

Ben Howard

HUMANE LETTERS

For John Donne the familiar letter was the voice of the soul. “Sir, more than kisses,” wrote Donne to Henry Wotton, “letters mingle souls, / For thus friends absent speak.” But in “Letter to Too Many People,” the American poet E. L. Mayo (1904-79) challenges Donne’s conventional assumption:

Now—as if it mattered: there are so many people
writing so many poems—I write to you
To say that everyone is still
very well, although
Somewhat beside themselves, there being more to do
than they can do, and airplane pilots higher
up in the air than we are
look freer.
Feet, feet, feet, feet, feet
For all their being cocked up in evening’s seat
are never quite rested by morning any more,
and hair
grows rare.
Friends that I miss,
I think there’s something specious in all this.
And so I set my face
rigidly (but secretly of course)
against the whole elaborate apparatus
designed, or so I guess, from the very first
simply to wear us out.
“The more angels the more room,” said Swedenborg
and the machines
in rubber factories that wear out tires
almost instantaneously say the same thing
and all our bonfires
of sugar, coffee, potatoes, human beings

so bright they can be seen in Asia
with peculiar distinctness.
Too many people see by these contents
the American way
of living graciously.
It is very simple what these people see;
But not knowing which were the greater courtesy,
to tell truth or make you a little happier,
I mutter beside myself uncertainly
as a bull in a china shop, a lion among ladies,
a monkeywrench
or, as the English say,
more elegantly, a spanner
in man's most delicate machinery:
honesty in a letter.

It has been thirty years since I first read those lines. At the time, I was an undergraduate at Drake University, where E. L. Mayo taught literature and writing. His poem struck a chord, partly because its author was my first mentor in the craft of verse, but mostly because the poem's closing lines posed a question I'd never seriously considered. In my Methodist home, as in my Midwestern social ethos, honesty was less an issue than a tacit expectation. It was the first principle of personal relations. The notion that a letter to a *friend* might be anything but honest had yet to color my awareness. The thought that honesty in letters might be an achievement, rather than a covenant, had yet to complicate my moral vision.

Suffice it to say that in three ensuing decades the seeds of doubt planted by Mayo's poem have found fertile soil. And here at the end of the twentieth century, the moral themes of Mayo's midcentury poem seem more germane than ever. Amidst the waste, violence, and fraudulence of American culture, Mayo affirms the integrity of the private self. For his vehicle he chooses the familiar letter, endorsing by example what Virginia Woolf called the "humane art which owes its origin to the love of friends." At the same time, Mayo questions both his chosen vehicle and his own ability to control it, portraying himself as a clumsy mechanic, who would take a monkeywrench to a delicate machine.

Delicate or not, the familiar letter can claim a long and resilient tradition. Its distinguished practitioners include Seneca, Pliny the Younger, Samuel Johnson, Fanny Burney, John Keats, Elizabeth Bishop and Virginia Woolf herself. And as an instrument of personal veracity, the familiar letter enjoys a unique and formidable reputation, rivaling if not surpassing those of the diary and devotional meditation. "The chief interest," wrote Sir Walter Raleigh, "of a study of the great letter writers is that it introduces us not to literary works, but to persons. This is the triumph of letter-writing, that it keeps a more delicate image alive and presents us with a subtler likeness of the writer than we can find in the more formal achievements of authorship." Echoing that sentiment, George Jean Nathan argues that "a single paragraph in an impulsive letter will often tell more about a man than a whole work calculated by him to the same ostensible end. . . ."

Yet despite these tributes to the letter as bearer of truth, Mayo's question lingers, engendering other questions. If the letter is indeed a bearer of truth, what kinds of truth does it bear? And to whom should that truth be credited? "To you I can talk," wrote Thomas Merton to Czeslaw Milosz, "and begin to say what I want to say." Is the truth of letters a love child—a joint creation of author and recipient? Is a personal letter a confession, a composition, or some uneasy amalgam of the two? Awaiting the guillotine in 1793, Camille Desmoulins composed a moving letter to his wife: "I was the husband of a woman of divine virtue. I was a good husband, a good son, I would also have been a good father. . . . The shores of life recede from me." Desmoulins's letter is a *cri de coeur*, an expression of the moment. But it is also a well-made composition, employing a polished figure of speech. "Fine words are seldom humane," Derek Mahon reminds us, invoking Confucius. In what ways do familiar letters reveal the truth? In what ways do they conceal it, even from their authors?

ii

Some years ago, a woman to whom I had written many a fine epistle offered an arresting observation. "You know, in your essays you are wearing a jacket and tie. In your poems, you are wearing an open shirt. But in your letters to me," said she, "you're wearing nothing at all."

