

H-France Review Vol. 11 (January 2010), No. 4

Seth Whidden, ed., *Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009. vii + 187. Index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6643-1. (ebook). ISBN 978-0-7546-9698-8.

Review by Suzanne F. Braswell, University of Miami, Coral Gables.

Challenging the notion of the lone artistic genius who toiled in the relative solitude of his or her garret, the twelve essays that Seth Whidden brings together in his edited collection *Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen* (2009) draw attention to the prevalence, diversity, and strategic function of nineteenth-century collective literary ventures and their vital role in the French literary scene of the period. Additionally, the essays collected here respond to theoretical conceptions of collaboration initially posited by Whidden in his article, "On Poetry and Collaboration in the Nineteenth Century," which was published in 2007 in *French Forum*.^[1] Whidden further develops this framework in this volume's "Introduction: On Collaboration" and in his essay "Poetry in Collaboration in the 1870s: The Cercle Zutique, 'Le Fleuve' and 'The Raven'."

Turning first to the theoretical framework advanced here, Whidden proposes an expansion of existing definitions of literary collaboration to include works written by multiple authors. He distinguishes as well two categories of collaboration: one whereby authors may be said to collaborate through direct contact with each other—"collaboration *in praesentia*," and the other category through which there is an absence of such contact—"collaboration *in absentia*" (p. 5-9). A specialist in late nineteenth-century French poetry, Whidden's theoretical model, and the essays that he has collected for this volume, have the distinct merit of revealing the prevalence of collaborative practices and ventures among nineteenth-century French poets, an under-represented group in the field of collaboration. Indeed, as Pascal Durand asserts in his essay "Sharing One's Death: *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873)", French poets, from the romantic era through the *fin-de-siècle* period, found solidarity in the relatively closed community of their peers, but rather jealously maintained their individualism, preferring to regard their alliances as "a juxtaposition of solitudes" (p. 67). Moreover, as the analysis developed in Durand's essay and in those of Anthony Glinoe ("Collaboration and Solidarity: The Collective Strategies of the Romantic Cenacle") and Joseph Acquisto ("Erasing Collaboration: The Case of André Gill and Louis de Gramont") show, the myth of the solitary poetic genius was to some extent fostered by the poets themselves, often in view of enhancing their own reputations or that of the group to which they allied themselves. Thus, the essays in this volume reveal a dimension of poetic production that has not often been considered in recent studies of collaborative ventures.

One can easily see that Whidden's definitional expansion of collaboration could be extended beyond the context of French nineteenth-century prose and poetry to provide a theoretical model for interpreting collaborative works in, for example, the blogosphere, in which a plurality of authors and the absence of physical contact among contributing writers are not uncommon features of collaborative production. In this regard, Whidden's articulation of collaboration *in absentia* is provocative, promising, and potentially ground breaking. However, his application of this category of collaboration is at times somewhat tenuous in its reach. For example, the

proposed model of collaboration *in absentia* essentially releases collaborating writers, and by extension those analyzing such productions, from the constraints imposed by propinquity. That is, the proximity of collaborators is necessary neither on the spatial plane, nor on the temporal plane. According to this definition, an author's parody of, or extended allusion to a deceased author's work may be understood as collaborative insofar as the ideas, style, setting, and perhaps motifs that characterized the deceased author's work play a sustained role in the living author's work.

In his introduction, Whidden offers, as a passing illustration of this conception, the example of Assia Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) in which the nineteenth-century painter "Eugène Delacroix's influence is felt throughout" (p. 8) the text. In chapter six, Whidden applies this model to an analysis of diverse poetic works that animate the pages of the *zutiste* collection of poetry, *L'Album zutique*, which was published in 1871. One such work in which Whidden sees collaboration *in absentia* is a parodic quatrain written by Léon Valade, in whose verses the poet refers implicitly and explicitly to Victor Hugo's *La Légende des siècles* (p. 77). According to Whidden, absent collaboration animates the entirety of Valade's quatrain. It is, for example, present in his choice of an exotic context (which, Whidden asserts, is a parody of "Le divin Mahomet enfourchait tour à tour" in Hugo's *La Légende des siècles*); in Valade's deliberate subversion of Hugo's use of the verb "enfourchait" (*straddled*) which Valade turns to evoke images of homoerotic practices; and finally in Valade's allusion to the "Sage." Crowned with a magisterial capital "S," the Sage refers to none other than the absent Victor Hugo (p. 78). Moreover, in the combined effects outlined above, Whidden finds proof that "Valade is conscious of the presence of Hugo, the [absent] authorial other" (p. 78), and therefore that Valade's parody of Hugo may be read as a collaborative work, in which the collaborating partners are Valade and the absent Victor Hugo.

