nature*’ – the scientific context to

the act of looking is undoubtable. One thinks, too, of the educational *maquettes* commissioned by Mme de Genlis for her students from the *planches* of the *Encyclopédie*.⁹ Vision, and specifically reading, is also central to the friendship which Mme de Genlis seeks to initiate; indeed, here, the reading of Bernardin's text is felt to be more informative than a physical meeting: 'Je vous ai assez *lu* et *relu* pour vous connaître parfaitement, une seule entrevue ne m'apprendra certainement rien à cet égard' (18 September 1786).

Yet Mme de Genlis's praise of her herbarium also testifies to the more troubling aspect of the primacy of vision: the fact that things may not always be what they seem; that sometimes deception is necessary; that sometimes the truth can be misapprehended. The deception operated by the artificial herbarium is here presented as part of the pleasure it offers to the viewer: 'je suis sûre qu'il verra avec plaisir rassemblées dans un petit espace, les productions des bois, des champs, des prairies et quelques unes des plus belles plantes exotiques, imitées et arrangées avec un tel degré d'illusion que sa plus grande surprise sera de savoir quelles ne sont pas naturelles' (18 September 1786). The pleasure and visual deception afforded by the herbarium find an echo in the practicalities of Bernardin's visit to it. Despite his extensive correspondence and evidence of numerous social engagements, Bernardin followed Rousseau in cultivating a reputation as a solitary figure, and Mme de Genlis responds to this reputation by offering to stage-manage his visit such that Bernardin will need to neither see nor be seen by anyone excepting a small child who will lead him to the herbarium:

si le déjeuner vous déplaît n'y venés point, si vous l'aimés mieux ne venés qu'à une heure $\frac{1}{4}$ toute la compagnie sera partie, et si alors vous voulés voir mes plantes sans moi, une jolie enfant bien gaie, bien fraîche, enfin telle que vous aimés les enfans, vous ouvrira la porte, et causera ou ne causera pas avec vous, comme vous voudrés, et vous n'entendrés pas parler de moi. (18 September 1786)

While in the above examples deception is part of the visual pleasure engendered by the herbarium, elsewhere Mme de Genlis displays a concern for Bernardin's mis-reading of letters in the early stages of their correspondence. Her second letter to him alerts him in advance of another letter he is due to receive announcing a pension granted by the duc d'Orléans. 'Je crains', explains Mme de Genlis, 'que, recevant cette lettre tout à coup [...] vous ne preniez une idée très fautive de la chose, et que craignant de contracter un engagement vous ne refusiez.' (26 September 1786) The delicate issue she is trying to resolve in advance is again one of appearances: firstly, she seeks to reassure Bernardin that the granting of this pension will be seen by the public as a recognition of his talents as a writer and not as a favour from well-placed friends: 'Vous avez une raison trop saine pour confondre un noble désintéressement avec la singularité et pour dédaigner une marque de distinction'. Secondly, she confirms that this pension requires no reciprocal action on Bernardin's part: 'vous ne serez même pas obligé de faire une seule visite par an, et cela sans aucune espèce de singularité.' Mme de Genlis's concerns were not unfounded: the previous year Bernardin had refused a government gratification of 200 *livres* because the notification had come from the *Mercure de France* rather than a ministerial letter. The issue here, it would seem, was again one of appearances: in 1785 Bernardin seems to have objected to being awarded a gratification as an author rather than as the higher-status *serviteur du Roi*.¹⁰

