

Vanishing Art of Letter Writing, by Julie Donnell, Presented April 4, 2014

It is only fair to warn you at the outset that since the topic “the vanishing art of letter writing” is rather ambiguous, I have relished that ambiguity and taken full advantage of it.

If the topic had been, “The Vanishing Act of Letter Writing”, that would be one thing, but it is not: the word is “Art” and so I have chosen to exclude the aluminum siding of letter writing comprised of e-mail, texting, tweeting, and electronic communication of any kind - except to note that, because of recent well publicized issues about government surveillance leading to the lack of privacy in this country since 9/11, President Jimmy Carter himself now relies solely on snail mail to deliver important messages to world leaders. As the world begins to grapple with the full impact of technology on communication, and consequently on civility, and insofar as fellow quester James Krouse has established that the post office is not obsolete, it may well be that many of us, frustrated with the tyranny of the “send” button, will follow suit.

I ask your indulgence because the structure of this paper is only somewhat linear. There is some logic to it, but if you are trying to identify its shape, please consider it a braid of several strands woven together throughout to celebrate the manifold and textured places where art and letter writing converge.

Let our point of departure be letter writing as an artful literary device.

In 1774, an impetuous 23-year old German poet named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe surprised himself, disappointed his father, and startled the world with the publication of his first novel, *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*, or *The Suffering of Young Werther*.

Goethe put his own feeling about very personal events in his life, including the suicide of a dear friend, into the words of his protagonist Werther. Werther falls in love with the beautiful Lotte, a woman already engaged, which Goethe also did. Werther, however shoots himself with his rival’s pistol, which Goethe did not. Instead he wrote about it.

Recent studies have shown that writing about one’s feelings can rid one of depression, boost the immune system and lower blood pressure, and that may be one reason why Johann Wolfgang von Goethe went on to live another 58 years and become one of the most revered poets in the Western canon.

The form of the novel is what we call in German a “Briefroman”, in English, an “epistolary novel.”, meaning a novel, the content of which is conveyed in the form of letters. An epistle, as you probably know, is a letter.

Werther’s epistles are exuberant, expressive, personal, emotional and beautifully written. Because of his excessive mood swings, today, in America, we would

probably “diagnose” Werther as bi-polar, and worse yet, if Goethe were from Indiana where we have seriously considered no longer requiring students to write cursive, poor Werther might have become just another whining blogger with a limited audience.

However, in the hands of the poet, this work becomes a moving tragedy, and not simply because a tragic event has taken place. The epistolary form itself aligns the story with tragedy in the technical literary sense. Tragedy, or any drama, on the stage takes place in the form of spoken conversation: WHAT IS correspondence by letter other than written conversation? – The letters unfold, layering and extending Werther’s side of the conversation – his very personal and exaggerated responses to the events in his life build to the dramatic conclusion. Although the letters are addressed to Wilhelm, you, the reader, are drawn in and really feel as if Werther is confiding directly in you, and you may very well find yourself weeping at the end, despite yourself. The book had such resonance that it is said to have inspired the first series of copycat suicides known in the western world

“Werther” exemplifies a German literary movement called “Sturm und Drang” which in English is often called “Storm and Stress”. The literal translation is “Storm and Urge”, or perhaps, a little more restrained, “Storm and Impulse”.

The popularity of this novel was so great and has lasted so very long that it is no surprise that a few decades after it was published, Napoleon Bonaparte carried it with him on his campaign to Egypt.

Bonaparte wrote with his own Gallic riff on Sturm und Drang. Here is an excerpt of a letter to Josephine written in April 1796:

I have your letters of the 16th and 21st. There are many days when you don't write. What do you do, then? No, my darling, I am not jealous, but sometimes worried. Come soon; I warn you, if you delay, you will find me ill. Fatigue and your absence are too much.

Your letters are the joy of my days, and my days of happiness are not many. Junot is bringing twenty-two flags to Paris.

