Letters Mingle Soules

Ben Howard
Letters Mingle Soules

Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules;  
For, thus friends absent speake.  

—Donne, “To Sir Henry Wotton”

BEN HOWARD

FEW LITERARY FORMS are more inviting than the familiar letter. And few can claim a more enduring appeal than that imitation of personal correspondence, the letter in verse. Over the centuries, whether its author has been Horace or Ovid, Dryden or Pope, Auden or Richard Howard, the verse letter has offered a rare mixture of dignity and familiarity, uniting graceful talk with intimate revelation. The arresting immediacy of the classic verse epistles—Pope’s to Arbuthnot, Jonson’s to Sackville, Donne’s to Wotton—derives in part from their authors’ distinctive voices. But it is also a quality intrinsic to the genre. More than other modes, the verse letter can readily combine the polished phrase and the improvised excursus, the studied speech and the wayward meditation.

The richness of the epistolary tradition has not been lost on contemporary poets. On the contrary, during the past three decades the verse letter has attracted a wide variety of poets, who have both explored and redefined the form. “There seems to be hardly a contemporary poet who does not make use of the epistolary tradition, whether s/he grounds the poem with the moniker ‘Letter’ or not.” And far from being limited to “academic” or formalist writers, the verse letter cuts across the usual divisions, appearing in the work of poets as diverse as A. D. Hope, Stephen Dunn, John Hollander, Robert Hass, and the poets of Northern Ireland. For Donald Davie, in Six Epistles to Eva Hesse, the verse letter is an occasion for moral and aesthetic reflection. For Linda Pastan, in “Letter to a Son at Exam Time,” the form is a vehicle for complaint. And for Sylvia Plath, in “Letter in November,” a mode linked historically with leisure becomes a setting for lyric intensity.

The popularity of epistolary verse may signify no more than a fashion, akin to the vogue for “metaphysical” poetry in the 1950s, but I suspect that the rise of interest in the form transcends mere fashion.

PHOTO: BRUCE TAYLOR

Ben Howard is the Margaret and Barbara Hagar Professor in the Humanities at Alfred University. He received an M.A. in creative writing (1968) and a Ph.D. in English literature (1971) from Syracuse University, where he studied with Donald Justice, Philip Booth, and the late William Wasserstrom. Northern Interiors, his second collection of poems, was published by Cummington Press in 1986; Lenten Anniversaries, his third collection, will be published by Cummington in 1988.

I would also suggest that the resurgence of epistolary writing reflects some important changes that have occurred in American poetry during the past two decades. In rethinking an ancient tradition, writers as venturesome as Hass and Richard Hugo have not been indulging in academic reconstruction. They have been reinterpreting a tradition and appropriating its conventions for contemporary use. To watch the transformations of the verse letter in the hands of such writers as Marvin Bell, William Stafford, and Carolyn Forché, and to contrast these with the more conservative use of the form by such poets as Howard Nemerov and Mona Van Duyn, is to see the features and the direction of American poetry a bit more clearly.

The present good health of the verse letter may be partly a matter of good luck, but my guess is that the stubborn survival of the form may also be due to its lack of crisp generic definition, its unusual adaptability. Unlike the verse drama, the sonnet, the ode, and the narrative poem, which have not traveled well in the twentieth century, the verse letter has passed more or less intact from Pope to Coleridge (whose "Dejection: An Ode" was originally a verse letter) to Auden and lately to Hugo, Bell, and Stafford, adapting itself to the needs and idioms of each new period.

The form has been so adaptable because, in part, it is so protean—or so ill defined. Aristotle provides no definition, and Horace, the Latin model for most verse letters in English and the author of Ars Poetica (itself a verse letter on poetics), provides abundant examples of the form in his Epistles but offers no definition. Even the neoclassical theorists—Nicolas Boileau, Thomas Blount, Joseph Trapp—remain virtually mute on the subject, though the verse epistle flourished in the age of Pope, and the master himself announced in 1729 that in the future he would write nothing but verse epistles. (Pope kept his promise, for better or worse, at least in his major poems.)

Modern scholarship has also paid scant attention to the verse letter, preferring to focus on epistolary fiction. The handful of articles that have appeared have traced the lineage of the form but shied away from precise definition, tacitly acknowledging the difficulty of the task. One modern scholar, Jay Arnold Levine, has suggested that the verse letter should not be thought of as a genre at all but as a "manner of writing... adaptable to such fixed forms as the elegy and the satire." That sounds like hedging, but it may be the only practical way to deal with a form that has so many practitioners and so few strict conventions.

Surveying such varied examples as Richard Howard's Fellow Feelings, Forché's "Ourselves or Nothing" (a verse letter to Terence des Pres), and Anne Stevenson's elaborate Correspondences, one is tempted to throw up one's hands and to conclude that the verse letter may be defined only loosely as a poem that imitates the tone and structure of a familiar letter and addresses itself to a recipient, real or imagined, alive or dead.