That comment has proved memorable, if not wholly original. Over the centuries, epistolary theorists have often invoked the trope of self-exposure. 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, Ben 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.” Jonson himself expressed a similar view: “Language most shewes a man. Speake that I may see thee.”

The image of the letter as naked confession appears often in epistolary literature, both in the early English formularies—the manuals for letter-writers, replete with principles and examples—and in familiar letters themselves. Writing to his dear friend Hester Thrale in 1777, Dr. Samuel Johnson framed a vivid definition of the familiar letter:

Dear Madam,

You talk of writing and writing as if you had all the writing to yourself. If our Correspondence were printed I am sure Posterity, for Posterity is always the author’s favorite, would say that I am a good writer too. . . . To sit down so often with nothing to say, to say something so often, almost without consciousness of saying . . . is a power of which I will not violate my modesty by boasting, but I do not believe that everybody has it. . . .

In a Man’s Letters, you know, Madam, his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives.

Of this great truth sounded by the knowing to the ignorant, and so echoed by the ignorant to the knowing, what evidence have you now before you. Is not my soul laid open in these veracious pages? Do you not see me reduced to my first principles? This is the pleasure of corresponding with a friend, where doubt and distrust have no place, and every-

thing is said as it is thought. . . . I know, dearest Lady, that in the perusal of this . . . you will be touched as I am touched. I have indeed concealed nothing from you, nor do I expect ever to repent of having thus opened my heart.

At once a confession and an act of definition, this letter may be said to describe itself. As an act of self-disclosure, it takes its place among its author's "veracious pages." Johnson's frequent recourse to colloquial diction ("you will be touched as I am touched") lends immediacy to his statement.

Yet Johnson's letter, for all its confessional tone, is also a notable feat of rhetoric. Its more prominent devices include parallelism, chiasmus, assonance, and a metaphor drawn from surgery. While lending force to Johnson's protestation, these devices also impart an air of self-conscious *gravitas*. For all his talk of nakedness, Dr. Johnson stands before us in his wig and waistcoat. And the disparity between style and content has caused some readers to interpret the letter as only half-serious—if not overtly satirical.

The formal reserve of Johnson's letter becomes even more apparent when contrasted with plainer forms of eloquence. In February, 1902, a peasant by the name of Martin McDonagh wrote from the Aran Islands to his friend John Millington Synge, who was wintering in Paris:

Johneen, Friend of My Heart. A million blessings to you. It's a while ago since I thought of a small letter to write, and every day was going until it went too far and the time I was about to write to you. It happened that my brother's wife, Shawneen, died. And she was visiting the last Sunday in December, and now isn't it a sad story to tell? But at the same time we have to be satisfied because a person cannot live always.

In contrast to Johnson's conventional cadences, these lines sound irregular to an English ear. Melding English words and Irish-Gaelic speech-rhythms, they leave an impression of artless elegance.

As the world knows, Synge savored the speech of the Aran Islanders and reproduced it, as faithfully as he could, in the language of his

plays. And in *Riders to the Sea* (1904), Martin McDonagh's letter becomes the lament of the widow Maurya, who has lost her husband and sons to the sea:

Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.

These lines bring down the curtain on a great tragic play. Their dramatic power is unassailable, as is their lyric beauty. Yet to compare Synge's lines with their source is to note a significant and not wholly salutary change. "[A]nd every day," wrote Martin McDonagh, "was going until it went too far and the time I was about to write to you." Plain, ungainly, and unmusical, that clause speaks in the unschooled voice of the Aran peasantry. By contrast, Maurya's speech sounds formal, musical, and conspicuously literary. In the translation from life to art, something has been gained, but something has also been sacrificed. Call it authenticity. Or call it nature.

iii

A tension between art and nature, formality and natural utterance, is perhaps intrinsic to the familiar letter. For if one of its bloodlines may be traced to the Augustinian confession, another lies in public speaking, specifically the formal oration, which the familiar letter was once thought to imitate.

