What Ever Happened to Mme de Sévigné? Reflections on the Fate of the Epistolary Art in a Media Age
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What Ever Happened to Mme de Sévigné? Reflections on the Fate of the Epistolary Art in a Media Age

What cannot letters inspire? They have souls; they can speak; they have in them all that force which expresses the transports of the heart; they have all the fire of our passions.

Abélard to Héloïse

The post is the consolation of life.

Voltaire

By JOHN L. BROWN

The letter, it seems, is dying; but its deathbed is surrounded by an unprecedented number of specialists, who find the moribund of great clinical interest, and every one of them seems to have a diagnosis of his own. All agree, however, that the health of the letter has been undermined and finally dealt a fatal blow by the telephone, the telegram, the cassette, the fax, and other technical innovations that have deprived it of its raison d'être. The written word has been vanquished by the audiovisual. The authentic "personal letter" (fictitious as this can often be) has been further devalued by the rise of computerized mail. The public now receives masses of "letters," addressed by name and making a pitch for everything imaginable, from political and charitable contributions to "special offers" and "gifts for you alone." The flood of such patently phony missives, couched in terms of instant intimacy, is the "junk mail" which constitutes a major part of the correspondence most of us now receive. (This breakdown of the distinction between "the real" and "the fake" occurs in other areas of mass communication as well. On television it becomes difficult to separate the publicity from the programs.) On a smaller scale, of course, epistolary fakery has long existed. J. Douchin reports that Flaubert was quite taken in by the letters "brûlantes de passion" sent to him by a certain Eulalie de Langlade. He preserved them preciously, apparently unaware that they were copied from a popular manual on how to write love letters.1

Today Mme de Sévigné would not be sitting down, pen in hand, to write to her daughter; instead she would be ringing up Provence to have a chat with her. Moreover, Mme de Graffigny would be sending off a cassette of endearments to her lover "Panpan" up in Lorraine. Voltaire would be conducting highbrow conversations on an intellectual TV talk show, for the good letter writer is usually a good conversationalist as well. Sainte-Beuve’s weekly literary roundup would beat Bernard Pivot’s "Apostrophe" in the ratings.

Paradoxically, as we shall observe in examining the present situation in France, there have never been so many letters, so many complete correspondences edited and published, so many scholarly articles, colloquia, and conferences devoted to every aspect—literary, sociological, and psychological—of the epistolary art. In the course of this essay I shall attempt to provide some of the reasons for the present vogue, very much in evidence from the fifties onward, of a literary genre (is it a genre? is it "literary"?) which has fewer and fewer practitioners. Laurent Versini has pointed out that "les études de genres et de techniques particulières, longtemps sacrifiées par la critique traditionnelle à l'étude des auteurs et des époques, ont d'abord caractérisé les années qui voy- aient aussi les romanciers sacrifier dans 'le nouveau roman' l'action, le personnage, la psychologie, à la technique, au 'roman du roman'; il était naturel que cette curiosité aboutit, dans les années 1950-1970, à une floraison de travaux sur la forme épistolaire."2

Indeed, the letter is being accorded more attention from literary scholars today than it ever enjoyed in the past. "Epistolarity" has had a long, vigorous, and prestigious career in French literature, beginning already in the Middle Ages, with the correspondence of Abélard and Héloïse. It gained momentum in the Renaissance, when collections of correspondence of classical authors—Cicero, Seneca, Pliny—began to appear, as well as the letters of such Italians as Annibale Caro and Girolamo Parabosco. Among the notable French productions of the period figure Etienne Du Tronchet’s Lettres missives et familières (1569) and Etienne Pasquier’s Lettres (1586). As Janet Altman notes in her article “The Letter Book as a Literary Institution, 1539–1789,” "They are inspired by Latin and Italian models and inherit the burden of medieval rhetoric."3 However, there are interesting exceptions, such as the letters exchanged with his wife by Gaspar de Saillans, supplier of saltpeter for the king’s artillery (Premier livre de Gaspar de Sal- lans, 1569), and the Epitres familières et invectives (1539) by "Hélisenne de Crenne" (Marguerite Briet), a passionate feminist whose "invectives" are directed...
against her husband (whom she had left), against one
of her correspondents who held that domestic work
was the only thing women were good for, and against
a number of her critics who contended that women
had no business writing and publishing anyway.4

