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LITERARY EPISTOLOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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This special issue of *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* emerged from a panel at the Modern Language Association convention devoted to the theory, practice, and future of letter studies. The exchanges that took place there confirmed what scholars of life writing, textual scholarship, book history, and literary criticism have increasingly recognized: letters can no longer be treated merely as supplementary documents that illuminate authors' biographies and canonical works from the margins. Correspondence is itself a site of literary production, self-fashioning, social relation, cultural transmission, and archival contestation. As the boundary between private communication and public writing is reconsidered, letters assume renewed importance not only as records of literary identities and intellectual communities, but also as instruments through which those identities and communities are constructed.

The interviews, essays, and reviews gathered here participate in what might be called an "epistolary turn", a renewed attention to letters as literary forms, material artifacts, social practices, and objects of archival and editorial mediation. The shared premise of this issue is that a letter is neither a transparent message of authorial intention nor a self-contained textual object. Drawing on formal, communicative, and social-practice approaches to epistolarity, the contributors understand the letter as a mediated relational event, whose meanings arise among writer, addressee, and subsequent readers, depending on material or technological medium, and conditions of circulation, see Altman (1982), Barton & Hall (2000), and Rybicka (2016). Janet Gurkin Altman's influential conception of epistolarity directs attention to mediation, confidentiality, readership, closure, discourse, and narrativity as constitutive features of epistolary writing (Altman 1982: 4). The present issue extends this formal insight into material, archival, ethical, and digital domains. It asks not

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simply what letters mean but what they do, how they travel, whom they address, what relations they create, and how their meanings change when they are withheld, intercepted, edited, published, digitized, or left unread.

Such an approach requires a broad understanding of correspondence. A letter may be considered simultaneously as literary form, material artifact, social action, historical record, affective transaction, and editorial construction. Its significance cannot be separated from the circumstances of its composition and circulation, or from the institutions and individuals that determine whether it survives and becomes legible to later readers. The archive, accordingly, is not just a storehouse in which correspondence awaits discovery. It is a historically produced field of selection and exclusion, shaped by accident, legal considerations, editorial judgment, and unequal access to sources. To study letters is therefore also to study the power relations that allow some voices to enter literary history while rendering others absent.

The origins of this issue in the MLA panel reflect this methodological range. Six presentations approached correspondence as literary form, material object, archival record, editorial problem, and social practice. Greg Zacharias, Co-General Editor of *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, drew on his extensive editorial experience to address the theoretical and practical questions involved in acquiring, editing, and publishing correspondence. Christine Flanagan, editor of *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon*, illuminated the labor of recovering letters from dispersed archives and negotiating the legal complexities surrounding literary estates. The renewed public attention to Flannery O'Connor associated with the film *Wildcat* (2023) made especially visible the role that edited correspondence can play in reassessments of an author's life, work, and cultural legacy.

James A. Schiff turned to John Updike's thousands of letters, postcards, and notes, concentrating on Updike's elaborate correspondence with his mother and on the ethical difficulties involved in reading, collecting, and editing private communications. Extending the panel's historical reach, Yulia Mevissen examined the gendered conception of epistolarity in Christian Fürchtegott Gellert's influential letter-writing manual of 1751, particularly its essentialization of women as supposedly sentimental correspondents. Lisu Wang explored the interdependence of letters, travel, and domesticity in Elizabeth Gaskell's development as a woman writer in nineteenth-century England. Kendall Grady, finally, investigated the spatio-economic power and nonhuman agency of the love letter, challenging the treatment of social imaginaries as inert and of love as an exclusively private emotion detached from the material conditions of historical experience. Together, these presentations established the central proposition developed throughout this issue: letters do not merely record literary and social worlds but actively participate in producing them.

The two interviews at the beginning of this issue place authorship and editorial mediation at the center of this inquiry. In the first, J.M. Coetzee reflects on correspondence as a mode of intellectual and literary engagement. The conversation offers insight into the relationship between letters and literary creation while raising broader questions about audience, privacy, collaboration, and the afterlives of personal communication. In an age when correspondence moves between paper archives and digital environments, such questions become increasingly difficult to separate from the media through which literary relations are established and preserved. The second interview features Christine Flanagan, whose work on the correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon illuminates the practical realities of archival research, textual editing, legal negotiation, and literary recovery. Her discussion demonstrates that an edited collection of letters constructs a field of reading through acts of discovery, arrangement, annotation, and contextualization. Editorial scholarship therefore shapes not only which letters become available but also how literary relationships, reputations, and histories can be understood.