"And to describe the true definition of an Epistle or letter," wrote William Fulwood in *The Enemy of Idleness* (1568), "it is nothing but an Oration written, containing the mynde of the Orator or wryter, thereby to give to understand to him or them that be absent, the same that should be declared if they were present." Fulwood's definition reflects the common view of the Renaissance humanists, most notably Erasmus, who was both an avid practitioner and an influential theorist 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 speaker and audience. And as Jay Arnold 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.”

By and large, the humanists viewed the familiar letter as a rhetorical performance, marked by a sense of balance and an acute awareness of diction, occasion, audience, and context. According to humanist precept, the diction of the familiar letter should be neither high nor low, sententious nor chatty. As Angel Day put it in *The English Secretarie* (1599), the letter should sound like “the familiar and mutual talk of one absent friend to another.” Structurally as well as tonally, the familiar letter should imitate conversation, being at once dignified and fluent, artful and seemingly spontaneous. Its structural ideal, analogous to the 18th-century English garden, is epitomized by Juan Vives, in his *De Conscribendis Epistolis*, as one of “careful negligence.” Beneath its guise of naturalness, the familiar letter may be as strict as a classical oration. But if it is to make its desired effect, it must employ what Ben Jonson called “a diligent kind of negligence,” such “as Ladies doe in their attyre.”

The conception of the familiar letter as an oratorical performance dominates the so-called Golden Age of English Letter-Writing, which Frank Kermode (in his *Oxford Book of Letters*) dates from 1700-1918. That abiding conception shapes the work of the great 18th-century letter-writers—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Horace Walpole, Thomas Gray, Lord Chesterfield, Fanny Burney—and its influence extends well into the 19th century in the letters of Jane Austen, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Macaulay, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë. On September 24, 1714, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote to her husband Edward, who was serving as ambassador to Turkey:

I am glad you think of serving your freinds; I hope it will put you in mind of serving your selfe. . . .

The Ministry is like a play at Court. There’s a little door to get in, and a great Croud without, shoveing and thrusting who shall be foremost; people that knock others with their Elbows, disregard a little kick of the shins, and thrust heart-

ily forward are sure of a good place. Your modest man stands behind in the Croud, is shov'd about by every body, his Cloaths tore, almost squeez'd to death, and sees a 1,000 get in before him that don't make so good a figure as him selfe. I don't say tis impossible for an Impudent Man not to rise in the World, but a Moderate Merit with a large share of Impudence is more probable to be advance'd than the greatest Qualifications without it. . . .

Tis my Interest to beleive (as I do) that you deserve every thing, and are capable of every thing, but no body else will beleive it if they see you get nothing.

Witty, worldly, and refined, this letter is not without a personal voice and a tone of affectionate concern. But its character is that of a polished performance, aimed at posterity as well as its immediate recipient.

A century later, Lady Emma Hamilton, the mistress of Lord Nelson, wrote to a benefactor, Sir Richard Puleston:

If you are in Town & will take a drive to see one who will ever love & respect you, you will make me happy. You will not see an ambassadress nor in splendor but you will ever find me firm & my mind uncorrupted. Shame on those who let me and Nelson's daughter pass the first of August in anguish. Mrs. Francis has often called for you but did not see you. May God bless you. I am well.

However different their contexts, Montagu's and Hamilton's letters share a common tonality: that of a dignified familiarity. In the first instance, the speech takes the form of an Augustan moral essay, in the second a chiding invitation. But in both, the voice of the informal correspondent blends with that of the formal speaker.

Among 19th-century American letter-writers, no one achieved a finer balance of the public and the personal, the eloquent and the familiar, than Abraham Lincoln. "I now wish to make the personal acknowledgement," wrote Lincoln to General Ulysses S. Grant, "that you were right and I was wrong." Balancing formality and plainness,

his sentence expresses a courtly respect. The same qualities inform Lincoln's most celebrated letter, written on November 21, 1864 and addressed to Mrs. Lydia Bixby:

Dear Madam: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,
Abraham Lincoln

Comparable in cadence to Lincoln's Gettysburg address, this letter bears the marks of the practiced orator. Two of its phrases—"the cherished memory of the loved and lost"; "a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom"—speak in the lofty register of the formal eulogy. But for the most part, Lincoln's diction stays well within the middle range, imparting a personal and even intimate tone. In his third sentence, he offers the "thanks of the Republic," rather than the Latinate *gratitude*. A generous act of compassion, his letter is also a model of literary tact.