The epistolary art continued to flourish throughout
the seventeenth century.2 This could be attributed in
part to the rarity of other means of information,
notably newspapers. The first French newspaper, La
Gazette, was founded by T. Renaudot in 1631. Con-
sequently, the letter sometimes filled the void. For
example, the correspondence of the physician Guy
Patin (1683) attracted readers because of its lively
reporting of current events.6 The letter was also
assuming other forms, other functions. Numerous
manuals on how to write “proper” letters began to
appear, and published collections increasingly in-
cluded missives, written often by such talented wo-
men as Mme de Sévigné, Mme Du Deffand, Mlle
Aissé, Mlle de Launay, and Mlle de Lespinasse,
among others, which were more personal than ped-
agogical.

Moreover, letters were no longer necessarily com-
munications exchanged between two individuals.
They were often fictional creations, “epistolar
novels”—such as the enormously popular Lettres d’une
périvienne (1747) by Mme de Graffigny. (Her per-
sonal letters, some of which describe her stay at
Cirey with Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet, are being
published by the Voltaire Foundation. The first vol-
ume, edited by English Showalter, appeared in
1985.) It is unnecessary to recall such well-known
works as Les lettres portugaises (1669), supposedly
written by a Lusitanian nun, Mariana Alcoforado, to
her lover, a French officer, and “translated” by the
Vicomte de Guilleragues, who was in reality the
author; or Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse (1761); or one
of the masterpieces of the genre, Les liaisons dange-
reuses (1782) by Choderlos de Balzac, recently made
into not one but two successful films. A popular
variation of the form, stimulated perhaps by the
increasing contacts of the French with foreign cul-
tures, is illustrated by such texts as Montesquieu’s
Lettres persanes (1721) and by numerous Lettres chinoises, Lettres iroquoises, Lettres siamoises, et
cetera. Utilizing the device of a foreign observer,
they satirized contemporary French life and institu-
tions. Cultivated people, undistracted by television,
had time, lots of time, to write letters. Also, skill in
the epistolary art was highly regarded in a society
“qui fait du commerce des esprits une des nécessités
de l’existence.”7 Many literary men devoted a part
each day to their letters, and the abundance of their
production may well astonish us: Voltaire’s corre-
spondence fills forty-five volumes, Rousseau’s forty-
three.

With the establishment of postal services, the pos-
sibility of having letters regularly delivered encour-
gaged writing them. It was during the reign of Louis
XIII that Richelieu authorized the public to use the
official post. Although Paris soon had several post
offices, mail was despatched to the provinces only
twice a week. Mme de Sévigné noted in a letter of 26
April 1671 that “this is Sunday and this letter will not
go out until Wednesday.”8 The arrival of a letter, a
real letter, in a provincial town could awaken the
curiosity of the entire community, and the recipi-
ent was often pressed to share it with neighbors. One
can imagine the excitement of her friends when Mme de
Grignan read her mother’s letter describing how
Vatel, the steward of Le Grand Condé, fearing that
the fish he had ordered would not arrive in time for a
Friday’s repast for Louis XIV, locked himself in his
room and stabbed himself to death. By the nine-
teenth century mail delivery ceased to be a special
event, and the letter lost some of its exotic glamour.
Nevertheless, literary men kept turning them out in
great quantities, as we see from the multivolume
correspondances générales of Chateaubriand, Lame-
rais, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, George Sand, Sainte-
Beuve, Flaubert, and Zola that are now appearing.

In spite of the competition of the telephone, the
telegraph, and the media, the letter continued to
flourish in France until the end of World War II, a
cultural watershed which witnessed the decline of the
traditional culte des lettres. In the recent past, lit-
térateurs, even though they lived in the same city,
even the same arrondissement (Paulhan used to say,
“French culture? 2000 people living in the VIth
arrondissement”), wrote to each other tirelessly. (Of
course, publication was often in the back of their
minds.) By the sixties, however, the brightest young
people were heading for the Ecole Nationale d’Ad-
ministration to become énarques and managers rath-
er than for the once-prestigious Ecole Normale Su-
périeure, which had formed generations of writers
and intellectuals. Letters were no longer “in.” Ador-
no, in his introduction to a 1966 edition of the
selected correspondence of Walter Benjamin, held
that such letters were an anachronism even in the
timeframe of the author.9