Mme de Genlis's concerns about Bernardin's misreading of the letters he receives were borne out. Even in the early stages of the correspondence, several of her letters open with an explanation of what she had written previously, as Bernardin had read into her words more (or something else altogether) than what she intended to express. And if Bernardin often misread the letters he is sent, he was even worse at reading social situations. On one occasion Mme de Genlis had to reassure him that he had not offended her husband, the Marquis de Sillery:

il me paroît inconcevable que vous ajoutiés sérieusem^t que m^r de sillery est fâché contre vous au sujet de ce p^{ce} cochinchinois, c'est lui supposer une puérilité dont il est assurément incapable, et il me semble que l'acueil quil v.^s a fait ne peut motiver un soupçon aussi étrange. non monsieur, les gens du monde sont très éloignés d'une aussi ridicule susceptibilité et si l'on en voulait trouver des exemples il ne faudroit pas les chercher parmi eux. (13 April 1787)¹¹

Their final fall-out comes from the continuance of this misunderstanding when, during a visit to Mme de Genlis, Bernardin takes offense at being made the object of a *plaisanterie* by the Marquis – a situation which was made worse, it seems, by the Marquis taking Bernardin's wounded response as a continuation of the joke on his part:

m^r de sillery en faisant cette plaisanterie l'a cru d'autant plus drole qu'il l'est en effet de dire d'un homme tel que vous qui a montré tant d'esprit et de génie, c'est un imbécile une contre vérité de cette force est toujours un compliment parcequ'il est absolum^t impossible qu'on la prenne en mauvaise part. telle a été son intention et son idée, et il sera étrangem^t surpris quand il saura quil v.^s a offensé et quil est p^r. cela brouillé avec vous. v.^s dites que v.^s avés été à lui d'un air riant il y a répondu en v.^s appellant cousin du bout de la chambre, il ne vous a point embrassé parceque m^{me} la duchesse d'orléans étoit là, et que des particuliers ne s'embrassent point devant des p^{ces} du sang, que cet usage soit absurde ou non ce n'est pas là la question, il suffit qu'il existe et que s'embrasser devant eux serait leur manquer de respect, si vous doutés de ceci demandés le à mesdames de chabannes et de grammont elles v.^s assureront que cela est ainsi. (21 April 1787)

Decoding social interaction, it seems, is a tricky business for Bernardin, and Mme de Genlis's explanations do little to resolve the matter. Their relationship, then, is both introduced and terminated by the problematic nature of reading and seeing, whether that be letters or social situations.

Living texts

Given the anxieties surrounding the legibility (or otherwise) of texts, it is perhaps not surprising that Mme de Genlis spends some time commenting on the texts of other writers, less so in regard to their actual content than in the context of what can be 'read' of the authors

and their character from their texts. Mme de Genlis defends her praise of Buffon in the following terms:

[il] fut également bon mari, bon père, bon maître, et ami fidèle et tendre. il est donc très estimable, d'ailleurs il n'a de sa vie intrigué, cabalé, et écrit contre personne. je sais très bien qu'il y a plusieurs principes dans ses ouvrages qu'on a jugé dangereux [...] sans adopter toutes ses opinions je lui sais gré de n'avoir jamais rien écrit contre les mœurs, d'avoir fait d'excellents raisonnemens qui tendent à prouver l'immortalité de l'âme, d'avoir enspiré même aux gens du monde le goût de l'histoire naturelle qui rapproche tout de la nature, et d'avoir répandu dans ses ouvrages des traits admirables de morale. [March 1787]

Mme de Genlis's opinion of Buffon is perhaps not entirely disinterested, given his own praise of her works, which she hints at in one of her early letters to Bernardin: 'je n'oserais pas répéter ce que m^r de buffon m'a écrit Sur cette histoire ['L'histoire de la duchesse de C...'] et Sur Le magistrat et La mort d'adam deux de mes comédies' (15 October 1786). By contrast, Mme de Genlis risks a serious disagreement with Bernardin over her criticism of Rousseau:

vous aimés rousseau, cet homme qui s'est permis des peintures si licentieuses, et qui a formellement et directement attaqué la religion, cet homme enfin dont la conduite a été tant de fois répréhensible, vous l'aimés, je n'en suis ni surprise ni fâchée, mais lorsque j'aime m^r de buffon devés vous trouver en moi de la disparate? [March 1787]

