

Responsa Literature: partial replies to scattered letters

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Introduction

I am a fiction writer and a web-based new media artist. I have been “online” for twelve years. I first encountered the Internet in the totally textual days of BBSs, MUDs, MOOs and USENET newsgroups. The Internet has developed an interface since then, a painted face to hide behind. No one talks about Net-etiquette anymore. Gone, it seems, is our awareness of our online selves as writing beings.

So often, when we look at the history of the Internet, we only look at the evolution of the technology. What if we consider the Internet, and email in particular, as having evolved out of much older traditions of human correspondence? Lately I have been thinking a lot about letter writing. Letter writing, especially as necessitated by conditions of exile and or diaspora, is an ancient example of a decentralized mode of communication through which we have attempted, for centuries, to communicate by way of the written word.

I was an early adopter of the Internet in part because I was already a writer and an avid letter writer. Although I knew nothing about computers, written correspondence through a series of interconnected machines did not seem like such a leap of faith. As a child of immigrants I wrote many letters “home” to a family I barely knew. They rarely wrote back. In *Varieties of Exile: The Canadian Experience*, Hallvard Dahlie notes: “Not surprisingly, exiles have always been prolific letter-writers, for a side from the tangible

link provided with their homeland, this means of expressing oneself constitutes a subjective and, at times, a defensive response to the state of exile.”¹

Indeed, my letters to my family were so many repeated attempts to explain my surroundings and myself – an endeavour better suited to writing than to the telephone. My grandmother had a Master’s Degree in English Literature, but she was a terrible letter writer. But, then, she was not in exile – she felt no compulsion to explain anything. In the year 2000, at the age of eighty-two, old grandmother noted, in a phone conversation, that: “These days everyone is on the email”. Her first email to me read:

i print in lower case to regain some speed.
i must have pressed the wrong something ,but i think i am back on track.

The re-emergence of written correspondence not made better writers out of most of us. I am surprised that email has become so popular in that, for me, writing has always meant risk-taking. In weak writing, so much of is exposed. I have to wonder: Why on earth, in this day and age, do we continue to try to communicate across long distances through the elusive and transitory medium of the written word?

Writing is hard

Writing is hard. The writing of a letter no less so. There is always a disparity between what we think, what we say, and what we are able to write. In *Writing and Difference* Derrida describes writing as: “displaced on the broken line between lost and promised speech.”² In fiction, at least, one has the freedom to mean a number of things at once for we know that every reader will come away from our text with a different interpretation and we can always count on the critic to read carefully, however right or wrong-headedly. But a personal letter is written for an audience of one. How

¹ Hallvard Dahlie, *Varieties of Exile: The Canadian Experience*, Vancouver: U. British Columbia Press, 1986. Page 13.

² Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book”, in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Page 68.

intimidating. I keep this quotation, from a novel by Rose Tremain, taped to the wall above my desk:

“Irene left a note on his kitchen table. The spelling was weak and Irene, examining her note, marvelled at how difficult writing things down was compared to saying them. Saying something was as easy as laughing; writing caused you grief, as though you were mourning somebody who had abandoned you too soon.”³

Our awareness of and concern over our intended audience may displace our concern with actually expressing our own thoughts or opinions. Virginia Woolf wrote, in a letter: “The difficulty of writing letters is, for one thing, that one has to simplify so much, and hasn’t the courage to dwell on the small catastrophes which are of such huge interest to oneself; and thus has to put on a kind of unreal personality.”⁴ Perhaps the role-playing, gender-bending and general shit-talking that goes on in online chat rooms is an adjunct of this difficulty. Even if one wanted to, it is often too hard to write as oneself, so why bother?

