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Romanticism and the Letter: Introduction

1700 to 1918, write Frank and Anita Kermode, is 'the great age of letter-writing'.[1] It is also three distinctive periods of letter writing, the first of which, the eighteenth century, has often been singled out for its literary superiority. Masters of the form such as Walpole, Chesterfield, Gray and Pope have been widely praised for their elegance of style and cultured familiarity of address. The letter was leisured, fine writing and, in more than one case, the line between private correspondence and published work is blurred, deliberately or otherwise. The nineteenth century, so the story goes, was too fast to sustain such excellence and ushered in a decline in literary letter writing that technology would eventually render absolute. Thus Richard Garnet, editing a late Victorian selection of Shelley's letters, commends the 'familiar ease' of the eighteenth-century letter as the acme of the form's 'literary value' while regretting that in his own century letter writing is no longer 'an art among men of culture' but has become the 'earnest practical thing which it had always been among men of business'.[2] This apparent falling off is mirrored in the generic composition of published writings, with epistolary literature declining in popularity as the nineteenth century proceeded.[3]

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[1] Frank and Anita Kermode, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. xxiii.
[2] *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Richard Garnet (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co, 1882), pp. vii-viii.
[3] The decline of the epistolary novel as we enter the Romantic period is evident and well-documented. On the decline of the verse epistle from its eighteenth-century heights see Bill Overton, *The Eighteenth-Century British Verse Epistle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Epistolary communication, as we approach the British Romantic period, was in a state of bustle and progress, largely determined by the need for faster communications during the alarums of a French invasion. Thomas de Quincey recalled these, for him, profoundly exciting changes, in his nostalgic final contribution to *Blackwood's Magazine*, 'The English Mail–Coach, Or the Glory of Motion' (1849):

> SOME twenty or more years before I matriculated at Oxford, Mr Palmer, M. P. for Bath, had accomplished two things, very hard to do on our planet, the Earth, however cheap they may happen to be held by the eccentric people in comets: he had invented mail-coaches, and he had married the daughter of a duke.[4]

Although John Palmer did not marry the daughter of a Duke, he did, approximately twenty years before De Quincey's arrival at Oxford in 1803, usher in what Howard Robinson calls a 'new era in postal services', one that would last half a century until rail would bring another revolution in epistolary communication.[5] For the authors considered in the following pages, however, Palmer's revolution was immediately transformative. His new mail coaches were lighter, faster, and more secure than the crawling, highwayman-ravaged stagecoaches they replaced. They benefitted from better, increasingly 'macadamized' roads, regular changes of high-quality horses and, unlike the creaking stagecoaches, stopped only for official postal business.[6] 'It's felony to stop the mail', De Quincey exulted: 'Look at those turnpike gates; with what

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[4] Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Robert Morrison (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2013), p. 173.
[5] Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 126.
[6] Coleridge's flitting between Bristol and London around the turn of the century was aided by the fact that John McAdam, the Scottish road-building pioneer, moved to Bristol in 1802. Bristol was still a major port and, thanks to McAdam, its mail coach to London ran on some of the best roads in the country.

deferential hurry, with what an obedient start, they fly open at our approach!'.[7] In 1780 the journey from London to Sheffield took twenty-six hours; twenty years earlier the same journey had taken four days.[8] Such 'velocity' was 'at that time unprecedented' and captivated the daredevil while terrifying the timid.[9] If the young De Quincey was spellbound, for Wordsworth, the 'fierce career' of the mail coach summarized the relentlessness of modernity while encouraging and enabling the tourism of surfaces he so despised.[10] Although, with its 'natural pace of ten miles an hour',[11] the mail coach's role as vehicle of the sublime may be hard to imagine for the twenty-first century traveller, its effects were radical. If the Romantics, as both intellectuals and travellers, are marked by expansiveness, theirs had become, in this particular sense, a smaller world.