Her central criticism is Rousseau's brutally and, to her, unrepentantly honest presentation of himself in the *Confessions*. As a young girl, Mme de Genlis had read and admired Rousseau's opera *Le Devin du Village* but was deeply shocked when on meeting him he told her about his *Confessions*:

j'ai vu dans ma jeunesse deux femmes perdues par Leur entousiasme p^r. Les ouvrages de rousseau, vous croyés Ses Livres utiles, et moi je Les crois infiniment dangereux; Les détails licentieux de Son roman me révoltent, Ses horribles confessions m'ont fait frémir, nul ouvrage au monde ne fera autant de mal que celui Là. [...] un jour je m'avisai de lui dire que j'avais entendu conter qu'il avait fait un ouvrage ayant p^r. titre Ses confessions, et j'ajoutai que je voudrai bien L'entendre. il me répondit en propres termes: c'est en effet une chose unique et très curieuse. montaigne a prétendu qu'il s'était peint Sans déguisem^t mais cela n'est pas. j'ai eu Seul Le courage de tout avouer de tout dire. j'ose convenir que j'ai volé (a La vérité

une bagatelle) mais j'ai volé, j'ai calomnié L'innocence, j'ai changé de religion par des vues d'intérêt &c il y a d'autres détails dans ce manuscrit qui ne Sont pas faits pour votre age tandis qu'il parlait je Le regardais d'un air hagard et Stupéfait, et je frémissais jusqu'au fond de L'ame, cette impression fut affreuse elle a été ineffaçable. entendre un homme conter froidement de Semblables faits est une étrange chose. La vérité est belle quand elle est utile ou généreuse, mais quand elle n'offre qu'un Scandale éclatant, elle blesse La pudeur, elle révolte les ames honêtes et délicates. S'avilir par des aveux Superflus, c'est renoncer à L'honneur après avoir trahi La vertu. (15 October 1786)

The crime, as Mme de Genlis sees it, is not that Rousseau had committed such actions, but that he had gone on to confess them in writing. Of course, as a *gouverneur* and writer of didactic literature for children, Mme de Genlis is convinced of the immense power of the written word and she writes to Bernardin that although she is full of compassion for human weakness, the one thing she cannot forgive is the creation of morally dangerous works: 'c'est d'ébranler les principes de la jeunesse, c'est d'offrir des tableaux qui blessent la pudeur'.¹² The visual trope of the *tableaux* is key here, and she uses it again when she defends her admiration of Buffon against that of Bernardin for Rousseau: 'Vous aimez Rousseau, cet homme qui s'est permis des peintures si licencieuses' [March 1787]. For Mme de Genlis, the danger of such presentations is that immoral actions are embodied for posterity in text, always visible.

Such comments on Buffon and Rousseau feed into Mme de Genlis's use of personal and literary virtue as a key element in her own self-presentation as author in her letters to Bernardin. Indeed, she frames her published criticisms of Rousseau (based, it is worth noting, once again on her reading of his texts) within her own duty as mother and *gouverneur*: 'je n'ai point attaqué rousseau sur des oui dire mais uniquement sur ses écrits, j'ai condamné en lui des passages contraires à la religion et aux mœurs, et j'ai cru comme mère et comme institutrice le devoir faire.' (21 April 1787) And she takes care to present her publications as doubly inspired by a moral impulse: as she explains in another letter to Bernardin, the

Théâtre de l'éducation was initially written for private, domestic use – the education of her daughters – and published only in order to help victims of injustice:

j'avais fait Le théâtre d'éducation p^r mes filles, elles en ont joué presque toutes les pièces dans Leur enfance, ces petits Spectacles de Société firent beaucoup de bruit, on me pressait en vain de Les faire imprimer, enfin trois malheureux gentilshommes condamnés p^r une Somme de 20 mille francs à une prison perpétuelle, me déterminèrent je leur donnai Le théâtre d'éducation, L'écriture entière fut enlevée en un mois, j'étais alors à La veille de mon entrée à bellechasse avant de m'enfermer Sous ces grilles j'eus La Satisfaction inexprimable de rendre La liberté à ces 2 infortunés que je n'avais jamais vu que dans La prison, et j'ai eu Le plaisir de diner avec eux Le jour même de mon entrée à bellechasse. (11 October 1786)