Consider the arduous task of trying to write a love letter, especially if one suspects that the feeling is not mutual. In *The Metamorphoses*, in the tale of Byblis and Canus, the Roman poet Ovid writes:

“She wrote, then stopped, then shocked at what she wrote,
Erased, began again, crossed some words out,
And hoped to find the right ones, stopped, then threw
Her tablets to the floor, then picked them up,
She doubting everything she wrote, or right
Or wrong, or spelled correctly, her face flushed
With guilt, yet mouth set firm.”⁵

Worse than the fear of rejection is the heartache of the writer faced with the difficulty of even trying: “To write what should be said with lips and hands In a dark room in bed with him alone.” A letter is only ever a stand-in, a proxy, and an inadequate

³ Rose Tremain, *Sacred Country*, NY: Washington Square Press, 1992. Page 22.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, from a letter to Jacques Raverat, Oct. 3rd, 1924, in *Paper Darts: The Illustrated Letters*, Selected and introduced by Frances Spalding, London: Collins & Brown Limited, 1991. Page 84.

⁵ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated by Horace Gregory, NY: Viking, 1958. Page 261.

approximation of physical presence. When Canus rejects Byblis, by way of rejecting her letter, she says:

“I should have sent myself and not the letter,
Not trusted love and all I hoped to live for
To little words in wax that fade away.”⁶

Writing from Exile

Not more than one year after those verses were written, in 8A.D., the Emperor Augustus exiled Ovid from Rome for a crime, or an error as Ovid more often puts it, the details of which remain murky to this day. Ovid was sent over sea and over land to Tomis, “a small outpost on one of the most distant and inhospitable frontiers of the empire.”⁷ Ovid’s letters from the Black Sea, as compiled in *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* are the lamentations of a writer in exile. They speak both of the poet’s relation to place and language, and of his despair at being removed from his place and language of origin. As it is not possible for him to send himself instead of a letter, Ovid writes letters as solace: “As we were wont to pass long hours in converse, till day light failed our talk so now should out letters bring and return our voiceless words, and the paper and our hands should performs the office of our tongues.”⁸

In *Plainwater, Short Talks: On Ovid*, Montréal poet Anne Carson writes:

I see him there on a night like this but cool, the moon blowing through black streets. He sups and walks back to his room. The radio is on the floor. Its luminous green dial blares softly. He sits down at the table; people in exile write so many letters. Now Ovid is weeping. Each night about this time he puts on sadness like a garment and goes on writing. In his spare time he is teaching himself the local language (Getic) in order to compose in it an epic poem no one will ever read.”⁹

⁶ *ibid*, Page 263.

⁷ James C. Thibault, *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1964. Pg 11.

⁸ TRISTIA, V. XIII, Ovid, *Tristia: Ex Ponto*, translated by Arthur Leslie Wheeler, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1924. Page 259.

⁹ Anne Carson, *On Ovid*, from “Short Talks” in *Plainwater*, NY: Vintage 1995. Page 32.

It may be that the re-emergence of written communication, in the form of email, an indication of an increasingly exilic culture. The Internet emerged, in North America, at a moment of upheaval. We are increasingly uprooted by a combination of social, political and economical forces including immigration, economic migration and family-based migrations due to increases in divorce rates and intermarriage and a widening generation gap. Maybe we only notice our rootlessness less than Ovid did, because we do not have to wait a year for our letters to reach us. The sense of immediacy of communication inherent in modern mobile communication technologies represents a psychology of restlessness. Our sense of place is weakened, numbed. Our relationship to written language is fragmented, fractured. We have found, it seems: “the courage to dwell on the small catastrophes which are of such huge interest to oneself.”¹⁰

Think, in contrast, of the awareness of place evident in the correspondence of the great poet letter-writers of European literature. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, in a letter written from ‘Temporarily at Worpswede near Bremen, July 16th, 1903:

“My dear Herr Kappus: When I read [your letter], as I do now, in the great stillness of this faraway place, your beautiful concern for life moves me even more than I experienced it in Paris, where everything has a different ring and dies away by reason of the monstrous noise that makes all things tremble. Here, where a vast countryside is around me, over which the winds come in from the seas, here I feel that there is nowhere a human being who can answer you those question and feelings which have a life of their own within their depths; for even the best men go astray with words, where these are to express something very gentle and almost unutterable.”¹¹

¹⁰ op cite, Woolf, 1991. Page 84.

¹¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter IV, written from ‘Temporarily at Worpswede near Bremen, July 16th, 1903. *Letters to a Young Poet*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2002. Page 20.

