The Letter: A Dying Art?

Why are you capable of imagining a world without letters? Without good souls who write letters, without other souls who read and enjoy them, without those third-party souls who take them from this person to that person—that is, a world without senders, addressees, and letter carriers? A universe in which all is said dryly, in abbreviated fashion, hurriedly and on the run, without art and without grace?

Pedro Salinas, "Defense of the Missive Letter and of Epistolary Correspondence" (1948)

By IVAR IVASK

It has become a literary commonplace to state that as novels deconstruct into impersonal experimentation for experimentation's sake, more and more readers are turning to biographies, diaries, historical panoramas, and collections of correspondence to share in the realities of our common human experience in time and place. A further paradox is that "although people write letters less and less, scholars are writing more and more about writing letters," to quote one of the contributors to our special issue, John L. Brown. Brown also observes that French writers and publishers unleashed "a tidal wave of epistolarity" during the period 1900–50, "when the epistolary art experienced a magnificent autumnal flowering that produced, as the leaves were falling, a phenomenally rich harvest." The same seems to hold true for English letters, of which Leslie B. Mittleman "go[es] so far as to say that the twentieth century, of all previous periods in English literary history, is the greatest in terms of the art of the letter." Just G. B. Shaw alone produced a total of 250,000 letters during his lifetime. James Joyce, Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf wrote far fewer than that, but what a gift their letters are to admirers of their novels and poetry! Mallarmé's and Proust's correspondences offer an unexpected extension to their life work.

Spanish literature has been notoriously lacking in epistolary revelations. Therefore the imminent publication of the Salinas-Guillén correspondence, comparable to the classic Goethe-Schiller correspondence in German, will be the more remarkable. Pedro Salinas believed, as we read in Andrés Soria Olmedo's presentation of this correspondence, that "as a piece of writing, the letter encompasses all the possibilities of literature." All the more regrettable therefore is the fact that the letter never caught on as a genre in Hispanic literature. The opposite holds true for Germany and Austria, whose epistolary art would have deserved more than the one article we were able to obtain for this special issue. Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, and Gottfried Benn all cultivated the private letter with great verve. Nevertheless, the unsurpassed German-language masters of the epistolary genre in the twentieth century remain such Austrian writers as Kafka, Hofmannsthal, and Rilke. Rilke's farflung correspondence with some four hundred people all over Europe has been published in some fifty volumes to date, with additional volumes in preparation. To quote from a recent biography: "Rilke himself, however, fully realized the significant interconnection between how he lived and what he produced. That is quite clear from the care with which he preserved his papers, and especially from his specific authorization, in his will, of the publication of the letters to which he had confided so much of himself. It could not be otherwise: for he was a rare instance of a poet who contrived an existence exclusively dedicated to his art, who made indeed a work of his life; and if we are fully to appreciate the written words we cannot leave out of account the circumstances in which they came into being."[1] Rilke's exchange of letters with the Russian poets Marina Tsvetaeva and Boris Pasternak, brought out in 1983,[2] is but one example from this incredible epistolary fertility, which the poet himself referred to with some self-irony as his "letter-factory."

Rilke's letters could be artificially contrived, hiding more than revealing about their author. It is because of this criticism that some discriminating readers will prefer the more spontaneous pen and always delicate personal approach of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. His were missives destined for very specific persons and circumstances, not stylized in advance for posterity. The one exception to this general rule was his correspondence with the composer Richard Strauss, whose successful librettist he was. Another extraordinary letter writer in Austria was the novelist Heimito von Doderer, of whose correspondence so far only the *Briefwechsel 1928–1962* with his colleague and revered teacher Albert Paris Gütersloh has been published.[3] Letters, like diaries, are nothing if not personal. Every person has had in his life at least one or several correspondences which profoundly shaped, even di-

rected his life. As editor of this journal for twenty-three years (the current issue happens to be my ninetieth) I have naturally exchanged letters with quite a few famous writers around the world, and some of these exchanges have become rather extensive. This is not the time or place to mention them in detail. I would only like to refer here to four long-term correspondences with authors now deceased which decisively shaped my development as poet and critic well before I assumed the editorship of *WLT*. The letters from the Lithuanian poet Henrikas Radauskas (1910–70) span the years 1951–70; the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén (1893–1984) sent some 330 communications between 1952 and 1983; the correspondence with Heimito von Doderer (1896–1966) ran from 1957 until the year of his death; the contact with Marie Under (1883–1980), the doyenne of Estonian poets abroad, was close during the period 1957–74. Each of these writers opened a different language and literature to this then-young author who was living at that time away from the world's literary centers, in Minnesota. I have been asked in later years how I initiated those epistolary encounters, and what lucky star guided me? The answer is surprisingly simple: I just wrote out of sincere enthusiasm for their work and was rewarded by an equally enthusiastic echo, which reverberated until the death (or illness) of these much older, more celebrated writers. It is a misconception of beginning authors that they alone are lonely; fame too can be a solitary privilege, surrounded by professional attentions of specialists but penetrated by fresh approaches of inquiry. Years later Claudio Guillén revealed to me how well he remembered his father's excitement upon the arrival of my first letter, written while I was still a mere graduate assistant at the University of Minnesota. That seems almost incredible, but it must have been true, considering how our correspondence flourished for more than three decades. For me it is hard to imagine myself today as poet, critic, and editor without these four profoundly significant encounters through years of epistolary dialogue. There was no university I could have attended where these four writers would have taught. Still, a unique Spanish-Austrian-Lithuanian-Estonian literary salon was created by way of correspondence, and the point of contact for Guillén, Doderer, Radauskas, and Under was a young Estonian émigré poet in Minnesota.

Such epistolary nets were possible until recently, judging from my own experience. Are they still being woven and cast by young aspiring writers today? Probably another special issue on "The Letter: A Dying Art?" decades hence will elaborate on this in the affirmative or negative. Most declarations of the death of a literary genre have so far proven premature. This may well hold true also for the letter, perhaps the most intimate manifestation of our humanity for millennia.