Fortunately for the critic, there are a few limiting conventions. Most prominent among these is the expectation that an epistolary poem will...
be intimate and self-revealing. It will disclose the stirrings of the inner self. “Language most shewes a man; speake that I may see thee.” So wrote Ben Jonson, translating Juan Vives, the Renaissance rhetorician, and echoing a Renaissance commonplace. For Jonson, as for his classical forebears, a familiar letter is a mirror of the soul. Its first cousins are the diary, the journal, and the written or spoken confession. And of all those forms, the letter is the most revealing. In his treatise on style, the first-century rhetorician Demetrius suggests that “everybody reveals his whole soul in his letters. In every other form of composition it is possible to discern the writer's character, but in none so clearly as in the epistolary.”

Sixteen centuries later, Jonson's friend James Howell describes letters as the “Keys of the Mind;' which “open all the Boxes of one's Breast, all the cells of the Brain, and truly set forth the inward Man.” The expectation that a familiar letter will reveal its writer's inmost thoughts is so firmly rooted in tradition as to carry the force of an unwritten rule. A verse letter that disappoints this expectation is likely to be read as something else—a treatise, perhaps, or an essay in verse.

But the convention of intimacy is only one of two parallel strands in the epistolary tradition. Interwoven with the idea of the letter as a diary or confession is the idea of the letter as a declamation, the written counterpart of a formal oration.

"And to describe the true definition of an Epistle or letter,' wrote William Fulwood, "it is nothing but an Oration written, containing the mynde of the Orator or writer, thereby to give to understand to him or them that be absent, the same that should be declared if they were present." This conception of the familiar letter was common among the Renaissance humanists, notably Erasmus, who was an avid practitioner of the form. In his De Ratione Conscribendi Epistolis, a compilation of the rhetorical rules for the familiar epistle, Erasmus places special emphasis on the context of the oration, which is to say, the relationship of the speaker to a specific audience. And as Levine remarks, "the humanist conception of the letter as an oration survived unchanged for at least 200 years in popular English formularies, from the first letter-writer of 1568 to a handbook published after the death of Pope." When Howell (in his Epistolae Ho-Elianæ, 1645, bk. i, s. i) distinguished between the letter and the oration, arguing that “the one should be attir'd like a Woman, the other like a Man,” he points to an important difference in diction and tone. But in seeing the two as comparable in the first place, Howell expresses the traditional view.

T THE TENSION BETWEEN public and private elements in the verse letter accounts, in part, for its inherent drama. Few other forms contain so rich a contrast of personal and impersonal, confessional and rhetorical conventions, which the poet must manipulate and hold in balance. Among contemporary poems, one can find instances, such as Anne Sexton’s “Letter Written on a Ferry Crossing Long Island Sound,” where the idea of letter-as-oration, directed toward an audience, is not very prominent. And there are other poems, such as
Charles Tomlinson’s “Letter from Costa Brava,” where the motive of self-revelation is almost entirely absent. But the ideal occupies a territory somewhere between these extremes. It lies somewhere between the “open” letter addressed to the New York Times and the monkish letter addressed to oneself, or to God, or to one’s most intimate friend.

The mingling of private and public elements in the verse letter helps account for its special affinity with the poetry of exile. “Carolina,” asks the speaker in Forché’s “The Island,” “do you know how long it takes / any one voice to reach another?” The speaker is Claribel Alegria, the exiled Salvadorean novelist, whose voice is introduced at the close of the poem, but it might speak for countless poets who have written to friends in exile or published their own sorrows in epistolary laments. As might be expected, such poems focus mainly on the exile’s deprivations. But often their subject is the remembered homeland. And not surprisingly, they often contain their share of special pleading, recrimination, and public criticism of those in power.

The ancestors of all such poems are the two series of verse letters entitled Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto, written by the exiled poet Ovid in the first century A.D. One of Ovid’s recent translators, the classicist L. R. Lind, has remarked that “the history of the exile of the artist begins for the western world with the banishment of certain Greek lyric poets and philosophers and in the Roman world with that of Ovid.” Even after twenty centuries, Ovid’s complaint remains compelling. Addressed to friends, enemies, and most often to his wife, Ovid’s verse letters tell the story of his banishment to the western coast of the Black Sea, where he lived in continual misery. His sequence of poems is at once a lamentation, a confession of guilt, and a plea for a reprieve.

The causes for Ovid’s exile are unknown. His banishment was ordered by Augustus, without benefit of trial, for reasons summarized by Ovid as “carmen et error.” The exact nature of the error has been debated for centuries, but carmen clearly refers to Ovid’s Art of Love, which offended Augustus’s sensibilities and threatened his program of moral reform. The second book of the Tristia, by turns witty, hyperbolic, wheedling, and ingratiating, is a defense of the Art of Love, organized along the lines of a legal brief. By contrast, Book 4 is a heartfelt lament, rich in autobiographical detail, in which Ovid reflects on his mistakes, contemplates the coming of old age, and reveals his fear of losing his friends’ affections. He rebukes a fair-weather friend who has neglected to write. He urges his wife to show strength. And he rejects all consolations, particularly the platitude that time heals all wounds:

Time makes the grapes swell riper as their clusters grow in the vineyard
Until each grape scarcely contains the juice that it harbors within.

Time and the seed produce the white ears of the ripening grain field.
And time takes care that the apples do not taste bitter or sour.
Time thins the edge of the plowshare as it cuts and renew
the farmland;

Time wears away rigid flintstones and adamant, hardest of things.
It gradually softens men’s anger no matter how savage it may be;
It lessens our sorrows and lifts up the hearts of those who feel low.
Everything therefore the passing of time with its silent footstep
Can diminish and weaken, yes, everything but my trouble and
care.

