

# BEYOND TALKING ON PAPER

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*Why the rise of electronic mail gives a scholar of “the great epistolick art” fresh hope for the renewed health of the 18th century’s quintessential literary form: the letter.*

*In the* final months of 1784, as he lay dying of congestive heart failure, Samuel Johnson set his life in order by writing letters. The flow of inspired talk had come to an end, but not what Johnson’s contemporaries called “the converse of the pen.” His letters produced rapid responses—such was the eminence of the writer and the urgency of the occasion. When one of these replies arrived, Johnson was heard to remark, “An odd thought strikes me: we shall receive no letters in the grave.”

To associate the deprivations of death with the absence of epistolary relations was entirely characteristic of this great writer—and of his culture. Yet since its golden age in the 18th century, the art of letter-writing has fallen into decline, despite the achievements of a few brilliant practitioners. If—as I once confidently prophesied—letter-writing is doomed, then

BY BRUCE REDFORD ART BY ALLEN CARROLL

surely historians will find Johnson's last true heir in Flannery O'Connor—a writer who might well have lamented the absence of a daily post in the next world.

As she lay dying in the spring and summer of 1964, O'Connor set her own life in order by writing letters. Prolific and versatile, she created—to redirect Robert Frost's definition of poetry—a "speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination."

Despite her declaration to one correspondent that "it is a great strain for me to speak like Dr. Johnson," O'Connor and Johnson were both epistolary talkers of comparable spice and cadence. One of the last and most memorable of O'Connor's letters was to the University of Chicago's Richard Stern, with whom she had corresponded since 1959. Its sense of voice, like Johnson's, defies death and leaps off the page to make of the text a speaking likeness:

"Our spring's done come and gone. It is summer here. My Muscovy duck is setting under the back steps. I have two new swans who sit on the grass and converse with each other in low tones while the peacocks scream and holler. You just ought to leave that place you teach at and come teach in one of our excellent military colleges or females academies where you could get something good to eat....I think of you often in that cold place among them interleckchuls."

**Is there** hope for what textbooks used to call "the familiar letter"? Five years ago, I would have said not. Today, however, the advent of electronic mail is fostering a revival that has already improved the letter's chances.

Underlying the appeal of "e-mail" is a late-20th-century version of "talking on paper" as a way of conceptualizing the act of communication. E-mail thrives because of its rapidity and fluidity: the e-mail writer performs as a speaker, sparking a conversation rather than laboring over a task that is painful to the degree that it is non-oral. Consequently, a Johnsonian sense of voices in resonant dialogue now seems to be creeping back. The converse of the pen may well have gone underground to reemerge as the converse of the modem.

That is not to say, however, that the 20th-century converse of the modem will be same as the 18th-century converse of the pen. For in 18th-century Britain, two interlocking sets of factors—technological and aesthetic—helped to explain the prominence and the excellence of what Johnson called "the great epistolick art."

