

Lovers' Letters – text from self-published book

Writing Letters

Lover's Letters began when my lover started to send me letters and poetry through the post. He lives only a few miles away. An avid letter writer all my life, technology and time, had finally eroded my letter-writing tendencies, so I was delighted.

A reciprocal conversation followed and follows, that must be differentiated from any other dialogue, verbal or written. I am still trying to tease out what *is* different about letters.

Letters are written for an audience of one. As A.S. Byatt writes in *Possession*, letters, 'exclude not only the reader as co-writer.....but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written if they are true letters, for a reader' (p. 131).

It is this that I have tried to re-capture in representing letters for others. As the letters are fictionalized and contain only references, and indices of original texts, they are not 'true' letters. They can only be representations of such.

A.S. Byatt's character Beatrice writes:

'There are poets whose love poems seem to be concerned neither with praise nor blame.....but with true conversation between men and women. [These] poems present every phrase of intimacy.....but always convince the reader of the real thinking and feeling presence of her to whom they are addressed'. She was proud of conversation which she had chosen in preference to the more obvious dialogue'.

Although writing of poetry, the two things: letters and poetry seem intimately bound and are both used in this project. Both letters and poetry are indeed intimate 'conversations', and I have endeavoured to capture this.....

Theoretically I like the notion of dialogue/dialogism, and use both letters and poetry to explore this notion. Leiman writes of the assumption that every utterance has an addressee. The central question is: To whom is the person speaking? Usually, we think of one listener as the immediately observable addressee. However, the addressee is rather a multiplicity of others, a complex web of invisible others, whose presence can be traced in the content, flow and expressive elements of the utterance, I'm directly addressing you but while speaking I'm protesting to a third person who is invisibly present in the conversation. Whilst this could merely refer to our different selves, by implication there is more:

'Any true understanding is dialogic in nature...in essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers...[its] meaning is realised only in a process of active, responsive understanding' (Tim Beasley-Smith on Bakhtin, p.91)

It is this 'active, responsive understanding' that I wanted to capture in the sequential letter format, and by intentionally including an audience, form a different position between speakers. The endeavour is to share a private exchange or conversation, and invite others to be part of 'a complex web of invisible others', who form different

meanings and connections in a relay of language, the expression, form, and interpretation, changed by the site, and context of the texts.

Siting.citing

The site of the stelae - style plaques on the trees was part of the original idea that the words could somehow be placed on the trees, without harming them (no possibility of traditional carved-hearts, and initials.) The woods, (especially at Kestle Barton with its links to the romance novel *Frenchman's Creek*) are the traditional site of the lovers' tryst; a place where they could meet, declare their love and may be more.

Originally I started playing with phrases from possible conversations from letters which I thought might positionality, overlap, and word play. This had the added advantage of having to find ways to place only a few letters or phrases which was easier. I hoped to crystallize whole conversations and somehow represent the dialogic nature of endeavour simultaneously. (e.g. *You are mine, I am mine, I am yours...*). I also played with the idea of multi-sensory installation of letters that could be heard, or felt using different senses. I planned and made ceramic letters that could be hung from the branches of trees, so they might chime in the wind as the letters moved. (e.g. *I hear what is written, I feel what is said...*). Yet I felt strongly that these 'clever short phrases', could never really intimate a true relation. Rather they remind one of short pithy sentences used in advertising, like those mimicked in the work of Barbara Kruger *et al.*

I still plan to experiment with other media besides clay. I had so many ideas about how to go about this project, yet many used technology in some way (mobile phone tree carved messages, video, documented performance, using Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself*, grand letter in some way....), Yet as I wanted to celebrate old-style pre-tech 'snail-mail', none of these seemed in keeping.

I wanted to make objects that were resonant with the environment and with the viewer, and let the objects perform individually....and yet in dialogue. The 'reader' is invited to find them on the trees, where they could be left. How long does pottery last?.....