(bk. 4, sec. 6, lines 9–18)

Reading Ovid’s mournful lines, Aleksander Pushkin was moved to write
his own Epistle to Ovid, declaring his affinities with a fellow exile. In
so doing, Pushkin “joined hands with the Latin poet across eighteen
hundred years.”

IN OUR OWN TIME, the poetry of exile and the epistolary
mode have continued to converge. One thinks of Ezra Pound’s “Ex
ile’s Letter” (a translation of Li Po) or, more recently, of John Logan’s
“Letter to a Young Father in Exile.” Viewing exile less literally, as a state
of mind rather than a physical condition, one thinks of Hugo’s letters
from the Far West, of Robert Pack’s “Letter from Hell,” and, most poignantly,
of Van Duyjn’s “Letters from a Father,” where the verse epistle
becomes a dramatic monologue, expressing the loneliness and vulner­
ability of old age. All of these poems join the meditative ethos of the
verse letter to the urgency of separation. All express what Derek Wal­
cott (in “Piano Practice”) has called “the epistolary pathos, the old Lafo­
guean ache.”

Carolyn Porche’s recent poems, in The Country between Us,11 explore
kindred feelings, though without much sense of leisure or meditative
calm. Only one of the poems in this collection identifies itself as episto­
lar (“Letter from Prague: 1965–75”), but several others, including
“Joseph,” “As Children Together,” and “Ourselves or Nothing,” have
the tone and structure of personal letters, and most are darkened by
a mood of exile, a sense of estrangement, both from the foreign coun­
tries she visits and from the homeland to which she returns. Porche’s
best poems might be described (in Thoreau’s phrase, later Philip
Booth’s) as so many letters from a distant land, though the “distance”
is figurative rather than literal—an emotional or temporal divide, im­
posed by years of growth and change.

Alienation is, of course, a modernist convention, an existentialist
cliché. In the work of European writers such as Joseph Brodsky and
Czeslaw Milosz, whose lives have been fractured by exile, the theme
can still take on great resonance, but in American poets, whose exile
is more often chosen than imposed, the stance can seem vicarious and
false. Porche is well aware of this trap, and if her weaker poems some­
times fall into it, her strongest hold up precisely because they subject
the sense of estrangement to exacting scrutiny. In “Expatriate,” for ex­
ample, Porche attacks the pretensions of a self-styled American exile living
in Turkey. And in “The Return,” the most reflective of her poems on
El Salvador, she employs the verse letter as a tool for self-confrontation.

For anyone interested in epistolary verse, “The Return” deserves close
study, because it is a poem that adopts the conventions of the form
while reversing its customary strategy. “The Return” is the epistolary
address of a speaker, presumably Porche, to a woman twenty years her
senior. The poem recalls a conversation in which Forché, newly returned from El Salvador, appears naïve and bewildered, while her friend is portrayed as clear headed, perceptive, and politically astute. As she presents herself in this poem, Forché is a fragmented woman, haunted by exposure to poverty and atrocity, frightened by strange cars near her house, and burdened by a sense of alienation from familiar surroundings.

Josephine, I tell you
I have not rested, not since I drove
those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. I go mad, for example,
in the Safeway, at the many heads
of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples
and coffee, especially the coffee.
And when I speak with American men,
there is some absence of recognition:

(19.62–72)

By contrast, her friend appears seasoned and stable—and unimpressed by the poet’s confessions. “[You’ve] learned a little about starvation,” she remarks. But does Forché think she has come close to the victims’ suffering? As viewed by this interpreter of her feelings, the poet is at best a well-intentioned spectator, a typical North American with dubious motives and the bad habit of viewing herself as “apart from others.” In the poem’s closing lines, her friend delivers a stinging rebuke:

It is
not your right to feel powerless. Better
people than you were powerless.
You have not returned to your country,
but to a life you never left.

(20.121–25)

Thus the older woman, who has prevailed all along, also has the final say.

“The Return” is a remarkable poem, not least because it adheres to convention while altering one important element: the balance of recipient and speaker. In the traditional verse letter, the response of the recipient influences tone and content but is, at most, implied. In Forché’s poem, however, the recipient’s role is crucial, and her attitudes shape our impressions of the speaker. In a sense, Forché has surrendered her authority, becoming her recipient’s eager pupil, but she has also gained rhetorical advantages. She can now probe her soul without cloistering herself in the lyric-meditative framework. She can observe herself through another person’s eyes. And, not incidentally, she can write an open letter on Salvadorean atrocities, presenting her didactic content within a convincing dramatic situation.

In other respects, “The Return” stays close to epistolary conventions, most notably in its use of direct address, its colloquial diction, its mingling of public and private elements, and its illusion of a free-flowing digressive structure. But by making the recipient the primary speaker
and the poem itself a kind of dramatic monologue in reverse, Forché extends the boundaries of the form. “The Return” is both a tour de force in its own right and a contribution to the history of the verse epistle.

I

IN THE ENGLISH SECRETARIE (1599), an influential treatise on the familiar letter, Angel Day defines the letter as a vehicle for “the familiar and mutual talk of one absent friend to another.”