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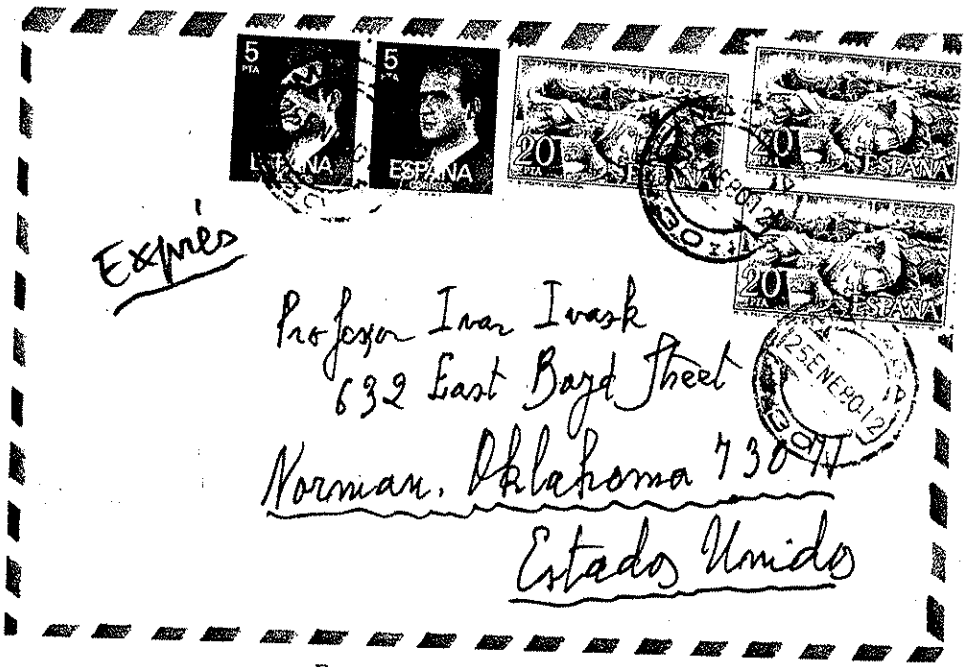
[1] Donald Prater, *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. ix.

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Zwetajewa, Boris Pasternak, *Briefwechsel*, Jewgenij Pasternak, Jelena Pasternak, Konstantin Asadowskij, eds., Heddy Pross-Weerth, tr., Frankfurt a.M., Insel, 1983. For a review, see *WLT* 58:1 (Winter 1984), p. 99.

[3] Heimito von Doderer, Albert Paris Gütersloh, *Briefwechsel 1928–1962*, Munich, Biederstein, 1986.



ENVELOPE FROM JORGE GUILLÉN

What Ever Happened to Mme de Sévigné? Reflections on the Fate of the Epistolary Art in a Media Age

What cannot letters inspire? They have souls; they can speak; they have in them all that force which expresses the transports of the heart; they have all the fire of our passions.

Abélard to Héloïse

The post is the consolation of life.

Voltaire

By JOHN L. BROWN

The letter, it seems, is dying; but its deathbed is surrounded by an unprecedented number of specialists, who find the moribund of great clinical interest, and every one of them seems to have a diagnosis of his own. All agree, however, that the health of the letter has been undermined and finally dealt a fatal blow by the telephone, the telegram, the cassette, the fax, and other technical innovations that have deprived it of its raison d'être. The written word has been vanquished by the audiovisual. The authentic "personal letter" (factitious as this can often be) has been further devaluated by the rise of computerized mail. The public now receives masses of "letters," addressed by name and making a pitch for everything imaginable, from political and charitable contributions to "special offers" and "gifts for you alone." The flood of such patently phony missives, couched in terms of instant intimacy, is the "junk mail" which constitutes a major part of the correspondence most of us now receive. (This breakdown of the distinction between "the real" and "the fake" occurs in other areas of mass communication as well. On television it becomes difficult to separate the publicity from the programs.) On a smaller scale, of course, epistolary fakery has long existed. J. Douchin reports that Flaubert was quite taken in by the letters "brûlantes de passion" sent to him by a certain Eulalie de Langlade. He preserved them preciously, apparently unaware that they were copied from a popular manual on how to write love letters.[1]

Today Mme de Sévigné would not be sitting down, pen in hand, to write to her daughter; instead she would be ringing up Provence to have a chat with her. Moreover, Mme de Graffigny would be sending off a cassette of endearments to her lover "Panpan" up in Lorraine. Voltaire would be conducting highbrow conversations on an intellectual TV talk show, for the good letter writer is usually a good conversationalist as well. Sainte-Beuve's weekly literary roundup would beat Bernard Pivot's "Apostrophe" in the ratings.

Paradoxically, as we shall observe in examining the present situation in France, there have never been so many letters, so many complete correspondences edited and published, so many scholarly articles, colloquia, and conferences devoted to every aspect—literary, sociological, and psychological—of the epistolary art. In the course of this essay I shall attempt to provide some of the reasons for the present vogue, very much in evidence from the fifties onward, of a literary genre (is it a genre? is it "literary"?) which has fewer and fewer practitioners. Laurent Versini has pointed out that "les études de genres et de techniques particulières, longtemps sacrifiées par la critique traditionelle à l'étude des auteurs et des époques, ont d'abord caractérisé les années qui voyaient aussi les romanciers sacrifier dans 'le nouveau roman' l'action, le personnage, la psychologie, à la technique, au 'roman du roman'; il était naturel que cette curiosité aboutît, dans les années 1950–1970, à une floraison de travaux sur la forme épistolaire."[2]

Indeed, the letter is being accorded more attention from literary scholars today than it ever enjoyed in the past. "Epistolarity" has had a long, vigorous, and prestigious career in French literature, beginning already in the Middle Ages, with the correspondence of Abélard and Héloïse. It gained momentum in the Renaissance, when collections of correspondence of classical authors—Cicero, Seneca, Pliny—began to appear, as well as the letters of such Italians as Annibale Caro and Girolamo Parabosco. Among the notable French productions of the period figure Etienne Du Tronchet's *Lettres missives et familières* (1569) and Etienne Pasquier's *Lettres* (1586). As Janet Altman notes in her article "The Letter Book as a Literary Institution, 1539–1789," "They are inspired by Latin and Italian models and inherit the burden of medieval rhetoric."[3] However, there are interesting exceptions, such as the letters exchanged with his wife by Gaspar de Saillans, supplier of saltpeter for the king's artillery (*Premier livre de Gaspar de Saillans*, 1569), and the *Epitres familières et invectives* (1539) by "Hélisenne de Crenne" (Marguerite Briet), a passionate feminist whose "invectives" are directed

against her husband (whom she had left), against one of her correspondents who held that domestic work was the only thing women were good for, and against a number of her critics who contended that women had no business writing and publishing anyway.[4]

The epistolary art continued to flourish throughout the seventeenth century.[5] This could be attributed in part to the rarity of other means of information, notably newspapers. The first French newspaper, *La Gazette*, was founded by T. Renaudot in 1631. Consequently, the letter sometimes filled the void. For example, the correspondence of the physician Guy Patin (1683) attracted readers because of its lively reporting of current events.[6] The letter was also assuming other forms, other functions. Numerous manuals on how to write "proper" letters began to appear, and published collections increasingly included missives, written often by such talented women as Mme de Sévigné, Mme Du Deffand, Mlle Aissé, Mlle de Launay, and Mlle de Lespinasse, among others, which were more personal than pedagogical.