The five essays gathered here further unsettle the image of correspondence as a simple reciprocal circuit in which one person writes and another reads and replies. Letters may be coded, withheld, delayed, unanswered, misread, selectively preserved, politically constrained, and retrospectively transformed by editors and critics. They cross borders between nations and genres, private experience and public history, embodied vulnerability and literary self-fashioning. Ranging from Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and Flannery O'Connor to contemporary trans fiction, the essays demonstrate that epistolography remains vital to English studies precisely because the letter is neither stable nor transparent. It is an event shaped by its medium, its imagined recipient, its circumstances of circulation, and the possibility that it may never arrive, never be answered, or never communicate what it appears to say.

A first major strand running through the issue concerns the complicated relation between correspondence and literary authorship. Jacek Gutorow reads Flannery O'Connor's letters not merely as biographical supplements to her fiction but as sites of artistic self-consciousness. Their intelligence, humor, theological seriousness, and attentiveness to language reveal the discipline and pleasure of O'Connor's writing life while inviting a renewed encounter with her stories. The letters do not simply explain the fiction from outside. They represent a distinctive field of literary practice in which voice, judgment, belief, and aesthetic choices are continuously tested. Ivana Čikeš's essay on Henry James presses this question further by asking what changes when letters cease to be treated as secondary evidence and become primary texts. Returning to correspondence previously used to support an argument about James's autobiographical prose, Čikeš considers how the language of the letters participates in James's aesthetic and political

imagining of the ideal citizen. Thus, these two essays challenge the hierarchy that places published literature at the center and correspondence at the margins. Letters have their own rhetorical designs, formal energies, and theories of authorship, community, and citizenship.

The boundary between letters and neighboring genres proves equally unstable. Ágnes Zsófia Kovács examines Edith Wharton's correspondence alongside her travel writing, showing how the two forms express observation and emotion differently. Letters may preserve affective qualities that travel narratives stylize or suppress, yet this relationship is not fixed. At other moments, the published travel account acquires an emotional force that correspondence registers only obliquely. Such reversals complicate any easy opposition between the intimate letter and the crafted public text. They also expose a central methodological difficulty: a letter's apparent immediacy is itself rhetorically produced, just as the restraint of a published narrative may communicate affect indirectly. Reading correspondence consequently requires attention not only to what a document discloses but also to how feeling becomes attuned to genres and audiences.

Questions of disclosure and concealment become especially urgent in Mirosława Buchholtz's analysis of Ernest Hemingway's correspondence with his Polish translator, Bronisław Zieliński. Here, silence becomes a form of evidence. Hemingway's physical and cognitive difficulties are displaced by declarations of work, while Zieliński interprets interruptions in communication through the political pressures of the Cold War. The correspondence reveals how disability may be denied, translated into assertions of productivity, or misrecognized as political estrangement. At the same time, the possibility that letters might be intercepted encourages both correspondents to withhold political opinion. Privacy, health, friendship, translation, and surveillance become inseparable. The letter operates as a bridge across geopolitical division, but it is also a medium damaged by that division. Buchholtz's essay thus demonstrates the need for an ethics of epistolary interpretation. Scholars must remain attentive to what historical actors could not safely articulate, what correspondents could not recognize in one another, and what later readers may be tempted to diagnose too confidently. Silence does not yield a single recoverable truth. It marks the point at which bodily impairment, rhetorical self-fashioning, political danger, and incomplete knowledge converge.

The interpretive force of unreadability is developed most radically in Aaron Hammes's account of trans literary epistolography. Contemporary trans fiction expands the epistolary field beyond conventional letters to include blogs, subtweets, coded social-media messages, and communications directed toward recipients who may never read or answer them. These texts draw upon queer and trans histories of obfuscation and plausible deniability, turning the unconventional use or deliberate failure of communicative technologies into a condition of survival

and invention. The "one-way" letter destabilizes reciprocity as the defining principle of correspondence. Rather than completing an exchange, it may project affiliation, imagine a lineage, address an absent or unknowable other, or produce intimacy through the very impossibility of response. Epistolary failure is therefore not necessarily communicative collapse. It may become a literary and political resource through which subjects excluded from conventional archives can fabulate histories, transmit knowledge, and inhabit relational possibilities unavailable elsewhere. Hammes's essay makes particularly visible what the collection suggests: the addressee need not answer, or even be present, for an epistolary act to transform the relation.