Paradoxically, however, correspondence (especial-
ly that of writers and artists) is now being published
more than ever before and read by a public less
attracted to fiction than to biography and personal
“revelations.” Biographers comb through the person-
al letters of their subjects and dig hungrily into every
possible source, hoping to unearth unpublished and
sensational material,10 but Richard Ellmann, author
of definitive lives of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde,
have warned his colleagues of the trickiness of letters
as “objective” documentation. In his collected essays
a long the riverrun (published in 1989, two years
after his death) he writes: “The modern biographer
is aware that the letter is itself a literary form, through
which writer and recipient play a game of conceal-
ment and revealment. What we have to read in
 correspondence is what is not written there.”11 M.
Bossa is agrees with Ellmann in being skeptical about
accepting the letter as a “document vrai,” claiming
that the writer reveals himself more openly in his fiction: "En raison de la pression sociale intériorisée, lorsqu'on est un personnage célèbre, on n'écris pas n'importe quoi de soi."12 Valery Larbaud, in his Journal (31 January 1934), is even more circumspect and in fact is opposed to the publication of letters at all. After having refused to write a preface for a selected correspondence of Rilke, he recalls that he had prevented the publication of certain letters of C.-L. Philippe, asserting that "c'est une terrible responsabilité de surcharger, l'œuvre d'un écrivain de ces sortes de documents 'externes.'" However, J.-M. Varaut claims in his essay "La difficulté d'être biographe: Les papiers de Montherlant" that citing unedited letters which throw light on the how and the why of a work is a right and a duty of the biographer: "Tout dire, ce n'est pas traquer les secrets d'un homme mais savoir de quelle faiblesse est née sa grandeur."13 This problem was the theme of one of the sessions of the Nantes colloquium of 1982, at which G. Bollée concluded his intervention on Flaubert by stressing the dangers of "confusion, simplification, and generalization": "Il n'y a pas de rapport correspondance-œuvre que particulier à chaque auteur."14

Derrida recurs time and again, in his voluntarily disconcerting book The Post-Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, to the ambiguities of the letter, its protean variety of forms, its resistance to any precise definition, since it can be a love lyric, an invective, a philosophical discussion, a political harangue.15 He is constantly concerned with the way in which the epistolary form "wrestles with the problem of making narrative out of discourse, of resolving mimetic and artistic impulses" and, in so doing, "exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature . . . and articulates the problematic involved in the creation, transmission, and reception of literary texts."16 How "personal" is a letter? Derrida asks. To whom is it really addressed? Does the writer really intend to send it? Does the person to whom it is addressed really exist, or is it all an elaborate fakery? J.-L. Bounat's comments are to the point: "Derrida joue de cette évidence qu'il est bien facile de mélanger ses papiers, de court-circuiter ainsi les prétendus destinataires jusqu'à s'envoyer à soi-même les missives apparemment écrites pour d'autres . . . et ainsi à devenir son propre légataire."17 The letter also constitutes a central element of the analytic essays of The Post-Card, and consequently the preface, entitled "Envois"—a series of letters—is very relevant. In "Le facteur de la Vérité" (note the play on words; facteur means not only "factor" but also "postman") Derrida criticizes Lacan's analysis of Poe's "Purloined Letter." "Spéculer—sur Freud" utilizes Freud's letters in explaining Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

More and more, as correspondence is recognized as an integral part of an author's work, writers themselves often take an active role in preparing the publication of their letters. Roger Martin du Gard personally oversaw and annotated Delay's edition of the Gide–Martin du Gard correspondence.18 Volumes of the correspondance générale of numerous twentieth-century French authors are now appearing or are scheduled for publication: Kolb's Proust, Du-chatellet's Romain Rolland, Martin's Gide, Pichois's Colette, Decaudin's Apollinaire, and Citron's Giono, among others.19 (Many of these have been financed by universities and by government organizations such as Le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Le Centre National des Lettres, since private publishers are often reluctant to finance multivolume projects with limited sales possibilities.) So, if the letter is a dying art, the tomb in which the defunct will repose—the elaborate editions of correspondances complètes—is certainly an impressive one, and its mourners, largely drawn from the academic community, are legion. In the course of the past decades "épistolalité" has become a lively area of research, perhaps because it offers a relatively uncultivated turf at a time when traditional fields have been hoed and harrowed to exhaustion. Thus, although people write letters less and less, scholars are writing more and more about writing letters.