The idea of the Romantic writer as isolated genius has been thoroughly challenged by recent scholarship, partly through an increased recognition and understanding of close literary and social groupings, such as those centring on Leigh Hunt and the publisher Joseph Johnson.[12] Often, such coteries were urban in nature and dependent upon regular and reliable correspondence. If London-based writers were brought closer to Bristol, the Lake District, and other important Romantic locales by the mail coach,

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[7] De Quincey, p. 178.
[8] See Robinson, pp. 58-63 and also Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009, pp. 53-58.
[9] De Quincey, p. 173.
[10] ('Alice Fell; or, Poverty', 1). William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works, including* The Prelude*,* ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), p. 241.
[11] De Quincey, p. 194.
[12] See Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2003.

they were particularly well served in their correspondence with each other. The Romantic-period Londoner, using the established and efficient 'Penny Post' (which rose in price significantly through the period) when corresponding with other Londoners, might receive a reply to a letter delivered before 10am the same day by the evening post, something today's Londoner could not expect.

If London-based writers could exchange their work and ideas rapidly, those reliant on piecemeal international modes of communication were not so lucky. Letters could take weeks, even months, to reach their destination and, especially during times of war, might not be delivered at all (ships carrying post were enemy targets and, if attacked, might jettison letters and other non-essentials to increase their chance of escape). Coleridge lost scores of manuscripts abandoned at sea *en route* from Malta to England. Byron was relentlessly baffled in his attempts to communicate with England from abroad. His letters often advertise a precariousness that also shapes them. 'I shall scribble no further', he writes to John Cam Hobhouse:

> I believe the best way is to write frequently and briefly – both on account of *weight* – & the *chance* of letters reaching their destination – *you* must forgive repetitions (as uncertainty induces them) and amongst others the *repetition* of my being
>
> Very much & ever yrs.
>
> Byron.[13]

[13] *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1980-94). Hereafter *BLJ,* V. p. 79.

Although an admirer of the great, elegant letter writers of the previous century, Byron's circumstances, for much of his life, did not favour epistolary craft. The rough-edged, dashing aspect of Byron's letters, which later readers have found so appealing, speaks of real life in ways published works cannot easily recreate.

If international mail was unpredictable, it was also, in a period of revolutionary war and domestic political reaction, prone to suspicion. 'Jacobin' ideas were seen everywhere and closely monitored by a jumpy British government. The link with letter writing was very clear. The London Corresponding Society (formed 1792) was perceived as a major threat. Its leaders were arrested for treason in 1794, in the wake of the Traitorous Correspondence Bill of the previous year. The government attempted to present Society members as an armed body of Jacobin insurgents and the latter were accused, without credible evidence, of more than one plot to assassinate the king. Personal letters were also intercepted and monitored by government agents, a fate which befell more than one of the writers considered in these essays. Shelley's correspondence with Elizabeth Hitchener, a young woman with whom he exchanged radical views, was brought to the attention of Francis Freeling (Palmer's successor), who was concerned enough to forward the matter to the Earl of Chichester, the Postmaster general.[14] Letter-based works by anti-establishment writers such as Helen Maria Williams' *Letters from France 1790–96* and Mary Wollstonecraft's ***Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*** (1796) only confirmed the connection in

[14] See Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 191.

conservative minds. The demise of the epistolary novel in the Romantic period had as much to do with politics as it did changing literary trends.[15]

The decline of epistolary literature as we enter the Romantic period seems clear enough, but it was from a very high height and it was not absolute. Scott and Austen may not rely upon the letter to the extent that Richardson did, but their novels are full of letters and depend upon their readers' understanding of epistolary culture. To take just one example: whole chapters of *Guy Mannering* are letters – written by Julia Mannering – a calculated ploy that does a great deal to shape the reader's understanding of that character. The period's great poets are not great epistolary poets as Dryden and Pope were, but Coleridge's achievement as a poet, to name one, remains strongly wedded to the traditions of epistolary verse.[16] Coleridge was involved in various forms of familiar and coterie writing, something fundamental to much Romantic period literary culture. Many writers of the period were voluminous correspondents and even those who were not fond of letter writing (notably Wordsworth) were immersed in the habits and tacit comprehensions of epistolary culture. Authors were highly sensitized to nuances of address and to the letter's complex play between public and private.[17] They knew the various strands of

