Letters

Epistolary essays and novels were prevalent at this time, a format that reflects the “letter-frenzy” (Briefwut)\(^69\) that engaged all of Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century, when the purpose of letters went well beyond simply conveying information to acquaintances or stating one’s case to those in power. As a genre, the letter developed into a conventional form for exploring one’s own subjectivity and opening one’s heart to others, as well as for projecting a powerful and emotionally wrought persona. Of course, letters still served as an important medium of intellectual exchange; Goethe reports in his autobiography how “Herder kept us aware of [Hamann] and through constant correspondence with us and his fiancée immediately informed us about whatever issued from that remarkable intellect” (380). But they also evolved into a literary form in their own right, to the point where they served as a model for other genres.

There were practical reasons for turning to the mails. Postal service improved markedly during this period, while the terrible roads, questionable accommodations, and multiple borders in Germany still made personal travel difficult, even by eighteenth-century standards. Furthermore, there were hardly any centers in Germany to attract the traveler: few towns counted over 3,500 inhabitants, and their economies were primarily local. With no intellectual capital, the literary public, which Friedrich Nicolai estimated at only 20,000 in 1773, was scattered among these isolated small towns (Sheehan 105-57). The Sturm und Drang writers were similarly diffuse. They clustered temporarily, if at all, in small groups in outposts like Göttingen, Emmending, Mannheim, Strasbourg, Weimar and Darmstadt, coming from as far away as Denmark and the Baltic provinces. The growing number of journals and easier distribution of books made publishing increasingly attractive, but it was still expensive, unremunerative to authors, subject to censorship, and by custom usually anonymous. Finally, both travel and access to publishing were especially difficult for women, while correspondence was open to both sexes. Indeed, letter-writing was seen as a particularly appropriate female intellectual activity.\(^70\) As a medium for self-expression, then, letters were relatively convenient. Postage could become a significant expense to the frequent correspondent, but sometimes an accommodating traveler could be found to carry a letter to its destination. In either case, the letter would not fall prey to routine censorship.

Furthermore, the author of a letter addressed a larger audience than a modern reader might suppose. While the act of reading increasingly took place in private, groups of people still consumed literature in salons and reading clubs and at parties. The ability to read well aloud was an important social asset, and someone like Goethe, who could give effective renderings of both his own and other authors’ works in various languages, was a valued guest. Letters were also a standard part of this repertoire. Franz Michael Leuchsenring, the “genius of the letter-cult” (Sauder 1984: 350), was known for traveling with a box of his personal correspondence, which he read aloud at social gatherings. While Leuchsenring himself was considered somewhat of a scoundrel, no one took umbrage at what might today seem to be a breach of confidentiality. “The creation of privacy and intimacy in the eighteenth century was an eminently public event.”\(^71\) Letters were the stuff of performances,
rather than discrete exchanges, and authors and recipients of even the most personal “documents of the soul” (Sauder 1984: 350) routinely distributed and copied them. As Goethe writes in Poetry and Truth, “There was then such a general lack of reticence among people that one could not speak or write to any individual without the feeling that various others were being addressed. A person would examine his own and others’ hearts, and [...] this moral and literary exchange was soon widespread. This correspondence, especially with notable persons, would be carefully collected and excerpts read aloud at gatherings of friends” (411). Such airings were not solely for the purpose of titillation, but resulted from the belief “that much that was valuable could be learned by the exposure of the inner self and private sentiment to public view” (Brewer 108). Indeed, it is even hard to draw a line between letters and verbal exchange. Missives of the time affected a conversational tone, replete with seemingly spontaneous elements meant to simulate orality. Of course, the authors of these letters worked hard to achieve the impression of unpremeditated expression. Correspondents took pride in everything from their penmanship to their mastery of artless-sounding phrases, and they sometimes self-consciously wrote en plein air for inspiration.