Yet, as American historians know, Lincoln's letter sprang, in part, from an error of fact. It has been called his "beautiful blunder." The widow Bixby of Boston lost two of her sons, not five, on the field of battle. A third was captured and exchanged. A fourth was captured and went over to the Confederate Army. The fifth deserted and went to sea. Applying for financial assistance, the widow Bixby had misrepresented her circumstances to Governor Andrew of Massachusetts, who in turn had asked Lincoln to write his letter of consolation.

Based, in part, on a falsehood, Lincoln's letter might be treated as indeed a blunder—or perhaps a spurious fiction. But as Carl Sandburg

observed, the essential reality remained intact: Lydia Bixby's five sons were lost to her. And whatever its historical veracity, Lincoln's letter can claim a deeper emotional truth. Avoiding what George Eliot, in a consolatory letter of her own, called the "drapery for falsities," Lincoln's lines can speak to anyone who has suffered a grievous family loss.

iv

Christopher Morley once defined the familiar letter as an unwritten sonnet. And like a sonnet, a letter such as Lincoln's can be read and interpreted autonomously, so long as its context is understood. At the same time, letters read singly can afford no more than a glimpse of that dimension which Virginia Woolf thought the provenance of the familiar letter, namely the intimacies of friendship. "[A]ll good letter-writers," wrote Woolf, "feel the drag of the face on the other side of the page and obey it—they take as much as they give." To witness that process of give-and-take, and to gain access to those intimacies, one turns not to the brilliant letters collected in anthologies but to the steady and sometimes mundane exchanges of lovers and friends. In the correspondence of George Bernard Shaw and Ellen Terry, or W. B. Yeats and Maud Gonne, or, more recently, Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, one witnesses both the deepening of a friendship and the shared creation of meaning, a mingling of sensibilities which births its own language, shibboleths, and versions of the truth.

Of the major literary friendships documented in familiar letters, one of the most engaging is that of Gonne and Yeats, who maintained a friendship for half a century. "[I] could not for one minute imagine marrying him," said Gonne of her ardent suitor, who twice proposed marriage and was twice turned down. But early on, she found Yeats's friendship "a charming restful thing," and over the decades it matured into a turbulent spiritual marriage, rocked by temperamental clashes and political upheavals, but undergirded by loyalty and mutual support. "I have *always* counted on your friendship," wrote Gonne to Yeats, "and it has never failed me." She could also count on his loyal opposition, as he on hers, especially when the conversation turned to politics. And the two friends' voluminous correspondence, collected in *The Gonne-Yeats Letters: 1893-1938*, attests to an intimacy marked less

by tenderness and fine perceptions than by frequent confrontation and unremitting candor.

One early collision occurred in 1897. The occasion was a counter-demonstration protesting Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, which coincided with preparations for the Centenary of the death of Wolfe Tone, father of Irish Republicanism. While the demonstration was occurring in Dublin's Rutland Square, Yeats was having tea with Maud Gonne in the nearby National Club. When violence broke out in the square, Maud rose to go out and minister to the victims of police batons. Fearing for the lady's safety, Yeats ordered the doors locked—an act of misguided gallantry which earned him a harsh epistolary rebuke:

Our friendship must indeed be strong for me not to hate you, for you made me do the most cowardly thing I have ever done in my life . . .

For a long time, I had a feeling that I should not encourage you to mix yourself up in the *outer* side of politics & you know I have never asked you to do so. . . . You have a higher work to do—With me it is different I was born to be in the midst of a crowd. . . .

Do you know that to be coward for those we love, is only a degree less bad than to be a coward for oneself. The latter I know well you are not, the former you know well you are.

Having delivered her verdict, Gonne goes on to express the hope that Yeats will not be "very vexed or hurt at anything [she has] said" in her letter.

Maud Gonne's critiques of Yeats extended to his poems. She had only the highest regard for his vocation and achievement, but she did not shrink from offering blunt criticism. Reading the manuscript of "Easter 1916," now commonly regarded as one of Yeats's finest poems, Gonne had this to say:

My dear Willie

No I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you & above all it isn't worthy of the subject—Though it reflects your present state of mind perhaps, it isn't quite sincere enough for you who have studied philosophy & know something of history know quite well that sacrifice has never yet turned a heart to stone though it has immortalized many & through it alone mankind can rise to God—You recognize this in the line which was the original inspiration of the poem 'A terrible Beauty is born' but you let your present mood mar & confuse it till even some of the verses become unintelligible to many. . . .