Mme de Genlis's retreat into the convent of Bellechasse is presented here as a means of mediating her entry into the public sphere through publication. From this point on, she implies, it would be her texts that spoke for her.

What is more, it is not just Mme de Genlis's own literary personality that she constructs within the correspondence; she also in her letters constructs an identity for Bernardin himself. Without having access to Bernardin's side of the correspondence it is of course impossible to know how far his letters to her contributed to this creation of Bernardin the author and the man within their exchanges, but nevertheless Mme de Genlis devotes much time in her letters to descriptions of who Bernardin is as both published author and private individual. As has been mentioned above, Mme de Genlis's certainty that she knows and understands Bernardin's character through having read his work is a key feature of her first letter to him: 'je vous ay assez *lu* et *relu* pour vous connoître parfaitement' (18 September 1786). And in order that they should know each other equally, she sends him copies of her books in advance of a face-to-face meeting, because, as she explains, 'je desire que vous m'aimies, il faut pour cela que vous me connaissiez' (11 October 1786). It is this claim to knowledge of each other through their writing that allows her to go on to describe

Bernardin's character back to him, constructed entirely along points of similarity with her own personality and experiences:

je serai véritablement charmée d'avoir le plaisir de vous voir, nous-nous conviendrons d'autant mieux que talens à part, nous avons beaucoup de ressemblance vous aimés la solitude et la nature, j'ai vécu solitaire autant que je l'ai pu et j'ai étudié la nature autant que mes foibles lumières me l'ont pu permettre comme vous j'ai su mépriser l'intrigue et dédaigner tous ses petits moyens, et quoique femme et flattée par de grands philosophes, j'ai repoussé leurs avances, et je n'ai point craint de m'attirer leur haine. vous avés démontré la vanité de leurs sistêmes, je me suis moqué de leurs travers. vous avés [illegible word] toutes vos études à la gloire de la religion, et j'ai fait la religion l'unique base de toute ma morale. [...] vous aimés la liberté, je l'aime aussi, et comme vous je n'ai jamais conçu comment on pouvoit le sacrifier à l'intérêt ou à l'ambition, mais ce bien n'est il pas comme les richesses, une possession que nous devons toujours sacrifier aux besoins des autres? (7 October 1786)

From this position of assumed knowledge and intimacy, Mme de Genlis also tells Bernardin not only what he is like as an author, but how he will behave. Adopting approaches frequently found in correspondence to Bernardin, her first letter acknowledges Bernardin's reputed dislike for social engagements; 'je sais Monsieur que vous ne voulés point recevoir de visites, et que vous n'en faites pas' (18 September 1786), while her second recognizes the demands on his time which have resulted from his recent literary success: 'cette lettre ne demande point de réponse. je vous supplie de n'en point faire. je serois au désespoir de vous importuner, et cela me géneroit si j'avois encore à v.^s écrire.' (26 September 1786) In her letter announcing the forthcoming pension from the duc d'Orléans, in which she (probably correctly) foresees Bernardin's objections, she takes care to point out that this is a recognition of his importance as a literary figure: 'je sais que s. a. s. m. le duc d'Orléans va donner des pensions à quelques savans, et des gens de lettres avec un titre qui attache a sa maison. il y a déjà des gens de lettres qui ont ce titre et des pensions [...] il les nommera sans aucune espèce de sollicitation uniquement par amour p^r les sciences et les lettres; je sais que la liste est faite, et que l'auteur des études de la nature est à la tête'. Secondly, she emphasises that the pension brings with it no obligation on Bernardin's part towards the duke: 'vous n'aurez