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[15] See Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: women, politics and the fiction of letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 12 and *passim*. Also, Mary Jacobus, 'Intimate Connections: Scandalous Memoirs and Epistolary Indiscretion', *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 274-89.

[16] If Overton is right that 'for Coleridge, as for most other Romantic poets, the conventions of the verse epistle as it had been practised during the eighteenth century no longer carried any weight' (p. 29), then it is because new conventions were emerging rather than because the epistolary mode was dead.

[17] There is no clear distinction to be made in the period between private (letters) and public (published) writing. 'Personal' letters were widely shared among social groupings and often written accordingly. Byron, for instance, knew that his letters to

epistolary tradition and were adept in deploying, as Janet Gurkin Altman puts it, the 'letter's formal properties to create meaning'.[18] This ingrained comprehension of the letter's complexity was shared by the period's readers. Readers of literary periodicals, in particular, would likely share the political and cultural inclinations of authors associated with those publications, a situation in which the epistolary mode takes on an extra significance in implying a broad, but not unlimited, intellectual collective.

This is nowhere more evident than in the pages of *The Monthly Magazine*, first edited by John Aikin, the physician-*belle lettrist*, friend of Joseph Johnson, and author of the *Letters from a father to his son, on various topics, relative to literature and the conduct of life* (1794). The *Monthly* published, among others, Anna Laetitia Barbauld (Aikin's sister), William Blake, Coleridge and Charles Lamb. Barbauld's 'To Mr Coleridge', which appeared in the *Monthly* in April 1799, includes elements of the open letter and advice letter, and draws upon, while critiquing, the imagery of Sensibility. Barbauld, who notoriously rejected 'The Ancient Mariner' as improbable and amoral, warns the young poet away from the 'maze of metaphysic lore' in which she fears he is becoming lost.[19]

Coleridge attracted advice and listened to some advisors more than others. One he did listen to was Charles Lamb, who suggested, in a letter to his old schoolfriend of November 1796, that he should, as a poet, 'Cultivate simplicity […] or rather, I

John Murray from Italy (as well as being read by the Austrian authorities) were read out to the cronies who assembled in the drawing room of Albemarle Street. For an intelligent discussion of this issue see Brant, pp. 3-6.

[18] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 4.

[19] Quoted from *Romanticism: an Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, 4th edition, (London: Blackwell, 2012), p. 46 (l. 34).

should say, banish elaborateness'.[20] Lamb was epistolary to the core of his achievement. The Elia essays – for which he is now most celebrated – often draw from and develop ideas first dashed off in letters. Much of Lamb's poetry, too, is epistolary, and strongly marked by a genius for address. 'To the Poet Cowper', which was published in the *Monthly* in December 1796, begins 'Cowper, I thank my God, that though art heal'd. / Thine was the sorest malady of all'.[21] The unadorned directness rings entirely true and manages, in different ways, to play down and highlight the fact that we are reading a sonnet, that most formal of literary forms. The voice is powerful on a sliding scale, depending on the reader's familiarity with the author and the addressee. Readers may have known that Lamb is referring to Cowper's struggles with madness. Some will have known the deep and terrible source of Lamb's especial sympathy, his sister Mary's repeated bouts of lunacy, the first of which ended in scarcely believable matricide (Charles also suffered with mental illness throughout his adult life). The sonnet was originally written into a letter to Coleridge, of July 5th, 1796, alongside another poem, titled 'To Sara and Her Samuel', a verse letter (within a letter) of complaint – at fate or the way of things – relating to Lamb's inability to find time to visit his friends. When published in the *Monthly* later in the year (December's issue), the personal signature remains, but that beautifully inclusive and familiar title becomes the mundane 'Lines addressed, from London, to Sara and S.T.C. at Bristol, in the Summer of 1796'. Lamb's writing, at its best, always has strong roots in personal correspondence, and it often loses out as it is moved further away from this context. This has not always helped his reputation, but it does

