Editorial

When I was a child I remember being fascinated by a bundle of very old letters which my grandmother kept at the back of her writing desk, tied together with a piece of faded ribbon. The letters were still in their respective envelopes; some had stamps bearing Queen Victoria's head – Penny Blacks and Reds – which I marvelled at, for these were collectors' items already in the 1950s, or so my older sister informed me. The envelopes were addressed in different styles of copperplate handwriting in blue or black ink which had sometimes spitted a careless blot or two randomly across the neatly etched script. Inside, curling characters scrolled across the folded pages, which occasionally enclosed a small memento: a sepia photograph or a pressed flower – a violet still faintly blue. The writing itself seemed to speak volumes to a small child who was still painstakingly learning to form her own characters at school; but the letters were far more than mere handwriting to be deciphered and interpreted. For me, as for my grandmother, these were distinct voices from the past. And in their different rhythms of speech, forms of expression and often old-fashioned vocabulary, these individual letter-writers seemed to momentarily live again when their words were reiterated.

I now have quite a collection of old letters myself, sent to me from various people whom I have known in the past, and I dip into them from time to time, not as Roland Barthes would have us believe – to rewrite these messages, long since detached from their authors, with meaning of my own, but rather to recall the writers themselves, to hear again their voices which are preserved both in my memory and in their choice of words, not spoken, but written down as they composed them.

Today a post-card from some exotic holiday resort, endorsed with a thumb print of sun-tan oil, is often as near as we get to the pen on paper missive; in the twenty-first century written correspondences are increasingly 'texted' or sent by email. Furthermore, lines of communication have themselves expanded – in addition to telephones, which enable two-way oral communication, we have audio tapes to convey voiced messages, and even video conference

which facilitates an image of the sender to be relayed as he/she speaks. Once upon a time, before the advent of these sophisticated audio/visual systems, oral communications which could not be voiced in person had to be spoken by messengers. At the start of Shakespeare's *Henry V* the French Ambassadors, messengers sent from the Dauphin, are instructed by the English king to 'Tell ... the Dauphin's mind' and they conclude their opening statement with the words: 'This the Dauphin speaks' (1.ii.245 & 257), confirming that the words, delivered by proxy, are the Dauphin's own, and as such are an expression of his mind. The situation is not dissimilar when words set down in writing by the sender are read by a messenger, as in *The Winter's Tale*, when the words written and sealed-up by Apollo's priest are opened and read aloud to the court at Hermione's trial. However, when Leontes does not like what he hears, he questions the missive: 'Hast thou read truth?' 'Ay, my lord, even so/As it is here set down', is the reply, exonerating the reader from error, if not the letter itself (III.ii.136-7).

In any linguistic system of communication there is room for question, ambiguity and even deceit, but these problems become more acute when the words are detached from the sender, transposed into a written text, for the text can offer no more than is set down, it cannot further explain or expand itself. In highly acclaimed works of literature the ambiguities of the text are often where the richness lies, in the multiplicity of available meanings. Furthermore, according to post-modern theory, ambiguities and uncertainties are evidence of the multi-dimensional space which writing occupies, of the variety of possible meanings which may be inscribed by different readers as they themselves supply meaning to the written text. But just how does the reader arrive at his/her interpretation?

Those of us who choose to read historically acknowledge that language does not exist in a vacuum; written texts are produced within a specific context which also gives shape to meaning. The context is one of time and place, but it also includes people, not least the author him/herself, and when the text attempts to convey a message from a specific person, as is usually the case with the letter, then the author's own position within the interpretative context looms large. When the letter-writer is known to the recipient, meaning is arrived at via a combination of the written words

and personal knowledge of the writer – his/her character, values and beliefs. This seems particularly significant in terms of the love-letter, perhaps the most intimate of all missives. Indeed, in some cases, such is the desired intimacy between correspondents that personally expressed words may be taken as a substitute for the writer him/herself, as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In this play, Julia, reading the words ‘love-wounded Proteus’ in Proteus’s letter, kisses the words and presses the paper to her breast that the hurt may be healed: ‘Poor wounded name! my bosom, as a bed / Shall lodge thee till thy wound be thoroughly heal’d; / And thus I search it with a sovereign kiss’ (1.ii.110-12). Here the written words contained in the letter stand proxy for the writer himself; more than an expression of Proteus’s mind, they have become a substitute for him. Julia’s affection for the words written by Proteus is, of course, an extreme example, but one which serves, rightly or wrongly, to identify the writer very closely with the written words. ‘Love letters straight from your heart, / Keep us so near, when apart. / I’m not alone in the night, / When I can have all the love you write’, claim the words of this love song. Certainly, when we refer to letters as correspondences, we identify them as operating within a two-way system, as ‘intercourse’ (*OED* 5), communication *between* writers and recipients.

The forged letter provides an interesting case study, for on the one hand it registers the significant role attributed to the author of a written document (the whole point of a forgery is to deceive the reader into believing that the missive is from a particular author), whilst on the other hand it demonstrates the unreliability of attributing authorship itself.

However, whether authority is an issue to be established or questioned, letters certainly play a significant part in our literary heritage, as the articles collected in this issue of *Critical Survey* demonstrate. Lisa Hopkins begins by examining the use of the letter in Shakespearean tragedy, identifying an awareness of the potential unreliability of letters in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and concludes that the introduction of the written missive in these particular plays serves to privilege the oral. John Turner considers a letter written by D.H. Lawrence in response to extracts from Scott’s journal published in 1913, noting the various ways in which these observations shed light on Lawrence’s fiction and his philosophy. In the third article,

Mary Summers focuses on the letters of Eugénie de Guérin, originally written for the religious guidance of her brother, and first published as the *Journal d'Eugénie de Guérin* in 1862. Summers examines the genesis and reception of the *Journal* and identifies its sources of inspiration, not least in the writings of St Paul, claiming that this collection was in fact the first of the popular letter-journals to be published in nineteenth-century France. Andrew Varney's analysis of gender relations in early eighteenth-century epistles considers Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture* (c.1710) in relation to a correspondence published in an early issue of *The Spectator*, and reveals how Pope's 'tender Correspondence' provided Miss Blount with a means to a new identity which echoed wider aspirations towards international harmony. And finally, returning the relationship between letters and literature to our own time, Eibhlín Evans observes the ways in which a flood of letters to the author served to relocate the personal experiences expressed in Nuala O'Faolain's autobiography (1996) into a shared community of Irish readers.

Barthes's ground-breaking 'Death of the author', may have shaken the confidence we once held in the authority of the written text and its ability to express the author's mind, but as the articles in this issue of *Critical Survey* reveal, letters themselves, whether reliable or unreliable, seem to plead a special case as they continue to be read as sources of authorial evidence – voices expressed in writing – and remain a significant and interesting field of enquiry for literary criticism.

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