autre chose à faire dans toute votre vie pour cela, que de répondre au chancelier de m. le d. d'[orléans] que vous acceptez cette marque de distinction avec reconnaissance &c.' And, moreover, she leaves him in no doubt as to how she expects an author of his stature to respond:

je crois que vous ne balancerez point à accepter avec une grace très honorable et qui ne porte pas la moindre atteinte à votre liberté. vous avez une raison trop saine pour confondre un noble désintéressement avec la singularité et pour dédaigner une marque de distinction qui doit vous être d'autant plus agréable que vous la devrez à un ouvrage fait en faveur de la religion. songez d'ailleurs monsieur que cet exemple donné par le 1^{er} prince du sang peut faire beaucoup d'impression sur les jeunes littérateurs, et les disposer à faire un usage honête de leurs talens, au lieu de les avilir en outrageant la religion et les mœurs. (26 September 1786)

Mme de Genlis's certainty that she knows Bernardin through the reading of his works is such a key feature of their correspondence that when their friendship begins to break down the discrepancy between her understanding of him through his works and her experience of him as an individual becomes an equally important element of their arguments:

vous prétendés monsieur que je vos ay objecté que votre ouvrage renferme des maximes de fausse philosophie voila ce que je n'ai jamais ni dit, ni pensé au contraire j'ai écrit, dit et pensé que ce bel ouvrage est aussi pur, aussi utile qu'il est intéressant [...]. j'ai pu ne pas trouver le même conséquence et le même supériorité de raison dans nos entretiens, dans vos lettres et dans vos procédés, voila ce que j'ai pu exprimer, mais quant à votre ouvrage il n'aura jamais d'admirateur plus sincère que moi, ce suffrage est très peu important et je ne vous en parle que parceque vous m'accusés fort injustement du contraire. (13 April 1787)

The Power of Words

Significant as the written word may be in initiating and cementing a relationship, then, it can also play a crucial role in a relationship's demise. Mme de Genlis is keenly aware from the start of their correspondence that one's words may sometimes take on a life of their own.

When asking Bernardin to read her works, Mme de Genlis deliberately warns him against reading them as they appeared in journals of the time, as she claims that they have greatly misrepresented her: 'en attendant je vous envoie mes ouvrages, vous m'aimés et je vous prie

de les lire, Si vous ne m'avés jugée que d'après des extraits de journaux, vous me jugés bien mal, ils m'ont fort estropiée dans Leurs citations, et Se Sont bien gardés de citer ce qui avait été Le plus Loué' (11 October 1786).¹³ And much ink is spent by Mme de Genlis on explaining her own words quoted back to her by Bernardin, not without some frustration on her own part: 'vous vous Servés de mes citations contre moi, cela n'est pas généreux' (15 October 1786). If words can develop a life of their own, then, the act of corresponding itself also eventually takes on a force beyond that of a 'simple' means of communication. From the spring of 1787, the central focus of almost all Mme de Genlis's letters is no longer the exchange of information, ideas and opinions, but rather the refutation of Bernardin's last letter (which presumably was itself a refutation of her last): the correspondence no longer has any real external context, but is instead a self-perpetuating force: 'je ne puis m'empêcher de répondre à quelques articles qui m'ont paru réellement étranges' (21 April 1787); 'dans ce dernier billet je désavoue toutes les expressions qui ont pu vous déplaire' [May 1787]; 'je v.^s ay répondu dans ce gros paquet dans mon 1^{er} mouvem^t d'impatience contre vos procédés que je trouve injustes et bizarres' (2 June 1787); and:

vous me reprochés d'avoir rompu l'amitié que j'avois formé, vous oubliés que c'est vous qui m'avés mandé que j'avois manqué d'égards pour vous parceque j'ai soutenu que la vertu tôt ou tard recevoit communément sa récompense &c et que vous vous estes amerement plaint de m^r. de sillery, en disant quil vous avoit fait une mauvaise plaisanterie quil vous avoit insulté &c pour moi je n'ai fait nulle plainte, vous m'avés mandé positivement que vous ne pouviés plus être mon ami, je vous ay répondu la vérité, que j'en etois très facheé et que je conserverais toujours beaucoup d'intérêt et d'estime p^r votre personne. (26 May 1787)