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[20] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb,* ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr., 3 vols. (London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975-8), I, pp. 60-1.
[21] *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London, 1903-5), IV. p. 16.

offer a good example of how heavily the period's literary achievement could depend upon transitions between private and public discourse – and the several shades between.

Despite its historical and aesthetic richness, the epistolary culture of the Romantic period has been, on the whole, a minor concern of Romantic period studies, especially as an object of involved literary criticism.[22] Books dedicated to the subject are scarce, and have tended to avoid canonical authors, with gender an especial focus. Favret's valuable monograph focuses on female authors and the political, and often disruptive and disreputable, implications of letter writing in the period. Altman focuses on the epistolary novel rather than on the letter *per se*, although her attention to the significance and literary possibilities of the letter offers suggestive parallels to the scope of this collection. Jonathan Ellis's collection *Letter Writing Among the Poets* takes a cross-period view of literary letter writing, of the 'closeness of letter writing to poetry' and the 'ambiguous difference' between the two, and several of that fine volume's insights are recognized and developed here.[23] On the whole, however, letters tend be thought of not as the business of literary critics but of biographers.[24]

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[22] The exception is Keats, for whom there is a small but significant mass of critical work devoted to the letters. This tends to grow out of the tradition, started by Eliot and Auden, of thinking the letters equal to, if not better than, the poems in terms of literary excellence. See T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 100 and W. H. Auden, 'Keats in his Letters', *The Partisan Review*, 18 (November/ December 1951).

[23] Jonathan Ellis, 'Introduction: "For what is a letter?"', *Letter Writing Among the Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 12.

[24] To give one example: *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) treats Coleridge's remarkable range of writings in great detail across its thirty-seven chapters. Yet, despite Coleridge being an astonishing and voluminous correspondent, there is no chapter dedicated to letters.

Biography, in turn, tends to be held in suspicion by literary critics – as naïve, reductive or even prurient – and this has helped to maintain a sharp distinction between letters and poems and the methods of interpretation typically applied to each.[25] This artificial divide exacerbates the problem by prompting further assumptions about the transparency of letters in the direction of the author's life. As Kylie Cardell and Jane Haggis note, there is a tendency to think of the letter as 'a peep-hole through which to glimpse the person behind the creative or political public testimony'.[26] Any such idea, however, naively assumes letters to be purely private documents that in some way communicate – rather than distort, create, or develop – 'true', bedrock human identities. On any level this seems dubious, but doubly so in the case of letters produced by the same minds that have left us highly sophisticated literary works. As Gerard Genette put it: 'we can use the correspondence of an author (any author)—and this is indeed what specialists do—as a certain kind of statement about the history of each of his works: about its creation, publication, and reception by the public and critics, and about his view of the work at all stages of this history'.[27] But what, the question is wisely raised and left hanging, is this 'certain kind of statement'? The absence of easy answers here, as a form of important resistance, informs the essays collected in this volume.

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[25] See Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes, 'Introduction: Romanticizing Biography', *Romantic Biography*, ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. xi (pp. xi-xvii) and Hugh Haughton, 'Just Letters: Corresponding Poets', *Letter Writing Among the Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 57-78.
[26] Kylie Cardell and Jane Haggis 'Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity', *Life Writing* 8.2 (2011), p. 129 (pp. 129-133), DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2011.559731.
[27] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 374.

