Epistolary Poetry

The Poem as Letter; The Letter as Poem

Several years ago in Missoula, at the customary after-the-reading bash, I was approached by a young grad school poet.

"I didn't realize that you were a former student of Richard Hugo's," he said.

"I'm not."

"But you write letter poems," he declared, "and that's an invention of Dick's."

With all the specializing and pigeon-holing done by scholars, it has always astonished me that no one (to my knowledge) has written on epistolary poetry as a genre. The poem as letter has been with us for nearly as long as we have had written poetry. In the Western tradition, the honor of inventing the genre is generally bestowed upon Quintus Horatius Flaccus, a Latin poet who preceded Hugo by roughly two thousand years. And ever since Horace, the letter poet has been prominently evident, especially during the 17th and 18th centuries when English poets were much taken with imitations of the Hora-
tian epistle. In 1804, Wordsworth wrote “To a Young Lady Who Had Been Reproached for Taking Long Walks in the Country:”

Dear Child of Nature, let them rail!
— There is a nest in a green dale,
A harbour and a hold;
Where thou, a Wife and Friend, shalt see
Thy own heart-stirring days, and be
A light to you and old.

There, healthy as a shepherd boy,
And treading among the flowers of joy
Which at no season fade,
Thou, while thy babes around thee cling,
Shalt show us how divine a thing
A Woman may be made.

Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee, when grey hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave.

A thousand years before Wordsworth, the great masters of T’ang poetry, Li Po and Tu Fu, were writing copiously in the same genre. Pound has translated Li Po’s “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter,” and “Exile’s Letter.” Shigeyoshi Obata translated “Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu” with
the following footnote: “In contrast with Li Po, who depended largely on inspiration, Tu Fu was a painstaking artist careful of the minutest details.” The poem is a marvelous example of just why the genre is so universally appealing:

Here! is this you on the top of Fan-ko Mountain,
Wearing a huge hat in the noon-day sun?
How thin, how wretchedly thin, you have grown!
You must have been suffering from poetry again.

Much of the charm of the letter poem lies in its “inside” information. Without Obata’s footnote, we could not possibly gain the insight into the difference between these two poets and their respective approach to craft, and yet even without the footnote, there is a certain appeal, even at a single reading. The poem as letter allows a privacy of speech, and a certain confidentiality of tone that other genres tend to repel. Epistolary poetry may be said to be the first expression of the “confessional school” since its tendency is to include and/or refer to autobiographical and biographical detail not generally known to the public. However, in order to establish a certain degree of accessibility in the poem, these details must reveal their own significance somehow with-
out the context of the poem. Obata’s footnote is unnecessary.

Many years later, Tu Fu would write a letter poem “To Li Po on a Spring Day:”

Po, the poet unrivaled,
In fancy’s realm you soar alone.
Yours is the delicacy of Yui,
And Pao’s rare virility.
Now on the north of the Wei River
I see the trees under the veral sky
While you wander beneath the sunset clouds
Far down in Chiang-tung.
When shall we by a cask of wine once more
Argue minutely on versification?

While the reader need not know that Yui Hsin and Pao Chao were probably as well known during the early T’ang as were Li Po and his correspondent, it requires little imagination on the part of the reader to sort out the details. Similarly, the last line requires no explication nor exegesis.

East or West, the letter poem is a fundamental concern. Shelley’s wonderful longish “Letter to Maria Gisborne,” all the Romantic poems beginning with “To . . . ,” these form the tradition of the genre on which all the modern and contemporary poets draw. In the Eastern tradition, there is so much epistolary poetry that it seems silly to mention a few of the better-known: Li Ch’ing-chao, Po Chü-i (see
Waley’s Po Chü-i’s “The Letter,” Ch’in Chia’s “To His Wife” and “Ch’in Chia’s Wife’s Reply”) and others.

Whether we prefer to trace the origins of the letter poem back to Horace, or whether we take it back beyond him to some anonymous poet of the Shih Ching (assembled roughly 600 BC), we shall soon see that it has become a mainstay since the advent of Modernism.

Although there is nothing in the title to designate it as such, William Carlos Williams wrote one of the Modern epistolary classics, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower:”

Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
like a buttercup
upon its branching stem—
save that it’s green and wooden—
I come, my sweet,
to sing to you.

... This poem, with its personal, confidential tone, its private reverie, and its declarative structure is, undeniably, a poem directly out of the epistolary genre. Williams wrote many such poems, although he did not bother with the formality of calling them “letter poems” in his titles.

Nor has the letter poem in its Modernist application been a pure product of America; nor, for that
matter, of the English-speaking world. While his finest translators, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, note his pre-eminent “Greekness,” George Seferis was at times fond of taking events that might seem, superficially at least, to be only of local and passing significance, and of transforming such events into a kind of universal understanding. This kind of poem is very much epistolary, drawing on the confidential tradition. Seferis spoke, Keeley and Sherrard remark, of the “Waste Land feeling,” and a great many, most, of his poems draw on Greek custom and history, place-names and events. But in poems such as “Letter of Mathios Paskalis,” and “Last Stop,” and especially “An Old Man on the River Bank,” Seferis becomes an epistolary poet of the first order, working within a well-developed, well-defined genre.