Rilke was said to be “the postal confessor, for at least a quarter of a century, of a large number of young people.”¹² It has been noted that, in the *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke “is really speaking at, not to, the young [poet]; he is thinking aloud, meditating his own problem, spinning – as always, and as he counsels his young poet to do – his web of creation from his own inwards.”¹³ So then, although his content is incomparably better, isn’t his approach similar to posting to a blog? It is his commitment to the dialogue itself, the poetic project as it exists and evolves beyond the efforts of his and his correspondents contributions, that elevates Rilke’s “beautifully phrased, beautifully penned, intimate talks to people he had never seen,”¹⁴ from what would in today’s terms be a mere blog post into the realm of a larger literary and cultural context. “Self-knowledge is transformed by the good writer, whether an exile or not, into a cosmic awareness of reality, but by a poor writer, merely into a kind of romantic solipsism.”¹⁵

Responsa

What conditions precipitate the writing of a letter? A physical distance separates the writer from the reader and we write to cover that distance. Wherever we are, when we write, we write from a local position. Time passes between the writing of the letter and the reading of it; more time passes between the reading and the reply. “Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning.”¹⁶ The writing becomes a question; the question desires a reply. From exile, Ovid writes: “In so long a time why has not they hand done its duty and completed even a few

¹² *ibid*, from the introduction, page 3.

¹³ *ibid*, page 3.

¹⁴ *ibid*, page 3.

¹⁵ *op cite*, Dahlie, 1986. Page 201.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book”, in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Page 75.

lines?”¹⁷ The reply embodies another question. Derrida asks: “Is not the writing of the question, by its decision, by its resolution, the beginning of repose and response?”¹⁸

Question and response is among the most basic communication protocols.

Every time a modem dials an ISP, TCP/IP initiates a handshake authentication:

Are you there?
Yes, I'm here – are you there?
Yes, I'm here.

And only then can communication begin.

Protocols allow machines or pieces of software to coordinate with each other without ambiguity, implying a common message format and an accepted set of commands that all parties involved understand. Communication between humans also requires common protocols, or standards, but they almost never work as neatly. Protocols require agreement. Agreement requires community. For standards of communication to emerge, a body of correspondence must accrue over time and contain within it as sense of commitment.

And if the participants are separated by distance?

There is a vast genre of Jewish law called Responsa Literature that has evolved in direct relation to the rise and spread of Diaspora. Responsa are written replies to questions submitted, in writing, to a rabbinic authority. In general, each reply repeats the questions, analyzes the issue and then renders an answer or resolution. The answer is supported by justificatory argumentation “designed to convince readers of the correctness of the response’s decisions by presenting those decisions in a way that appeals to the community’s sense of what is right or just.”¹⁹

¹⁷ op cite, Ovid, “tempore tam longo cur non tua dextera versus quamlibet in paucos officiosa fuit?” in TRISTIA, IV. vii. Page 189.

¹⁸ op cite, Derrida, Page 76.

¹⁹ Peter J. Haas, Responsa: Literary History of a Rabbinic Genre, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996, page 12.

Over time, the responsa developed a characteristic literary style, or, a set of protocols. As the distances between Diasporic communities increased the central authority of the Talmudic centres in Babylon decreased and local responsa arose creating a network of law-making connected through nodes, or hubs of community. Today, responsa is the most common form of rabbinic literature, part of a living law interpreted and implemented by the intellect and humility of the participants of each generation on a case-by-case basis according to an individual understanding of the prevailing circumstances of the times.