One idea that recurs throughout this collection is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert a meaningful distinction between an author's letters and their literary productions. What is revealed, again and again, is the fascinating dynamic between the two. Reading between letters and the monumentalized literary works from which letters have been, in many cases, severed, reveals originary and powerful human stories that have been overwritten by the narratives of ongoing reception. Several contributors to this volume pay close attention to letters as artistic achievements in their own right. Yet this close interrogation involves more than drawing letters into the generalized category of the literary text. This would be to ignore the cultural and historical specificity of the letter, its distinct possibilities within the long and complex story of human communication. It would also be to overlook the letter's generic fluidity, a feature of the form that has a particular resonance within Romantic writing. 'Mixture', writes Jacques Derrida, 'is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself'.[28] By encompassing yet evading all genres, the letter, for Derrida, becomes a privileged and also protean mode of literature, one that holds instrumental criticism at bay. Though sometimes domestic, or even banal in their content, letters at their finest stand as aesthetic achievements in their own right, refusing to rest within any pre-determined hierarchy of genres that would quickly and thoughtlessly diminish their significance. This collection places the letter under scrutiny, opening it to new forms of academic study and appraising its generic significance, while paying close attention to how the featured writers turned it to their own unique ends. We are interested in the letter as form, and a form that requires serious critical attention. This collection affirms the intrinsic value of letters as more

[28] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. with introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 48.

than a mere supplement or biographical source to the imaginative, philosophical, or journalistic work produced by each writer. They are literary works, but of a specific kind, one that is always the raising questions about what a literary work is and can be. They describe human dramas, both incidental and overwhelming, and become a vitally significant mode of thought and feeling in the Romantic age.

It is crucial that in recovering the letter we do lose it again somewhere in the unnavigable category of the literary. Key to this is an emphasis on the letter's materiality. Jane Stabler and Susan Wolfson, notably in this regard, quote directly from manuscript sources, noting cancellations and substitutions, while other contributors quote letters from published sources, some using a mixture of the two. These differences remind us that for the Romantic author's correspondents, the original, material letter would be full of significance that to today's readers, who are usually limited to transcribed editions, may be lost. The valuable work of research libraries (notably the Houghton Library's Keats digitizations), however, increasingly offers students an opportunity to pay sustained attention to manuscripts and their fascinating, unique properties, which include intriguing physical traces of the author. There is no single methodology embraced by contributors, with some focusing on close reading, others on historical and cultural context, and others still on theory and questions of epistolarity. But these are emphases rather than mutually exclusive methodologies: writing about letters, in fact, seems to demand that we think about all these things at once. Those who explore in detail the unique characteristics of their subject's epistolary prose include Michael O'Neill, who skilfully explores the variations of Shelley's epistolary style, as characterized by a 'continual swiftness of mind that prompts thought and awakens feeling'. This brings the letters closer to the

poems than we often find, but it does not simply blur letters and poems together: O'Neill reveals, also, Shelley's depth of humanity and insight in the specific form of the letter, his 'acute sense of the character and needs of the addressee'.

A similar but broader perspective is taken by Madeleine Callaghan, who compares the letters of Byron, Shelley, and Keats in the light of each writer's poetry. Her essay views the three poets' compositional practices as reflecting upon and extending, in different, and highly complex ways, the concerns of their letters. Callaghan traces the way in which these poets transform their epistolary preoccupations into aesthetic achievements, viewing selected letters as the experimental and experiential ground for some of their finest poetry. Oliver Clarkson's essay pays similar close attention to the tones and rhythms of Wordsworth's letters, showing how their verbal tics and habits cross over into a body of poetry that Wordsworth tried, on the whole, to keep separate from his epistolary writing. Clarkson opens with the view, inaugurated by the poet himself, that Wordsworth's letters were deliberately dull, but finds in this much of interest. Wordsworth's sense of disappointment, of which his letters are self-conscious emblems, has, flitting about its flipside, 'the enduring energies of hope'. Disappointment and hope, we find with Wordsworth's letters, 'share the same DNA'.