You must come back with him, you understand? — hopeless sorrow, inconsolable misery, sadness without end, if I am so unhappy as to see him return alone. Adorable friend, he will see you, he will breathe in your temple; perhaps you will even grant him the unique and perfect favor of kissing your cheek, and I shall be alone and far, far away. But you are coming, aren't you? You are going to be here beside me, in my arms, on my breast, on my mouth? Take wing and come, come!

A kiss on your heart, and (At this point Napoleon's passion got the better of his sense of decorum, so I have to stop – it is a private letter after all)

Letters used as a literary device to convey Werther's struggles ENHANCE the intimate, the passionate, the private, and the human in Goethe's novel. The letters of Napoleon to Josephine ARE intimate, passionate, private and human. We read both voraciously and voyeuristically, because we relate to them as human beings, and they tell often a juicy story.

What is it that makes a good letter?

Erasmus of Rotterdam was a revered independent scholar, theologian, and humanist who lived from 1466 to 1536. Erasmus updated Greek and Latin versions of the New Testament, which, as you know, is mostly composed of letters, so he knew whereof he spoke when he defined a letter as:

“a mutual conversation between absent friends, which should be neither unpolished, rough nor artificial, nor confined to a single topic, nor tediously long. Thus the epistolary form favors simplicity, frankness, humour and wit.”

About 500 years later, in 1922, scholar and critic George Saintsbury published a book entitled “A Letter Book: Selected with an Introduction on the History and Art of Letter Writing”. Saintsbury was above all an Englishman, but he was also a writer, literary historian, scholar, critic and we know him best today as a wine connoisseur. In his history of English prosody, he claimed to have read the work of every great English writer who had written verse since the 6th century. Saintsbury had also studied the letters of the Greeks and Romans, and he had read, and evaluated, the collections of private letters of most English literary figures. He was a true connoisseur of letter writing.

He agrees very much with Erasmus, stating that a good letter is the “kind of communication” which “most immediately succeeds the oral and supplies the claims of absence”. It is written when perhaps “there are circumstances (or – <and here he made up his own word >- ‘circumstanders’ - meaning people who might listen in on a conversation you don't want them to hear <or monitor e-mails that you don't want them to monitor >-) which or who make speech undesirable so you write.”

“The more the spoken word is heard in a letter the better. And the less that word is heard – the more it gives way to ‘book talk’ – the worse.”

So a good letter is not literary in nature, but rather, conversational and personal.

He, like Erasmus, was familiar with the letters of the New Testament, and he considers “St. Paul's allusions to his journeys, his salutations, his acknowledgement

of presents.... And his excellent advice to Timothy about beverages to be the purest and most genuine matter for mailbags.”

The art of letter writing is at its best “artless”.

Let us consider the following exchange of letters between Louis the XVIII and Napoleon Bonaparte:

Louis the XVIII to Napoleon:

“ You are taking a long time to give me back my throne: there is a danger you may miss the opportunity. Without me you cannot make France happy, while without you I can do nothing for France. So be quick and let me know what positions and dignities will satisfy you and your friends.”

Here is Napoleon’s reply:

I have received your letter. I thank you for your kind remarks about myself. You must give up any hope of returning to France: You would have to pass over a hundred thousand dead bodies. Sacrifice your private interests to the peace and happiness of France. History will not forget. I am not untouched by the misfortunes of your family. I will gladly do what I can to render your retirement pleasant and undisturbed.”

Even rivalry is a kinship of sorts; and while perhaps lacking humour and wit, at least in the case of the frustrated king, these excerpts are simple, and frank, and certainly not artificial.

The Greeks wrote letters, but not many good ones remain. However, a Greek rhetorician, Demetrius Phaelaerius was responsible for the first known attempt at classifying and explaining letters.

His work became the basis for the future classification and categorization of letters, at least in the Western world. In 1587, a book called the “The English Secretorie” was published in England and it must have been popular, because it was re-published 6 times in the 23 intervening years until 1610.