There are beautiful lines in your poem, as there are in all you write but it is not a great WHOLE, a living thing which our race would treasure & repeat, such as a poet like you might have given to your nation & which would have avenged our material failure by its spiritual beauty—

You will be angry perhaps that I write so frankly what I feel, but I am always frank with my friends & though our ideals are wide apart we are still friends.

Yeats's response to this letter has not been preserved, most of his letters to Gonne having been lost in raids on her home. But from this and other letters written by Maud Gonne, it is apparent that any new letter by Yeats to Gonne entered a complex emotional ambience, at once supportive and critical, respectful and scrupulous. As Yeats's spiritual wife, one of Gonne's self-appointed roles was to enforce a standard of honesty, both in herself and in her sometimes dreamy correspondent. "The drag of the face on the other side of the page" can be felt acutely in reading Yeats's letters, and its presence influences one's judgment of Yeats's veracity.

One example will suffice. On September 27, 1927, at the age of sixty-two, Yeats wrote these lines to Maud Gonne:

You are right—I think—in saying I was once a republican, though like you yourself I would have been satisfied with Gladstone's bill. I wonder if I ever told you what changed all

my political ideas. It was the reading through in 1903-04 of the entire works of Balzac. . . . I hate many things but I do my best, & once some fifteen years ago, for I think one whole hour, I was free from hate. Like Faust I said 'stay moment' but in vain. I think it was the only happiness I have ever known.

However poignant, Yeats's closing sentence strains belief. In his sixty-two years, was the poet never happy at any other hour? Not even upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature? At the birth of his children? In his one sexual encounter with Maud Gonnet? Were Yeats's declaration to appear at the end of a lyric poem, it would, I think, be suspect—and might well be dismissed as romantic posturing, made all the more improbable by the poet's likening himself to Faust. But in the context of the Gonnet-Yeats correspondence, Yeats's confession gains, at the very least, the credibility of dramatic truth. It is, one feels, what Yeats really believed at the moment of writing, Maud's stern presence standing as his witness. In that respect, the meaning of Yeats's statement may be seen as the joint creation of Gonnet, Yeats, and readers like ourselves. "Our children were your poems," wrote Gonnet to Yeats. And the same might be said of their letters, whose truths—dramatic and otherwise—are the work of two authors, two consciences, two loving but opposed sensibilities.

v

So far I have been speaking of the truth of letters as if it were mainly a matter of content. Whether it be emotional, dramatic, or literal truth, it resides primarily in what a letter says. But there is another kind of veracity, residing less in content than in form. "[W]hat we demand of a letter," wrote Tom Paulin in his review of Elizabeth Bishop's *Collected Letters*, "is writing rather than the written, speaking not the spoken, the mind in action not the mind at rest." In other words, we demand a kind of authenticity, reflected in the author's syntax, diction, turns of phrase, and so on. The author's sayings may be wise or foolish, graceful or lumpish. What we demand is authentic presence, expressed primarily through an authentic voice.

Authentic presence can take many forms, not all of them very literary. The mind in action, untrammelled by reflection, can say outlandish things. "My name is Lisa," said a voice on my phone one afternoon. "I had you at 11:00 this morning and I'd like to make an appointment." A blend of ambiguity, specificity, and inadvertent innuendo, Lisa's request has lodged itself in my memory as an example of authentic utterance.

Printed words can make a similar impression. In 1535 Lord Edmund Howard wrote a letter to Lady Lisle, complaining of a problem:

So it is I have this night after midnight taken your medicine, for the which I heartily thank you, for it hath done me much good, and hath caused the stone to break, so that now I void much gravel. But for all that, your said medicine hath done me little honesty, for it made me piss my bed this night, for the which my wife hath sore beaten me, and saying it is children's parts to bepiss their bed. Ye have made me such a pisser that I dare not this day go abroad . . .

Complaining of another kind of problem, Katherine Mansfield wrote on March 24, 1921 to Princess Bibesco, who was having an affair with Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband:

I am afraid you must stop writing these little love letters to my husband while he and I live together. It is one of the things which is not done in our world.

You are very young. Won't you ask your husband to explain to you the impossibility of such a situation.

Please do not make me have to write to you again. I do not like scolding people and I simply hate having to teach them manners.

In both instances, one hears an authentic voice, be it that of an incontinent aristocrat or an exquisitely acidulous spouse. And one feels an authentic presence behind the words.