In recent years congresses and colloquia on the theme of "épistolalité" have been burgeoning on two continents, among them a colloquium held at the University of Nantes in 1982, whose proceedings, Ecrire, publier, lire: Les correspondances—Problématique et économie d'un genre littéraire, were published in 1983; a second one was also held at Nantes, in 1984, followed by others in Aix-en-Provence, Fribourg (May 1984), and Urbino (July 1984). In 1986 the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises sponsored a meeting on "l'art épistolaire." The décade of the Centre Culturel International at Cérisy-la-Salle in July 1987 was devoted to the theme "L'épistolalité à travers les siècles: Geste de communication et/ou geste d'écriture."20 Leading scholarly reviews are allotting more and more space to "the letter in literature." Yale French Studies devoted a special issue (number 71, 1986), edited by Charles H. Porter, to "Men/Women of Letters," with contributions by specialists, several of whom had participated in the 1982 Nantes colloquium, including J. G. Altman (author of the Ohio State University dissertation "Épistolalité: Approaches to a Form," 1982), P. Kolb, English Showalter, M. Bossis, D. Dawson, and M. Reid. The journals Genre, Diacritics, La Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France, Cahiers d'Histoire des Littératures Romanes, Poétique, Critique, the NRF, La Revue de Littérature Comparée, and La Revue de Synthèse, among others, have featured contributions on épistolalité.

This growing interest in the letter is not only reflected in scholarly books and articles and in the publication of correspondence, of which Kolb's ongoing edition of Proust's letters is an outstanding example. As L. Versini has observed, we have witnessed
the rise of “innovative” epistolary fiction in contemporary French literature. The movement began in the early years of the century with works by Gide, Colette, Max Jacob, Montherlant, and Yourencier. Even before, in 1893, one of Proust’s projects was the writing of an epistolary novel in collaboration with W. D. Halévy, F. Gregh, and L. de la Salle. Colette’s Vogabonde and Mitsou (especially the latter) utilize epistolary techniques, as Joan H. Stewart has pointed out. The notice devoted to Mitsou in the Pléiade edition of Colette’s Oeuvres complètes (2:1513) states that Mitsou seduced Robert through her letters, which attracted him to her thanks to their “gracieuse ingénuité” and that an epistolary dialogue in which there is never a guarantee that a question will have an answer “est la forme la plus appropriée pour que reste ouvert le champ des suites imaginaires.” The early works of Gide make liberal use of letters. Les nourritures terrestres (1897) could be described as a long letter addressed to Nathanael. Much of L’école des femmes (1929) is cast in the form of a diary-letter. Les faux-monnayeurs (1925) contains only ten letters, but they make up a significant part of the various techniques by which Gide sought to liberate the novel from its “aspects pré-fabriqués.”

The letters of Bernard to his friend Olivier and those of Laure, of Félix, and of Lady Griffith are employed to achieve a multiplicity of viewpoints, and the “sincerity” (?) of the letter is contrasted with the “counterfeit money,” with the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Yourencier’s Alexis ou le traité du vain combat (1929) consists of a single letter in which the writer confesses his homosexuality to his wife. Montherlant employs epistolary devices in four volumes of Les jeunes filles (1936–39) to recount the tumultuous existence of a completely selfish and cynical novelist, Pierre Costals, incessantly pursued by madly adoring women such as Andrée Hacquebaut, who bombards him with passionate letters which he rarely answers.

The epistolary novel has also found many adepts among the post–World War II generation, among them Nicole (Les lions sont lâchés, 1955), Gilles Sandelier (L’un n’aura plus d’hiver, 1960), Lucie Faure (Les filles du Calcaire, 1963), Robert André (La mémoire vaine, 1964), and Arlette and Robert Bréhon (Les noces d’or, 1974). Influenced by contemporary critical theory, some of these writers emphasize by technical experimentation the inherent ambiguities of correspondence. Louis Palomb in Correspondance (1968) shifts the interest of his text from the correspondents themselves, who become impossible to identify precisely, to speculations about who they might be and what they may be trying to say. In the course of B. Poirot-Delpech’s novel La folle de Lituanie (1970), a collection of letters from a woman to a Lithuanian friend, we learn that the writer and the addressee are one and the same person, that she is guilty of the murders she is describing, and that, since she is writing to an imaginary individual, that her existence is being filled only through the correspondence addressed to him by an astonishing variety of persons: organizers of chain letters, publishers, an astrologer, fundraisers.) The three most important correspondents are: Creux’s uncle, a retired professor; Frère Gaucher, the mystery of whose identity remains deliberately unresolved; and finally Gripari himself, employing a technique used by Gide in Les faux-monnayeurs of “la composition en abyme.” Perhaps the “real” writer of all the letters is Creux or Gripari himself. Versini fears that the work is an indication that the epistolary novel, once ingénue, has now become ingénieux—too ingenious for its own good.