Moreover, letters were no longer necessarily communications exchanged between two individuals. They were often fictional creations, "epistolary novels" such as the enormously popular *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747) by Mme de Graffigny. (Her personal letters, some of which describe her stay at Cirey with Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet, are being published by the Voltaire Foundation. The first volume, edited by English Showalter, appeared in 1985.) It is unnecessary to recall such well-known works as *Les lettres portugaises* (1669), supposedly written by a Lusitanian nun, Mariana Alcoforado, to her lover, a French officer, and "translated" by the Vicomte de Guilleragues, who was in reality the author; or Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761); or one of the masterpieces of the genre, *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, recently made into not one but two successful films. A popular variation of the form, stimulated perhaps by the increasing contacts of the French with foreign cultures, is illustrated by such texts as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) and by numerous *Lettres chinoises*, *Lettres iroquoises*, *Lettres siamoises*, et cetera. Utilizing the device of a foreign observer, they satirized contemporary French life and institutions. Cultivated people, undistracted by television, had time, lots of time, to write letters. Also, skill in the epistolary art was highly regarded in a society "qui fait du commerce des esprits une des nécessités de l'existence."[7] Many literary men devoted a part of each day to their letters, and the abundance of their production may well astonish us: Voltaire's correspondence fills forty-five volumes, Rousseau's forty-three.

With the establishment of postal services, the possibility of having letters regularly delivered encouraged writing them. It was during the reign of Louis XIII that Richelieu authorized the public to use the official post. Although Paris soon had several post offices, mail was despatched to the provinces only twice a week. Mme de Sévigné noted in a letter of 26 April 1671 that "this is Sunday and this letter will not go out until Wednesday."[8] The arrival of a letter, a real letter, in a provincial town could awaken the curiosity of the entire community, and the recipient was often pressed to share it with neighbors. One can imagine the excitement of her friends when Mme de Grignan read her mother's letter describing how Vatel, the steward of Le Grand Condé, fearing that the fish he had ordered would not arrive in time for a Friday's repast for Louis XIV, locked himself in his room and stabbed himself to death. By the nineteenth century mail delivery ceased to be a special event, and the letter lost some of its exotic glamour. Nevertheless, literary men kept turning them out in great quantities, as we see from the multivolume *correspondances générales* of Chateaubriand, Lamennais, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, George Sand, Sainte-Beuve, Flaubert, and Zola that are now appearing.

In spite of the competition of the telephone, the telegraph, and the media, the letter continued to flourish in France until the end of World War II, a cultural watershed which witnessed the decline of the traditional *culte des lettres*. In the recent past, *littérateurs*, even though they lived in the same city, even the same arrondissement (Paulhan used to say, "French culture? 2000 people living in the VIth arrondissement"), wrote to each other tirelessly. (Of course, publication was often in the back of their minds.) By the sixties, however, the brightest young people were heading for the Ecole Nationale d'Administration to become *énarques* and managers rather than for the once-prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, which had formed generations of writers and intellectuals. Letters were no longer "in." Adorno, in his introduction to a 1966 edition of the selected correspondence of Walter Benjamin, held that such letters were an anachronism even in the lifetime of the author.[9]

Paradoxically, however, correspondence (especially that of writers and artists) is now being published more than ever before and read by a public less attracted to fiction than to biography and personal "revelations." Biographers comb through the personal letters of their subjects and dig hungrily into every possible source, hoping to unearth unpublished and sensational material,[10] but Richard Ellmann, author of definitive lives of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, has warned his colleagues of the trickiness of letters as "objective" documentation. In his collected essays *a long the riverrun* (published in 1989, two years after his death) he writes: "The modern biographer is aware that the letter is itself a literary form, through which writer and recipient play a game of concealment and revealment. What we have to read in correspondence is what is not written there."[11] M. Bossis agrees with Ellmann in being skeptical about accepting the letter as a "document vrai," claiming

that the writer reveals himself more openly in his fiction: "En raison de la pression sociale intériorisée, lorsqu'on est un personnage célèbre, on n'écrit pas n'importe quoi de soi."[12] Valery Larbaud, in his *Journal* (31 January 1934), is even more circumspect and in fact is opposed to the publication of letters at all. After having refused to write a preface for a selected correspondence of Rilke, he recalls that he had prevented the publication of certain letters of C.-L. Philippe, asserting that "c'est une terrible responsabilité de surcharger, l'œuvre d'un écrivain de ces sortes de documents 'extérieurs.'" However, J.-M. Varaut claims in his essay "La difficulté d'être biographe: Les papiers de Montherlant" that citing unedited letters which throw light on the how and the why of a work is a right and a duty of the biographer: "Tout dire, ce n'est pas traquer les secrets d'un homme mais savoir de quelle faiblesse est née sa grandeur."[13] This problem was the theme of one of the sessions of the Nantes colloquium of 1982, at which G. Bollème concluded his intervention on Flaubert by stressing the dangers of "confusion, simplification, and generalization": "Il n'y a pas de rapport correspondance-œuvre que particulier à chaque auteur."[14]

Derrida recurs time and again, in his voluntarily disconcerting book *The Post-Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, to the ambiguities of the letter, its protean variety of forms, its resistance to any precise definition, since it can be a love lyric, an invective, a philosophical discussion, a political harangue.[15] He is constantly concerned with the way in which the epistolary form "wrestles with the problem of making narrative out of discourse, of resolving mimetic and artistic impulses" and, in so doing, "exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature . . . and articulates the problematics involved in the creation, transmission, and reception of literary texts."[16] How "personal" is a letter? Derrida asks. To whom is it really addressed? Does the writer really intend to send it? Does the person to whom it is addressed really exist, or is it all an elaborate fakery? J.-L. Bounat's comments are to the point: "Derrida joue de cette évidence qu'il est bien facile de mêler, d'embrouiller les pistes de l'adresse; de court-circuiter ainsi les prétendus destinataires jusqu'à s'envoyer à soi-même les missives apparemment écrites pour d'autres . . . et ainsi à devenir son propre légataire."[17] The letter also constitutes a central element of the analytic essays of *The Post-Card*, and consequently the preface, entitled "Envois"—a series of letters—is very relevant. In "Le facteur de la Vérité" (note the play on words: *facteur* means not only "factor" but also "postman") Derrida criticizes Lacan's analysis of Poe's "Purloined Letter." "Spéculer—sur Freud" utilizes Freud's letters in explaining *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

More and more, as correspondence is recognized as an integral part of an author's work, writers themselves often take an active role in preparing the publication of their letters. Roger Martin du Gard personally oversaw and annotated Delay's edition of the Gide–Martin du Gard correspondence.[18] Volumes of the *correspondance générale* of numerous twentieth-century French authors are now appearing or are scheduled for publication: Kolb's Proust, Duchatelet's Romain Rolland, Martin's Gide, Pichois's Colette, Decaudin's Apollinaire, and Citron's Giono, among others.[19] (Many of these have been financed by universities and by government organizations such as Le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Le Centre National des Lettres, since private publishers are often reluctant to finance multivolume projects with limited sales possibilities.) So, if the letter is a dying art, the tomb in which the defunct will repose—the elaborate editions of *correspondances complètes*—is certainly an impressive one, and its mourners, largely drawn from the academic community, are legion. In the course of the past decades "epistolarity" has become a lively area of research, perhaps because it offers a relatively uncultivated turf at a time when traditional fields have been hoed and harrowed to exhaustion. Thus, although people write letters less and less, scholars are writing more and more about writing letters.