Ceramic Stelae

Here, the letters form a completed public dialogue. Whilst fictional, it is intended that they retain a sense of intimacy and reality, and genuine dialogue. The making of the ceramic plaques, or stelae, was a process of experimentation; each set of 3, is made with a different clay and glaze method (terracotta, stoneware buff, or stoneware raku with a variety of things....). Their aesthetic success or failure, clarity or legibility is no matter to me. I desire to show a process of dialogue, and a lover's delight in making a re-presentation of letter-objects, possessed with words more concrete, and lasting, than even paper. In this sense they become stones of remembrance, celebration and demarcation.

The format for each set of 3 stelae - plaques is **sender:poem:reply**.

The poems are lodged between, rest and reside, in the centre of the dialogue as a pause, breath, and perhaps a 'third voice'. I wanted to explore positionality not duality: instead of self and other Bakhtin's notion of dialogism presents 3 positions, which I feel the stelae could represent

1. 'I-for-myself' -spirit (dukh)

2. 'another-for-me' - soul (dusha) bestowed as a gift

3. 'I-for-another' - seeing through another standpoint, an answering consciousness

I felt that the poems represent, position 2: between, and bestowed as a gift. They are intermezzos, as well as part of the dialogue/conversation. Unlike the letters they are not fictitious. In a public context, they symbolise unedited, whole reality. Poetry is a different kind of personal expression but has similar values to letter writing, made in and from interior space with the intention of being shared with others, perhaps in many voices.

It is hoped to place the 3 stelae in close juxtaposition on selected trees, and invited readers to find them. It is possible that in presenting them in this way that the reader may also join the dialogue as position 3: 'I-for-another'

Letters

What is utterly striking about letters *a propos* other forms of communication is the use of an intimate voice that is not used in email. In an article on 'the art of writing letters' by Andre Klein (<http://learnoutlive.com/the-lost-art-of-writing-letters/>), he outlines differences between personal email and letters; the majority of emails are functional, and short, in order to get noticed in over-full in-boxes. Both have a similar format, starting with a greeting and perhaps a formal adieu, yet the similarities end there. Studying the language of both email and letters, reveals that in letters,

'There's a heightened sense of *interpersonal sensitivity* in these letters, a great sense of respect towards the addressee, even disagreement and/or professional discourse is wrapped in a profound sense of *deep contact*.'

Klein finds that emails are more superficial, with less personal expression. In their speed-format, short-cut instant technological delivery, email lack time and space.

'Writing and reading a good letter takes time. ... It takes time to unfold perspectives in a deep and comprehensive way. It takes time and attention to *really* listen, to express how you feel about things in a way, that can be understood by others'.

Letters have the potential, more than any other writing activity to be a shared journey, and a personal self-exploration. Unlike email, what unfolds, comes from time and exploration. Unlike a personal diary, the personal is addressed, tempered and answered by another.

Without knowing what one is going to say, it is a venture of faith from a compulsion or volition to write which only makes sense in the other's (recipient's) hand . There is

consummation in its delivery, and release in its making; Letter writing and poetry are unique ways of sharing inter-personal expression.

Letters as objects

Why do I turn once again to writing?

Beloved, you must not ask such a question

For the truth is, I have nothing to tell you,

All the same, your dear hand will hold this note

Goethe

There is a sense of object-hood about a letter, which virtual equivalents cannot have. It is written, enclosed, delivered, received.

'Made by hand, the...object bears the fingerprints, real or metaphorical of the person who fashioned it,' (Octavio Paz, *Convergences*, 1987). The letter-as-object is treasured for many reasons, not the least for their symbol of human skill and craft as well as bodily contact. As objects letters must be treasured for their beauty (paper, and ink), the workmanship of the handwriting, or equally its interesting illegibility, or palaeographic skill in its reading! Each recipient may chose to file, hide, display, tie together with a ribbon one, tear or burn, the other's letters - only half of a conversation!