This blurring of letters’ private and public functions had a marked effect on human relationships within the literary public. Correspondent and friend became interchangeable terms, and intimacies developed even among those who had never met in person. It was common to initiate correspondences with complete strangers on the basis of a shared interest like poetry or Klopstock, using the vocabulary of friendship. When Merck read Johann Georg Jacobi’s anonymously published epistolary essay, Brief an die Freydenker (Letter to the Freethinkers), he was inspired to write to the unknown author, “Permit me, whoever you may be, to call you my brother.” Jacobi wrote back, “Allow me, my splendid friend, with the sincerity of my heart, for whose sake you address me as brother, to embrace you” (Steinhausen 313). In 1775, Goethe began to write to the Stolbergs’ sister, Auguste; his letters to her over the next few years are so marked by confidences and passionate declarations of affection that the reader is surprised to learn that they never actually met. And Voss’s courtship of his wife even commenced by vicarious mail: Boie showed him letters that he had received from his three sisters, and Voss was so impressed that he started an enthusiastic correspondence with the eldest. When her husband objected to the nature of the exchange, Voss next addressed the middle sister and then finally the youngest, who eventually became his wife (316).

The husband’s concerns are understandable, since epistolary professions of affection often blurred the distinction between friendship and eros. Even exchanges between heterosexual males could take on the language of erotic attraction:

‘Beloved of my soul, how I love you’, Fuseli wrote to [Lavater] when they were separated for a day or so in 1763. ‘How I kiss you! My God, my God! When I see you again, when shall I lay my hand in your hand, my breast against your breast, against that truest of all hearts, and be in bliss — life such as you desire of me shall at least make me worthy of it....’ On another occasion he wrote: ‘I lay down my pen for a moment to embrace your picture, and kiss it through and through....’ And when Lavater married, Fuseli introduced himself to the young wife with words which would have astounded, if not alarmed, a bride in any other period: ‘I enjoin you to kiss him twice each day for me. My soul will often hover about the lips of both — would it were granted to my hand to embrace both of you!’ (Powell 24-25)
Passionate outpourings like these do not by themselves evince homoeroticism, closeted or otherwise. The sentiments contained in such semi-public documents were well-accepted conventions. Nor were they necessarily confined to Sturm und Drang writers. All correspondents of the time sought to express feeling. But while most writers carefully cultivated tender sentiment, those of the Sturm und Drang valued a heartier tone, filling their letters with dialect, slang, curses, vulgarisms, repetitions, fragmentary phrases, and exclamations (Steinhausen 274-76). But it is wrong to assume, as Steinhausen’s history of letters does, that such missives dispense with form in order to speak straight from the heart (276). Sturm und Drang writers, in fact, took elaborate pains to achieve the effect of spontaneity. Another of Steinhausen’s examples, a letter from Bürger to Goethe, is clearly no immediate outpouring, but a self-consciously constructed exercise: “Through me courses the courage and feeling of healthy youth, the eyes of my spirit have grown bold, I stand there and say Hey! and weave and strive, and a mockery to me are the storm and the flood. Oh, if only I had now to battle the dragons, giants and monsters of the world of bodies and spirits!”

Sometimes such effusions seemed extravagant even to the other members of the Sturm und Drang; Goethe once complained about “the great Lavater’s pen, trimmed for superlatives, and his phosphorizing inkwell” (292). But on the whole, they valued efforts to break through what they considered to be artificial barriers to emotional exchange. Preferring to err on the side of immoderation, they saw their letters as practice for their published works or as literary ends in themselves.

69 Georg Steinhausen, Geschichte des deutschen Briefes. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes (Berlin: Gaertner, 1889-91), 303. Ernst von Schenck’s Briefe der Freunde. Das Zeitalter Goethes im Spiegel der Freundschaft (Berlin: Die Runde, 1937), an anthology of letters from the period, includes those from members of the Sturm und Drang. See also Joeres 1997: 160-64. The following discussion does not imply that the cult of letter writing was confined to Germany, any more than were the epistolary novel and essay.


72 Which, of course, does not necessarily imply the converse, a complete absence of homoeroticism. For a discussion of the issues involved, see Alice A. Kuzniar’s introduction to Outing Goethe and His Age (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 1-32. Compare Clark 110.