In recent years congresses and colloquia on the theme of "epistolarity" have been burgeoning on two continents, among them a colloquium held at the University of Nantes in 1982, whose proceedings, *Écrire, publier, lire: Les correspondances—Problematique et économie d'un genre littéraire*, were published in 1983; a second one was also held at Nantes, in 1984, followed by others in Aix-en-Provence, Fribourg (May 1984), and Urbino (July 1984). In 1986 the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises sponsored a meeting on "l'art épistolaire." The *décade* of the Centre Culturel International at Cérisy-la-Salle in July 1987 was devoted to the theme "L'épistolarité à travers les siècles: Geste de communication et/ou geste d'écriture."[20] Leading scholarly reviews are allotting more and more space to "the letter in literature." *Yale French Studies* devoted a special issue (number 71, 1986), edited by Charles H. Porter, to "Men/Women of Letters," with contributions by specialists, several of whom had participated in the 1982 Nantes colloquium, including J. G. Altman (author of the Ohio State University dissertation "Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form," 1982), P. Kolb, English Showalter, M. Bossis, D. Dawson, and M. Reid. The journals *Genre*, *Diacritics*, *La Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, *Cahiers d'Histoire des Littératures Romanes*, *Poétique*, *Critique*, the *NRF*, *La Revue de Littérature Comparée*, and *La Revue de Synthèse*, among others, have featured contributions on epistolarity.

This growing interest in the letter is not only reflected in scholarly books and articles and in the publication of correspondence, of which Kolb's ongoing edition of Proust's letters is an outstanding example. As L. Versini has observed, we have witnessed

the rise of "innovative" epistolary fiction in contemporary French literature.[21] The movement began in the early years of the century with works by Gide, Colette, Max Jacob, Montherlant, and Yourcenar. Even before, in 1893, one of Proust's projects was the writing of an epistolary novel in collaboration with W. D. Halévy, F. Gregh, and L. de la Salle.[22] Colette's *Vagabonde* and *Mitsou* (especially the latter) utilize epistolary techniques, as Joan H. Stewart has pointed out.[23] The notice devoted to *Mitsou* in the Pléiade edition of Colette's *Œuvres complètes* (2:1513) states that Mitsou seduced Robert through her letters, which attracted him to her thanks to their "gracieuse ingénuité" and that an epistolary dialogue in which there is never a guarantee that a question will have an answer "est la forme la plus appropriée pour que reste ouvert le champ des suites imaginaires." The early works of Gide make liberal use of letters. *Les nourritures terrestres* (1897) could be described as a long letter addressed to Nathanael. Much of *L'école des femmes* (1929) is cast in the form of a diary-letter. *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1925) contains only ten letters, but they make up a significant part of the various techniques by which Gide sought to liberate the novel from its "aspects pré-fabriqués."[24] The letters of Bernard to his friend Olivier and those of Laure, of Félix, and of Lady Griffith are employed to achieve a multiplicity of viewpoints, and the "sincerity" (?) of the letter is contrasted with the "counterfeit money," with the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Yourcenar's *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat* (1929) consists of a single letter in which the writer confesses his homosexuality to his wife.[25] Montherlant employs epistolary devices in the four volumes of *Les jeunes filles* (1936–39) to recount the tumultuous existence of a completely selfish and cynical novelist, Pierre Costals, incessantly pursued by madly adoring women such as Andrée Hacquebout, who bombard him with passionate letters which he rarely answers.

The epistolary novel has also found many adepts among the post–World War II generation, among them Nicole (*Les lions sont lâchés*, 1955), Gilles Sandier (*L'an n'aura plus d'hiver*, 1960), Lucie Faure (*Les filles du Calvaire*, 1963), Robert André (*La mémoire vaine*, 1964), and Arlette and Robert Bréchon (*Les noces d'or*, 1974). Influenced by contemporary critical theory, some of these writers emphasize by technical experimentation the inherent ambiguities of correspondence.[26] Louis Palomb in *Correspondance* (1968) shifts the interest of his text from the correspondents themselves, who become impossible to identify precisely, to speculations about who they might be and what they may be trying to say. In the course of B. Poirot-Delpech's novel *La folle de Lithuanie* (1970), a collection of letters from a woman to a Lithuanian friend, we learn that the writer and the addressee are one and the same person, that she is guilty of the murders she is describing, and that, since she is writing to an imaginary individual, that person exists: "Je m'adresse à toi, donc tu es." In *Des lettres non écrites* by Xavier-Agnan Pommeret (1974) the two correspondents engage in a lengthy discussion concerning the letters of a dead man. Frédéric Vitoux (*Les cartes postales*, 1973) describes the life of a family by means of the postcards which its members exchange.

Polyphony is used and abused in Pierre Gripari's *Frère Gaucher ou le voyage en Chine* (1973), an elaborate, farcical *rébus* composed of some 250 letters received by a beginning writer, Charles Creux. (The name Creux, meaning "empty," suggests that the void of his existence is being filled only through the correspondence addressed to him by an astonishing variety of persons: organizers of chain letters, publishers, an astrologer, fundraisers.) The three most important correspondents are: Creux's uncle, a retired professor; Frère Gaucher, the mystery of whose identity remains deliberately unresolved; and finally Gripari himself, employing a technique used by Gide in *Les faux-monnayeurs* of "la composition en abyme." Perhaps the "real" writer of all the letters is Creux or Gripari himself. Versini fears that the work is an indication that the epistolary novèl, once *ingénu*, has now become *ingénieux*—too ingenious for its own good.

However, a very recent novel, Dominique Eddé's *Lettres posthumes* (1989), returns to a classical simplicity in presenting the letters of an elderly Lebanese from Beirut to a French woman friend. He prefers that she be far away. (Mme de Sévigné shared this feeling: "J'aime à vous écrire. C'est donc signe que j'aime votre absence, ma fille.") The old man, writing from his war-torn city, confides to his friend: "Je n'abuserai à mon aise de votre amitié qu'en raison même de votre absence." Consequently, he is able to speak of feelings that he would have considered "immodest" to express in her presence. Absence, separation have very often in the past been a powerful motive for the writing of letters. Today, however, the ache of absence due to distance can be easily overcome—by dialing long-distance or by hopping on a plane and rejoining the loved one in a few hours, even though she be on the other side of the world. Perhaps we no longer feel so deeply the pain of physical absence. (Has modern man ceased to feel anything very deeply?) Still, ease in abolishing distance does not necessarily abolish a deeper sense of separation, even in the physical presence of "the other." We no longer have time to write letters or, by extension, to establish and maintain the long-term human relationships of which they are an expression. It is rare to find, at the end of this century, correspondences like those of Gide and Martin du Gard which extend over many years, from youth to old age. In spite of this apparent "renaissance," Versini fears that the epistolary novel, like the letter itself, is a menaced species: "Au crépuscule de la civilisation écrite, le roman épistolaire semble condamné. Il peut nous réserver de nouvelles surprises; effacé par l'inculture, ou s'effaçant devant le téléphone et le roman

'téléphonique' (Marguerite Cassan, *Fil à fil*, 1965), renaîtra-t-il de recherches purement formelles qui puent le mandarin?"