Of course, the Internet also evolved out of a political and social need for a decentralized model of long distance communication. It grew, in large part, because of the intellectual property that skilled programmers gave to the early Internet community. In 1993 Howard Rheingold wrote, in *Virtual Community*:

“The essential elements of what became the Net were created by people who believed in, wanted, and therefore invented ways of using computers to amplify human thinking and communication. And many of them wanted to provide it to as many people as possible, at the lowest possible cost. Driven by the excitement of creating their own special subculture below the crust of the mass-media mainstream, they worked with what was at hand. Again and again, the most important parts of the Net piggybacked on technologies that were created for very different purposes.”²⁰

Network Communication

In 1993 I was an active member of Nomad Web: Sleeping Beauty Awakes, an interactive network installation and newsgroup, alt.arts.nomad, moderated by Ingrid Bachmann. The newsgroup was a strange hybrid of oral and written traditions, mixing the immediacy and conversational quality of the telephone, the epistolary potential of letter writing, and the 'dissimultaneity' of a fax or a letter. The limits of the screen size of most computers demanded brevity and economy, and the clumsiness of the majority of text editors available on the Internet made editing and the correcting of spelling and

²⁰ from the electronic version of Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the electronic Frontier* 1993. <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html>

grammatical errors inconvenient. Participants of alt.arts.nomad were invited to consider certain questions:

- What does it mean to speak without a body, without visible gender?
- How can we think about a site as a network rather than a specific location?
- What constitutes community? How do intellectual, ideological, geographical, national, social, political and cultural spheres shape community definitions?
- How does nomadism reflect certain flexibilities or states of flux?
- What happens to issues of place and nation as electronic cultures collapse conventional notions of physical distance and space?²¹

These questions still resonate. Perhaps even more so. The more that emphasis is placed on speed, access, mobility and connectivity, the more I wonder – connected to what? Are we edging toward exile from the very notion of physical place?

Toronto novelist Anne-Marie MacDonald wrote, in *As the Crow Flies*:

“If you move around all your life, you can’t find where you come from on a map. All those places where you lived are just that: places. You don’t come from any of them; you come from a series of events. And those are mapped in memory. Contingent, precarious events, without the counterpane of place to muffle the knowledge of how unlikely we are. Almost not born at every turn. Without a place, events slow-tumbling through time become your roots. Stories shading into one another. You come from a plane crash. From a war that brought your parents together.”²²

Indeed, it was a war that brought my parents together (I am a first generation Canadian as a direct result of the Vietnam War). I am also a child of a generation of divorce and it looks like I will be the last in a long line of a family of Jews who have wandered, in generational increments, for centuries. In *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes wrote, of the wandering Jew: “No matter where and when you meet him you feel that he has come from some place – no matter from what place he has come – some country that he

²¹ Ingrid Bachmann, <http://www.research.umbc.edu/~lmoren/nomadweb.htm> Also published in *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, edited by Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, Toronto: YYZ Artists’ Outlet.

²² Anne-Marie MacDonald, *As The Crow Flies*, Toronto: Knopf, 2003. Page 36.

has devoured rather than resided in, some secret land that he has been nourished on but cannot inherit, for the Jew seems to be everywhere from nowhere.”²³

Where, then, but the Internet to reside? The network as site, the Inbox as the only safe or even feasible place for a family reunion, and the web server as storage bin in lieu of ancestral basements or attics. My early web art projects utilized the imagery and methodology of maps and map-making to explore place and displacement in a non-linear narrative manner.²⁴ As web art expands into the realms of GPS and mobile or locative media, I think increasingly of how much the frailty of infrastructure has both helped and hindered us.

Optimism?

The Internet has changed so much since it's inception. And so have its users. These days the web is an increasingly consumer driven, controlled and predatory vehicle, its participants too numerous to know. When I got my first Internet account, I'm sure I thought the Internet was up in the air. Not literally, but in the early days, all that talk about cyberspace made it sound like the data traveled through space. I didn't have a computer of my own. I worked in the UNIX lab in X-Windows on Sun stations with huge monitors that made you feel like you were falling. I knew the machines were all connected but I wasn't sure how. Receiving and email was an event; writing one eloquently, in vi editor anyway, was a feat of mastery. I felt like a kid again, waiting for rare letters. The postal service of every nation has its vagaries. In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote:

²³ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, NY: New Directions, 1961. Page 7.

