



CLASSIQUES
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SUMMARY

Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, the Huguenot writer (1552-1630), figures in anthologies and companion guides to French literature. His name conjures up the many violent scenes in the *Tragiques*, often accompanied by feelings of horror. We are drawn almost unconsciously to a past so remote from us that we can only think : this is pure fiction. There are many literary works from the time of the French religious wars that have yet to be studied, and d'Aubigné's *Correspondance* is one of them. It has, however, been read by critics and scholars, as becomes apparent when we consult editions of d'Aubigné's other works, which contain many notes referring to the letters. The letters have a biographical value above all and reveal the stylistic elements that characterize d'Aubigné's work – and of course the metadiscourse. Those letters regarded as most interesting have been included in various journals and other publications, but no complete edition exists. There are also very few articles on the texts themselves, and the few that have appeared are very recent : five of the eight studies on d'Aubigné's letters were published in 2001. Most discuss a single, randomly selected letter, sometimes a book of missives and only twice has the collection of letters as a whole received attention. Does this mean that the *Correspondance* has never been studied as an independent literary work ? It would appear that such an approach is missing from studies to date on d'Aubigné's work, or on the epistolary genre in general.

An examination of the collected letters reveals how much this final work of d'Aubigné's centres around the concept of 'œuvre'. We see this at once in its organization into 'livres'(books). Also, the first book of the *Correspondance* is entitled *Livre des missives et discours*

militaires. The ‘book’ as object represents the œuvre, at least for the writer. The painstaking composition that gives meaning to the whole is another compelling reason for defining it as a literary œuvre. The subsequent books are *Lettres et mémoires d’Estat*, *Lettres d’affaires personnelles*, *Lettres familières*, *Lettres de piété ou poincts de theologie* and lastly *Lettres touchant quelques poincts de diverses sciences...*

In the first part of my study I attempt to interpret the transition from collection of letters to œuvre. When estimating the scope of the project, I studied the different stages in the evolution of the œuvre – from its announcement in *Les Tragiques* in 1616 to the various other publications I have looked at. This brought me to the realization that a definitive interpretation would be possible only when there is a complete and reliable edition of the *Correspondance*. The comprehensive description of the manuscripts that takes up much of the first part of my study is a first attempt in this direction. The *Correspondance* is an œuvre of d’Aubigné’s not merely in the sense that he is its author, but also in the sense that it is seen as a monument to his memory, written for posterity. I will study d’Aubigné in turn as a letter writer, a soldier, a cleric and a scholar, and finally as an historian. That is how the letters work for posterity: they present the reader with a picture transcending the generic rules that apply to autobiographies like *Sa Vie à ses Enfants* or the *Histoire Universelle*, a picture that emerged during the writing process itself and which was first and foremost intended as a means of communication.

The transition from collection of letters to œuvre involved a three-stage process. Firstly, the author set out to create from a simple collection of letters an œuvre which then, secondly, functioned as a monument in the creation of his own myth. Finally, through their relationship to d’Aubigné’s work as a whole, the letters form at the same time the starting point for the metadiscourse.

We might therefore expect this study to consist of three parts, and this was my original intention. But when studying the *Correspondance*, I realized that the metatextual approach cannot be separated from other ways of reading the text. A metatextual reading is much better placed to explain and emphasize each interpretation of the letters; we would miss part of the meaning of the text if we failed to take this into account. For this reason I thought it preferable to include this special way of reading in my line of argument and not

to treat it separately. It therefore appears regularly in my study, sometimes in footnotes but more often in greater detail in the body of the text, where it functions as a unifying element linking the two parts. To accord it its own place, however, each chapter in the second part ends with an analysis of a passage from the *Correspondance* and its equivalent from another of d'Aubigné's works, thus rounding off my argumentation for that chapter. Once again, this kind of conclusion is an aesthetic choice arising out of a desire to decode d'Aubigné's texts and to link the *Correspondance* to his work as a whole.

I have also supplied a prologue: it seems an obvious assumption that d'Aubigné decided to make his private writings public before he created his letter œuvre. But this would have been a very avant-garde decision at a time when this was not yet customary in France. In an attempt to get to the bottom of this, I have devoted the prologue to this early stage. Hence the title of my dissertation – Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Correspondance*: letters as a life's work