Day’s phrase is felicitous and useful. It is a reminder that a familiar letter is often an act of friendship, and that its diction is usually conversational. A gesture of true friendship requires an appropriate idiom. And over the centuries the familiar letter, whether in verse or prose, has maintained its ties with the “plain” or Senecan style.

But friendship has been more than the occasion for epistolary poetry. It has often been the subject. Epistolary poets from Jonson to Auden have analyzed the obligations and potentialities, the varieties and the nature of friendship while addressing their friends in verse. Friendship as a theme for epistolary writing goes back at least as far as Jonson’s verse letters, particularly his “Epistle to Sackville,” where the poet (drawing freely upon Seneca’s De Beneficiis) appraises acts of friendship within the ethos of courtly cynicism. In this frank and witty poem, Jonson distinguishes between “forc’d” or dutiful gifts (“Gifts stinke from some”) and those, like Sackville’s, that spring from generosity and reflect true friendship.

Elsewhere, Jonson ponders the question of style. In his epistle to his friend John Selden, he observes that friendship is best served by candor, and candor is best expressed in an idiom void of ornament:

I know to whom I write. Here, I am sure,
Though I am short, I cannot be obscure:
Less shall I for the Art of dressing care,
Truth, and the Grace best, when naked are.

(“An Epistle to Master John Selden,” 158.1-4)

These lines describe themselves, being as succinct and unadorned as any in Jacobean poetry. The views they express are by no means limited to Jonson. On the contrary, Jonson echoes principles set forth in Renaissance epistolary treatises, most notably Justus Lipsius’s Institutio Epistolarum, which prescribes “brevity, perspicuity, [and] simplicity” as the qualities of an appropriate epistolary style. Jonson’s friend Francis Beaumont expressed similar views in a homelier fusion, when he promised to write his letters in a style “which men / send cheese to towne with.”

In the poetry of our own time, the marriage of the plain style and the “epistolary way” has proved lasting, though perhaps one should not make too much of it, since, as Donald Hall has remarked, many postwar American poets “explore the diction that cats and dogs can read,” and the demotic style is not unique to the epistolary mode. There are also a number of modern epistolary poems, such as Howard’s Fellow Feelings, F. T. Prince’s “Epistle to a Patron,” and Stanley Kunitz’s “Night Letter,” that rise several octaves above the demotic.


But the prevailing style has been the colloquial, even in poets one thinks of as formal, such as C. H. Sisson, whose “Letter to John Donne” begins with direct conversational address (“I know you well enough, John Donne. . .”). The risk, of course, is that the diction will be nothing more than colloquial and that the style will sink into a lax discursiveness. The epistolary mode encourages ease of measure, but it can also foster self-indulgence. More than the lyric poet, the epistolary writer must resist the urge to stew, as E. L. Mayo once put it, in one’s own juices. A firm hand is desirable, if not essential; and a formal pattern may be helpful.

Among contemporary poets, the writer who has most successfully joined the formal pattern and the plain style is probably Mona Van Duyn, who has continued to write in rhyme and meter while nudging her language close to the level of prose. Speaking of Letters from a Father and Other Poems, Van Duyn has commented that in writing those poems, she was trying deliberately to approach the level of prose without losing poetic intensity. That tendency is also evident in her earlier work, especially in such poems as “Valentines to the Wide World,” “Toward a Definition of Marriage,” and “A Time of Bees,” and it is particularly noticeable in her two epistolary poems, “Letter from a Constant Reader” and “Open Letter, Personal.”

The latter poem deserves to be better known. It is a verse epistle of unusual wit and power, whose subject is friendship, and whose theme is the effects of long-term friendship on the psyche. As envisioned by this expansive, analytic poem, friendship has two distinct phases or stages. The first is a form of courtship, in which the mystery of personality attracts strangers to each other. The second is the advanced stage, in which friends of ten years’ standing know each other inside and out, and feel trapped in the roles created by their bonds.

In the first stage friends feel a sense of distance but also affection and fascination: “As long as the moon hides half her face we are friends of the moon. / As long as sight reaches through space we are fond of the star.” At this point, friends resemble literary critics whom an obscure text baffles and entices:

It is in the strain, in the reaching of the whole mind to see what it is that is coming toward us, what we are coming toward, as the earliest essays on Wallace Stevens’ poetry touch and retouch the lines, trying to tell, but the words are just behind the tip of the tongue— it is there, below knowledge, before the settled image, that the lovely, hard poem or person is befriended.

(“Open Letter, Personal,” 15–21)

Friends at this stage still like each other. And because the “image” each presents is not yet “settled,” they still have room to move. They can take on new identities and adopt new roles.

But, as Van Duyn ruefully informs her recipients, “we are in the
late essays”; “we do not like each other any more.” Gathered in one room, she and her friends crowd each other; their smoke burns “each other’s eyes raw.” They know each other all too well and can hide “nothing personal but the noises of sex and digestion and boredom . . . “ They can predict each other's gestures, tastes, and attitudes, and they all know “which of us are jealous of each other, and which fake or lic, / or don’t shave their legs . . . “ Worse yet, their mutual knowledge stultifies personal growth. “I have given you paper faces,” Van Duyn complains, “and they have grown lifelike, / and you have stuck on my lips in this sheep’s smile.” The product of their friendship is a web of dependencies, from which no one can be freed:

We know the quickest way to hurt each other, and we have used that knowledge. See, it is here, in the joined strands of our weakness, that we are netted together and leave together strongly like the great catch of mackerel that ends an Italian movie. I feel your bodies smell and shine against me in the mess of the pitching boat. My friends, we do not like each other any more. We love.