²⁴ "Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls" <http://luckysoap.com/mythologies/map.html>

“Nothing is more occult than the way letters, under the auspices of unimaginable carriers, circulate through the weird mess of civil wars; but whenever, owing to that mess, there was some break in our correspondence, Tamara would act as if she ranked deliveries with ordinary natural phenomena such as the weather or tides, which human affairs could not affect, and she would accuse me of not answering her, when in fact I did nothing by write to her and think of her during those months - despite my many betrayals.”²⁵

When did email become a way of life, a working environment? While working for a division of a multinational corporation, I came to dread email. I sat at my desk and workload flowed through the network at me. I had a rack and a half of live web servers running, root access to the only hardware sitting outside the firewall. I watched the stats through my browser - data generated graphs, log files and traffic reports. Sometimes I felt inadequate to be so intimate with it all – all the servers and their backups, the switches and where they are on the gig, the router, the local loop and the shifting vagaries of the pipe. I used to think that the Internet was full of limitless possibilities, endless information – if only I was clever enough to uncover it all. Now I find few people seem willing to accept how expensive the Internet is, how fragile it is in places, how permeable and how slow. It is embarrassing to admit the failings of infrastructure. The backend remains a murky secret, a subconscious unwilling to be explored.

In 2003, ten years after Nomad Web Ingrid Bachmann launched an installation at Gallery Articule, in Montréal, called: "Digital Crustaceans v.0.2: Homesteading on the Web" in which the once mythic architecture of cyberspace is represented in a tangible form: five feet tall and painted in orange and lime green, "Router level Interconnectivity of the Internet" looks like a giant, blood-shot eyeball. Larger still, a map of the world in heavy, painted lines: "Optical Fibre Submarine Systems Across the Globe," represents the subterranean cables which constitute part of the Internet's material base in rough, coloured string. The antiquated backbone of the Internet thus depicted evokes the

²⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, NY: Vintage International, 1967.

fragility of infrastructure; a weakness we are kept blissfully unaware of in the high speed, eye-candy strip mall that is now the Internet's public face. The instability of the internet remains a point of hope for Bachmann: only because it is such a porous and unstable medium will the internet continue to provide an alternative site for different points of view, continued easy access, and hacker and shareware freedoms.²⁶

Has the Internet's decentralized model of communication has helped to entrench or to impoverish our lives? How does the new immediacy of writing communication affect the interpersonal narrative of writer and reader? Does so-called connectivity bring us any closer to piecing together an idea of who we are and where we come from? Or does connectivity allow us to remain separate, separated, entrenched in our diaspora? What compels us to continue to try to communicate through writing across physical, political, social and linguistic boundaries? I don't know. What compels us to write at all? I don't know. Ovid asks: "Why then do I write, you wonder? I too wonder."²⁷ And Derrida replies: "The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech."²⁸

In 1993, Howard Rheingold wrote: "Packets can carry everything that humans can perceive and machines can process." As a fiction writer and a web artist, I take this as a challenge. I strive for optimism; I strive for content. The more the Internet freaks me out, the more I feel compelled to try to use it in poetic and intransigent ways.

²⁶ J. R. Carpenter, "Ingrid Bachmann: Digital Crustaceans v.0.2: Homesteading on the Web," art review in Fuse Magazine, Volume 26, Number 4, Toronto, Ontario, March 2004.

²⁷ "cur igitur scribam, miraris? miror et ipse." EX PONTO, l. v., Ovid, Tristia: Ex Ponto, translated by Arthur Leslie Wheeler, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1924. Page 293.

²⁸ op cite, Derrida, Page 67.

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I am an independent new media artist, researcher and award-winning fiction writer. I began using the Internet as an artistic medium in 1993. I made my first web art project at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1995. I have exhibited my web art projects internationally, presented artist talks and published numerous critical essays, catalogue essays and art reviews on the subject of art and technology. I have taught HTML, and worked in the industry as a designer, programmer, consultant, and manager of Web Development. In 2003 my short story, "Precipice", won the CBC Radio's Québec Short Story Competition. In April 2005 I launched my most recent web art project: "How I Loved the Broken Things of Rome" produced with the aid of the artist in residence programme at the Oboro New Media Lab and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. I am currently writing a novel and a collection of short stories.

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