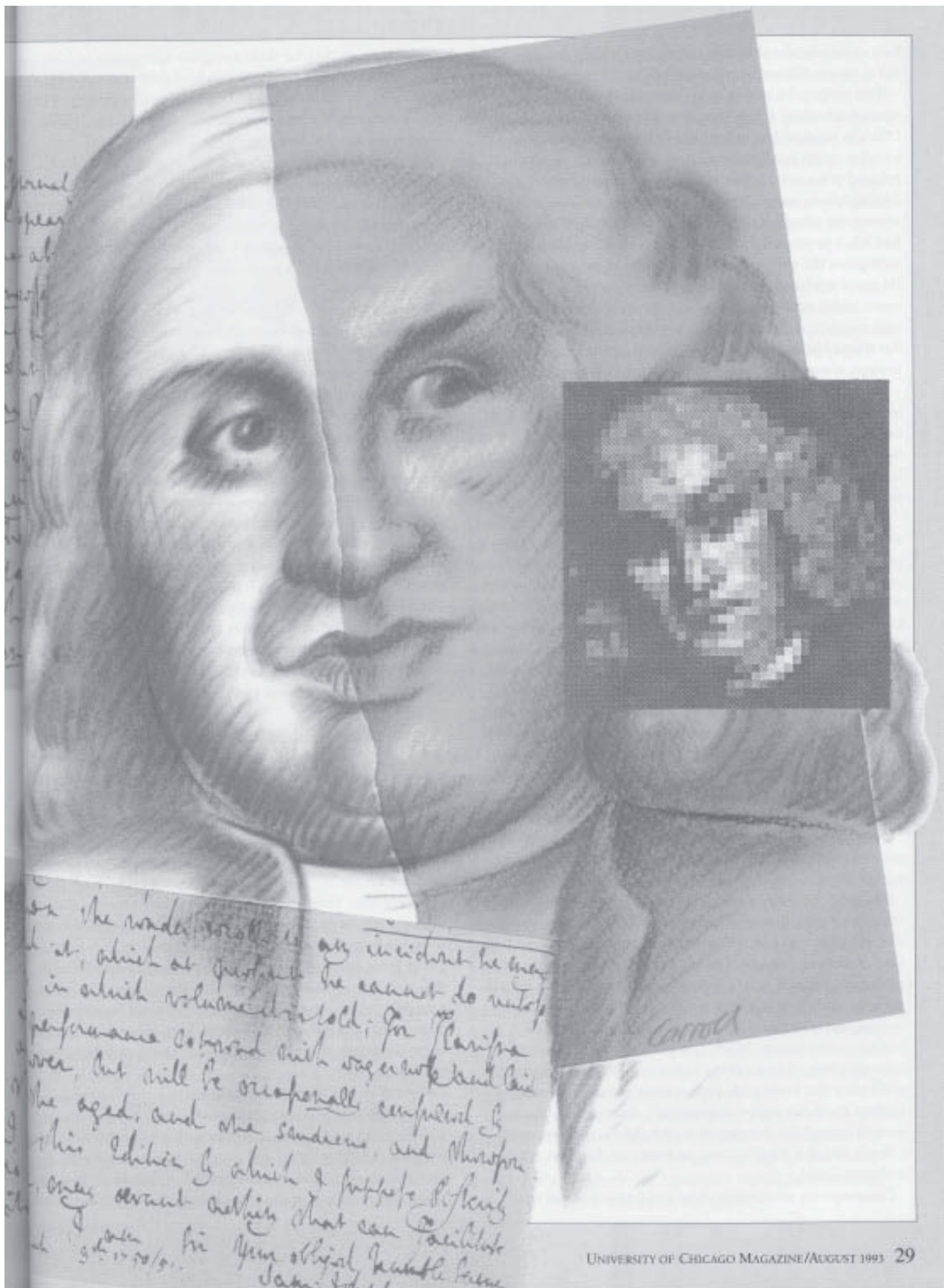
Letter-writing could only flourish in a country stitched together by a comprehensive and reliable postal system. By about 1735 such a system was in place throughout Britain, thanks in large part to the efforts of one man, Ralph Allen of

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Dear Sir

I though Clarissa wants me to  
doe I am glad so for her comfort  
but more glad so find what she  
is of probity, and confident  
tho whatever had been without  
doubt find a hint of any such  
tho though the story is long, very

I wish you would add  
that when the reader recollects  
not find it, which is perfect  
he knows in which volume it  
is not a performance without  
of the work, but will be occupied



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...the reader would be any incident he may  
...at, which at present he cannot do without  
...in which volume is told; for Clarissa  
...performance colored with rage with her  
...over, but will be especially competent to  
...the aged, and she sends, and therefore  
...this Edition by which I suppose I shall  
...more devout wishes that can facilitate  
...I am  
...9th 1790/1  
...Your obliged servant  
...John [unclear]

Carroll

Bath (who was also the patron of Henry Fielding and the original of Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*).

Allen perfected a system of by- and cross-posts: "by-post" designated subsidiary routes that circumvented the General Letters Office in London, through which all letters once had to pass, whether or not London lay on their direct route; "cross-post" referred to a service between towns on different main roads. During Allen's years in charge of Britain's postal system, daily service was extended to hundreds of towns and villages that had fallen between the cracks. At the same time, Allen helped to improve the efficiency and the security of the entire service. He could not have done so without the cooperation of Parliament, which passed more than 400 turnpike acts designed to improve the conditions of the roads between 1700 and 1750. But it was Allen, above all, who deserves credit for guaranteeing prompt, comprehensive delivery and complete privacy.

As a result, by the 1740s it was possible to send and receive letters with considerably more assurance than in the late 20th century. A letter from London to Johnson's hometown, Lichfield (approximately 125 miles away), took a mere two days; a letter from London to Edinburgh (350 miles to the north, as the crow flies) usually took four.

The technological starts to impinge directly on the aesthetic when we consider that the recipient, not the sender, paid the postage. And even by our inflationary standards, 18th-century postal rates were high: threepence for a single sheet that traveled 80 miles or less; fourpence for any distance over 80 miles. Double sheets were charged double postage. This at a time when a newspaper cost one penny, an issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (the preeminent periodical of the day) sixpence, and one could dine handsomely on the town for a shilling (12 pence).