Here are the chapters:

- Of epistles merely descriptive
- Of epistles laudatory or vituperatory
- Of epistles deliberative
- Of epistles responsory
- Of epistles Dehortatory and Disswasory
- Of epistles conciliatory
- Of Epistles Reconciliatory

Of Epistles petitory
Of epistles commendatory
Of epistles monetorie and Reprehensorie
Of epistles Amatorie

II

Of epistles Iudiciall (accusatorie, excusatorie, Purgatorie, Defensorie)
Of epistles expostulatorie
Of epistles invective
Of epistles Commemorative
Of epistles Deprecatorie
Of epistles familiar
Of epistles remuneratorie
Of epistles Iocatorie and Gratulatorie
Of epistles obiurgatorie
Of epistles mandatorie.

In 1568, not two decades earlier, had come the puritanically entitled how to book: *The Enimie of Idlennesse: Teaching the manner and Stile how to endite, compose and write all sorts of Epistles and Letters*". Letter writing was becoming a skill, if not yet an art – a skill that people could learn, and thereby improve themselves and become productive citizens.

Indulge me here: As evidence of the proclaimed demise of the art of letter writing, in 1922, both Saintsbury AND Emily Post complain that the proliferation of newspapers had virtually made letter writing obsolete. Thus both of them had considerably shortened Phaelarius's list to only a few useful categories. Emily Post's include "Letters No-one Cares to Read", "Letters Everyone Loves to Receive" and "Letters No Woman Should Ever Write."

"Letters of Petty Misfortune" is a subcategory to Emily Post's "Letters No-one Cares to Read."

Here is Abraham Lincoln's response to what I imagine to be one of those letters from his brother:

"When I came to Charleston day-before yesterday I learned that you are anxious to sell the land where you live, and move to Missouri.... What can you do in Missouri, better than here? Is the land any richer? Can you there, any more than here, raise corn and cattle, wheat and oats? Will anybody there, more than here, do your work for you ?..The eastern 40 acres I intend to keep for mother while she lives – and if you *will not cultivate it*; it will rent for enough to support her...Her Dower in the other two forties, she can let you have and not thanks to me. Now do not misunderstand this letter. I do not write it in any unkindness. I write it in order to get you to see the truth – which truth is, you are destitute because you

have *idled* away all your time. Your thousand pretenses for not getting along better, are all non-sense – they deceive no body but yourself. *Go to work* is the only cure for your case.”

Lincoln’s correspondence falls into about the only category that Saintsbury approves of: that of letters that reveal character, are direct, and are well written.

While we are on the subject of Lincoln and letters, you may have noticed in the New York Times about 10 days ago, an article entitled “The Lost Art of the Unsent Angry Letter”. Lincoln is known for writing angry letters in order to get his feelings on paper, and then, after reflection, not sending them. Other public figures like Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, and Mark Twain, have done the same. What we love about this is that so many of those unsent letters still exist, and give us a glimpse into what the writers were really feeling in private.

However, if such a letter were to be sent by accident, we have this advice about insulting letters, given in 1883 by James Willis Westlake, author of the book “How to Write Letters.”

“If a letter is not insulting it should be answered promptly. If it is insulting it should be either returned to the writer or treated with silent contempt. The former is the better way, as silence might invite a repetition of the offense.”

Saintsbury categorizes letters first by century, and then by carefully chosen authors, and, as I mentioned, he prefers letters and collections of letters that reveal the character, hopefully elevated, intelligence, and ability to write, of the man or woman who wrote them.

He does not consider business letters to be art, and certainly would frown on form letters of any kind. But here is one I came across used in China in the 9th century that I just have to share with you.

The body of the letter goes as follows:

“Yesterday, having drunk too much, I was intoxicated as to pass all bounds; but none of the rude and coarse language I used was uttered in a conscious state. The next morning, after hearing others speak on the subject, I realized what happened, whereupon I was overwhelmed with confusion and ready to sink into the earth with shame.”

The person using this letter would “copy the template, enter the dinner host’s name, and sign it and deliver it with head bowed”. www.lettersofnote.com.

Let’s note that not all letters fit neatly into one or the other category. Here is a quote from a letter that might be considered to be a business letter or a personal letter depending on your point of view. Marie Duplessis was the French courtesan turned

countess whose tragic and very short life is the basis of the novel and later the play *La Dame aux Camellias* by one of her lovers, Alexandre Dumas, fils. Many of you know her as the selfless heroine Violetta of the Verdi opera *La Traviata*.