More so than the project promised in the *Tragiques*, d'Aubigné's *Correspondance* is a literary work – his last, as he was unable to complete it. A substantial portion of the letters were actually sent to his correspondents and they are included as such in the collection. Some, however, were certainly revised with a view to publication, to add greater balance and structural interest to the whole. In contrast perhaps to our initial expectations, and to some other collections of letters from the period, the *Correspondance* is not organised along purely chronological or thematic lines. The constant tension between, on the one hand, the many structural effects that aim at unity and, on the other hand, the impression of fragmentation generated by the phenomenon 'letter', as well as the different literary genres and references to the other works, all serve to make the *Correspondance* an œuvre that is work in progress. After all, each reader interprets the work differently, depending on the associations that he or she makes between d'Aubigné's different books of letters, missives and writings. The *Correspondance* shows readers from a later period a portrait gallery of the letter writer amidst his contemporaries. This encyclopaedic method, centred on the person, as well as on the relationship to reality and to the experience of this Calvinist soldier, make the *Correspondance* a new kind of œuvre that looks at

how an individual is moulded during a time of turbulence and persecution in a society that may on occasions have lost its way.

D'Aubigné also provides us with clues to the understanding of his work as a whole: he clarifies matters by giving free reign to the genre's freedom from constraint. The multiple meanings of the *œuvre* as a whole only emerge following a complete, metatextual reading. This openness broadens the scope of all his writings and is a reflection of his own expanded geographical horizons – a precondition for his survival in exile when he was being persecuted in France. The openness can be seen in his choice of correspondents, who together form European networks, and it is true of both the *Correspondance* and the *Histoire Universelle* that France alone was not large enough for him. Biographical reality, namely the author's international contacts, thus offers a context for his letter *œuvre* which would otherwise have been no more than a collection of letters. But this expanded horizon is a key component of d'Aubigné's personal myth creation, which I believe is the primary objective of the *Correspondance*.

Analysis of the manuscripts reveals not only how incomplete this work was at the time of d'Aubigné's death, but also how he went about his work, assisted by transcribers who made fair copies of the individual papers in accordance with a system that showed off the different facets of the letter writer, making him exemplary. This highlighting of the person contrasts with the approach in *secrétaires* (XVIth century correspondence manuals), whose aim was to provide model letters for every occasion, as well as in collections of missives, including those from the early Renaissance. But if d'Aubigné's letters are models already, then they are models for a type of writing incorporating different kinds of text – from speech to novel, from memoirs to verse, from expressions of sympathy to eulogy, from anecdote to story – which constantly show how this militant Calvinist had to adapt his discourse to circumstances.

This gave rise to new literary forms, governed no longer by the form of the letter, but by the search for a process with its own particular meaning, which was nevertheless also appropriate for the epistolary *œuvre* as a whole. D'Aubigné's letters also set themselves apart from tradition, for example by addressing unknown correspondents and combining different writing styles (those of the military man and theologian, or writer and politician). Whenever *topoi* are used in his

letters, they are renewed and developed: the traditional motif of friendship, for example, is linked to that of persecution, a reality in d'Aubigné's life. The different sides of the man – such as letter writer, soldier, cleric, scholar and historian – are not given equal attention in the *Correspondance*. This difference cannot be ascribed to the varying lengths of the books of letters, since d'Aubigné considered it vital – and this was typical of him – that his struggle as a Huguenot be constantly alluded to. As a result, even when another person is speaking, the theologian is always present in the missives.

All acts, especially those of the writer, were designed to bear witness to this struggle and to record it for posterity. In this respect the *Correspondance* is also a historiographical work that confers on d'Aubigné a place in history. It even corrects the official history, as formulated in his *Histoire Universelle*, using satire – and sometimes a gentler humour – to reveal the shortcomings of a society in decline. From the demobilization of the protestant army to the carnivalesque situations in which the catholic clergy find themselves, from the powerful who are in fact powerless to the teachers who are made to look ridiculous, the letter writer paints a hilarious picture in order to make the deepest possible impression on the reader.

It is interesting to see the position that d'Aubigné himself occupies in these descriptions, as well as in the letters: he assigns roles to his correspondents and the others present, thereby making himself the focal point. He teaches the reader how to read his work and how – by being constantly alert to signs which reveal a different truth from the immediate, deceptive, semblance of reality – to interpret the reality he describes.

The *Correspondance* has another function as well: it is the source on which the author draws for his other works. Often the letters still contain essential elements no longer present in the other genres, where rules of censorship apply. They enrich the content, establishing a context for it. And it is precisely these details and these other meanings given to language by d'Aubigné that reveal the true personality of a man who appears to be the opposite of the devout fellow that he is all too often considered to be. They show traits which are otherwise invisible, like those of the son who reveres his mother and women in general, or the father who consoles his son-in-law, or the captain who is good to his soldiers. They are also the traits of a man who is deeply disappointed in his contemporaries and in his

own son. But whatever the situation, his portrait is always multifaceted, as if he were simply incapable of one-dimensional representation, as if only a multiplicity of forms was meaningful for the myth creation of a man who was far ahead of his time.