Far more absorbing than these recent epistolary novels are the letters, the letters themselves, of French writers of the period 1900–50, when the epistolary art experienced a magnificent autumnal flowering that produced, as the leaves were falling, a phenomenally rich harvest. We return with pleasure and fascination to the correspondence of Proust in Kolb's definitive edition. It adds new light and shadow to our understanding of the man and the artist, of the life and the work. Kolb himself has underlined its importance.

> His correspondence belongs in a special category and is, in a sense, unique, because Proust is one of those writers who kept no diary, who wrote no memoirs. Not only that, but he took considerable care to dilute the autobiographical elements of his great novel. . . . In consequence, Proust's letters represent the only authentic record we have of his inner self and of his earthly existence. We find in them the day-to-day record of his activities, of his feelings, his opinions on every conceivable subject, his methods and practices in composing his works—in short, what constitutes his life and his personality.[27]

In retrospect, Gide appears as essentially a diarist and letter writer, maintaining a lifelong contact with a vast gallery of his contemporaries, ranging from Jacques Copeau and Henri Ghéon to Roger Martin du Gard and Claudel, from the famous (Valéry) to the relatively obscure (C. Beck), and including Francis Jammes (1893–1938), Claudel (1899–1926), J.-E. Blanche (1892–1939), Jules Romains, Marc Allégret, Edmund Gosse, and Arnold Bennett. From the start, letter writing played an important role in the life of Martin du Gard,[28] who lived most of the time in semiseclusion in his château in the Orne; it served as a substitute for conversation. He could "converse" more freely with others by mail than he could in their company. Gide hailed him as a master of the epistolary art and preferred the spontaneity of his letters to the unbending discipline of his novels. Jacques Maritain and Julien Green in their long dialogue do not engage, as do most of their contemporaries, in a semipublic exposition of their views about literature, personalities, and social and artistic events. Saint Paul is mentioned more frequently than Paul Valéry. Rarely do we encounter such a moving record of an extended friendship founded on shared spiritual concerns.[29]

How different the two volumes of letters between Jean Paulhan, longtime editor of the *NRF*, and Francis Ponge, the poet of *Le parti-pris des choses*.[30] They cover a period of forty-five years and steam with invective and personal recriminations. Many of them containing Ponge's most violent attacks against Paulhan were never mailed. He included them, nevertheless, in the collected correspondence between the two, in his determination, apparently, to "settle old scores" even twenty years after Paulhan's death. As an editor, Paulhan maintained close contact with the literary lights of his period, including the flamboyant André Suarès.[31] (Gallimard has also published Paulhan's correspondence with Gide, Claudel, Rouault.) Suarès, always raging, denounces Gide as "ce pasteur de Sodome," Mauriac as "un hanneton de sacristie." Paulhan evidently put up with him, however, for in the political crises of the 1930s he had the courage to curse both Stalin and Hitler as "cancers in the stomach of Europe."

After such venting of bile, one turns with relief to the letters exchanged by the cosmopolitan and civilized Valery Larbaud with Marcel Ray, L.-P. Fargue, A. Reyes, Gide, C.-L. Philippe, G. Jean-Aubry. We await the eventual publication of many others, now in the Larbaud archives in Vichy. Saint-Exupéry's (Gallimard, 1984) express his deep devotion to his mother and illumine his literary work as well as his concept of "heroic humanism." The two volumes (of one thousand pages!) of Sartre's *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres* (Gallimard, 1983), edited by Beauvoir herself, abundant as they are, cover only the periods when the two companions were apart. When they were together, notes Beauvoir, "we telephoned." These letters represent only a minuscule part of Sartre's vast correspondence, and we may expect that many additional volumes will continue to appear. Included are letters (of an explicit sexuality) in which Sartre describes his affairs with a series of dubious young ladies even as he was proclaiming his love for Beauvoir, "Le Castor." One suspects that he may have been inventing these spicy stories, though, as he attempts to play the role of a Left Bank Valmont to divert and perhaps titillate his Castor-Mertueil.

One could go on and on, for we are confronted with an embarrassment of riches: letters of Ghéon, of E. Dabit, Jean Cocteau (*Lettres à Jean Marais*, 1987), Georges Bataille (*Lettres à Roger Caillois*, 1987), Jean Genet (*Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat*, 1988), Céline (*Lettres à des amies*, 1979), Jacques Rivière, Joë Bousquet, Colette (*Lettres à sa fille*, 1984), Max Jacob, Jules Romains, Albert Camus, Henry de Montherlant . . . A tidal wave of epistolarity! And it would be possible to add to this list dozens of other names.

It seems highly problematic if such productivity will persist in the future. Writers who have reached maturity in the closing years of the century are reaching for the phone or the fax rather than for the pen. As Henri Mendras has made clear in *La seconde révolution française*, France has experienced in the last twenty-five years a revolution more radical and wide-ranging than that of 1789. It has changed every aspect of national life, including that of the role of "culture" (which is no longer the possession of an elite) and of the social situation of writers and intellectuals, who are now more and more involved in pursuits allied to scientific and technological fields.[32] Literary activity has been absorbed by many other

sectors—publicity, radio, television, computerized information: "L'homme de lettres se double d'un expert et le milieu littéraire se dilue par gradations invisibles; l'activité littéraire tend à se confondre avec maintes autres activités, soit de publicité, soit d'information."[33] Mark Lilla in his "Letter from Paris" in the *Partisan Review* observes that the adjective most frequently used by French intellectuals today is "mediatized": politics has been *médiatisé*, sex has been *médiatisé*, and even the life of letters has been irreversibly *médiatisé* by the press and television.[34]

In this agitated and uncertain time of rapid and dramatic change, the decline, indeed the demise, of the letter constitutes one of the minor, less spectacular signs that we are entering, or have entered, a new "electronic" phase of world history. Derrida hints (as always enigmatically) that "the passing of the post" may well be a minor symptom of larger global developments: "A great thinker is always something of a great post, but here it is also the (historical, destinal) end of the posts, end of the race, and end of the mail ['fin de courses et fin de courrier'], of a great epoch, of a great halt in postal technology."[35] Meanwhile, in Europe and America, literary scholars nostalgically continue to occupy themselves, more than ever in the past, in studying, in commemorating the epistolary art, which perishes, unwept, unhonored, unsung, and largely unnoticed by the world at large. Still, its ghost will never cease to haunt a minority among us. And perhaps, who knows, one day it may rise again from the tomb.

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[1] J. Douchin, discussion of the intervention of M. de Saint-Laurent, "Cent lieues en dix-huit jours," in *Ecrire, publier, lire: Les correspondances* (Actes du Colloque International, "Les Correspondances"), Université de Nantes, 1983, p. 90. (Henceforth "Colloque de Nantes.")

[2] L. Versini, *Le roman épistolaire*, Paris, PUF, 1979, p. 7.

[3] Janet G. Altman, "The Letter Book as a Literary Institution, 1539–1789," in "Men/Women of Letters," C. A. Porter, ed., special issue of *Yale French Studies*, 71 (1986), p. 19. (Henceforth *YFS*.)