To a potential suitor she wrote:

"Monsieur le Baron,
I realize that mine is a sordid profession, but I must let you know that my favors cost a great deal of money. My protector must be extremely rich to cover my household expenses and satisfy my caprices."

So much for selflessness. This might be said to be an example of a place where letter writing and the art of fiction meet but do not necessarily converge.

Saintsbury assures us that letters written before 1700 are to be read more for the "matter they contain than for the manner in which they contain it" meaning they appeal more to a historian, than to a literary critic.

There exists a remarkable collection of letters from 15th century in England. The Paston family correspondence covers three centuries until 1732. The Pastons managed to acquire a great deal of land through the death of Sir John Fastolf, the historical figure on which Shakespeare's Falstaff was based. Here is a letter from that collection which may very well be the first time that the term Valentine was used in written form in a letter. It is dated February of 1477 and is written by Margery Brews to her fiancé John Paston.

*Unto my right well-beloved Valentine John Paston,
squire, be this bill delivered.*

"Right reverent and worshipful and my right well-beloved valentine, I recommend me unto you full heartedly, desiring to hear of your welfare, which I beseech Almighty God long for to preserve unto his pleasure and your hearts desire.

"And if it pleases you to hear of my welfare, I am not in good health of body nor of heart, nor shall I be till I hear from you.

"For there knows no creature what pain that I

endure, And even on the pain of death I would reveal no more.

"And my lady my mother hath laboured the matter to my father full diligently, but she can no more get than you already know of, for which God knoweth I am full sorry.

"But if you love me, as I trust verily that you do, you will not leave me therefore.

"For even if you had not half the livelihood that you have, for to do the greatest labour that any woman alive might, I would not forsake you.

If you did not get the gist of it, Margery is letting her fiancée know that, even after her mother's has pleaded with him, her father will not pay the dowry the fiancé requires. She reproaches him and basically says that if the tables were turned and he had no money, she would still marry him.

Although this letter would have been dictated to a man who would have written it down, that does not mean that Margery, herself, could not write. It just means she could afford to have someone write it for her. In fact scholars now think that the literacy rate was much higher than previously believed, thus creating a strong market for those aforementioned letter writing manuals.

Indeed we **love** to read real letters for the glimpse they give us into time gone by – Quester John Beatty suggested that I look at the correspondence of Susan Mann McCulloch and her husband Hugh McCulloch. Hugh was a prominent banker and became the Secretary of the Treasury under Abraham Lincoln. Sue moved from the east coast to Fort Wayne with a girlfriend to start a school for girls here in the city.

She, like most people of the time, received and sent news in letters. In fact she writes home that she would have included a Fort Wayne newspaper, but there is “nothing in them but advertisements and politics”

In 1836 Susan wrote home to her mother:

“I am almost afraid to tell you of the wretchedness of this place...all the bank directors were high on election day and we had a fine description of the scene from

Mr. McCulloch as he was the only sober one at the bank. Judge Hanna and his oldest son were both carried home drunk with champagne. Mr. Hamilton and most of the other directors are very much mortified and wish it to be kept still for they are members of the temperance society but not of the total abstinence. A week last Sunday nearly all the little boys got drunk at the Harrison dinner after the example of their parents.....”(Mrs. Hanna) has been weeping constantly since election and as Judge Hanna repents of his conduct, I think he will not give her occasion again.”

The Judge Hanna referenced is of course Samuel Hanna.

After Susan and Hugh became engaged, she spent a few months with her family out east and had a miniature portrait painted to send to her fiancé. Here is his response:

“I received you miniature last evening and I was thankful hat it has at last come to hand...it is an excellent likeness, but I cannot say that I am pleased with the style of the dress. The bosom is more exposed than I think consistent with good taste. It would have appeared more like mine own sue if the neck had been partially covered with a handkerchief and the sleeves of the dress had been a little less tight....”

During the 17th and 18th centuries, as letter writing matured, there emerged a phenomenon that Americans caught on to – it is that of the pamphlet, or an essay which was often written in the form of a letter and published in a newspaper.