(50–56)

The figure is exact, the vision a mixture of tragic and comic. One is reminded of the old joke about fish and house guests: after three days both smell bad.

“Open Letter, Personal” is in some ways a conventional verse letter, but it is also a departure from tradition. In keeping with the precedents set by Jonson, Donne, and Pope, it addresses friends in the vernacular style. But in Van Duyn’s hands, the “plain style” becomes an earthy, talky idiom, constrained and shaped by meter and rhyme. Friendship itself becomes a state far removed from the traditional ideal. No longer elevated to a spiritual sphere, where souls mingle and spirits mix, friendship is viewed as a sorry but necessary condition, a terrestrial confine, from which escape is out of the question.

And the style of the poem suits its theme exactly. Van Duyn’s level, discursive line, from which traces of lyricism have been all but blotted out, corresponds to her generous, comic, and realistic vision. Friends such as these have much to talk about, but they have little reason to sing.

STANLEY KUNITZ ONCE DEFINED the verse letter as an exercise in tone. That definition is humbling, and it is less than comprehensive, but it does call attention to a problem central to the form.

Kunitz’s own “Night Letter,” written before he abandoned the formal style, well illustrates the point. From beginning to end, the poem sustains the tone established in the opening lines:

The urgent letter that I try to write
Night after night to you to whom I turn,
The staunchless word, my language of the wound,

Begins to stain the page.

(101.1–4)

The tone is at once formal and colloquial, familiar and grand. The John­sonian eloquence of the third line balances the conversational “try to write” and “begins to stain,” and the regular pentameter braces the rhythms of ordinary speech. The result is a heightened colloquialism: the verse letter’s “graceful precision and dignified familiarity.” 21

To control such a tone is no easy matter. The tendency is either to rise to a Yeatsian oratorical pitch or to sink into chatty banalities. “Night Letter” tends in the first direction, becoming stiffly Jacobean and rather too formal for a contemporary ear (“The bloodied envelope addressed to you, / Is history, that wide and mortal pang”). In postwar verse letters, however, the tendency is in the opposite direction, and when control lapses, the tone goes flat.

That is often the case with Richard Hugo’s letters, 22 where moments of poignancy and lyric grace must coexist with news and prattle. In his verse letter to Mayo, who has just returned from teaching, Hugo dreams of a retirement and a record of integrity comparable to Mayo’s:

O.K., then this,

I want to retire kind and hardheaded as you, to know
not once did I leave the art, not once did I fail to accept
the new, not once did I forget that seminal coursing
of sound in poems and that lines are really the veins of men
whether men know it or not.

(“Letter to Mayo from Missoula,” 53.35–40)

Elsewhere, in a letter on permanence and change, Hugo writes his own compelling variation on a line from Vi Gale (“Lakes change, trees rot and birds move on”):

And listen to ourselves move on, each on the road he built
one young summer while the world was having fun. Lakes change.
Trees rot. Roads harden. Whatever road, it was the blind one
and the only. Poems are birds we loved who moved on and remain.
Think of poems as arms and know from this town I am writing
whatever words might find a road across the mountains. Dick.

(“Letter to Gale from Orlando,” 41.25–30)

The power of such passages is undeniable. Yet language as height­ened and moving as this must stand cheek by jowl with chummy re­marks (“Marvin Bell is fun to work with”), newsy details (“Went icefishing / Saturday with Yates”), and offhand observations (“I felt funny that day in San Francisco”), which level an otherwise vigorous style. It is as if the poet distrusted his own lyric gift or felt that ground-level diction might authenticate his flights of rhetoric. If the effect is unfor-
And this problem grows even more critical when the recipient of a verse letter is a dead poet or historical figure. By their nature, poems of this kind (whose noble ancestor is Petrarch’s *Letters to Classical Authors*) run the risk of dwindling into parodies or gestures of pious veneration. Their artifice—or artificiality—is all too apparent.

Nevertheless, one does not have to look far in postwar verse to find persuasive examples of this kind of poem, for example, Nemerov’s “To Lu Chi,” an eloquent address to the fourth-century Chinese poet. More recent examples are Maura Stanton’s verse letters to Marcus Aurelius and William Pitt Root’s “Dear Jeffers (A Note from Sheridan to Carmel-by-the-Sea),” which celebrates Root’s affinities with the earlier poet.