They come to represent the other: 'Every object touched by the loved being's body becomes part of that body, and the subject eagerly attaches himself to it...the metonymic object is presence'. (Barthes, *Lover's Discourse* p.174. ribbon: objects.) The letter-as-object can be a stand in for the person themselves. Or can be.

This cannot be true of other forms of address. Email is often ephemeral, not printed, not kept. It is 'virtual' - not an object to be treasured, or used to evoke remembrance of the other. In this project, it has been a joy to make objects by hand that represent and evoke both parts (and in-between) in dialogue. In reality letters kept are only one half of a mysterious monologue. Only when all letters are collected together can both parts of the conversation be comprehended and the reciprocity be whole again.

Public:Private

Is it possible that letters are more personal, more private? As email uses the server/public domain there is a sense of public access or worse, the possibility of accidentally sending it to someone else. Whilst this could be true of the postman delivering your post to the wrong address, a letter is physically enclosed by an envelope, and the Royal Mail even in its death throes still commands a little respect - especially as letters are not free to send.

In many novels, letters are a dramaturgical device often going astray, or getting lost. The crux or *retourn* of many a plot, is the lost or too-late letter, where information not divulged, creates twists and tragedy. In this information age of social networking, we are more likely to suffer from knowing too much about others: where they are, what

they ate.....every trivial thought or gesture, any time of day. In contrast there is perhaps a 'proper' distance in letters. Letters allow a different way of thinking, expressing, and they contain a different rhythm of time, space and place.

Letters can be a slower conversation, and a flow of dialogue that anchors, and satisfies a human hankering after slower reciprocity. I will often see, or talk to the sender/receiver of a letter, before my letter is delivered/received, so it is never the bearer of factual or practical. Letters are more of like a

'Rhythm.... an embrace and a kiss bestowed upon the axiologically consolidated or bodied time of another mortal life....where there is rhythm there are 2 souls...one of these lives, and experiences its own life and has become passive for the other, which actively shapes and sings the first' (Tim Beasley Smith, on Bakhtin, p.21 & p.121)

Letters contain an altered time-state in which intimacy and personal expression flourish, and the rhythm of sending and returning letters is a sense of embrace.

Afternotes: theory and research

'encounter this set of sounds hammers out [of] decisive gestures, of ideas all made of tinder and fire, of deep attention and hidden closure, of laughter and smiles which one feels to be 'dangerous' at the very moment when one feels tenderness' (Deleuze, Dialogues II, p.9)

At the same time as making, writing letters I read, Barthes' *Lover's Discourse*. Fragmented chapters led to a-chapter-a-day reading- almost like a thought for the day. Whilst the language is compelling and there was much that inspired me to write, some of this was in blank refutation of his personal experiences of love, and the representations he references. His text continually contradicts, and contraverts itself. It is an embodied text with an intention to de-centre and de-stabilise subject and meaning, in the same way that 'love' (in many guises) I found in his discourse on love (or being-in-love), love was most often portrayed as selfish, conditional and demeaning. Still they were many useful passages:

'the letter is a scrupulous form.. the answer assumes an effective value, in the manner of the formula but to hear it said, affirmative, as complete, articulated on its own, no syntactical subterfuge, no variation, two phrases and two words should correspond totally. What matters is the physical, bodily, labial proffering of the word.....I can fall in love with a *sentence spoken to me*, and not only because it says something which manages to touch my desire, but because of its syntactical turn (framing), which will inhabit me *like a memory*.' (Barthes, p.152)

Corresponding, affirming, inhabiting and offering the words, letters are a haunting scriptive intercourse. For me, letters are an 'affirmation of affirmation', to borrow Deleuze's phrase, as part of his discourse on the possibilities of 'becoming' Letters are a dialogue, a language of which we are, and can be co-owners. Letters are generously shared. They meet, express and ceaselessly re-name. Conversations are outlines of possible 'becomings'. They are a dialogue 'between the two', an assemblage of enunciation, an encounter between conjunction and double-capture. In the project of *Lovers' Letters*, it is hoped these ideas exist in repetition and the poetry.

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