Beginning April 2, 1722, James Franklin published a series of letters from an outspoken middle aged widow named Silence Dogood in the Boston *Courant*. Mrs. Dogood, expressed herself about life and politics in America. She commented on the relations between men and women, proposed schemes for the relief of single women, and she took great interest in the political controversies of the time.

She describes herself:

“I could easily be persuaded to marry again. I am courteous and affable, good humored, (unless I am first provoked) and handsome and sometimes witty.”

Further, she is:

“....a mortal enemy to arbitrary government and unlimited power. I am naturally for the rights and liberties of my country, and the least appearance of an encroachment on those invaluable privileges is likely to make my blood boil exceedingly. I have likewise a natural inclination to observe and reprove the faults of others, at which I have an excellent facility.”

After a while, the James Franklin began to suspect that the essays were being written by his cheeky younger brother and apprentice Benjamin, and he was right.

Not only was the talented young Franklin able to write plausibly, at least at first, as a middle aged woman, but the humour that is considered particularly American, that of Will Rogers, Mark Twain, and the gentle James Whitcomb Riley from Indiana, has its roots in these satirical letters. They resonate with the art of fiction, the art and passion of politics and patriotism, and the art of humor, thus possibly paving the way for Harvey Feierstein's recent success playing middle aged woman in the very American musical "Hairspray".

Here is an example of a letter to the editor written in 1912 by a real woman.

"After reading Sir Almroth's Wright's able and weighty exposition of women as he knows them the question seems no longer to be "Should women have votes?" but "Ought women not to be abolished altogether?"

I have been so much impressed by Sir Almroth's Wright's disquisition, backed as it is by so much scientific and personal experience that I have come to the conclusion that women should be put a stop to."

The letter is signed by "One of the Doomed" – who turns out to have been the 26-year-old Clementine Churchill.

If we are to subscribe to Professor Saintsbury's literary point of view, the apogee of the art of writing fine personal letters, at least in English, was the late 18th century and carried over into the early 19th century. Some of the authors of these letters are familiar names to us – Shelley, Keats, Thackeray, and Dickens, and the actress Fanny Kemble – letters by these authors are longer than this paper allows but they include beautifully written descriptions of travels and work, charming letters to children and playful personal games with words.

To give you an idea, here are some excerpts from one written by George Gordon, Lord Byron:

"Dear Mr. Maurice,

Tell Mr. Hobhouse that I wrote him a few days ago from Ferrara It will therefore be idle for you or him to wait for any further answers or returns of proofs from Venice as I have directed that no English proofs be sent after me The publication can be proceeded in without and I am already sick of your remarks, to which I think not the least attention ought be paid."

What follows is a description of a visit that morning to a museum and then a cemetery in Bologna:

I "found besides the superb burial ground an original of a Custode (custodian) who reminded me of the gravedigger in Hamlet."

He has a collection of capuchin skulls, labeled on the forehead, and taking one of them down, said "This is brother Desiderio Birro, who died at 40 – one of my best friends I begged his head of his brethren after his decease and they gave it me. I put it in lime and then boiled it. Here it is, teeth and all in excellent preservation. He was the merriest, cleverest fellow I ever knew."

Byron continues:

"Some of the epitaphs at Ferrara pleased me more than the splendid monuments at Bologna. For example "Martini Luigi Implora pace" or "Lucrezia Piccini Implora Eterna Quietè". Can anything be more full of pathos? Those few words say all that can be said or sought. The dead had had enough of life. All they wanted was rest and this they implore."

The depth of feeling and subtlety of observation in this letter are personal, and cannot be equally conveyed in a scholarly tome. The juxtaposition of the comic and serious is also personal and can certainly not be duplicated on Facebook.

PAUSE

Charles Dickens was a prolific letter writer and an editor, as well as author and social activist.

Here is a charming response to some advice a youngster sent him relative to the book *Nicholas Nickleby*.

"To Master Hastings Hughs
December 12 1838

Respected Sir:

I have given Squeers one cut on the neck and two on the head, at which he appeared much surprised and began to cry, which, being a cowardly thing, is just what I should have expected from him – wouldn't you?