Nemerov’s letter is especially interesting. At first glance, its premise seems improbable: an epistolary address from a modern American poet to his ancient Chinese counterpart, musing on the nature and function of language. Moreover, the text to which Nemerov addresses himself, an English translation of Lu Chi’s *Wen Fu*, or Essay on Literature, is not, on the face of it, a poem with which an ironic-skeptical temperament such as Nemerov’s could be expected to feel much kinship. Lu Chi’s concerns are timeless, but in diction and tone the English translation of the *Wen Fu* often resembles an imitation of William Blake or Rabindranath Tagore. In a section entitled “Meditation Before Writing,” we are told that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In the beginning} \\
\text{All external vision and sound are suspended,} \\
\text{Perpetual thought itself gropes in time and space;} \\
\text{Then, the spirit at full gallop reaches the eight} \\
\text{limits of the cosmos,} \\
\text{And the mind, self-baundant, will ever soar to new} \\
\text{insurmoutable heights.}^{23}
\end{align*}
\]

That may be an apt description of the meditative state, but its idiom is far removed from the precise, ironic voice of Nemerov. In more ways than one, the poet and his recipient are worlds apart.

But to say as much is only to attest to Nemerov’s remarkable achievement. In a poem of some 132 lines,\(^4\) he has bridged a wide cultural and historical gap. He has created a moving meditation on the role of the poet in a society preoccupied with economic gain and military might. And, like Pope in his major epistles, he has moved freely and assuredly through a wide tonal range, modulating deftly from one tone to another.

The poem begins quietly, in a mood of ironic self-dramatization:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Old sir, I think of you this tardy spring,} \\
\text{Think of you for, maybe, no better reason} \\
\text{Than that the apple branches in the orchard} \\
\text{Bear snow, not blossoms, and that this somehow} \\
\text{Seems oddly Chinese. I too, when I walk} \\
\text{Around the orchard, pretending to be a poet.}
\end{align*}
\]
Walking around the orchard, feel Chinese,
A silken figure on a silken screen
Who tries out with his eye the apple branches,
The last year’s shriveled apples capped with snow,
The hungry birds. And then I think of you.

Nemerov’s tone is gently self-ironic, as though he were not taking himself or his poem—or even Lu Chi himself—to seriously. Yet the elegance of the lines tells another story. The combination of sonorous pentameters (“A silken figure on a silken screen”) and conversational idiom (“I think of you... for, maybe, no better reason”) creates a tone that is at once formal and intimate, ceremonial and personal.

In the lines that follow, Nemerov’s voice grows somber and analytical. He confesses to Lu Chi that “in all the many times” he has read the Wen Fu, the Chinese poet’s words

have not failed
To move me with their justice and their strength,
Their manner gentle as their substance is
Fastidious and severe.

Yet, as he recalls the substance of those lines, Nemerov’s own manner turns gentle and contemplative once again, and he envisions:

Some still, reed-hidden and reflective stream
Where the heron fishes in his own image

It is as if this emblem of the poet’s act, this figure of thought, had calmed the tense intellect of the previous lines, providing focus and repose.

But that repose is short-lived, for very soon Nemerov’s thought turns to “the active man,” who has expropriated language for his own use. “And as Nemerov considers the view, prevalent among intellectuals, that in the “objective, brazen light / Shed by the sciences,” the arts in general and poetry in particular “must wither away,” his tone turns harsh. The active man, he tells Lu Chi, “spits on everything he cannot use”; and when, in “bad times,” he is threatened by the breakdown of authority, such a man “sits / In his bomb shelter and commissions war songs / From active poets with aggressive views,” never once consulting “those who consult the source;” the genuine poets “who by then, in any case, can do nothing.” Nemerov ends this complaint with an image of personified Pride “twisting its tongue.”

But then, as if to renounce his own bitterness, Nemerov turns abruptly away from social criticism. “What then?” he asks; to which he answers, “Nothing but this, old sir: continue / And to the active man... say nothing.” The poet’s vocation, he recalls, is to

look into the clear and mirroring stream
Where images remain although the water
Passes away.
Thus he recalls the image of the heron fishing in his own reflection: the image that had banished his anxiety, however briefly. And so it does again, ending the poem in a mood of reassurance and relief. Once again the poet takes note of his surroundings. This time he finds them uplifting:

And now the sun shines on the apple trees,
The melting snow glitters with a great wealth,
The waxwings, drunk on last year’s rotten apples,
Move through the branches, uttering pretty cries,
While portly grosbeaks, because they do not drink
That applejack, chatter with indignation.
How fine the Chinese day! delicate, jeweled,
Exactly spaced, peaceably tense with life.

Closing with these lines, the poem comes full circle, ending with a sense of grateful renewal.

Is “To Lu Chi” an exercise in tone? It might better be described as a celebration of tone: a tribute to one poet’s masterly control. Yet Nemerov’s persona is not the only presence controlling the tone of his poem. Here, as in Pope’s celebrated epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, the implied response of the recipient influences the tone and meaning of what is said. And here the recipient is not a kindly British physician but an ancient Chinese poet, whose serene presence ennobles the occasion, lending a radiant calm.

The distinctive ambience of the verse letter may be largely the creation of diction and tone. But it is also the product of structure—or rather, of a strategy that generates a structure. Perhaps the best description of that strategy may be found in De Conscribendis Epistolis, where Vives, echoing Cicero’s commentary on the Attic orator, describes the letter writer’s manner as one of “careful negligence.” The writer of the familiar letter—and the Horatian verse epistle—has no designs on the reader, no conscious plan. He writes spontaneously, allowing himself digressions and wayward thoughts and leaps of association. Or so he pretends, employing what Jonson called “a diligent kind of negligence,” such as Ladies doe in their attire.”