[4] Altman, p. 26.

[5] P. Dumonceaux, "Aux origines de la lettre intime et du genre épistolaire," Colloque de Nantes, p. 289.

[6] R. Duchêne, "Réalité vécue et réussite littéraire: Le statu particulier de la lettre," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 75:2 (March-April, 1973), p. 178.

[7] G. Lanson, *Choix de lettres du 17e siécle*, Paris, Hachette, 1890.

[8] Lee and Gauthier, *La vie des lettres*, New York, Van Nostrand, 1970, p. viii.

[9] P. Missac, "La correspondance comme genre littéraire et phénomène sociologique," *Critique*, 38 (1981), p. 1317.

[10] G. Guitard-Auviste, "L'intérêt du biographe pour les correspondances privées," in *Colloque sur les correspondances inédites*, Françon and Goyard, eds., Paris, Economica, 1984, pp. 103–12.

[11] Richard Ellmann, *a long the riverrun*, New York, Knopf, 1989, p. 265. For a review, see *WLT* 64:1, p. 114.

[12] M. Bossis, "La correspondance comme figure de compromis," Colloque de Nantes, p. 237.

[13] J. M. Varaut, "La difficulté d'être biographe: Les papiers Montherlant," *Correspondances inédites*, pp. 97–102.

[14] G. Bollème, "Préface à la vie d'écrivain," Colloque de Nantes ("Rapports de la correspondance et de l'œuvre"), p. 452.

[15] J. Derrida, *The Post-Card from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, A. Bass, tr., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 64. See also S. Benstock, "From Letters to Literature: *La Carte Postale* in the Epistolary Genre," *Genre*, 18 (1985), pp. 257–95.

[16] Janet G. Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1982, p. 112.

[17] J. L. Bounat, "Ouverture du Colloque: Envois," Colloque de Nantes, p. 13.

[18] A. Gide, R. Martin du Gard, *Correspondance*, 1: *1913–1934*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 117.

[19] C. A. Porter, "Foreword," *YFS*, p. 12.

[20] Porter, p. 13.

[21] Versini, pp. 253ff.

[22] Mina Curtis, *Other People's Letters*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1978, p. 207.

[23] Joan H. Stewart, "Colette and the Epistolary Novel," in *Colette the Woman*, Eisinger and McCarty, eds., Penn State University Press, 1981, pp. 45–53.

[24] Versini, p. 249.

[25] M. Delacroix, "*Alexis ou le traité du vain combat*: Un roman épistolaire de M. Yourcenar," *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises*, 29 (May 1977), pp. 223–41.

[26] Versini, p. 262.

[27] P. Kolb, "Proust's Letters," *YFS*, p. 199. See also A. Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983.

[28] R. Martin du Gard, *Correspondance générale*, vols. 1–5, Paris, Gallimard, 1980–88. For reviews of volumes 4 and 5, see *WLT* 63:1, p. 69, and 63:4, p. 654.

[29] J. Maritain, J. Green, *Une grande amitié: Correspondance, 1926–1972*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982. For a review, see *WLT* 57:3, p. 426.

[30] J. Paulhan, F. Ponge, *Correspondance, 1923–1968*, 2 vols., Paris, Gallimard, 1986. For a review, see *WLT* 61:3, p. 420.

[31] J. Paulhan, A. Suarès, *Correspondance, 1925-1940*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987. For a review, see *WLT* 62:3, p. 436.

[32] Henri Mendras, *La seconde révolution française, 1965–1984*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988.

[33] G. Brée, E. Morot-Sir, *La littérature française*, 9: *Du surréalisme à l'empire de la critique*, Paris, Arthaud, 1984, p. 34. For a review, see *WLT* 59:4, p. 571.

[34] *Partisan Review*, 2 (Spring 1989), p. 264.

[35] Derrida, *The Post-Card*, p. 32.

German Letters: The Correspondence of Georg Kaiser and of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem as Opposing Mirrors of Inner and Outer Reality

By HANS J. FABIAN

Although in the first decade of the twentieth century the art of letter writing started promisingly enough, as exemplified by the charming custom of illustrated and decorated mail gracing the letters and postcards of German artists,[1] the events of World War I soon set a different tone. There is no shortage of letters and collections of letters that have come out of the war itself, including the correspondence of many who gave their lives on what was believed to be a field of honor, but these letters are more akin to the lone cry of a wounded humanity than the measured sharing of thoughts, ideas, and concerns that is the essence of correspondence. World War I changed Europe in more ways than merely rearranging its borders. It also changed values and perceptions and, ultimately, the way people related to one another and valued one another. It is therefore only to be expected that one would find this changed and revalued relationship reflected not only in the political, artistic, and literary sphere, but also in the more personal and intimate realm of letter writing.

It is the more than fifteen hundred letters of the German dramatist Georg Kaiser that provide us with a revealing insight into the times, the man, and also the state of letter writing that extends over almost the entire first half of this century. Kaiser himself is somewhat of an enigma, both as a writer and as a man. No biography of his life exists, not even in the seemingly ubiquitous "rororo" books, which appear to include nearly all persons of note in our time. So these fifteen hundred letters of his which we have[2] might be expected to hold the promise of filling this gap and giving us an insight into the man and his work; and indeed they do provide a great deal of insight and penetration into unsuspected dimensions of his life. The letters extend over the larger part of Kaiser's adult years, from his days as a twenty-two-year-old in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century to his death in the Swiss Ascona in 1945. His Argentine excursion was prompted by his labors as a clerk in a German electrical firm—the budding writer's attempt to escape the confines of his bourgeois upbringing—whereas his Ascona presence represents the last days of his exile in Switzerland.

Although relatively little has been written about Kaiser himself, he was a figure of considerable note and significance in German literature during the first half of this century. Several of his plays continue to be works of importance. From the end of World War I to Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933, Kaiser was one of the luminaries of German stage and drama. His plays were a powerful and dominant factor of the Weimar stage; the frequency of their performance rivaled that of his nearest competitor Gerhart Hauptmann and even Shakespeare, the perennial favorite of German theater audiences. The appearance of Kaiser's plays on German stages at the end of World War I was of such meteoric effect and creative impact and his output so prolific that he was suspected of being the cover for a consortium of collaborating writers. At the zenith of his career his plays would open on several stages simultaneously.