The result of this comparatively high rate, to be paid by one's correspondent, was that greater pains were undoubtedly taken to write a letter worth receiving—that is, worth paying a high price for. The same system also bred a set of rhetorical ploys, such as this representative apology from the poet William Cowper, who was also a passionate and gifted letter-writer: "You must pay a solid price for frothy matter, and though I do not absolutely pick your pocket, yet you lose your money and as the saying is, are never the wiser."

Cowper's career as a dedicated correspondent living in rural seclusion exemplifies in at least two respects the close interaction of technology and aesthetics. First, his vocation would have gone unrealized without the improvements introduced by Ralph Allen and other postal reformers. Second, his achievement depended upon, as it contributed to, a theory of letter-writing that interpreted epistolary exchange as a form of intimate conversation. When Cowper writes to his favorite correspondent, "I love talking letters dearly," he expresses a preference that undergirds 18th-century culture. The scholar Herbert Davis has argued convincingly that conversation was viewed throughout this period as "the chief art of human life." I would add that letter-writing, as a sister or daughter art, ran a close second.

Contemporary treatises on these two forms of social inter-

course indicate that the skills and goals appropriate to both overlapped significantly in the minds of their practitioners. One of the century's principal rhetoricians described epistolary correspondence as "conversation carried on upon paper, between two friends at a distance."

The criteria governing face-to-face exchange also applied to talking-by-mail: one should strive for a blend of "ease," "grace," "propriety," and "obliging Manners"—for a mean between the extremes of formality and negligence. "Pomp of Words" was as much to be avoided as "entire Carelessness." The ultimate goal might be described as a mysterious fusion of the studied and the spontaneous.

Both conversation and letter-writing, in short, embodied the paradox that underlies much of the century's aesthetic theory: "Nature" takes precedence over "Art," but it is "Nature methodiz'd." Furthermore, as preeminently social forms of exchange, the two kinds of talk depended on, as they reflected, a sense of cultural solidarity.

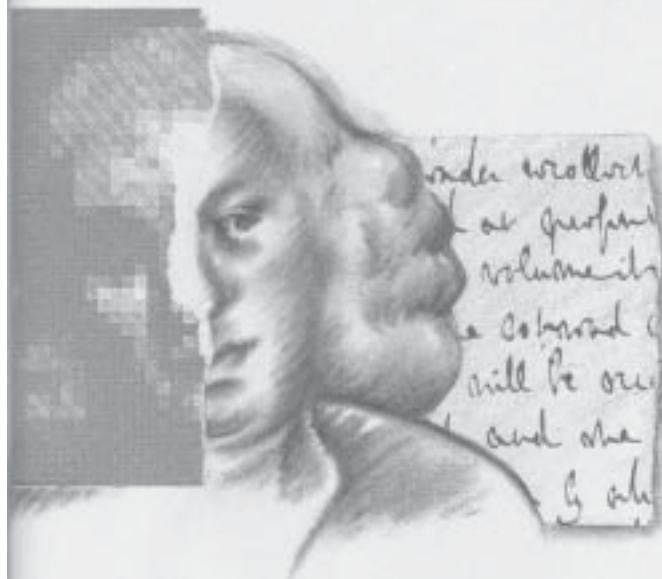
When Thomas Gray quotes a few words of Horace, or Johnson echoes a line from the Bible, he can count on instantaneous recognition and the ability to recover the context of the original. Since the letter is the cameo of literary forms it depends upon such strategies of implication, selection, and miniaturization. To work effectively on a small canvas requires the artist to find ways of gesturing outward while maintaining integrity of scale.

More than any other technique in the letter-writer's arsenal, allusion allows for simultaneous broadening and deepening. It fosters role-playing, irony, a sense of shared play, and a community of interest—not so much by means of the information conveyed as the shorthand used to convey it.

*In writing* to his closest female friend, Hester Thrale, Johnson (like his contemporaries Gray, Cowper, and Horace Walpole) juggles subjects and tones, approximating on paper the shifting rhythms, half-voiced associations, and abrupt juxtapositions of oral exchange. Through nearly 20 years of "prattle," he pieces together a mosaic of epigrams, proverbs, endearments, precepts, and domestic minutiae.

Because Mrs. Thrale had studied Latin, moreover, he can deploy a battery of allusions by invoking those poets who continued to form the basis of the literary canon. Such is Johnson's gift as letter-writer, however, that these allusions do far more than decorate the surface of the letter: they transmit its central concerns. Nowhere is this function as principal message-bearer clearer than in a melancholy bulletin from Johnson in Lichfield to Hester Thrale in Streatham, the family's country house south of London.