Beneath its guise of naturalness the verse letter may be as strictly designed and as rigorously structured as a classical oration. But if its illusion is to be credible, if it is to have the desired effect, it must create a fiction of negligence. Though it rises to eloquence, it must seem improvisatory: the offering of an untrammeled and intimate spontaneity.

Such are the traditional expectations, which the verse epistles of Jonson, Donne, and Pope amply fulfill. In contemporary verse letters, however, the situation becomes more uncertain, partly because many contemporary poets do not conceive of their poems as rhetorical instruments, nor their “negligence” as a fiction, nor their naturalness as a guise. One thinks of John Engels’ wistful, exploratory “Letter,” which seems to trace rather than imitate the fluid movement of the mind.
Last night a luna moth came to the lantern, and at noon two hummingbirds perched for an instant in the wild apple. I suppose what I mean is that everywhere I look, something is moving, a fact which occupies my mind, not precisely the oil and wine of consolation. If I for example play Schumann’s Third Symphony through the open window, its molecules instantly disperse, the horns thinning in the hayfield, the trumpets dying in the pines.

One also thinks of Marvin Bell and William Stafford’s Segues: A Correspondence in Poetry, which affirms the spirit of “the loose epistolary way,” even as it departs sharply from its convention. The forty-four poems of Segues are, to begin with, much shorter than most verse letters. Each occupies about one page, and within themselves the poems do not digress very much, each exploring a theme or motif within a closely integrated structure. Nor does the series itself pretend to digress. Rather than veer off on a tangent, each new poem develops a phrase, image, or theme from the previous one, or allows the old idea to suggest a new one, which subsequent poems will explore. The result is not so much a “fiction of negligence” as a genuine improvisation, unified not by a single voice or underlying theme but by the poets’ shared concerns, their trust in the work they are creating, and their joint effort to hear “what the world is trying to say.” “We didn’t know where we were going,” Stafford says in a preface, “and we didn’t care.” But this very openness, this willingness to “accept what comes,” is itself a kind of intention: a desire, expressed in poem after poem, to let forms and patterns in the world reveal themselves, unhindered by the poets’ conscious design.

What role will imagination play in such a venture? In two contiguous poems, Bell and Stafford consider that question, along with questions of choice, chance, and personal responsibility. Stafford’s poem sounds the themes in its opening lines:

Most things are impossible. But I think them all. Before they happen, I climb ahead and call back—“This way!” They follow, though sometimes awkwardly till I tell them exactly how to move—even what to look like.

I coach them along and invent their reasons, or why they don’t have any. In the mountains I often create shadows and echoey sounds; but in the desert—a few high, thin voices and bright light everywhere.

(“Things Not in the Story,” 1–10)

The two poems previous to this one dealt with a “hunger for stories.” Here, Stafford views himself as a maker of stories, a conjurer of events,
whether they appear on the page or are enacted in the world. The maker sets the stage—desert or mountain—and directs the action. His urgings are slight but firm, as he nudges events into being.

In subsequent stanzas, imagination takes on the task of perception rather than construction:

*But sometimes I sleep and falter, and many things never happen at all. In my dreams—and somehow under my dreams too, at a level where I don’t quite exist—a great moving carpet mutters and heaves, of things wanting to be.*

*I remember my mother hearing the heartbeat under the floor, and my father saying it’s nothing—and knowing that that is the worst of all: for the sound you hear from nothing may never stop; it may fill the whole world.*

(11–20)

Stafford’s role, implied more than stated, is to listen and intuit, to perceive potentialities and attend to events as they come into being. The metaphors of carpet and heartbeat suggest that the potential for these events and even the pattern they might take already exist in the world. The poet’s job is to intimate potentialities through acts of imagination.

The poet might fail or falter in his work, leaving the potentials of the world and of the self unrealized. And others, such as the poet’s mother, might make choices that will leave them unfulfilled:

*Once when she looked I saw myself taken back into her eye: if only I hadn’t been born, maybe all else had come true; and I pitied her: “I’m sorry.” And I tremble still—the helper—and the source—of her sorrow.*

(21–25)

With these lines the theme shifts from imagination to the question of personal responsibility, as Stafford ponders the role of choice in determining personal destiny.

In the poem that follows, Bell explores the latter theme while redefining the former. His starting point is the idea of “calling,” or “calling back”:

*Suppose,*

*aftet years of letting things happen, a person decided not to let things happen unless called. Names would have to be changed: your wife and mine couldn’t both keep Dorothy; your mother, having died, could keep Ruby,*
but my sister, only having
almost died, would have to change
her name—a shame,
Ruby Bell having a red sound
the color of life itself in the ward
where she works.

(1–14)
The poet evoked by these lines is not so much a maker as a namer—or
renamer—who honors the uniqueness of each event by assigning it a
separate name. A playful caricature of nominalism, this passage also
sets the stage for reflections on chance, choice, and personal responsi-

Well,
we could make exceptions. I tried,
once, to 650 miles
to the mountains of Mexico
before the Olympics paved it,
first day, first hour,
walking through a garden
toward my room, a street-vendor’s ice
to sugar me awake, and to my right
suddenly in the shade
a friend ten years before.
I kept walking; I refused.
I didn’t call. Instead, I made this other
story happen. I wonder if I
could tell it if it hadn’t.