Susan Wolfson's chapter turns from William to Dorothy, and her lightness of touch in the letter mode. The chapter begins by comparing *The Prelude* with Dorothy's *Alfoxden Journal*, revealing what is termed the 'female textual underpresence' in William's poetry. In Wolfson's reading, William's poetry is always, among many other things, a letter to Dorothy, one in which artistic achievement meets a more intimate form of communication. Attuned to the playfulness as well as the beauties of

Dorothy's letter of 21 October 1818 to Reverend William Johnson, Wolfson shows how Dorothy's epistolary practice reaches a state of prose poetry. Wolfson emphasises the communicative as well as the aesthetic nature of Dorothy's writing, where the shared emotion between the writer and her correspondents, is vividly drawn out. Gregory Leadbetter's essay takes us from the Wordsworths to Coleridge and shows us the deeply literary nature of the latter's best letters, their finding ends in writerly means. The 'verbal life' of the correspondence, Leadbetter demonstrates, 'refuses to be instrumentalised or subordinate to a purpose separable from their medium'. The letters are 'constitutive—not merely denotative—of experience'. They comment upon and illuminate Coleridge's complex thinking about the poetics of prose writing, his sense that impassioned prose is naturally rhythmical and, as such, impossible to distinguish, meaningfully, from verse.

Completing the 'Lake School' section of the book, Lynda Pratt's essay asks us to reconsider any preconceived notion of Robert Southey's career as something 'complete', focussing on the evidence for the incompleteness of achievement compared to his literary ambitions. The relatively huge collection of surviving letters bears witness to both his prolific sociability, but also reveals his responses to difficulty and loss, notably in letters concerning the death of his son, Herbert, in 1816, and his difficult relationship with John Murray and his associates at the *Quarterly Review*. Pratt draws attention to the problem of inheriting only a fraction of what an author actually wrote, and how such gaps in correspondences prevent critics from being able to create a full picture of the significance of various correspondents in the life of an author.

The social and cultural vitality, as well as the sheer human depth, of Romantic period letter writing come to the fore in Stephen C. Behrendt's thoughtful and original account of the generous epistolary friendship of Melesina Trench and Mary Leadbeater. For these neglected but illuminating writers epistolary exchange was grounded in generosity, the letters themselves embodying warm gestures of mutual support. As such they chime with Lindsay O'Neill's sense of exchanging letters as a kind of 'gift economy'.[29] If Trench and Leadbeater use letters to sustain a deep friendship against an unfavourable social backdrop, Leigh Hunt used them to articulate and maintain an entire literary coterie. Daniel Westwood's essay focuses on one aspect of this, Hunt's epistolary relationship with P. B. Shelley, revealing the deft intellectual and emotional play of their letters, despite the distances endured – although in some ways enjoyed – by this pair of correspondents. Something like a dance between well-matched partners, their letters push eloquence to its limits, becoming the fluent and fluid gestures of an inward, and outward-looking poetic friendship. Mary O'Connell's chapter also focuses on epistolary relationships, this time the crucial connection in the period, between author and bookseller. Moving from Joseph Johnson, the liberal publisher of writers including Priestly, Godwin and Wollstonecraft, to an exploration of John Murray's dealings with Byron and Austen, and also Shelley's pragmatic response to Charles Ollier, O'Connell builds a composite picture of how, in more or less productive ways, the commercial world from which authorship had become forever inseparable, conflicted and negotiated with the highest levels of creative expression.

[29] Lindsay O'Neill. *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 122-23.

The letter's capacity to perform at the highest standards of literary criticism and creative expression is shows up in Timothy Webb's reassessment of Charles Lamb's epistolary writing. Emphasising Lamb's urban perspective against Wordsworth's nature poetry, Webb considers Lamb as offering a clear intervention into Romantic poetics. Lamb's letters, Webb demonstrates, are not merely a biographical phenomenon, nor are they pseudo poetry, but represent the possibility of a new mode of expression of creative and critical thought.