However, a very recent novel, Dominique Eddé’s Lettres posthumes (1989), returns to a classical simplicity in presenting the letters of an elderly Lebanese from Beirut to a French woman friend. He prefers that she be far away. (Mme de Sévigné shared this feeling: “J’aime à vous écrire. C’est donc signe que j’aime votre absence, ma fille.”) The old man, writing from his war-torn city, confides to his friend: “Je n’abuserai à mon aise de votre amitié qu’en raison même de votre absence.” Consequently, he is able to speak of feelings that he would have considered “immodest” to express in her presence. Absence, separation have very often in the past been a powerful motive for the writing of letters. Today, however, the ache of absence due to distance can be easily overcome—by dialing long-distance or by hopping on a plane and rejoining the loved one in a few hours, even though she be on the other side of the world. Perhaps we no longer feel so deeply the pain of physical absence. (Has modern man ceased to feel anything very deeply?) Still, ease in abolishing distance does not necessarily abolish a deeper sense of separation, even in the physical presence of “the other.” We no longer have time to write letters or, by extension, to establish and maintain the long-term human relationships of which they are an expression. It is rare to find, at the end of this century, correspondences like those of Gide and Martin du Gard which extend over many years, from youth to old age. In spite of this apparent “renaissance,” Versini fears that the epistolary novel, like the letter itself, is a threatened species: “Au crépuscule de la civilisation écrite, le roman épistolaire semble condamné. Il peut nous réséver de nouvelles surprises; effacé par l’invasion, où s’éffacant devant le téléphone et le roman
phenomenally rich harvest. We return with pleasure

Jammes (1893-1938), Claudel (1899-1926), J.-E.

Jacques Copeau and Henri Gheon to Roger Martin

ow to our understanding of the man and the artist, of

the life and the work. Kolb himself has underlined its

puent le mandarin?"

the correspondence of Proust in

flowering that produced, as the leaves were falling, a

phenomenally rich harvest. We return with pleasure

and fascination to the correspondence of Proust in

Kolb’s definitive edition. It adds new light and shad-

ow to our understanding of the man and the artist, of

the life and the work. Kolb himself has underlined its

importance.

His correspondence belongs in a special category and is,

in a sense, unique, because Proust is one of those writers

who kept no diary, who wrote no memoirs. Not only

that, but he took considerable care to dilute the auto-

biographical elements of his great novel. . . . In conse-

quence, Proust’s letters represent the only authentic

record we have of his inner self and of his earthy

existence. We find in them the day-to-day record of his

activities, of his feelings, his opinions on every conceiv-

able subject, his methods and practices in composing his

works—in short, what constitutes his life and his person-

ality.27

In retrospect, Gide appears as essentially a diarist and

letter writer, maintaining a lifelong contact with a

vast gallery of his contemporaries, ranging from

Jacques Copeau and Henri Ghéon to Roger Martin

du Gard and Claudel, from the famous (Valéry) to the

relatively obscure (C. Beck), and including Francis

Jammes (1893–1938), Claudel (1899–1926), J.-E.

Blanche (1892–1939), Jules Romains, Marc Allégret,

Edmund Gosse, and Arnold Bennett. From the start,

letter writing played an important role in the life of

Martin du Gard,28 who lived most of the time in

semiseclusion in his chateau in the Orne; it served as

a substitute for conversation. He could “converse”

more freely with others by mail than he could in their

company. Gide hailed him as a master of the episto-

lary art and preferred the spontaneity of his letters to

the unbending discipline of his novels. Jacques Mari-

tain and Julien Green in their long dialogue do not

engage, as do most of their contemporaries, in a

semipublic exposition of their views about literature,

personalities, and social and artistic events. Saint

Paul is mentioned more frequently than Paul Valéry.