(14–28)
Bell’s arbitrary (or fated?) choice, which prevents this chance encoun-
ter from becoming a reunion, creates an event (or nonevent) of another
kind: a story of a reunion that never happened. By declining to call
out his old friend’s name, he leaves a potential unfulfilled, while mak-

My father’s brother married my mother’s
sister, both older, after
Harry and the father made the money
to bring over the family.
In Venice, their suitcase and papers
were stolen. They placed an ad;
it was all returned! Otherwise,
I’d be living in Siberia,
where things that happen otherwise
don’t, but other things do.

(34–43)
Once again, though in a different way, language determines destiny.
Imagination calls—here through a newspaper—and reality answers, de-
termining the fate of a child.
Questions of chance and choice prevail in the opening poems of Segues. And as the series unfolds, chance and choice also play roles in its composition, as the two poets, with their very different temperaments and backgrounds, guide each other's themes into unfamiliar waters or lead the series itself into frightening places. But through all their turnings and wanderings, the poems maintain the assurance of the two I have just discussed, and most work by the same method. A theme from one will be teased or turned, until it yields a new idea or suggests a new direction; then three or four poems, headed in that direction, will follow. Thus the series begins with the subject of stories and moves, through subtle modulations, to the themes of imagination, language, choice, and destiny, and from there to subjects as diverse as schooling, testing, childhood, and the definition of a loser. The outcome is not a hodgepodge or a string of beads but a richly varied sequence, bonded and enhanced by the rhythmic alternation of antiphonal voices.

Segues is, in fact, the most ambitious and original contribution to epistolary writing in recent memory, and if it elicits any disappointment, it is only because such a project will probably set no precedents for other writers. It is a unique event, a thing apart. In their prefaces, Stafford expresses a hope that the series will suggest to other writers "some possibilities in this kind of corresponding," and Bell remarks that he and Stafford have already "written beyond the covers of this book." But I believe that both are being overly optimistic. Segues sprang from a rare convergence of circumstance and sensibility. Imitations are likely to seem forced or artificial.

Yet it does seem probable that other American poets will pick up where Bell and Stafford have left off and will continue to explore the epistolary mode. From my examples it should be apparent that postwar poets have already redefined the traditional verse epistle and continue to do so, and that the possibilities are by no means exhausted. Moreover, the epistolary mode is particularly suited to the poetry of our time. It is, in the first place, a legitimate vehicle for a poetry of the self. Its convention of intimacy, sanctioned by the examples of Ovid, Horace, and others, affords ample opportunity for self-discovery, and its confidential tone is entirely compatible with the aims of Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and others who have placed self-revelation at the center of their writing. In recent years we have begun to hear objections to the self-absorption of American poets. And in little more than a decade, we have seen the "confessional" mode make its entrance and its exit through the revolving door of literary fashion. At the same time, it seems unlikely that the turn toward self-disclosure, which Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and others initiated in the early sixties, will be reversed in the near future. If one can judge from the poems now appearing in the quarterlies, the impulse toward self-disclosure has not much abated. For the expression of that impulse,
the epistolary mode provides a credible occasion, a convincing dramatic solution.

More important, perhaps, epistolary form provides an escape from self. It fosters a relationship of self and other. It values civility as well as intensity, clarity as well as self-expression. By positing a listener (fictive or actual), it cultivates communication, and it nurtures the growth of a public voice. Recently Steven Ratiner, defending Stanley Plumly's latest collection, saw a "new American poetry" emerging in the work of Plumly and his contemporaries, a poetry that combines the public and the private voice and steers a course between "confessional intimacy" and "scholarly reserve." Whether such a poetry will gain prominence remains to be seen. In any event, the middle course envisioned by Ratiner is not very different from the route already charted by poets in the epistolary tradition.

The epistolary mode is, in fact, a kind of Elizabethan compromise, or via media, among poetic forms. It allows for reflection without loss of immediacy, formality without loss of personal voice. With its roots in both oratory and confession, it confers dignity and intimacy on whatever it touches. And by establishing a dramatic context for discursive content, it offers an alternative to what Robert Pinsky has called the "prejudice against abstract statement" in contemporary poetry. More readily than the lyric poet, the epistolary writer can accomplish those long, meditative monologues, which Peter Stitt has identified as the characteristic poems of our time. Moreover, as Thomas McGrath has shown in his massive Letter to an Imaginary Friend, the epistolary act can be as brief as the privileged moment or as open ended as the Cantos.

On a more practical level, the verse letter offers a mode of communication, an open conduit between American poets, whose numbers are legion but whose homes are often far apart. Mention the verse epistle to a literary historian, and you will probably conjure an image of London in the early eighteenth century, when writer and recipient were often no farther apart than Twickenham and Hampton Court. But the situation, geographical and spiritual, is different with contemporary American poets, and it is a curious irony that a mode associated in English literature with sociable Augustans should, in our own time, be associated with poets distanced by hundreds or thousands of miles. For absent friends who are also poets, the verse letter offers a medium of address, a way of meeting. And despite its transformations, it remains what it has been for centuries: the human spirit's trusted messenger, the articulate envoy of the soul.