One of the fascinating features of letter writing in the period is how it weaves in and out of other major literary forms. Austen's novels are full of letters and immersed, to an unmatched extent, in epistolary culture, as Joe Bray's chapter demonstrates. If Austen's own letters are rarely considered classics, the letter form, within her novels, becomes a sophisticated means of exploring interpersonal nuance. While letter writers are revealed through their epistolary style, especially relating to the proximity of letter writing to speech, letter readers reveal themselves, Bray demonstrates, through the emotional fulness, or otherwise, of their responses. Also concerned with crossovers between epistolary practice and the Romantic novel is Angela Wright's essay on the correspondence of Mary Shelley. As well as being 'intrigued by the forms and shortcomings of correspondence', Mary Shelley, Wright demonstrates, writes, in her grieving letters to Maria Gisborne, 'as much to herself as to her addressee'. The letter becomes a mode of self-analysis but also of self-displacement, a way of interweaving private words with the tradition of the novel. Mary, in writing out her despair for her own purposes, takes on characteristics of her own character Walton and her father's Caleb Williams.

If letters are hosted by other literary forms such as the novel, they can also play the host themselves, most frequently to poems. The sheer amount of the period's poetry that was written into letters, often in different versions to what was eventually published, is remarkable and there has been insufficient consideration of how such acts of hosting can inflect the meanings of particular poems. As Anthony Howe argues, certain forms of hybrid text begin at a hermeneutic disadvantage because of the categories – novel, poem, letter – that are etched so deeply into the critical and, especially, the editorial, consciousness. Some of Keats's letters do far more than contain the poems written into them; as well as commenting on them directly, the letters become complex critical frameworks in which ideas and images from the poems are thought through, recollected and tested. Several of Keats's poems become more vital and relevant works when read attentively with reference the letter prose with which Keats associated them.

The practice of collecting poetry out of letters with little reference to the host text (beyond editors noting a letter's direct references to hosted poems) has not helped our understanding of the potential complex workings of literary letters. A further obstacle is a lack of stable theoretical frameworks against which to test ideas about what we might (awkwardly) call the poetics of the letter. Several contributors encounter this issue directly or indirectly, and it is considered in some depth, although from different perspectives, by Andrew Bennett and Jane Stabler. Beginning with the large questions that drive literary theory, those relating to the singular nature of the literary work and what it means to read a text as 'literature', Bennett turns to the 'personal letter' as 'an almost uniquely difficult case'. Focussing on the letters of Keats, Bennett's chapter reveals the paradox at the heart of Keats's epistolary practice, where the letter creates

'a sense of intimacy that is contingent upon a certain absence'. Given the unstable and plural generic status of the letter – as identified by Derrida – how do we develop new and productive theories of epistolarity? Stabler considers the case of Byron to be productive in this regard. Taking a relatively small body of Byron's letters and correspondents – associated with the period before he became famous – Stabler considers in detail how Byron's letters are 'shaped by the contours of his relationship with living correspondents' but also how they are the products of 'self-conscious literary artistry'. Thinking between these aspects of Byron's immensely complex self-fashioning, Stabler works towards a poetics of Byron's letters that has significant implications for a wider theoretical consideration of the form.

Taken together, the following essays explore Romantic period letter writing as a vital mode of experimentation, in which creativity, critical thinking, and domestic concerns coalesce. Romantic letters possess a communicative power that expresses itself in different ways from writer to writer, and from letter to letter. To rethink the value of letters is to reevaluate the canon, and as Timothy Webb's, Stephen Behrendt's, and Susan Wolfson's essays in particular reveal, such reconsideration is not only overdue but also urgent. But in every essay in this collection, there is the sense that Romantic writers must be rethought in the light of a received form that each writer makes their own. The correspondence of writers of the Romantic period constitutes a major literary achievement in its own right.