Early in his career Kaiser was chosen to serve as the stage director of the Weimar theater, and thus as worthy to tread in the footsteps of the immortal Goethe. His play *The Citizens of Calais* (1914) foreshadowed the pacifist and antiwar sentiment that was to sweep Germany some four years later and cause it to lay down its arms in the face of certain defeat. The dramas *Gas I* and *Gas II*, written under the impact of that war, already envision the dilemma that modern industrial society would be forced to face in the exploitation of its resources and talents for selfish ends. Although these visions of disaster remain confined to the dimension of a gas explosion, their future atomic dimension is clearly apparent. Kaiser's many filmscripts and conceptualizations never reached the screen, but the reflection of his ideas can be seen in such films as Lang's *Metropolis* and Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

Kaiser himself was so successful in obscuring the sources of his inspiration that one of his earliest critics, Bernhard Diebold, characterized his work as utterly "cerebral" and devoid of feeling and sentiment. What Kaiser demanded of the drama and of his own work was to "think an idea through to its utter conclusion" and not to shrink from recognizing its uncomfortable or unprofitable consequences. In the case of *Gas I* this means that the play is more than a visionary illusion, that it takes the ideas of such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century town planners as Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard, and Raymond Unwin and casts them in the form of an inescapable choice between survival and indulgence. In the realm of ideas, Kaiser is here in the company of such men as Lewis Mumford and Walter Gropius and such idealists as his friend Gustav Landauer and his fellow dramatist Ernst Toller. Nowadays Kaiser's

writings languish in little-read anthologies of expressionist plays, but his work remains the prime example of this movement's stillborn idea of the "new man."

In the absence of many other authoritative biographical sources of substance, the fifteen hundred letters that have been published and to which we have access offer considerable insight into Kaiser the man and his work. Still, the picture of the man that they present is not necessarily that which we might expect in view of his writings or the ideas which we find in them.

One episode in Kaiser's life, amply reflected in his letters, illustrates the problem. In 1920, with his fame newly established, Kaiser, along with his wife, was arrested for embezzlement. The facts relating to this case, though well established in court records, seem unreal in retrospect. For whatever reasons—and any number might suggest themselves and be disproven—Kaiser pawned the valuables of a Munich villa he had rented for himself, his wife, and their three small children. The use he made of the money remains a mystery. His wife, the daughter of a well-to-do merchant whose inheritance Kaiser had squandered years earlier, joined in this bizarre undertaking by purloining jewelry out of the handbags of her visiting friends. After the arrest of Kaiser and his wife, their children were put into an orphanage, and Kaiser himself was dragged handcuffed through Germany over the course of a week, from Berlin, where he had gone to close a lucrative publishing contract, back to Munich, the site of his malfeasance.

The incident may be considered a small tragedy, and some insight into its dynamics might be sought in Kaiser's letters pertaining to it. Indeed, there are some forty printed pages of letters (thirty-eight items in all) written during the five months of his confinement. Addressed almost exclusively to his wife, they were composed in the psychiatric ward of a hospital to which he was admitted—and where he was judged quite sane—and in the jail to which he was remanded for four months after his conviction. In those forty pages, however, one will look in vain for the slightest hint of his motives or the dynamics of his actions. There are imploring declarations of devotion to his wife and children but not a single line related to the reality of his situation. Kaiser completely ignores the dire circumstances of his family and confines his letters almost exclusively to lamenting his own fate. When this state of illusion is interrupted by the realistic offer of legal assistance for him by the actress Blanche Dergan, with whom Kaiser had been romantically involved for some years, he prefers to remain in his world of illusion and advises her "not to lose herself" in such "trivial matters." Shortly before the end of his sentence, however, and in anticipation of his release, he is unable to respond to the emotional needs of his wife, and his mood abruptly changes. He writes to her in a letter of 4 April 1921:

> Margarethe
> These lines serve the purpose of informing you that the kindness of your frequent letters violates the regulations of prison: I receive these letters only intermittently and only now read your long letter of March 16th.
> I have to ask you to limit your correspondence considerably; you may only inform me of very essential matters.
> Greetings to you and the children.

His relationships are of his own making, and the closest ties are discarded when they have served their purpose and his needs.

Kaiser based the defense in his trial for embezzlement on the claim that the burden of being an artist was sufficient in itself and exonerated him from the consequences of his actions per se. Although the court remained unimpressed by this defense, the defendant's name and renown as an artist sufficed to keep many of his other schemes from being seen as the houses of cards that they were. At one point he initiated elaborate plans to buy a theater for the exclusive use and performance of his plays but failed to appear for the final signing of the contract because he lacked the means to give substance to this charade. Later, during the period of his exile in Switzerland from 1938 to 1945, he managed, in a Felix Krull–like manner, to manipulate a whole array of Swiss admirers—men as well as women—to suit his ends. His was an exile, incidentally, which may well have been motivated as much by a desire to escape family responsibility as by the need to avoid political persecution.

It is Kaiser's correspondence which is the cement holding together that labyrinthine construct involving a wife and family in wartime Germany, a paramour and a daughter in Switzerland, and various female liaisons of diverse nature and function, as well as fellow artists and other Swiss benefactors. Always picturing himself in the role of victim, posing as a Pygmalion-like figure who sacrifices himself for the sake of his art and on behalf of an uncomprehending and undeserving humanity, Kaiser dispenses letters in all directions and for the slightest purpose. At least once, near the end of his days, he meets his match in his fellow writer Bertolt Brecht. Undoubtedly banking on the fact that enough residue remained of Brecht's erstwhile respect for his work, he proposes to Brecht that they set up a joint publishing venture in postwar Germany, from which Kaiser promises untold riches for both of them. Brecht responds to this idea with the appropriate silence.

Characteristic of the unreality pervading Kaiser's letters is his obsession with secrecy and obfuscation, which extends to the deletion of dates from his letters and correspondence—a means of hiding his movements and whereabouts from recipients. The actual date and point of origin of many of them are no more than conjecture even today, since he would frequently resort to the ruse of having others mail his letters for him in distant locations. This deception was not merely for the sake of momentary effect; it

went to the heart of the matter, for at the center of Kaiser's world was his conviction that his ordination as artist freed him from ordinary restraints. It was this solipsism which was central in his defense on the embezzlement charges, where he claimed that his state as an artist constituted sufficient punishment in itself. It was a sentiment to which he gave poetic expression in one of his last plays, *Pygmalion*, which he judged as a major contribution to the purification of the world. How well Kaiser succeeded in constructing this world of his own is documented by his letters, which are a paper trail obscuring the man and camouflaging his actions, while he himself takes refuge behind his works. His solifidian arrogance must also be considered responsible for the astonishing mixture of fact and fiction found in the few cursory sketches of his life that we have to this day.

Kaiser's critics saw him as a combination of the idealist and the steel-edged dramatist of uncompromising logic, but his letters show the dichotomy between the man and his works, between the promise of the artist and the reality of the man. Perhaps this too is part of the reason for his nemesis as an artist. The bombast of Kaiser's letters, their often hysterical posing, and the hypnotic repetitiousness of phrases and expressions are reminiscent of another contemporary poseur—in the field of politics—whose coin of the realm was also deceit and charlatanism. Although the poet, ever more strident and insisting on his own genius at the last, may have stood at the opposite end of the political and ideological spectrum from the creator of that ideology which caused his exile, Kaiser's letters reveal their symbiosis as products of the same time and society.