I have carefully done what you told me in your letter about the lamb and the two "sheeps" for the little boys. They have also had some good ale and porter, and some wine. I am sorry you didn't say *what* wine you would like them to have. I gave them some sherry, which they liked very much, except one boy, who was a little sick and choked a good deal. He was rather greedy, and that's the truth, and I believe it went the wrong way, which I say served him right, and I hope you will say so too.

Nicholas has had his roast lamb, as you said he was to, but he could not eat it all, and says if you do not mind his doing so he should like to the rest hashed to-morrow with some greens, which he is very fond of, and so am I. He said he did not like to have his porter hot, for he thought it spoilt the flavor, so I let him have it cold. You should have seen him drink it. I thought he would never have left of. I also gave him

three pounds of money, all in sixpences, to make it seem more, and he said directly that he should give more than half to his mamma and sister and divide the rest with poor Smike. And I say he is a good fellow for saying so; and if anybody says he isn't I am ready to fight him whenever they like – there!

Fanny Squeers shall be attended to, depend upon it. Your drawing is very like, except that I don't think the hair is quite curly enough. The nose is particularly like hers, and so are the legs. She is a nasty disagreeable thing, and I know it will make her very cross to see it; and what I say is that I hope it may. You will say the same I know, at least I think you will.

I meant to have written you a long letter, but I cannot write very fast when I like the person I am writing to, because it makes me think about them, and I like you, and so I tell you. Besides it is just eight o'clock at night, and I always go to bed at eight o'clock, except when it is my birthday, and then I sit up to supper. So I will not say anything more besides this – and that is my love to you and Neptune; and if you will drink my health every Christmas Day I will drink yours – come.

I am, respected Sir, You affectionate Friend,

P. S. I don't write my name very plain, but you know what it is you know, so never mind."

What could be more elegant and civilized than to reply in this charming way to a child?

PAUSE

The American author Kurt Vonnegut was a native of Indiana as you are probably aware. When he was teaching, wrote his course assignments in the form of letters as a way of speaking personally to each student in the class.

Here are excerpts from his "Form of Fiction Term Paper Assignment" dated November 30, 1965

Beloved,

"As for your term papers, I would like them to be both cynical and religious. I want you to adore the universe, to be easily delighted, but to be prompt as well with impatience with those artists who offend your notions of what the Universe is or should be. "This above all..."

Vonnegut then asks the students to read and grade 15 short stories – A to F,

“The grades should be childishly selfish and impudent measures of you own joy or lack of it. I don’t care what grades you give. I do insist that you like some stories better than others.”

They students should then choose the three best and the three worst, about which they are to “write a report to be submitted to a wise, respected, witty and world weary superior.”

“Do not do so as an academic critic, nor as a person drunk on art, nor as a barbarian in the literary market place. Do so as a sensitive person who has a few practical hunches about how stories succeed or fail. Praise or damn as you please but do so rather flatly, pragmatically, with cunning attention to annoying or gratifying details. Be yourself. Be unique. Be a good editor. The Universe needs more good editors, god knows.

“Since there are eighty of you and since I do not wish to go blind or kill somebody, about twenty pages from each of you should do neatly. Do not bubble. Do not spin your wheels. Use words I know.”

It is signed

“Polonious.”

Dickens’ and Vonnegut’s letters express the profound art of teaching and of course, parenting. They are the masters passing culture to the next generation in their very special original styles.

I love the statement in Dickens’ letter, “I cannot write very fast when I like the person I am writing to, because it makes me think about them.” To excel at the art of letter writing requires patience and time, and not just the time one spends at the writing desk. It requires time to be with oneself. It requires the time one spends reading, developing the skills of thinking and analyzing. It requires the luxury of time to reflect and question, It requires the time to be observant and confident, loving and creative, the courage to be direct and the subtlety to be nuanced.

The letters one writes are the person one has become.

If the art of letter writing is vanishing, what else are we losing?

Quest Paper: The Vanishing Art of Letter Writing

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I read a lot more but did not include everything, obviously.....