The two reviews at the end of the issue extend these questions beyond the individual letter to the broader networks of friendship, translation, journalism, and cultural mediation that correspondence can recover. Elizabeth Emerson's *Letters from Red Farm: The Untold Story of the Friendship between Helen Keller and Journalist Joseph Edgar Chamberlin* draws upon previously unpublished letters and extensive research to reconstruct the lasting relationship between Helen Keller and Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, a journalist who became her literary mentor and friend. The book also connects that relationship to Keller's developing involvement in disability rights, women's issues, and pacifism. Its review thus reinforces a central concern of the issue: correspondence makes visible forms of intellectual companionship and literary formation that conventional author-centered narratives may obscure. The review of Mirosława Buchholtz and Dorota Guttfeld's *Ernest Hemingway in Interview and Translation* develops a complementary account of literary mediation. The book juxtaposes interview and translation, situates Hemingway's late interviews within the Cold War, examines Bronisław Zieliński's work as Hemingway's Polish translator, and draws upon their correspondence from 1958 to 1961. It also considers how translation participates in constructing literary meaning. Read alongside Buchholtz's essay in this issue, the review underscores that a writer's international presence is produced not by texts alone but through correspondents, translators, interviewers, and historically situated acts of interpretation. Both reviews therefore expand epistolography beyond the study of isolated documents, framing it as an inquiry into the networks of mediation through which authors, friendships, political commitments, and literary reputations become visible.

Taken together, the contributions call for a relational and medial epistolography attentive to the letter's textual form, material embodiment, circulation, reception, and archival afterlife. Such an approach preserves the formalist insight that the properties of the letter shape meaning while recognizing that those properties are never exclusively textual. Paper, handwriting, postal systems, digital platforms, censorship, editorial conventions, copyright law, and archival institutions all participate in the

production of epistolary meaning. Material approaches to epistolarity similarly emphasize how physical objects may mediate "the presential absence or absential presence, as you wish, of the respective epistolary other in the context of epistolary communication" (Bayer 2023: 131). The letter is therefore not only an object traveling between human subjects. It is an assemblage of media, institutions, technologies, and historical circumstances.

This perspective also requires the field to reconsider inherited assumptions: that letters are truthful because they are intimate, secondary because they were not originally published, reciprocal because they address another person, or complete because they survive in an archive. In place of these assumptions, the issue poses more demanding questions. Who can write openly, and who must write in code? What does silence communicate? How do different media organize intimacy and distance? When does a letter document an identity, and when does it help to invent one? What forms of vulnerability are concealed by assertions of productivity, objectivity, or control? What ethical obligations arise when private communication becomes public evidence? And what histories become possible when correspondence is read not as material subordinate to literature but as literature and social action? The fascination of letters lies finally in their constitutive uncertainty. They invite interpretation while making interpretation ethically and historically precarious. Whether intimate or public, joyful or guarded, reciprocal or one-way, handwritten or digital, letters negotiate the conditions under which selves become legible to others and to history. Yet that legibility is always partial. It depends upon reception, survival, access, and mediation.

The conversations that began at the MLA convention and continue in these pages consequently point toward a more expansive future for letter studies. As archives are digitized, editorial projects extend their reach, and correspondence assumes new technological forms, scholars must attend both to unprecedented possibilities of access and to the exclusions that new systems may reproduce. Letters preserve traces of lives and relationships that might otherwise disappear, but they also remind us that no archive is complete, transparent, or innocent.

This special issue therefore offers more than a collection of studies about letters. It provides a forum for examining what letters do: how they create communities, fashion authors, mediate intimacy, conceal vulnerability, cross political and generic borders, and generate literary and historical knowledge. Bringing together interviews, essays, and reviews across different periods and traditions, it presents literary epistolography as a dynamic area of English studies, a field in which authorship, embodiment, affect, technology, politics, editorial judgment, and archival strategies converge.

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