If the letters of Georg Kaiser represent in their posturing, their self-delusion, and their misconception of reality the nadir of the art of letter writing during the first half of this century, and particularly that of the Weimar era, then the letters found in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*[3] can be considered its high point. The Benjamin-Scholem letters cover a seven-year period extending from the assumption of power in Germany by the National Socialists in January 1933 to the time just prior to the German attack on France in June 1940. Benjamin's death by suicide in September 1940 during an abortive attempt to cross the French-Spanish border and reach the security of a neutral country ended the correspondence. The circumstances surrounding the survival of the letters in Benjamin's possession, of which his were the only copy, are themselves worthy of note. Confiscated by the Gestapo along with the rest of Benjamin's few possessions in his Paris apartment, the letters escaped destruction by being misclassified and shipped to Germany at the approach of the Allies. After an odyssey which took them to Moscow and finally to the archives of the East German Academy of Sciences, they were made available to Scholem for editing and publishing.

The correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem ranges from the intensely personal, such as their concern for their respective brothers—both of whom perished in German concentration camps—to a report on the American view of the fate of Jews in post-Anschluss Austria. According to Scholem, who was visiting America at the time, this "had a huge impact here as well, but more of an abstract one—it's just too far away, and nobody has any real notion of what it might be like." Within these relatively few letters, 128 in all, one comes across much of what made up the intellectual landscape of Europe of that day, or at least its discussable remnants. One finds here comments on works such as Hannah Arendt's *Rachel Varnhagen* and the "feeble" early anti-Nazi polemics of Heinrich Mann's publication *Die Sammlung*, as well as insights into the dynamics of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and its disciples Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. The state of Arab-Jewish relations in the British mandate of Palestine is discussed along with the attitude of the French authorities toward the German exiles within France's borders.

So extensive is the range of topics found in these letters that one becomes aware of those events which escape comment, though they too must have drawn the correspondents' attention and captured their concern. One thinks, for example, of the fate of such fellow writers and intellectuals as Carl von Ossietzky, who received the Nobel Peace Prize while in a concentration camp, and of Kurt Tucholsky's suicide in Sweden in 1935 out of despair over the events in Germany. Although the focus of their critical concern may have differed markedly in depth and orientation, the four were of nearly equal age and shared a common Berlin heritage and childhood. The bond of that common early experience lies at the core of the Scholem-Benjamin relationship. The lost innocence and promises which that childhood now represents surface again and again in Benjamin's letters through his continual references to his biographical work "Berlin Childhood around 1900." The increasingly abstract nature of the various versions of this work reflect Benjamin's desire to preserve its intellectual honesty, even though the perceptions on which it was based had been branded an illusion by later developments. By referring again and again to his "Berlin Childhood' in his letters, Benjamin also bridges the separation in time, space, and ideology between himself and Scholem and reaffirms their common dedication to truth, their shared fate as Jews in a hostile world, and the awareness of their being devoted to an intellectual and moral honesty which was their heritage.

At the time of the earliest surviving letters Scholem had become a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It was a financially precarious existence but one of relative security. Benjamin, on the other hand, was about to depart permanently from the newly proclaimed Third Reich

to France, which offered exile but little security. The measure of their ideological differences remains considerable. Scholem is the committed Zionist, whereas Benjamin lays claim to an abstract and skeptical Marxism. The essence of their differences lies in Benjamin's continuing faith in and insistence on a "secret and healthy complementarity" between German and Jewish tradition, which at this time "required a silence about their ties to each other." Scholem, for his part, also believing in a "secret core of tradition," did not think of finding such a core outside Judaism itself.

The letters also provide a great deal of insight into the personal relationships of the writers without ever becoming "personal," though neither Scholem nor Benjamin hesitates to speak candidly about those whom he knows or encounters. The correspondents' honesty extends to their own writings and to their criticism of each other's works. To whom but a trusted friend would Benjamin confess that he was spending ten days writing an essay for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on the occasion of the two-hundredth birthday of Christoph Wieland, of whose work he had not read a line prior to this time? Scholem, by contrast, can claim that his lectures in New York were an "enormous success" without sounding anything but honest in his appraisal. What a sacrifice it must have been for both when Benjamin refrained from using his meager resources, financial and emotional, to go to Paris during Scholem's transit through that city in 1938 for what would have been their last chance to meet. Doing so would have jeopardized Benjamin's completion of his famous essay "Baudelaire and the Paris of the Second Empire," a piece on which he was working while in Sweden as a guest of Brecht, with whom he also shared a close friendship.

The one topic which binds these letters and this friendship more closely than any other—and indeed in a very real sense can be said to dominate them—is Kafka. For both Scholem and Benjamin, Kafka and his work are at the center of the issues of the day and represent the key to the dilemma which Europe is facing. It is at Scholem's urging that Benjamin puts down his ideas on Kafka in a letter which sparkles with both insight and the joy of a shared revelation. In a short and precise analysis of Max Brod's *Kafka* Benjamin demolishes the false logic and incongruity he detects in that work. Unable to accept the idea of seeing Kafka swing "pendulum-like between the figure of a Hausfreund and a saint," he presents his own analysis, in which he recognizes Kafka as the ultimate disciple of society's fateful dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Equating the solitary nature of Kafka's writing with the unimodular painting of Paul Klee, he makes an imaginative foray into artistic symbiosis and casts more light on the work of both artists than does many a longer treatise.

In comparing the Benjamin-Scholem correspondence with the letters of Georg Kaiser, one cannot escape observing that the latter display no meaningful reflections of contemporary events. The betrayal of Czechoslovakia, the Anschluss, the beginning of World War II, the invasion of Normandy, the liberation of France—all pass without comment in Kaiser's letters. The most that one can point to in them in this respect are some diatribes against the Allied leadership, at one point even predicting a German victory in the face of already certain defeat—statements which can only be explained as prompted by Kaiser's frustration at the deliberate rate of the Allied advance and his eagerness and expectation to continue his pre–1933 existence. Not a line in these letters indicates any awareness of the tragedy which had befallen Germany and all of Europe or the consequences that this engendered for the future. The figure of Kafka is a case in point. Obviously familiar with Kafka's oeuvre, Kaiser mentions it only once, in a letter to his wife, comparing his existence to that of the "hunger artist." Kaiser's use of this title to lament his own condition exhausts the depth of its meaning for him.

In his splendid and definitive essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin examines the changing nature of art in our time in the face of its wide dispersal and availability. The same evaluation may well be accorded to the art of letter writing in the age of faxes, photocopiers, and electronic information transfers. The Benjamin-Scholem correspondence furnishes evidence that letters, even more than literature itself, are an act of personal devotion, a sacrifice of self, of trust and love and even of art, placed in the hand of the recipient. If these ingredients are missing, letters are mere husks of words, devoid of lasting meaning. In his last letter to Scholem, Benjamin writes, "Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it—is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness." His own letters have brightened that future in no small measure and will remain a benchmark against which others will have to be judged.

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[1] See Gerhard Wietek, *Gemalte Künstler-Post*, Munich, Thiemig, 1977.

[2] Georg Kaiser, *Briefe*, West Berlin, Propyläen, 1980. Reviewed in *WLT* 55:4 (Autumn 1981), p. 667.

[3] *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, Gary Smith & André Lefevere, trs., New York, Schocken, 1989.