Rarely do we encounter such a moving record of an

extended friendship founded on shared spiritual con-

cerns.29

How different the two volumes of letters between

Jean Paulhan, longtime editor of the NRF, and Fran-

cis Ponge, the poet of Le parti-pris des choses.30

They cover a period of forty-five years and steam with

inventive and personal recriminations. Many of them

containing Ponge’s most violent attacks against Paul-

han were never mailed. He included them, neverthe-

less, in the collected correspondence between the

two, in his determination, apparently, to “settle

old scores” even twenty years after Paulhan’s death.

As an editor, Paulhan maintained close contact with

the literary lights of his period, including the flam-

boyant André Suarès.31 (Gallimard has also published

Paulhan’s correspondence with Gide, Claudel, Rou-

ault.) Suarès, always raging, denounces Gide as “ce

pauvre de Sodome,” Mauriac as “un hanneton de

desarticile.” Paulhan evidently put up with him, how-

ever, for in the political crises of the 1930s he had the

courage to curse both Stalin and Hitler as “cancers in

the stomach of Europe.”

After such venting of bile, one turns with relief to

the letters exchanged by the cosmopolitan and civi-

lized Valéry Larbaud with Marcel Ray, L.-P. Fargue,

A. Reyes, Gide, C.-L. Philippe, G. Jean-Aubry. We

await the eventual publication of many others, now in

the Larbaud archives in Vichy. Saint-Exupéry’s (Gal-

limard, 1984) express his deep devotion to his mother

herself, abundant as they are, cover only the periods

when the two companions were apart. When they

were together, notes Beauvoir, “we telephoned.”

These letters represent only a minuscule part of

Sartre’s vast correspondence, and we may expect that

many additional volumes will continue to appear.

Included are letters (of an explicit sexuality) in which

Sartre describes his affairs with a series of dubious

young ladies even as he was proclaiming his love for

Beauvoir, “Le Castor.” One suspects that he may

have been inventing these spicy stories, though, as

he attempts to play the role of a Left Bank Valmont to

divert and perhaps titillate his Castor-Mertuel.

One could go on and on, for we are confronted with

an embarrassment of riches: letters of Ghéon, of E.

Dabit, Jean Cocteau (Lettres à Jean Marais, 1987), Georges Bataille (Lettres à Roger Caillios, 1987), Jean Genet (Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat, 1988), Céline (Lettres à des amies, 1979), Jacques Rivière, Joë Bousquet, Colette (Lettres à sa fille, 1984), Max Jacob, Jules Romains, Albert Camus, Henry de Montherlant . . . A tidal wave of epis-

tolarity! And it would be possible to add to this list
dozens of other names.

It seems highly problematic if such productivity

will persist in the future. Writers who have reached

maturity in the closing years of the century are

reaching for the phone or the fax rather than for the

ten. As Henri Mendras has made clear in La seconde

révolution française, France has experienced in the

last twenty-five years a revolution more radical and

wide-ranging than that of 1789. It has changed every

aspect of national life, including that of the role of

“culture” (which is no longer the possession of an

elite) and of the social situation of writers and intel-

lectuals, who are now more and more involved in

pursuits allied to scientific and technological fields.32

Literary activity has been absorbed by many other
sectors—publicity, radio, television, computerized information: "L’homme de lettres se double d’un expert et le milieu littéraire se dilue par gradations invisibles; l’activité littéraire tend à se confondre avec maintes autres activités, soit de publicité, soit d’information." Mark Lilla in his "Letter from Paris" in the Partisan Review observes that the adjective most frequently used by French intellectuals today is "mediatized": politics has been médiatisé, sex has been médiatisé, and even the life of letters has been irreversibly médiatisé by the press and television.

In this agitated and uncertain time of rapid and dramatic change, the decline, indeed the demise, of the letter constitutes one of the minor, less spectacular signs that we are entering, or have entered, a new "electronic" phase of world history. Derrida hints (as always enigmatically) that "the passing of the post" may well be a minor symptom of larger global developments: "A great thinker is always something of a great post, but here it is also the (historical, destinal) end of the posts, end of the race, and end of the mail [‘fin de courses et fin de courrier’], of a great epoch, of a great halt in postal technology." Meanwhile, in Europe and America, literary scholars nostalgically continue to occupy themselves, more than ever in the past, in studying, in commemorating the epistolary art, which perishes, unwept, unhonored, unsung, and largely unnoticed by the world at large. Still, its ghost will never cease to haunt a minority among us. And perhaps, who knows, one day it may rise again from the tomb.

Washington, D.C.