Allusion in this letter allows Johnson to communicate a wealth of feeling without compromising his chosen mode of address (simple, direct, relaxed), or wallowing ostentatiously in self-pity. It gathers writer and recipient into a community at once social, emotional, and intellectual. It says much in a little space, and it contributes to an ongoing epistolary dialogue cul-



rated to the terms of the friendship. In this respect Johnson's letter testifies to a characteristic of 18th-century letter-writing that situates it even more meaningfully in a conversational context. Reading the letter without knowing its recipient, we would be able (equipped with a certain amount of advance knowledge) to tell for whom it was intended. Like all the best letters from this period, it is correspondent-specific. The spine of the letter consists of three thematically connected allusions: to Ovid's *Tristia*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Heroides*:

You are returned, I suppose, from Brighthelmstone [Brighton], and this letter will be read at Streatham. Sine me, liber, ibis in urbem.

I have felt in this place something like the shackles of destiny. There has not been one day of pleasure, and yet I cannot get away. But when I do come, I perhaps shall not be easily persuaded to pass again on the other side of Styx, to venture myself on the irremovable road. I long to see you, and all those of whom the sight is included in seeing you. Nil mihi rescribas; for though I have no right to say *Ipsa veni*, I hope that *ipse veniam*.

In part this literary cluster assimilates Lichfield, a dull provincial town where Johnson was staying with his equally dull step-daughter, to a mythological realm, a classical place of banishment. It thereby introduces a hint of mock-heroic irony and sense of self-deprecation ("I can stand outside my loneliness," Johnson appears to suggest, "as well as experiencing and recreating the solitude that makes me so forlorn"). But the primary force of the poetic references is to emphasize an acute sense of banishment.

The first quotation, from Ovid's *Tristia*, implicitly compares the letter-writer to the exiled poet, who longs for Rome and the company of his friends while languishing by the Black Sea. "Little book," says Ovid wistfully, "you will go without me to the city." A similar intention holds true for the second Ovidian

allusion adapted from the beginning of the *Heroides*, where Penelope pines for the long-absent Ulysses and exhorts him, "writing back is pointless: come yourself!"

The reference in the middle of the paragraph to the "irremovable road" gestures toward the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the descent to the Underworld and the crossing of the River Styx, the *irremovable unda* or "Stream whence none return." This is especially appropriate given Johnson's derivation of "Lichfield" in his great *Dictionary* from the Old English word meaning "field of the dead."

**The ways** in which 18th-century letter-writers discussed, practiced, and refined their craft help to explain its marked decline through much of our own century. Technological change—principally the oft-cited dominion of the telephone—has been much less decisive in that decline, I would argue, than certain cultural shifts.

Chief among those shifts is the fracturing of consensus—a phenomenon that might also be called the burgeoning of alternative cultures. No longer is subtle, resonant allusion generally available. In 1993, what shared text can one take for granted?

In our attitudes toward conversational and epistolary exchange, we continue to share with the 18th century a concern for candor and sincerity. However, these values have come to be linked not with forethought, as they were in the 18th century, but with incoherence—incoherence as the badge and condition of truthfulness. Consider the following representative tangle from a 20th-century correspondence: "So hopefully when figuring out the big picture the deal is that you'll let me know that." The less shapely the utterance, the more obviously unpremeditated, the closer we feel to the goal of intimacy. Nature is not nature if she is "methodiz'd."

Correspondingly, we associate *insincerity* with the stylization of multiple selves, the plurality of voices so brilliantly exploited by the letter-writers of Johnson's age. Ours is the era of the Xeroxed Christmas letter, whose typical and typifying salutation—"Dear Folks"—erases the individual identity of the recipient, thereby denying the essence of the form as Johnson conceived it.

Johnson and his contemporaries believed—as every dedicated letter-writer must—that what one says is ultimately not as important as how one says it: letters are not intended to be generalized monologues but ingratiating acts of communication between a specific writer and a specific reader.

As Johnson himself declared, "A letter is addressed to a single mind of which the prejudices and partialities are known, and must therefore please, if not by favouring them, by forbearing to oppose them." Versatility is of the essence: one must be able to take a given event and calculate its presentation according to the identity and interests of the addressee.

The result of such efforts is something "partial" in both senses—a piece of the whole, and one that favors the recipient. It is also a letter (in the terms of Cowper's apology for his "frothy" prose) that puts money, the "epistolical capital" of friendship, into the pockets of both writer and reader.