Authentic presence also distinguishes letters of a darker and more serious nature. The letters of emigrants, exiles, and prisoners often

make compelling reading, perhaps because enforced absence or confinement turns attention inward, and the authors of such letters seem uncommonly present to themselves. One thinks of Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," or of the letters of Andrei Sinyavsky from a Russian labor camp, or of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters from a Nazi prison, written in the shadow of the gallows but rich in compassion and moral insight. "There is a wholeness," wrote Bonhoeffer, "about the fully grown man which makes him concentrate on the present moment." With quiet insistence, Bonhoeffer's letters express that wholeness.

So indeed do the letters of another prisoner, the pilot Claude Eatherly, who became an American hero for his part in the Hiroshima bombing. On August 8, 1960 Eatherly wrote a letter from the V.A. Hospital in Waco, Texas, where he was then confined. The recipient is identified as "Reverend N," a member of the Japanese Diet:

I will first answer the question you asked as to my role in the Atom bombing of Japan at Hiroshima.

I was the commander of the lead plane, named the *Straight Flush*. It was my job to reach the target of Hiroshima, which was the primary target, to get information on the weather and determine if we would have any resistance from enemy aircraft and ground fire. . . . The weather seemed ideal to me—the city would be obscured and saved and the dropping of the bomb on the military headquarters would cause the military to realize the strength and destructive force of the bomb, thus convincing the Japanese military that they should sign a peace treaty and end the terrible war. I sent my coded message which was the final 'go ahead' to the bomb-carrying plane to bomb the primary target. . . .

Now that you know my role on the mission, I wish to tell you that I made a dedication that day of 6 August 1945, that I would dedicate my life to destroy the causes of war and the banishment of all nuclear weapons. I said this to myself in prayer on the trip back to my home base—whatever may happen in the future, I know that I have learned three things which will remain forever convictions of my heart

and mind. Life, even the hardest life, is the most beautiful, wonderful, and most miraculous treasure in the world. Fulfilment of duty is another marvellous thing which I, at that time and on that trip back to Tinian, accepted as my dedicated duty to make life happy, without fear, poverty, ignorance and the lack of freedom of all races, whether red, white, black or yellow. This was my second conviction. My third is that cruelty, hatred, violence and injustice never can and never will be able to create a mental, moral and material millennium. The only road to it is the all giving creative love, trust and brotherhood, not only preached but consistently practiced.

Some fifteen years have passed since that dedication, and it has cost me much because of the mental and emotional disturbances, caused by the guilt of such a crime. I have spent nearly eight of those years in hospitals and a short time in jails. I always seemed to be happier in jails because I had a release of guilt by being punished. . . .

Eatherly's critics have questioned whether his emotional difficulties stemmed solely from the trauma of Hiroshima. What is not so questionable, at least for this reader, is the anguished conviction in Eatherly's voice: the presence of the man and his pain.

vi

Man's most delicate machinery: honesty in a letter. Were E. L. Mayo to rewrite his poem today, he might well reiterate his question. And to deepen the sense of doubt, he might also question the continuing existence of the vehicle on which so much depends. Not long ago Sven Birkerts, the elegist of the printed word, imagined a time when his grandchildren would listen to him tell of "sitting in a room quietly turning the pages of a book with the same disbelief with which I listened to my grandfather talk about riding in a horse-drawn carriage or pitching hay with a pitchfork." If the printed word is indeed threatened with extinction, as Birkerts and others believe, how much more

vulnerable is the *unprinted* word—the familiar letter, written in its author’s own hand?

It is premature, I think, to write an elegy for the familiar letter, or even to list it among the endangered species. So long as there are friends, one hopes, there will be letters. And in the view of some, digital technology has spawned a rebirth of correspondence, albeit by electronic means. But e-mail, as Frank Kermode observes, “fosters promiscuous communication and a lack of that privacy formerly taken for granted as a natural condition of letter-writing.” And in that very privacy reside the kinds of truth which familiar letters are uniquely suited to convey. Apropos of their correspondence, Thomas Merton wrote to Boris Pasternak in 1958: “the great business of our time is this: for one man to find himself in another one who is on the other side of the world. Only by such contacts can there be peace. . . .” And Elizabeth Bishop, writing to Robert Lowell, urged him never to forsake their correspondence, which she likened to a lantern in a dark cave. Given such avowals, and given its distinction as a conduit of the human spirit, the familiar letter deserves—and needs—renewed attention, renewed commitment. Like letterpress books, or like furniture made of solid woods, or like the hair in E. L. Mayo’s poem, the humane art may well be growing rare.