Moreover, in this lengthy exchange of accusations and refutations, the physical letters themselves are used as evidence: 'Il n'y a point de tiers qui, en voyant vos lettres et les miennes, puisse penser que l'injustice soit de mon côté', and in fact they are used to stoke the argument: on learning of the perceived slight and the ensuing argument the Marquis is at first willing – offers, even – to visit Bernardin to smoothe the matter over; Mme de Genlis then

'has' to show Bernardin's letters to him in order to convince him of Bernardin's irrational behaviour.

To conclude, then, the rupture between the two authors – begun in a social faux-pas but continued and enlarged in correspondence – is too strong to be resolved even by a return to the texts which initiated the friendship. On the occasion of the publication of the third volume of the *Études*, containing the new addition of *Paul et Virginie*, Mme de Genlis writes a letter glowing with praise, and with little of the defensiveness evident in her previous letters, but she still notes somewhat sadly that 'je suis bien facheé qu'il y ait autant d'opposition entre nos caractères, car assurément rien ne me convient mieux que votre esprit et vos sentimens' [1788]. The meeting of minds which Mme de Genlis so ardently sought in her initial letters to Bernardin may occur between the pages of a book, but certainly not within the pages of a letter.

¹ 26 December 1786. Letters unless otherwise stated will be cited from the *Correspondance de Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre*, ed. by Malcolm Cook et al, *Electronic Enlightenment*, <<http://www.e-enlightenment.com>>. The letters from Mme de Genlis are forthcoming. In accordance with the principles of this electronic edition, all quotations from the correspondence respect the spelling and punctuation of the original letters. Approximate dates for undated letters are shown in square brackets. The second edition of the *Études* appeared in April 1786.

² Mme de Genlis to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 18 September 1786.

³ Rebecca Ford, 'Reading Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Letters and the Book of Nature', *Nottingham French Studies*, 48:3 (2009), 113–24.

⁴ See the correspondences with Mme Le Pesant de Boisguilbert and Jean-François Mesnard.

⁵ Mme de Genlis later quotes this poem in *De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature française* (Paris: Maradan, 1811), p. 249.

⁶ See Mme de Genlis to Bernardin [November 1786].

⁷ See for example the letter from Brochant Mesnard to Bernardin, 26 December 1784. On the reception of the *Études*, see Malcolm Cook, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: A Life of Culture* (London: Legenda, 2006), pp. 88–104.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2001), pp. 136–79.

⁹ See Dominique Ferriot, 'Madame de Genlis ou la passion de pédagogie', *Musée des arts et métiers – La Revue*, 5 (December 1993), 22–30.

¹⁰ Letters from Bernardin to Hennin, 11 August 1785, and Hennin to Bernardin, 13 August 1785.

¹¹ The 'prince cochinchinois' is the young prince Nguyen Phuc Canh, who had arrived in France in February 1787. See D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*, 6th edn (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009), p. 74.

¹² Mme de Genlis was given the title *gouverneur* rather than *gouvernante* when appointed as the tutor of the duc d'Orléans' children; a title which caused considerable scandal, according to Gabriel de Broglie, *Madame de Genlis* (Paris: Perrin, 2002), pp. 113-17.

¹³ For the reception of Mme de Genlis's works in the journals of the day, see Birgitta Berglund-Nielsson, 'Madame de Genlis et les correspondances littéraires', *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, 48 (1996), 57–73.