Likewise, we have Octavio Paz writing a “Carta a León Felipe” in a private and calm voice that refers to philosophy, literature, and politics, that calls back a letter of Felipe’s, bringing in more and more as it turns through its syntactic labyrinths. And Borges, of course, writes across the centuries “To a Saxon Poet:”

The snowfalls of Northumbria have known
And have forgotten the imprint of your feet,
And numberless are the suns that now have set
Between your time and mine, my ghostly kinsman.
As though the dead poet might receive his mail as promptly as the living. Borges, Seferis, and the others invite us into their studies as they write. We read their mail before it’s sent.

It is not in the least surprising that so many poets find the confidential style of the epistle attractive. Whether it is written in English iambic pentameter or in the classical literary Mandarin of the T’ang (usually in a five-character line), or whether, with the contemporary hand, it is composed in organic form, the letter poem rimes across the centuries; it permits an intimacy which no other genre admits; it is almost always “occasional” in the best sense. From Allen Tate (“To a Romantic”) writing to Robert Penn Warren, from Yvor Winters writing “To Emily Dickinson,” poets of conservative literary persuasion, to the slightly less formal Lowell of Life Studies (“To Delmore Schwartz”) and Elizabeth Bishop’s “Invitation to Marianne Moore” (“but please/please come flying,” the poet begs), and “letter to N.Y.” in which she says, “In your next letter I wish you’d say/where you are going and what you are doing;/how are the plays, and after the plays/what other pleasures you’re pursuing:/...” the letter allows us to enter the poem in the midst, most often, of its occasion.

Sometimes the letter poem arrives inside a larger format, as with Robert Penn Warren’s “The Letter About Money, Love, or Other Comfort, if Any,”
which serves as the second section of the longer "Garland for You." Likewise, in the fourth of ten sections in *The Book of Nightmares*, Galway Kinnell continues a previously established epistolary tone with "Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata." In the second movement of this section, he carries the letter poem another step by including a letter addressed "Dear Galway," and concluding with, "Yours, faithless to this life, Virginia."

Continuing to explore letter poems in organic forms, we find John Logan's "Letter to a Young Father in Exile," his "Lines to His Son on Reaching Adolescence," and even "Heart to Heart Talk with My Liver," each of these falling clearly into the epistolary tradition. Other poets have freely modified the tradition to include the "postcard" poem, a brief letter, such as Denise Levertov's "Postcard" in *Life in the Forest*; she is also author of "Letter" (from the same book), in which she says, "... And I in my house/of smaller plants, many books, colored rugs,/my typewriter silent,/have been searching out for you, ..."

Levertov is working well within the genre, using, marrying, the descriptive and the declarative, allowing a smooth discursive element into the informal appearance or realization of the poem. William Stafford does the same kind of thing in "A Poet to a Novelist," and then returns to the simpler "Letter from Oregon," addressing his mother directly:
Mother, even home was doubtful; many slip into the sea and are gone for years, just as I boarded the six-fifteen there. Over the bar I have leaped outward.

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. The style and tone declare the genre as certainly as fourteen lines of rimed, five-syllable stresses declares itself a "form."

I shall close these comments with a few words of reference to certain epistolary poems of recent years that seem to me high points, not only of a genre, but of poetry in our time in general. Among "younger" poets, I recommend Robert Hass's rhythmical tour-de-force, "Not Going to New York: A Letter."

Dear Dan—
This is a letter of apology, unrhymed. Rhyme belongs to the dazzling couplets of arrival. Survival is the art around here. It rhymes by accident with the rhythm of days which arrive like crows in a field of stubble corn in upstate New York in February.

...
Hass has the ability to carry four pages of discursive, intuitive poem by ear alone. It is a fine poem that expands the epistolary genre, reinvigorates it, and very nearly redefines it in strong narrow terms.

But there remain two absolute masters of the epistolary poem in our time. The younger, Thomas McGrath, has totally re-visioned all epistolary writing in poetry that I know of—and he’s done it by adapting the genre as a form for his long poem, 

Letter to an Imaginary Friend:

—“From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east.”

I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street, Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio, thinking, . . .

and so on, presently nearly 300 pages and as yet unfinished.

But McGrath’s contribution to the letter poem is not limited to his neglected and unfinished masterpiece. In his collected shorter poems, Movie At the End of the World, there are short lyric letter poems of a very high order: “Postcard Amchitka, 1943,” and “A Letter for Marian” which opens:

I sit musing, ten minutes from the Jap, Six hours by sun from where my heart is, Forty-three years into the hangman’s century, Half of them signed with the difficult homage
Of personal existence.

... The letter poem is, for the poet, "the difficult homage of personal existence," as all being is first personal, then universal. Its declarative nature permits the poet a freedom of commitment and subjective experience utterly alien to other genres. At its most fully realized and most lyrical, at its most intense occasion, the letter poem expresses emotion more purely than any other. And here I shall close with a few references to the poetry of Kenneth Rexroth: the elegies for Delia and Andree Rexroth, poems like "For a Masseuse and Prostitute," and "The Signature of All Things," and even the longer "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart," poems that bring together the epistolary tradition of East and West as perhaps no other poet has done. A great deal of the shorter poetry of Rexroth is very clearly within this tradition. That he is not universally recognized for the master he is, that he, like McGrath, is almost a neglected poet, is nearly incomprehensible. As Rexroth says at the close of "A Letter to William Carlos Williams:"

And that is what a poet
Is, children, one who creates
Sacramental relationships
That last always.
The letter poem will remain with us for as long as we write poems. There was nothing I could say to the young man in Missoula but to go home and read the classics, both ancient and modern.