If we pursue this line of argumentation to its logical conclusion, it would seem that Whidden is proposing to broaden the category of absent collaboration to encompass a very wide range of subgenres and rhetorical strategies, including but not limited to parody, pastiche, the rhetorical techniques of prosopopoeia, various citational strategies which serve to reify an otherwise absent authorial presence, and so forth. This is an ambitious agenda. Indeed, by positing a conceptual model whose reach is so vast in its scope, a degree of precision may be lost in our understanding of that which fundamentally distinguishes a literary work of shared labor (a "collaboration" in its etymological sense), from one that considers another's work or life in a sustained literary project, such as a literary homage or an elegy, or perhaps even some forms of biography.

Indeed, definitional tension of this kind is apparent in the argumentation of Pascal Durand's superb analysis of the 1873 poetic collection, *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier*, and in that of Jennifer K. Wolter's illuminating essay, "The Médan Group and the Campaign of Naturalism." In both cases, Durand and Wolter identify collaborative ventures whose expressed purpose was either to commemorate the passing of the poet Théophile Gautier (Durand's essay), or to instantiate and legitimate Emile Zola's naturalist school to literature (Wolter's essay). In both instances, however, Durand and Wolter show that close analysis of, for example, the order and content of key poems in *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier*, and stylistic dimensions of the individual novellas that comprise *Les Soirées de Médan* reveal that contributing writers subtly but surely tended to assert their own identities as writers in these works. The assertion of individual literary perspectives tends to undermine the stated objectives of these works, which were, respectively, to honor the work of an esteemed poet and to mourn his loss, and to support and promote the arrival of a new literary school. It also tends to suggest the fragility of collaborative ventures whose participants seem to aspire to realizing a shared project in which individual authorial differences are muted. In this sense, the analyses of Durand and Wolter

suggest that these two collective literary works may be characterized as collaborative only to the extent that individual authors momentarily gathered in solidarity to express support for a common cause. In practice, the edifice of unity tends to erode.

In this edited volume, specialists of nineteenth-century French studies will find rich and often provocative essays on the phenomenon of literary collaboration in nineteenth-century literary circles. Readers will also find studies of collaboration in a wide variety of genres represented in this volume, from literary reviews to illustrated books, from collective poetic ventures to collaborative approaches to prose cultivated by Edmond and Jules Goncourt or the writers of the Médan group, or in the novel *L'Ami Fritz* by the team of writers who published under the pen name of Erckmann-Chatrian. The organization of the essays in this volume will also provide a glimpse of collaborative approaches to literary production that preceded and followed those practices developed by French writers in the nineteenth century. Finally, Whidden's theoretical discussions and analyses also offer a promising and potentially ground breaking approach to the study of collaboration in the emerging field of collaborative literary production in cyberspace.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Seth Whidden, "Introduction: On Collaboration"

Joan DeJean, "How Often Did Authors Write Alone?: Ways of Becoming an Author in Early Modern France"

John R. Iverson, "Le Dîner des philosophes': Conviviality and Collaboration in the French Enlightenment"

Anthony Glinoe, "Collaboration and Solidarity: The Collective Strategies of the Romantic Cenale"

Julia Przybos, "Smooth Collaboration: Vitalism and Judaism in Erckmann-Chatrian's *L'Ami Fritz*"

Pascal Durand, "Sharing One's Death: *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873)"

Seth Whidden, "Poetry in Collaboration in the 1870s: The Cercle Zutique, 'Le Fleuve' and 'The Raven'"

Joseph Acquisto, "Erasing Collaboration: The Case of André Gill and Louis de Gramont"

Jennifer K. Wolter, "The Médan Group and the Campaign of Naturalism"

Frédéric Canovas, "From Illustration to Decoration: Maurice Denis's Illustrations for Paul Verlaine and André Gide"

Pamela A. Genova, "A Collective Experiment in Literary Journalism: The Case of *La Revue Wagnérienne*"

Lawrence R. Schehr, "Rhyparographers: Les Frères Goncourt and Monstrous Writing"

Daphné de Marneffe, "Belgian, Modernist, and Avant-Garde Literary Journals from the Early 1920s: A Model for Network Collaboration"

NOTE

[1] Seth Whidden, "On Poetry and Collaboration in the Nineteenth Century," *French Forum* 32.1-2 (Winter/Spring 2007): 73-88.

Suzanne F. Braswell,
University of Miami, Coral Gables
sbraswell@miami.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172